


The Art of the Comeback

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I've experienced a little bit of everything in my twenty-five year running career: a serious leg infection, a chronic thyroid condition, a career-threatening Achilles heel problem that shut me down for a year, and two babies. Each time I was off, I used it as an opportunity to catch my breath and review what had been working – and not working – in my life and in my running. I have found that a forced lay-off can be a chance to refresh my approach and transform into a more complete runner.

When my first son was born, I had to start by rehabilitating my Achilles as well as rebuilding after the pregnancy. For almost a year during the pregnancy and immediately afterwards, I really limited my running regime, but I came back as a better, stronger runner. Eight months after the baby was born, I ran a 34-minute 10k and 15 months postpartum I ran a 2:41 marathon. Here's my advice for the comeback trail, based on my own experience and the expert advice that I've had along the way.



When I read the stories of the iRun Award winners (January 2009), I noticed that many of them were comeback stories. The truth is, almost every dedicated runner has had a layoff because of injury, pregnancy or illness. And coming back isn't as easy as just lacing up your shoes and running out the door. If you do too much too soon, you could get injured and face another long setback.



STAGE 1

WHEN YOU CAN'T TRAIN, USE YOUR BRAIN

The first step is to reflect, gather information and make a plan. You can start this while you're still recovering. If you were injured, you can even start building up your fitness again with some non-running training. Make sure you've got experts guiding your plan. It helps a lot to have someone who can monitor your progress, answer your questions and stop you from going out too hard. You might want to find a personal trainer who can give you constant feedback and help motivate you. And while you're off, stay close to running. To keep me connected with the running community despite my inability to run, I have directed my energy to good causes like the race committee for the Share the Spirit of Care 5k in support of my local York Central Hospital.



STAGE 2

GETTING BACK TO GROUND ZERO

An extended layoff means that your body is no longer the body you remember. You have likely lost general strength, cardiovascular fitness and probably have had some weight gain. Before you can run, you need to get back to ground zero. In my most recent comeback, from my second child, Christian, I have started by laying a foundation with a focus on core strength, flexibility and gradual increases in cardiovascular activity. I started with gentle yoga and walking, before adding pilates. I actually had a setback at three months and modified my cardio to swimming. As I became stronger, I was able to add pilates and an elliptical trainer.



STAGE 3

BECOME A LEAN, MEAN, RUNNING MACHINE

This stage focuses on building lean muscle mass through strength training. It can be a tough stage for those of us who are cardio-addicts. The good news is that I have used this training phase to transform my body into a lean and strong running machine. I have changed my body composition, resulting in lower body fat, through strength training combined with the right nutrition. My post-baby body fat was 36%; after one-year I am now at 26% with plans to go lower for my spring racing. These changes allow my body to make more efficient use of glycogen needed to run fast marathons. Upon reflection, I have identified that physical weakness has been the primary reason why I did not reach my full potential as a runner. My advisors have recommended an intensive eight to 12-week block of structured strength training. This is not my favourite training so I have found that the right program combined with partners or within a group is way more fun. I push myself harder with friendly competition. So go to a boot camp or sign up for a class with friends. For me, the new Kinesis cable training system is just right. I like the fact that a trainer is driving the class and I can focus on doing that one extra rep.



STAGE 4

EASING BACK INTO RUNNING

After you've rebuilt your strength, and with the support of your medical team, you can finally start running again. This is the moment you've been waiting for, but you can't rush it. You have to start with easy running. If you haven't run in a year, you have to start with a walk-run. Even as an elite athlete, I started slowly when I was coming back, with easy walk-runs. At this stage, it's all about building your mileage so your body can adapt to the pounding. While speedwork is tempting, your body is just not ready to handle the stress. You may even want to use a treadmill at this point, so you can measure your progress in a consistent environment and you can stop anytime without having to hail a cab to get home. While I have found it challenging to maintain yoga and strength training, in addition to running due to time constraints, there is immense performance enhancement from keeping my strength and flexibility. A note of caution regarding training partners: by this time, you are dying to get back into your routine and join your training group. Keep in mind that it can be very easy to overdo it when you are in a group. Other folks may be able to complete runs you which are not ready for. Be prudent and make good choices.



STAGE 5

TAKING IT UP A NOTCH

Once I had been running again for a few weeks and I had the green light from doctors and experts, I was able to increase my mileage even more, then add tempo runs and finally speedwork. But until you get the mileage up, I don't recommend speedwork. A fun and easy way to get your running legs back is to increase your pace briefly during an easy run. For two minutes, run slightly faster while staying relaxed and running smoothly, slow back down for two minutes and then repeat. I find this gently asks my body to step it up and adapt to a faster pace. Repeat this each week and push a bit more each time.

TIPS FOR THE COMEBACK TRAIL

If I've learned anything, it's to use a setback as an opportunity to transform into a more complete runner. The beauty of the comeback is that you've been stripped of the blinders. You're forced to try something new to prevent the same problem from recurring. It took me just over a year to get down to a 2:40 marathon after my son was born. But I came back as a better runner. I was stronger because I put so much into building my base and into strength training. I was able to leverage that strength and toughness for the next three years, so that even in 2006 I won a silver medal at the Canadian Marathon Championships in Ottawa and was the top Canadian finisher at the Toronto Waterfront marathon. Even after a setback, you can achieve your goals, whatever they are.



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