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Baking is a part-time hobby and a full-time passion for Jess Collins. Luckily for her running buddies at Toronto’s Pace & Mind, she enjoys experimenting in the kitchen. “It’s never too early for a marshmallow and chocolate concoction after a long run,” says Collins. “My teammates are more than willing to take things off my hands, even if it’s 9 a.m.”

Her baking escalated recently when she had to take a break from running to nurse a stress fracture. While her teammates ran drills, Collins took classes at George Brown College’s culinary program. Her colourful Instagram account, the Department of High Fives (@deptofhighfives), showcases growing skills in cream puffs and éclairs, piping, bundts, muffins, corn bread and pavlova. Peppered among her food posts are snapshots from her running life. Collins documents Pace & Mind runners’ progress and highlights their personal bests and Boston qualifiers.

Collins joined the club in November 2014 after completing her first marathon. “The level of caring for people on our team is incredible. Whether it’s during a practice, at brunch or on race day, the support is always there,” says Collins. “We have really talented runners, and even when they aren’t racing so many people make an effort to come out and cheer for each other.”

One of Collins’s favourite memories was at the Scotiabank Toronto Waterfront Marathon in 2014 when one runner was having a terrible case of nipple chafing. Members of the Pace & Mind cheering squad purchased bandages and applied them to their teammate mid-race. “He looked pretty badass,” says Collins. “And the story has become part of the Pace & Mind lore.”

Also legendary is #RunTOBeer, Toronto’s craft beer running group, which Collins has helped promote. The race combines Collins’s two loves: magic in the kitchen and running.

Collins, who also brews beer at home, says she’s been cooking and baking since she was eight years old. The long runs and intense training help to offset the extra calories that come with all that baking.

With marathon season here, Collins is gearing up to create celebratory desserts for her teammates, and looks forward to getting back on the track soon. In the meantime, she’s focused on her current PB, the Perfect Brownie.

Tania Haas is a runner, yogi and baked goods aficionado.
Pace & Mind
Tough love coaching uncovers the elite runner within, along with your new best friends

By Tania Haas

Sunday long runs with Pace & Mind often wrap up with a brunch at downtown Toronto’s Duke’s Refresher. It’s where runners check-in with each other or follow up on a text exchange or Instagram post. But don’t let the one-liners and zingers over eggs with poutine fool you. This club takes their running seriously. They just approach the social element with equal ferocity.

Pace & Mind is the love child of two former members of BlackToe, another Toronto-based crew aligned with the store of the same name. Nathan Monk, a social runner, and Rejean Chiasson, a 2012 Canadian Marathon Champion, met on a BlackToe Sunday long run. Monk overheard Chiasson coaching another runner, and sprinted up to eavesdrop on tips. Chiasson spent the remainder of the run asking Monk about his running history and goals. Only later did Monk learn that Chiasson was a 2:17 marathoner.

“I was super impressed with how humble he was and how smart he was,” says Monk. “I knew he was the guy who could help me get to the next level.”

Thus began a coach-student relationship. By the end of the training cycle months later, Monk qualified for the Boston Marathon, a seemingly unlikely outcome for the former chain-smoking workaholic in the start-up field.

Monk’s entrepreneurial instinct recognized Chiasson’s appeal, and he eventually proposed the idea of an offshoot club that would espouse tough training and a generous community spirit.

Pace & Mind had a short incubation period and launched out of the city’s innovation hub, the MaRS Discovery District, in May 2014. Run For Your Life, proclaims the team’s motto, can be interpreted as a threat or a fervent life mission, depending on which end of Chiasson’s training you may find yourself. A main goal of the club is to help runners adopt an elite mentality for their personal level resulting in extended potential and performance. The “team,” as they like to refer themselves, is made up of around 60 people aged 21 to late-40s with 60–40 female-male split.

Over a year and a half later, the team has collectively covered thousands of kilometres in customized plans, guided runners to over five hours of cumulative personal best improvements in half- and full-marathon distances, and celebrated major race milestones, including over a dozen Boston qualifiers.

The community branch of Pace & Mind is equal in its intensity. They raise funds for the Toronto Pride Run benefiting The Pride and Remembrance Foundation, and sponsor a child with People to People, an organization which supports Ethiopian children orphaned by HIV/AIDS. Community runs with top Canadian marathoners Lanni Marchant and Dylan Wykes rounded out this year’s highlights.

New members Josie Nguy, 31, and Shawn MacLean, 25, say they each joined the group to get faster. The club’s youngest member, Saeed Osman, 21, serves as an encouraging illustration.

“I used to think that I would just run for fun, but since joining, in less than a year, I’ve gone from a 3:42 marathon to 3:18,” says Osman, who is set to run his fourth marathon. “Being the youngest, I’m picked on quite a bit,” Osman laughs, “but I’m faster now than I’ve ever been. It’s all been worth it.”

Runners are coached in-person and virtually by Chiasson or Kate Van Buskirk (one of Canada’s best track runners) using personalized online training plans that are modified based on immediate performance tracked by the runner’s GPS watch. Toronto runners meet up on Thursdays and Sundays when they take on the city’s more scenic routes along ravines, parks and the waterfront. A satellite Pace & Mind group has also popped up in Montreal. The club’s 20-person waitlist suggests that the tough love approach is in demand.

“I want runners to feel supported while they push it,” says Chiasson. “Just because you’re not a professional runner, doesn’t mean you should be babied on the course. Social runners also need and deserve badass workouts.”

Monk likes to promote the club’s successes like the more than 20 members who have qualified for Boston, the one runner who ran a negative split, or the other who went from 3:15 to 2:56.

But there aren’t a lot of numbers being discussed over brunch. There are a lot of hugs and smiles and jokes thrown across the table, and reunions with runners who are injured or plans for the cheering squad at the upcoming race.

People sign up for Pace & Mind to get faster but they seem to stay for the friends. An inclusive bunch with an elite mentality, imagine that.

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