How Running Actually Changed My Life- The Beginning

The term, "changed my life," is used quite a bit. It's used as a slogans, memes, and as conversational exaggerations. In my bio, on the "about" page, I mention that running changed my life and that it was a motivating factor in wanting to open a run specialty shop. Here I want to delve into that a little more and explain how running changed the course of my life and quite probably the length of it.

Like a lot of American kids, I grew up slightly overweight. I was semi-athletic but I was never much of an athlete. I had poor eating habits that were masked by a fast metabolism. However, those habits were exacerbated when I went to college and was solely making my own dietary choices. Gone were the days of playing basketball and running around and they were replaced with reading, studying, playing video games and drinking. Gone were any dietary restrictions. Those were replaced with an unlimited meal plan which included unlimited access to fast food. Within 18 months I had gone from being a somewhat chubby teenager to an obese college kid who made poor health choices. The only real exercise I got was lifting weights. I didn't do much cardio, other than the occasional pickup basketball game while at the gym to lift. As I neared graduation in early 2005 I started to realize how overweight I was. I weighed myself and I came in at 260 lbs. I'm 6'1". So My BMI was 34.3. I started trying different diets. I would cut a few things out here and there and I would make either half-efforts or full efforts for short bursts of time. My weight dropped down to about 220. It actually got as low as 210 the week of graduation because I got strep throat. But, after graduating, moving back to Chicago and getting a new job, I was back up to about 230-240. By December 2005 I was back to 250.

As 2006 was staring at me I made the decision that I would make drastic changes. Throughout December I kept saying, "Once the new year hits I'm making changes." Then, I woke up on December 27th, 2005 and asked myself a question. Why do I need to wait another 5 days? What difference does that make? Why do I need to wait for the calendar to turn? It's just another day like any other. It was epiphany. It is something that was likely obvious to everyone but me, but the bell finally went off in my head. I decided to go to the gym that day (there was one in the condo building I lived in.) I did 25 minutes of cardio on the elliptical and some light weightlifting. I went back the next day. Then the next. I didn't miss a day the rest of 2005.

So, where does running come in? Not where you would think. I lost 100 lbs from my peak of 260 lbs. By January 2007 I was 160 lbs. I still hadn't run at all. Through 2007 and into 2008 I would have some pretty massive weight swings. I could shift 20-30 lbs in a matter of a few weeks. My body was trying to find it's balance and I was trying to find something to grab onto to help me keep the weight off. When you're losing weight your main focus is on losing the weight. I would focus daily on where the scale was going to land. But, when that's over and "the war is won," you feel a bit lost. At least, I did. And, my body seemed to as well. I didn't really know who I was, physically. I had gone from a size 40 waist to 29. My button down shirts went from a 17.5" neck to a 15" neck. My body was confused. And, mentally I needed

something new. In May 2008 my weight was on the upswing. I was back to about 195 lbs. A friend and co-worker suggested we all run the Chase Corporate Challenge, which is a 3.5 mile race through downtown Chicago. Since we all worked for the company our entry was free. I had no interest. I hated the idea of running and running outside was even worse! People would be watching. I would feel judged! I said no every time it came up. Until, finally, I was the only person, of about ten, that was holding out, so I agreed to run it. On race day I was pleasantly surprised. I ran with two other co-workers, held about a 10:30 per mile pace and actually really enjoyed myself. The following week I left my apartment for a 1.5 mile run along the lakefront in Chicago. I ran 1.5 miles out. I stopped for about a 2-3 minute break to enjoy the view and the weather and then turned around and headed back home. I started doing that 3-4 days per week. After a couple of weeks I mentioned to the same co-worker, that I had been running and that I really enjoyed the race and wanted to do another one. He told me he was running a 5k in August that I should run with him. I signed up that same day. It was as if something clicked for me that day. I had a target to train for. It was no longer a goal weight but a goal time. I felt that if I could run a mile in under 8 minutes I would have achieved something. For me, saying you could run a mile in seven-something meant that you were pretty fast. So, I continued my running on the lakefront. I even raised it to 2.5 miles out and 2.5 home after about 6 weeks. When the 5k race day came I was feeling great! I went out and ran a 22:31. It was a 7:16 per mile pace. I had blown my goal out of the water! I was also hooked! The following week a friend of mine reached out and said that he saw on Facebook that I was now running and that he was going for a long run that weekend and wanted to know if I wanted to join him. I had no idea what a "long run" meant but I was very excited. At 5am on Saturday morning I met my friend on the lakefront path. He was locking up his bike and he said to me, "How far do you want to go today?" I just shrugged and said, however far you were thinking. He said we were going to do 17 miles. I said, "I'll go as far as I can." My thinking was that this would push me to my physical limit. I hadn't run further than 5 miles. And, if I made it 8.5 miles out I would have to get back somehow. I'd walk if I had to. I ended up running all the way up until about one mile out. I walked that last mile. I was really proud of myself. And, that part is important! One thing that is wonderful about running is that you don't have to beat someone to feel good. It's about achieving your own goals. You can have 10 runners all racing with each other and regardless of the ranking of first to tenth that they come in they can all achieve their goals. On that day I decided I wanted to run a marathon. Like most people that idea had never even entered my head. But, I'm glad it did! Running became a piece of me. It helps define me now. It's how I've spent the majority of my free time. It's how I met a lot of my friends. It's how I met my wife and was able to have my two wonderful kids. But, it really wasn't that long ago that I would tell anyone who asked that I absolutely hated it and would never do it.