



Marathon Woman

How She Conquers the
Ultimate Uphill Climb

By Jennifer Gerlock
Photography by Mike Collins



Marathon.

The word alone can send shivers down the spine of a weekend running enthusiast. I shivered. I committed. I ran. I completed. I was on top of the world.

I had never really considered myself a runner until that day in 2007 when I crossed the finish line of the Marine Corps Marathon. I had been training for a good two years by then, and I had been sidelined by a number of injuries. You would think that by the time I hit the 20-mile training runs, I would have owned the

title. For some reason, I didn't. But the minute that Marine draped a finisher's medal around my neck, I cried. After 18 months of training, one out-patient surgery, countless physical therapy sessions, hundreds of dollars spent in shoes, training gear and GU (energy in a tube), it hit me. I was not just a runner. I was a marathon runner.

Since that fall day, I have gone on to complete two half-marathons and even participate in a two-state, 182-mile relay race. But nothing has matched the sense of accomplishment I felt when I crossed the Marine Corps Marathon's 26.2-mile line.

Running is something that I do for myself. It is my chance to be something more than a mother, a wife, a friend or a professional. It is a chance to take on and conquer my own self-imposed limitations. When I tackle a particularly challenging course, I feel like nothing less than a warrior. It is on those days that I feel invincible.

Commitment

I decided to embark on my second marathon journey in December of 2008, largely because my life felt too stagnant. I live in Frederick, so it only made sense to run in my hometown marathon on May 3.



Top: The hills of the Spring Ridge community prove a challenge, one that Jennifer trains for during her solo run. **Above:** As soon as her two sons are "off and running," Jennifer is, too.

It is believed that only one to two percent of the population will ever run a marathon. The training requires a huge time commitment—one that someone with a family cannot take lightly. It entails hours of running, cross-training, mental discipline and dietary restrictions. All of these factors must be woven into daily life with as little impact on work and family as possible, sometimes easier said than done. Support from the whole family is crucial.

Training

People often assume that marathoners-in-training run major mileage every day for months. I don't ascribe to that philosophy. My marriage would never survive it. Plus, where exactly would you find the time? I, for one, still have to work for a living, and I would like to see my sons for a couple of hours each week. I'm funny that way.

The training program that fits me best has me running three times a week. This works for a couple of reasons—most importantly, because it impacts my family the least, and also because I have a condition called plantar fasciitis. When I run too much and don't rest properly, my feet are so sore that I can hardly walk.



Above: Jenny Marino fits Jennifer with the right running shoe at If the Shoe Fits, a store on West Patrick Street. **Below:** (left to right) Rani Pellet, Katie Barkdoll and Jennifer run past a barn along Gas House Pike.

I train six days a week, Monday through Saturday. On Monday, Wednesday and Friday, I cross-train at home with my husband Michael, and we wake up at 4:30 a.m. to fit it in with our work schedules. I reserve Tuesdays for a tempo run, Thursdays for speed work and Saturday mornings for my long runs.





The Long Haul

January 24

I'm excited because I just finished my first long run with Katie Barkdol, my new training partner. We ran eight miles this morning in 8-degree weather. As luck would have it, Katie has two young boys similar in age to my two sons; our pace is extremely compatible and our marathon goal is exactly the same: to finish. We are a perfect match.

February 14

Training is going really well. For our long runs, Katie and I have been alternating taking flat and hilly routes. We are both concerned about the Spring Ridge section of the marathon. We plan to incorporate that part of the route into our training so that mentally we're prepared to tackle it on race day.

At this point, our biggest obstacle is the weather. It is so cold! The other day, I literally had icicles in my hair when I finished my run.

One fringe benefit of running with partners is the unique friendships you develop. I have run with some amazing women. We are all married with children, and although we are very different, we share a common love of the run. One running pal once revealed that she ran because "it is cheaper than therapy." I completely agree. I also run for the camaraderie and hilarity that only good running partners can provide. We have so much fun sometimes that it is like a girl's night out, only in sneakers!



Left: (left to right) Rachel Hartje, Katie Barkdoll, Jennifer and Rani Pellet cross the East Patrick Street bridge over Carroll Creek, with the spire of St. John the Evangelist Roman Catholic Church in the background. **Above:** Early risers Jennifer and husband Michael cross-train at home, hours before sunrise. **Below:** Jennifer stretches in a parking lot off Highland Street where she meets others for an early morning run.

March 12

I've started to increase the intensity of my cross-training. Consequently, I'm in pain. Between the core work and strength training, it actually hurts to move. I feel like a walking bruise. Getting on the treadmill is the last thing





that I want to do. But I really don't have a choice, so I do it anyway.

I'm also reevaluating my diet. My doctor says that I'm anemic, apparently a common problem for women who are physically active. I had been thinking that I was just tired from training and trying to keep up with the kids.

My hope is that with eight weeks left to train, I will be able to finish strong. I don't want to spend the last six miles of the marathon in agony. I want to cross the finish line with my body feeling just as powerful as my mind.

March 21

I'm a little frustrated. Although I feel good running through the flat parts of downtown Frederick, the hills of Md. 144 and Spring Ridge always get the best of me, causing me to walk.

It is interesting that although you spend months physically training for the race, if you neglect to prepare yourself mentally, you simply won't make it. As the saying goes, it's "mind over matter." Everyone develops some type of strategy to get them to the finish line. I am a quote collector. Every time I feel that I just can't possibly run another 10 minutes, I pull out a quote—like "Your life is an occasion, rise to it" or "Pain is temporary, pride is forever" or "My sport is your sport's punishment"—and it gets me through.

April 5

Life is definitely getting in the way. It's terrible timing. I've started a new job, which has necessitated that I adjust my workout schedule. Now I run more at night, or I split the run into two shorter distances. Plus, my long runs are getting more intense, requiring a bigger time commitment. We even had to cut short a visit to



Top: Katie Barkdoll and Jennifer run along a walking trail in the Spring Ridge community. **Above:** With race day quickly approaching, the two running partners are up to the challenge.

family in New Jersey this weekend just so I could get in a 20-mile training run. My husband has had to take charge of the kids and shuttle them around to their activities. I've been missing out. I sometimes wonder if it is all worth it.

April 8

Race day is quickly approaching. I'm trying not to think about that too much. We have a couple more long training runs to get in before the big day.

Training is always the hardest part. Running the marathon is comparatively easy. By the time you get to the actual starting line, you have had to overcome tremendous obstacles. You've fought exhaustion, injuries and scheduling conflicts, not to mention your own doubts and fears. You've faced all of this and still you've persevered. You've already won.

Earning That Medal

Not everyone feels the draw of the marathon. I understand that. Most of my friends think I'm crazy, and maybe I am. Let's face it: How totally sane can I be when I pound on my body for months just to run a race?

So why do I do it? That's hard to explain. But any marathon runner will tell you, something inside of you changes the minute you cross that finish line. That's the



Above: Jennifer shops for energy food, critical to keeping the body running during a marathon, at *If the Shoe Fits* on West Patrick Street. **Below:** Katie Barkdoll and Jennifer run along Carroll Creek Promenade near the C. Burr Artz Public Library.

moment when you realize that you have joined the ranks of an elite few and done what millions of others would never even dare to dream. You are never the same. You are elated. You feel invincible.

And in the future when you face life's challenges, you'll be able to look them straight in the eye knowing full well that you have the inner strength to conquer anything. Seriously, how hard can anything else be? You've run a marathon. ✚

