

# Run like a girl!

**When I first started training for the Gold Coast half marathon I realised I wasn't alone. Every night the streets of Broadbeach turn into a public running track. I knew Gold Coasters liked working out, but I didn't expect there to be so many. And I was surprised that the number of women running was so large.**

**I was especially happy that women who passed on the sidewalk smiled at me or said hi. Back in Sweden I also noticed the growing running trend amongst women. It got me thinking. What has changed? And why do women run?**

By: Josefine Hagström

Countless women in pink fill the green grass area outside the Surf Life Saving Club in northern Surfers Paradise. It is 7.30 in the morning on Mother's Day and four different races are about to start soon: run or walk four or eight kilometres. I'm guessing 80 per cent of the participants are women, women of all ages.

The fun run event is called the Mother's Day Classic, and this is the third one on the Gold Coast. Every year you can celebrate Mother's Day by participating in the Mother's Day Classic and at the same time raise money for breast cancer research. The first Mother's Day Classic, organised by Women in Super, was held in 1998 and the number of participants has steadily increased since then. Today over 120,000 people take part in the 37 Mother's Day Classics around Australia.

## **Fun runs the right motivation**

There is no doubt running has become more popular amongst women. In 2009 31% of the participants in the Gold Coast Marathon were women, and 46% in the half Marathon. Last year the numbers were 32% and 50%.

The increasing number of fun runs is a good explanation of why so many women have started running. Tressa Lindenberg, the first woman to reach the goal in the 8 km run this day, is certain the number of female runners has increased.

“Regardless of how fit I am I always try and participate in those charity runs,” she says.

She started running when her son was born. Her son, now 15, has difficulty walking and that’s why Tressa wanted to run - because he couldn’t.

Wendy Fogarty, also participating in the 8 km run, runs two or three times a week to clear her head. Running makes her relax but still puts her outside her comfort zone. She says it’s about self-achievement.

“This is my favourite race. I think things like this make women run more,” says Wendy Fogarty. “What keeps me going today is knowing that a lot of people have been through a lot more pain.”

The fun runs have given women the right motivation to run. Of course men are also participating in the charity runs, but Laurie Brotherstone, psychologist at Life Resolutions Gold Coast, reckons the fun runs are targeted towards women.

“I think that’s hooked a lot of women, because it’s for a good cause.”

So, running for charity seems appealing to women, but still women find it difficult to find time to run.

“Females are tougher than men! But we have to be fairly organized. It’s harder for us, with kids and all, to find time,” says Tressa Lindenberg.

### **Doing something “just for me”**

Women tend to always prioritise someone or something else. Kids, jobs, and even social events are put higher on the to-do-list than a simple 30-minute run. Somehow, we find it difficult to justify the luxury of doing something “just for me”. This is one of the key statements made by women I meet at the Mother’s Day Classic, and other women I know.

Laurie Brotherstone’s experience is that men are better at saying “this is important to me”. Men finish work, and then they go for a run. After the run, they can schedule something else.

“Women try to juggle around so it fits more people around them. That seems to be the message I get, how women structure their lives. Training comes last sometimes. That’s why they like running once they get started. Running is a way to escape from other responsibilities, like children and work. It means freedom,” she says.

Of course the very first one to finish eight kilometres in the Gold Coast Mother's Day Classic is a man. The women I talk to this sunny morning in May all agree on the same thing: men are more competitive. And of course they are physically stronger, no arguments there.

Also, people have started realising that running is something you can do without participating in other sports; it's now considered a sport in itself. What used to be a complementary exercise to keep fit for other sports – and let's face it, men tend to play sports a lot more than women – is now an exercise on its own, and it's simple. Or as Paula Hamilton puts it: "It requires no coordination whatsoever!" Maybe the simplicity suits the women who find it hard to find time to run. There are no excuses; you just need a pair of good shoes. Being a runner gives you an image, a lifestyle. This image is strongly emphasised in commercials about fun runs and sports clothing companies.

On the other hand, the women I meet think women are more determined. Setting up a goal: "I'm, going to run 10 kilometres", and reaching it, lifts their self-esteem, and at the same time it helps them stay fit and healthy. And by fit and healthy I don't just mean physically. Today we try to achieve a mental fitness, by doing physical exercise.

When a new client starts seeing Laurie Brotherstone, one of the first things she tries to make them do is start exercising. She is a strong believer in relieving stress and anxiety by exercising. Laurie believes that men use running to relieve stress, whilst women do it because they want to feel good about themselves, and get more energy.

Over the last few years both men and women have become more aware of health and fitness. The women I meet at Mother's Day Classic think awareness is one of the strongest reasons for the increase in running. Today women care more about their wellbeing than they did before.

So, trend or awareness? Susanne Ridolfi, participant in the Mother's Day Classic 8 km run, believes it's a bit of both. (But she also tells me she is a "fitness freak", and has always been – she started running because she decided to do the New York Marathon.)

"I don't feel good if I don't run. Running for me is an easy thing, I just bring my running shoes wherever I go."

## **More pink motivation**

“Even though men tend to come first you can still do it all together. Families can do it together,” says Laurie Brotherstone.

Inclusiveness, in fun runs or running clubs, is more important than winning to women.

“Women are more proud of being part of something, than competing against themselves and others. The social part is important, rather than just doing it by yourself. It gives them a goal and keeps them motivated. You lose motivation quite quickly, but if you have a goal, and a whole pile of people do it, you keep going,” says Laurie Brotherstone.

Personal trainer Emma Sidwell, from Embodied Personal Training, believes women like running because everything is “more pink” nowadays. The sporting companies have realised this too; targeting a product or event towards women makes them feel more included, that it’s something for them. For Emma Sidwell running is a lifestyle, and she does it because it’s enjoyable. Today she is taking part in the race with slightly older Pauline King, who is trained by Emma twice a week. This is their third Mother’s Day Classic together.

“Basically the goal is to stay as fit as possible. I do events like these together with Pauline to do better on the next one,” says Emma.

Together the two women motivate each other to do their best. But what do they tell themselves when the training is going really bad?

“We close our eyes,” they say. “Today we held hands for the last two kilometres.”

“A good group of people” also motivates Tressa Lindenberg. The two friends Alison Fahlbusch and Paula Hamilton are part of a running club of six or seven women.

“I started eight years ago because I wanted to look and feel good. They (the women in the club) give me inspiration,” says Paula.

So why do women run? For charity, fitness or mental health? Which one is it? I think it’s a little bit of everything. But my impression is that women are bad at doing something for themselves. They seem to always need a reason, in

terms of another person, or a cause, for doing something. I think it's important that women start running for themselves, and nobody else.

Running is becoming a way of achieving an active lifestyle, which is more important now than ever, now that our lifestyle has become so sedentary. Something so fundamental as getting your body active is not a natural part of our lives anymore. The running trend, if we choose to call it that, is positive, no let me rephrase: essential, for our wellbeing. Whether your reason for starting to run is to lose weight, relieve stress or help people with cancer, the most important thing, *for just you*, is that you do it. Make sure you give yourself the time, because you need it and deserve it. Once you get into it, you'll realise that it's fun to achieve something and getting better at it. I hated running when I started. Sometimes I still do and swear I'm never running again, but for some reason I do it anyway. Because when women smile at you when you're out running in the streets is the greatest inspiration. And now I'm running half a marathon for the first time!

Do yourself a favour and start running. Because really, what would be more ultimate than not needing any charity runs, because we people start taking care of ourselves? Wow, I think I just realised why there are charity runs... By participating we may be sparing ourselves, and the next generations, endemic diseases, like stress.

Or maybe you can just start running for this simple reason: "I run so I can eat whatever I want!" (Paula Hamilton)



