Follow the Road to Recovery

Some injuries can take months, even years to heal. Patience and a well-rounded approach can increase your chances of a successful return to running.

By Tania Haas

ONE MONTH BEFORE MY FIRST MARATHON, the 2010 New York City race, I was the fittest I had ever been. The momentum was building. Since I gained entry by lottery, I felt luck was on my side. That changed, however, when I heard something crack near my right knee when I got up from a chair. It didn’t hurt, so I ignored it and chalked it up to tired muscles. Then, a day later, 2k into a slow run, my right leg suddenly gave up. I tried to run it out, but my leg did not respond.

Days later, I learned the name for this symptom. Runners call it “dead leg,” and the cause was a severe case of Iliotibial Band Syndrome, also known as ITBS. My chiropractor referred me to a physical therapist who said, yes, I could do the marathon, if I downed several anti-inflammatories, strapped on a custom-made knee brace and drastically changed my race-day expectations. I eventually decided not to risk further injury and I reluctantly pulled out. Instead of running with the crowds through New York’s five boroughs, I entered the five stages of grief.

My doctor told me I had to rest and do nothing for a while. It was tough to digest, and I insisted that doing nothing was not an option. A sports medicine specialist agreed that I need to take time off. He told me the injury wouldn’t be permanent, and when ready, I could start building up stronger muscles around the knee. The process could take six months to a year. I had to be patient. Start slow, he advised.

At first, I denied the injury. Two minutes into a run, I would often turn around and limp home. I got angry at my typical training mistakes. Why did I overtrain? This was followed by stretches of bargaining, depression and finally, acceptance. After six months of grieving, I set my first post-injury race goal: a sprint triathlon in July. Kate Hays, a psychologist who specializes in sport and performance psychology, tells her patients to consider biking, swimming and other activities after sustaining an injury. “Often an injury is an opportunity to cross-train, find other ways to use your body that also is pleasurable,” says Hays. “And it often extends your running that much longer.”

With a goal in mind, I turned to professionals to make sure I trained properly this time around. My chiropractor, Rosty Serebryany, created an extensive post-injury strategy. It included Active Release Technique, Graston technique and acupuncture to help heal the weakness and pain in the iliotibial band. Then he gave me a series of specific rehabilitation exercises, geared to strengthen my weaker muscles. “Exercises for the ITB help increase strength and size of the muscle, which help with the recovery process. A stronger and larger ITB can more easily repel ground reaction and shearing forces that result from running,” Serebryany says. While I worked on strengthening my muscles, I needed an outlet to calm my mind, so I turned to yoga.

Riki Richter, who incorporates rehabilitative yoga and pilates in her classes, helped me work on strengthening weak areas and stretching tight spots. “I assess the person and try and remove any misalignments or limitations to the healing process,” says Richter, pilates and yoga director at Synergy Sports Medicine in Toronto. “Common issues I find with runners are a pelvic torque and foot issues. I treat these [conditions] using techniques in order to bring balance.”

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When I was strong enough to train, I asked a good friend, Karla Bruning, to be my triathlon partner. She had a strong record of getting back into shape, even after suffering her own devastating injury. Bruning had a non-cancerous bone tumour removed from her leg in her mid-20s and used running initially as a form of therapy. She’s now 33 years old and has run four marathons since the operation. “Training with a friend is fun and motivating, whether you’re physically training together or emotionally training together,” Bruning says. “You have someone to inspire you and encourage you and commiserate with you, and then someone to share the experience of the race with.”

Bruning and I cross-trained together, and we finished the Tri Sport Canada Peterborough Sprint Triathlon only minutes apart, last July. While I still think about running the New York City Marathon, my focus right now is enjoying a brisk 5k. As the saying goes, the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. And when it’s a pain-free step, the journey is much, much sweeter.

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