

Are you still running?

by Libby James

It's a question I'm asked with great regularity, especially by people I haven't seen for a while. It's a way to break the ice - an easy conversation starter. Yet there's a smarty little part of me that wants to answer, "Are you still brushing your teeth?" Now, that's not very nice, but what I'd really like to say is, "Yes, I am still running, because after 40 years, it's as much a part of my day as brushing my teeth, and honestly, I hope to keep on running until the day I can no longer hoist a toothbrush to my mouth".

I didn't run in high school or college or during the years when my children were very young. But when I turned 35, I read an article about how the "first hundred miles are the hardest," and I began to run. I did it in the dark, in time to be home to get four kids off to school, and because in the early seventies, women who ran were enough of an oddity that it was best done in the dark. Only four or five years earlier, Kathryn Switzer registered with initials only, wore a hooded sweatshirt, and hid in the bushes because women were not allowed in the Boston Marathon. In 1980 when I ran in Boston, there was a qualifying time for women over 40 only because I wrote to the race director and asked what he had against older women. Will Clooney wrote back and said that if I could run a 3:30 marathon, I'd be welcome in Boston. I did it with 30 seconds to spare.

My one mile-every-day jaunts in the dark ended after I entered my first race at age 40, a 10k. I had a little success, and for the first time in my life, realized that maybe I was competitive, and maybe that was okay. Because I came to running late, my competition has always been with myself, to see how well I can do. It's one of the many things I love about the sport. More often than not, runners offer encouragement when they pass each other. As recently as last September I was helped to run a faster than expected 10-mile time because of a stranger who helped me out by setting a speedy pace and sticking with me.

Running isn't a sport that suits everyone, but for me it provides an uncomplicated way to stay in shape, enjoy fresh air every day, maintain a decent weight, and be in touch with a whole community of people who feel the same way. Races get the adrenaline going, and are often a chance to visit new places and meet new friends.

As the years go by, I am ever more grateful for the benefits of running and for the fact that I can still do it. I now have the pleasure of running with grandchildren. It doesn't get any better than that. I look forward to sharing some running experiences and a few tips for getting started and staying committed to my favorite sport in future columns.