

Inside This Issue:

We walk or run or hike for many reasons.

What motivates you to keep moving, even when it's hard - habit, hope, healing - or something more?

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Catching My Breath By Megan Mogan

I wiggled my feet in and out of several running shoes at The Running Shop before deciding with a friendly staff member named Geoff that we'd need to special order a larger size. As I took off the last pair, Geoff asked if I was training for something in particular. Without really thinking,

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The Path Forward By Mackenzie Fritz

In the words of Matthew McConaughey's character, David Wooderson, in the 1993 cult classic *Dazed and Confused*, "The older you get, the more rules they're going to try to get you to follow. You just gotta keep livin', man. L-I-V-I-N." Now what does a fictional character have to do

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Running Provides By Hilary Heskett, DPT

There once was a young girl who spent several years of her childhood in hospitals throughout the country. In fourth grade she developed gastrointestinal problems that stumped medical professionals. The young girl underwent countless tests, several surgeries, and consulted

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Embracing Life By Lily Liggins, LPC

When you have survived an ovarian cancer diagnosis, you begin to ask yourself, what haven't I done yet that would bring me joy? And if I were to die tomorrow, what regrets would I have? This was exactly what I often thought about after I completed chemo treatments in

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Catching My Breath cont.

I blurted out "I'm training for divorce!" I immediately thought, "Training for divorce?" Oh my God, Megan, why do you have to be so weird and say stuff like this to total strangers? This poor guy is just trying to help you, and you've made it totally awkward and should probably never show your face here again."

Even though I had known for several weeks that I was getting divorced, Geoff was the first person I told out loud. It was like trying on a new pair of shoes to see how they fit. "What does this new identity feel like?" I looked up from my feet, bracing myself for Geoff to make a swift exit. Instead, he held up his hand for a high-five, smiled brightly, and exclaimed "YEAH you are!"

About a week before I met this lovely stranger, I had started thinking about running as a way to flush out the denial, anger, resentment, exhaustion, self-doubt, and loneliness that had built up in my body over the last several months. I had been active my whole life, but never as a runner. I was a Division I athlete in college and continued playing club-level sports during graduate school and throughout my early career in public schools. But running had always been that dreaded "extra," necessary evil tacked onto my training.

As a child with severe asthma, I had a hate-hate relationship with feeling out of breath. And at 48 years old, I found myself out of breath even at rest, sometimes in the middle of the night, due to the ongoing stress and panic of my family falling apart. I thought running might force me to breathe in the most primal way possible. Since my body had seemingly forgotten how, maybe running would help me catch my breath, and untangle the tight knot of anxiety wrapped in my chest for the past several months.

While I paid for my shoes at the counter, Geoff

continued chatting with me and suggested I join a running club. I had absolutely no idea what that entailed, but after listening to my experience with running, he underlined a few clubs on a piece of paper and encouraged me to reach out. Eventually, I contacted coach Autumn Ball at Southwest Endurance Training (SWET) and started training with a group for the TMC Arizona Distance Classic.

That's how I found myself one dark and very cold Sunday morning, standing alone in the parking lot of La Encantada Mall. My freezing toes were spread comfortably in my roomy new running shoes, and I was ready to meet a total group of strangers. I stood there and coached myself: "Do not make awkward jokes about getting divorced. Do not make awkward jokes about getting divorced. Do not make awkward jokes about getting divorced."

The folks in my running group turned out to be an absolute joy – exactly what I needed to feel like I could call myself a runner. It turned out the main reason I didn't like running was that I had never been taught how to do it properly. Not only was I wearing shoes that were too small, but my running form was crap. After Autumn coached our group, it felt like someone had asked me to write with my non-dominant hand.

I had brilliantly planned on using my twice-a-week honor runs to process all my big feelings. Instead, I found myself focusing on my cadence, the way my feet hit the ground, and my posture. When I returned to the group the next week, it was a little easier to run up a hill. These complete strangers became people who showed up on Sundays, laughed at my inappropriate but genuinely hilarious divorce jokes (always coming out in the first mile or so), and accepted me however I showed up.

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Catching My Breath cont.

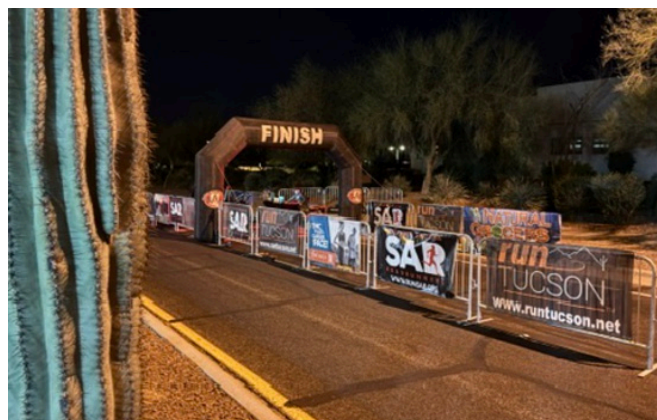
This past week, I completed my first 5K at the TMC Arizona Distance Classic in my new shoes and with my newly learned running form. As I crossed the finish line, I breathed my same shaky and prickly breath. I won't sugarcoat it - denial, anger, resentment, and all the other feelings hadn't magically disappeared after 12 weeks of training. They were all still very much present. But I knew everyone I ran alongside that morning was carrying their own big feelings too. We may all be runners, but we are first and foremost humans.

I still have a lot of work to do and big feelings to work through. It will take both therapy and running. I won't compare healing from divorce to a marathon - I think I'm training for something bigger, something that probably doesn't have a finish line. Learning to run differently and more smoothly fits right into my story right now.

So I will continue to show up on training and race days, honoring my big feelings and forcing myself to catch my breath. And yes, I will probably make awkward jokes in the process. Maybe, like Geoff, just go with it and give me an affirming high five. I'll see you at the next starting line. Bring water and your big feelings. 

TMC Arizona Distance Distance Classic

The inaugural edition of SAR's newly acquired TMC Arizona Distance Classic (AZDC) took place this past March 2nd in Oro Valley. The event was originally founded by John "the Penguin" Bingham in 2004 and the first races (half marathon, 5K) took place on March 13th, 2005. Under Bingham and two subsequent owners the event was held continuously for fifteen years



Early morning on race day. Photo by Randy Accetta.

through 2019. (The less common quarter marathon distance was added in 2011.) The 2020 event was held virtually due to COVID-19, and then it laid dormant for five years until SAR purchased it and quickly shifted into high gear to put on the 2025 races (half marathon, quarter marathon, 5K).

Organizing an event of this scope in just four months took a herculean effort by SAR, the SAR board sub-committee of Craig McCarthy, Dave Dixon, Greg Wenneborg, Lucas Tyler, and Robert Rezetko, and race director Randy Accetta of RunTucson. To them, and to title sponsor TMC, numerous other sponsoring, civic, production, and community partners, many race day volunteers, and to the more than 900 participants from 5 countries and 28 states, we want to say a huge "thank you" for making SAR's first TMC AZDC so successful! We are also especially proud to announce that over \$18,000 was raised for the event's local beneficiary, St. Luke's Home, a non-profit assisted-living community for seniors of limited financial means.

SAR is looking forward to putting on the AZDC again next March 8th, 2026 - mark your calendars! - and we are already working hard to make the experience even more enjoyable and successful! Visit ArizonaDistanceClassic.com for information, news, and updates. 

The Path Forward cont.

with an 800-mile trek across the state of Arizona, you ask? Mostly the sentiment that eventually in life, you reach a point where you have to decide between society's unspoken rules and regulations, and the life path that is going to work for YOU. For some this might be a given, but for me it took a lot of trial, error, and daydreaming to get the gumption to finally do it. I needed to do something that had enticed me but terrified me for the better part of my adult life. So I left my stable routine, quit my job, and prepared to do what was calling me: a solo thru-hike.

By the time I finally got the chutzpah, my friends and family were tired of hearing me drone on about my need for a change and my desire to do something I loved for longer than a week at a time without ever taking action. On the cusp of the New Year, I announced to my inner circle that in May of 2024 (the end of the semester in education speak), I was quitting my 9 to 5 to travel and FINALLY thru-hike the AZT. I decided the worst thing I could do for myself was to not even try, even if the thought of failure terrified me. So I dug deep to summon a little Matthew M. for courage and reminded myself that I just gotta keep livin'. When that stops, when I stop trying to grow and push myself out of my comfort zone, when I finally concede to my self-imposed narratives about what I'm truly capable of, when I give in to narratives of self-doubt and fear, then I know I'm not living the life I was meant to. With those thoughts percolating in my mind, I dropped everything and embarked on my solo thru-hike of the Arizona Trail, and I am stoked to say, it was truly "L-I-V-I-N."

Outside of really needing a change and loving outdoor recreation, I set out on my thru-hike as yet another example that the outdoors IS for women and girls and NO, we do not need to be afraid just because of our gender. Obviously, I

was not the first woman to solo thru-hike. I am constantly inspired by a long list of incredible women crushing it on trails across the world, so I know I did not do something novel or unique. Despite this, I was shocked by how many individuals I personally interacted with leading up to my hike that were aghast, that I, an adult woman, would fathom hiking alone for 800 miles.



Mackenzie at the northern terminus of the Arizona Trail.

The fearmongering was out of control, and despite my good faith attempts to educate the naysayers, most simply could not grasp the concept of a solo female hiker taking on more than a few hours or days on the trail. Now I am not claiming that hiking as a woman does not pose some inherent risks that might not be as prevalent for our male hiker friends, but I do think the narrative is wildly distorted. I can't help but wonder if the people I talked to about my thru-hike would have responded the same way to a man. Nonetheless, that didn't stop me from getting out there like so many other amazing, show-stopping, capable, skilled, brave, competent, female hikers before me, to hike alone . . . and thrive while doing it.

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The Path Forward cont.

Thru-hiking the AZT was the HARDEST but most rewarding journey of my life. When I decided to pursue this goal, it seemed so incredibly outlandish and unattainable. I had a lot of backpacking experience but had never taken on a hike of this length, let alone by myself. Looking back at all of the trials and tribulations, the setbacks and the problem solving, the crazy weather (ranging from sweltering heat in the bottom of the Grand Canyon to a thunderstorm turned snowstorm near Mormon Lake), the injuries that caused me to get off trail for three weeks and filled my head with doubts about continuing (hello, tendonitis!), I cannot help but laugh at the rollercoaster of it all. I cried (more than once), I laughed, I went DAYS without seeing another person, and I talked to myself probably more than most people do in their lifetime. I sang at the top of my lungs, I walked faster and further than I ever have before, and I pushed myself outside of my comfort zone every day until it didn't seem so scary anymore. I watched countless sunsets, I drank water from more sketchy cattle troughs and cow ponds than I care to recount (filter your water, folks!), and I smiled at the unspeakable beauty around me. I cursed the elevation gain, regained my will to hike on the downhill (but not too much downhill because oh, my knees!), and pushed harder than I ever have as an athlete. I hiked for weeks with no rest days when I was on a deadline to finish so I could fly out of the country mid-December. I quieted the voice that said it was too late in the season for me to finish and that the weather would turn bad, and I wouldn't make it over Mt. Lemmon or the Rincons in time before the snow hit. I raced the clock as the days got shorter and shorter and I learned that I am stronger, braver, and more capable than I could have ever imagined. I learned that the narratives we tell ourselves are mostly fiction and we can pivot, change, grow, and learn at any point. I learned that I am a thru-hiker, an Arizona trail

finisher, and I can do hard things. The outdoors are for EVERYONE, especially women and girls. So do it even if you're scared. It is so worth it. 

Running Provides cont.

medical specialists in top pediatric hospitals across the United States. She relied on her family and faith to endure so much suffering at such a young age.

Finally, after several years of illness, uncertainty, and loss, the young girl began to heal. She slowly regained her strength and wellness. One day she informed her mom that she wanted to begin running. Her mom expressed concern that she did not yet have the strength to run. However, the determination that powered the girl through all her years of hardship drove her desire to run.

Initially, she was only able to run halfway around her neighborhood loop. She remained consistent each day and worked up to running the entire loop. After a couple of months, she could run six miles. The next fall she joined the high school cross country team and ran track in the spring. The young girl returned to outdoor recreation with her family in the beautiful Rocky Mountains of Montana. She hiked, biked, downhill skied, Nordic skied, and backpacked to her heart's content. In the mountains she felt most alive. Mountaintop experiences filled her soul.

Fast forward to 2025 and that girl continues to feel a deep passion and joy for running. That girl is me. Running carried me through the trials of teenage years, transition to college, and the challenges of graduate school. Running is one factor that inspired my desire to pursue a Doctorate in Physical Therapy. In 2018 I graduated with my DPT from Pacific University.

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Running Provides cont.

I know the joy of health and fitness, and feel inspired to share that with others.

I continue to run consistently and am pursuing marathon racing at an elite level. I am grateful for all that running provides physically, mentally, and socially. Running has greatly enhanced my life. It provides an opportunity to set goals. Choosing races structures weekly and monthly training. I enjoy consistency and dedication to reach race goals. Running offers me time for mindfulness and moving meditation. It allows for time outdoors and exploring nature. Additionally, running provides community – Tucson has a thriving running community and SAR offers an abundance of race opportunities for all ages and abilities.

As a physical therapist at Desert Palms PT, I enjoy helping others achieve their optimal functional capability. Everyone can benefit from physical therapy, from someone who is new to running and needs guidance on strengthening and their running form, to a seasoned runner who experiences areas of discomfort or movement dysfunction, to those interested in injury prevention. When we use our bodies and perform high-impact repetitive sports there is always a chance for breakdown in the system. Even a small weakness can result in muscular compensations and tissue strain. The question is not if, but when, that imbalance will manifest in pain or injury. I highly encourage anyone who is active to have a physical therapy evaluation to assess joint mobility, strength, movement mechanics, balance, proprioception, and motor control. Correcting posture and form contributes to more fluid striding, greater power, and efficiency. By having a strong and balanced body, one can be unlimited in their pursuit of running and outdoor recreation. Life is a gift and I feel incredibly fulfilled in my life as I experience two meaningful joys – running and helping others heal. Happy running! 

Embracing Life cont.

September of 2023.

Determined to embrace life, I decided to become a “yes” person. I wanted to create new adventures with my three-year-old son, because when the future feels uncertain, all that truly matters is how we spend today. So when my best friend from grad school announced she was coming to Arizona for a camping trip, I didn't hesitate. I packed our bags and set off for the Superstition Mountains, ready to share some quality time and fresh air with her.

It felt incredible to be outdoors and to move my body hiking. But let's be clear, I was not a camper and certainly not a hiker. So, when Pache asked me to hike up to Flat Iron Peak—a very challenging hike with a steep climb and very rocky terrain—I hesitated because I was in the thick of chemo recovery and my body still had a lot of healing to do.

Despite my nerves, I agreed to the hike. As I climbed, I felt a flicker of strength that I hadn't experienced in years. For that moment on the mountain, I rediscovered parts of myself that I thought cancer had taken away. I felt strong, capable, and in my element, like nothing could stop me. It was empowering; I no longer viewed my diagnosis as a limitation.

Returning from that camping trip, I was fueled with determination to reclaim my health through movement. I signed up for swimming lessons and joined Southwest Endurance Training (SWET), eager to push my limits. Little did I know, I had mistakenly signed up for the advanced 5K group meant for seasoned runners. Go big or go home right?

The day of our first meeting, anxiety flooded me. I spent all day trying to find excuses to back out.

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Embracing Life cont.

My mind raced with negative thoughts:

- "You're just a cancer survivor."
- "You can't do this."
- "You'll never run like you used to."
- "Everyone will outrun you, and you'll be at the back of the pack."

I took a deep breath, gave myself a pep talk, and decided to show up. When I arrived, I felt like a fish out of water. There was a big group congregating outside at Reid Park and immediately the coaches and runners all introduced themselves and welcomed me in.

We warmed up and then tackled a mile lap. When Coach Brandon announced a 5K time trial, I felt my heart race. I stayed at the back, running alongside Coach Sarah, who guided me through interval training. I gasped for air and felt discouraged as my body struggled, but I finished that time trial, reminding myself that I shouldn't compare my current performance to the runner I once was.

I realized that my journey was unique. I was a six-month ovarian cancer survivor, focused on regaining my cardiovascular health. My only competition was myself, and my job was to show up consistently. Yet the following month, I wrestled with the same negative thoughts, battling excuses that tried to convince me to skip running. Still, I developed a discipline that pushed me through.

When the goal race—TMC's Meet Me Downtown 5K—arrived in May, I felt ready. It was a hot night, but I managed to shave off a minute and a half from my previous time. I was proud of my progress and eager to continue. I decided to join STaT—Strength, Track & Trail—where I discovered a love for early morning runs on trails. Waking up before dawn became my new routine, and I cherished those moments watching the sunrise

over the mountains. I felt stronger and more focused, repeating mantras like "I am healthy, I am strong, I am whole" to motivate myself.

As summer training came to a close, I sought an even bigger challenge: a half marathon. Inspired by my fellow ovarian cancer survivor, Meredith, who has been an advocate for the National Ovarian Cancer Coalition (NOCC) for over twenty years, I was eager to give back. NOCC had supported me during my darkest days, and I wanted to pay it forward by running for Team Teal in the Walt Disney World Princess Half Marathon on February 23, 2025—the exact date of my two-year survivorship anniversary.



Lilly with members of Team Teal.

In the fall of 2024, I joined the 10K to half marathon training group and began to increase my mileage. However, I soon faced a new challenge: neuropathy pain in my right heel, a lingering side effect of chemo treatments. As my runs got longer, I struggled more, eventually developing a secondary injury on my right ankle. I was compensating for my foot's issues of not being able to feel the heel, a caved arch, and improper gait because of the neuropathy. Determined to succeed, I kept adapting my training, switching shoes multiple times, using Naboso insoles to feel my feet when I landed, and even trying acupuncture for pain management.

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Embracing Life cont.

This season of training taught me so much patience. I learned to respect my body's boundaries, to know when it was okay to push and when I needed to pull back to give my foot time to recover. I learned to trust the process and the guidance of my coaches. On race day, February 23, 2025, I laced up my shoes and joined Team Teal at the Walt Disney World Princess Half Marathon. Emotions ran high during the race. I felt so much gratitude that I was running that day and not recovering in a hospital bed or sitting in a chemo chair. I was thankful for my second chance at life, surrounded by my

husband and son, who have always cheered me on.

Surprisingly, the pain in my ankle faded into the background as I ran. I had learned to adapt, to push through without feeling my heel. Each step was a reminder of how far I had come—not just in distance, but in reclaiming my life and my health. I know now that my body has the ability to heal and rebuild strength from the ground up, and it fills me with hope for the future. This journey has transformed me, and I am ready to embrace whatever new adventures and challenges lay ahead. 

2025 SAR RACE SCHEDULE

- **May 4th: Dr. Gann's Diet of Hope Cinco de Mayo 10K, 5K & FitKidz Mile**
- **May 18th: Tucson 5000 & FitKidz Mile**
- **May 31st: TMC Meet Me Downtown 5K Night Run/Walk & Festival of Miles**
- **September 1st: TMC Saguaro National Park Labor Day 8 Mile & 5K Run/Walk**
- **September 7th: TMC 10K & 5K Run/Walk**
- **September 27th: Sabino Canyon One Mile FitKidz Classic**
- **September 28th: Jim Click's Run 'n' Roll 5K & 1 Mile**
- **October 19th: TMC A-Mountain Half Marathon & 4 Mile + FitKidz Mile**
- **November 2nd: Dave's Run for ALS 8K + FitKidz & Family Mile**
- **November 27th: Thanksgiving XC Classic – 5K & 1.5 Mile Fun Run/Walk**

About SAR

The Southern Arizona Roadrunners is a not-for-profit organization dedicated to promoting health and fitness in Tucson and Southern Arizona through running and walking.

Our vision is to strengthen and support the running and walking community in Southern Arizona through high-quality, affordable, and family-friendly events and programming that empower people of all backgrounds, abilities, and ages to pursue a healthier lifestyle. We promote community engagement by celebrating the joy of athletic achievement, individual and group participation, philanthropy, and volunteer service.



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