

TAMSIN IMBER

# RUNNING MY WAY



A TALE OF PASSION,  
DETERMINATION AND ADVENTURE

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PART  
ONE

# The journey begins: My first marathon

## **Running away**

At the age of 33 years young, I had my first baby. What I failed to realise was that as well as having a baby, I had also had emergency major abdominal surgery. So it was a shock to find that, unlike the day before, I was in a lot of pain and now needed help standing up, sitting down and turning over in bed to breastfeed. I could only walk very slowly as far as the bathroom. How had this happened? Only three weeks earlier, bump and I had been at the top of St Sunday Crag in the Lake District. As I had previously been a healthy person who liked going for long walks, I found this sudden change hard to deal with. I wondered if my body had been physically changed forever and if I was now a different person.

There was also the brain haze from being on a worryingly large number of strong painkillers, and dizziness from low iron levels. With a caesarean, unlike other operations, you can't rest and recover. Mainly, you have to stay awake for three months or more! Friends who had caesareans at a similar time said they felt fine and were driving a few weeks later, so I think I was probably at the far end of the spectrum in terms of recovery. I'd say I took six months to recover fully. Two months after, I still found opening our stiff living room window impossible and painful, and four months later I realised that trying to karate kick icicles on

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the washing line was a bad idea. Still, I recovered in the end and was soon happily pushing my beautiful baby boy around the estate in the sun the following spring.

Two years later, I was lucky to have a second child without intervention or complication. This birth took me three weeks to recover from. Much more preferable.

The next four years were a seamless whirlwind of little sleep, thousands of nappies, wiping food off the kitchen floor, baby and toddler groups, reliving my childhood in playgrounds and returning to work. There were lots of golden moments with the kids that I will treasure and some very ugly moments that I will not. It was very tough as I had other health issues and also stress at work. Then my eldest started school and things changed at work. Suddenly, I felt a bit more normal! I wanted to do something for myself.

It was November and once the kids were in bed I started to go for an evening walk in the dark around the well-lit estate in Durham where we lived. One evening, I had a sudden urge to see if I could run. I'd maintained some fitness by pushing prams and hauling kids about. So, the next time I went out for my 'walk' to recover from the day, I tried running. I was wearing the same clothes I'd been in all day, plus a coat and hat, and normal shoes, so not ideal for running, but once I'd got the opportunity to leave the house I didn't want any delays!

I managed to run as far as the local Co-op three streets away. It felt amazing! I felt like I had some space away from everything. Next time, I made it to the edge of the estate, then to the hospital. Soon, I could do one of my 'baby nap time' pram routes running, which was about three miles. Usually at halfway I had to take my hat and coat off, and I rolled them up into the smallest roll possible and ran

with them under one arm. I started to do this regularly. GH (gorgeous husband) is a geologist and is away a lot with work, and when he was away I missed my run. So as an alternative after I'd settled the kids into bed, which could take until 9pm or later, I'd open the upstairs hallway window a bit, so I could hear the kids if I needed to, then go round the side of the house and invent my own step aerobics routine on the step outside the back door. Being dark was perfect as I hoped the neighbours would not see! I guess I could have bought a fitness DVD but that would have woken the kids up, plus I liked the fresh air.

A few weeks later, over Christmas, I wondered if I could run a bit further than my normal three-mile pram route. I experimented with a five-mile, then did an eight-mile route. I was dead chuffed. In 2015 I started to run three times a week, just doing a six-mile route, then early in 2015 a thought entered my head: I would love to achieve something. I wondered if I could run a marathon. I kept the idea to myself and it didn't go away.

Two months later, I told GH I was going to run a marathon. He was a bit surprised. I then 'googled' how long should you have been running before you run a marathon and the shortest times I could find were a year. I found out that marathons seem to happen in May and October. Well, October was nearly a year, so October it was. I'd already made my mind up.

I didn't tell anyone else except two close friends, Sally and Lisa. They were both mums I had met at toddler groups and had kids who were similar ages to mine. I'm not sure what they thought of my plan but they were positive about the idea. I didn't want to tell anyone else.

## **The masterplan**

I searched on the internet for a suitable marathon. I didn't want to do a big, popular one with lots of crowds, but I wanted a road one to see how I did time-wise. I found the Leicester Marathon, which was due to take place in October. The information on the website said the participant numbers expected were about 600. This seemed like a plan. GH could take the kids to the Space Museum and afterwards we could travel a little further south to stay with my parents, so we could include seeing them in the trip too. Great!

I got a book from the library about running marathons. It was written by the people who write *Runner's World* magazine, a recent guilty pleasure publication I had discovered, so I deemed this to be a good book. The most important section was at the back, where it had a beginner's marathon training plan. Unfortunately, I didn't understand half of it. There was a lot of jargon; fartlek, strides, intervals etc. It all sounded a bit serious and I didn't fancy serious. I was doing this for fun.

So I amended their plan. I decided to do all the plan except the bits I didn't understand. This changed it to three short runs and one long run per week. The short runs would be my six-mile route. The long runs would be as long as it said in the plan. I didn't understand the stuff about pace, so I ignored that. I'd just leave the house and run along listening to my music. I copied down the length of the weekly long run within the 16-week plan on to my calendar and returned the book to the library. I got a notebook and started to keep a running log. I decided that if I could manage to complete about 75 per cent of the plan, that would be enough. I didn't want to be in the position of fretting if I had missed a run due to illness/tiredness/kids/

life. I wanted to relax about it. You might ask why not do a couch to 5k programme? I wanted to do this myself.

### **Jumping in**

My training went well. GH was on board with the idea and didn't mind me disappearing after the kids had gone to bed. I did most of my runs in the evening as there was no time in the mornings/days what with the kids and work. My short route kept to well-lit streets and avoided the local teenage hangouts. Not that the teenagers around here are bad, but I thought I might as well reduce the likelihood of any hassle. This might sound boring but it was never boring. Winter in the North East normally lasts until June. Over time, I remember running this route with crisp snow on the ground, in falling snow in the wind, where it all stuck to my glasses, and in a thunderstorm, where I got completely drenched.

After a few weeks, I thought I needed some running clothes. I bought a cheap running top from a supermarket and wore it with supermarket leggings and a jumper. I knew I needed decent trainers though, so I excitedly splashed out on some rather nice orange ones from a sports shop. As it was super cold, I wore an old coat and then left it in a bush on the way when I had warmed up. My route came back the same way, so it was easy to pick it up on the way back. I could tell how cold it was by the distance of the bush where I hid the coat from the house. There was one night I couldn't find my coat. I had to drive back there with a torch and poke about in the bush.

Over time, I started to feel fitter. I just felt stronger when running. But then, my running was interrupted by a two-week chest infection, which was very annoying as

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I found I really missed it. I carried on afterwards. I had made up a ten-mile and 12-mile route around Durham and I also had off-road and pavement routes depending on the time of day. I did the weekly long run mostly on a Sunday morning, so being daylight, off-road was possible. I extended my 12-mile route to make 14 and 16-mile routes but by then it was getting a bit loopy, so I decided to run ten miles out and back along the local disused railway line towards Lanchester and back for the 20-mile runs. I now thought I ought to think about water and food. I bought a small running rucksack that had room for only a water bladder and a small pocket for tissues. I bought my first sports gel; the lightest one I could find from the selection of two types in my local sports shop (sports gels are small plastic packets of liquid food for use during endurance sports. They have a gel-like consistency, so they can be taken quickly and easily digested). I loaded my MP3 player up with *Woman's Hour* podcasts, had a quick breakfast as I can't do anything without breakfast, and set off for the first 20-mile run on a grey, drizzly morning at 6am. After an hour, the clouds dispersed and the sun came out. It was a lovely run down the silver birch tree-lined railway path. The sunlight glimmered and flickered through the trees and there were views of the River Browney valley either side. I was just running and it felt wonderful. I got halfway, had my gel, then ran back. It took me four hours at what felt like an easy pace on the day. I was back by 10am, ready to enjoy the family day. Having now run 20 miles, I felt more confident about the marathon. Had taking the gel helped, I wondered? I wasn't sure. But I read in all the magazines that runners were supposed to use gels, so it must be the right thing. I decided therefore to use a gel halfway on all my

future long runs and in the marathon. Carrying water had also worked well, even if it did taste of chlorine or whatever chemicals they put in these things.

Summer was now upon us and I did a second 20-mile run by linking up all the little footpaths around Durham. It was a beautiful still summer evening. Lots of people were out at 7pm, rowing on the river, walking their dogs, having picnics. By 9pm, the air was cooler and the paths and streets quieter. By 10pm, I had it all to myself. It was lovely to see the whole evening from start to finish.

I did another 18-miler early one Sunday morning. I felt fine afterwards and we took the kids out for the day up Roseberry Topping. There is a little grassy bank halfway down that's perfect for body boarding. It's not too high but you can get up a good speed. We often have races on this (head-first is a good, exhilarating one), and I felt bizarrely fine doing this after my 18 miles. My training was going well, I had managed 80 per cent of my plan. My peak weekly mileage had been 35 miles. It was now two weeks to go and time to start tapering. The book explained this is the bit before the race where you do less in order to rest. so you feel fresh on race day. During this time you will not gain by doing more training, as it has already been done, according to the book.

The week before the race, I felt really nervous and had a sudden panic that the Leicester Marathon did not exist. This was brought on by the fact that the font colour used on the Leicester Marathon 2014 web page was light grey, which I found hard to see, almost as if it wasn't there. I also noted that this race was not listed in my bible, *Runner's World* magazine. Help! In a panic, I typed out a message on the *Runner's World* forum asking if this was a race. I got

some very puzzled replies but they were all in favour of it being a goer.

My other moment of paranoia was on the journey there. We broke the long drive to Leicester at Clumber Park National Trust property. A great 'service station' for families as it has everything you need (except petrol), including a fantastic adventure playground. This was one of our regular service stations at the time and being a fidgety kind of person and disliker of long journeys, I usually relished the opportunity given by having kids to make maximum use of adventure playgrounds. But not this time. I was petrified of getting some 'no more marathon injury'. I approached the rope bridge with trepidation ... and walked past. In a moment of madness I stepped on to a small, raised wooden platform, but it wobbled and I fell off sideways, inducing a near cardiac arrest. Phew, that was quite enough!

After a further long drive south, we pulled up quietly (the kids were finally tired) in the car park of a Premier Inn on the outskirts of Leicester. It was 7pm on Saturday, 25 October and pitch dark. We dumped our bags in our room and made our way to a nearby eatery. The meal the night before my big challenge turned out to be a floury, warm (that's being generous) jacket potato of an uncertain shade of grey. GH looked a bit concerned. I reassured him it was carbohydrates. Probably better than the oily grease that comprised 99 per cent of the rest of the menu!

### **The Leicester Marathon, Sunday, 26 October 2014**

The race was to take place on the day the clocks changed. I set my alarm clock, mobile and watch in the new time for the next day. But I was still worried about Leicester remaining in BST and me missing the start by an hour! So

it was a night of frequent waking and checking the time on my three time pieces, until finally, finally, the time came to get up. I was full of excitement and nerves. I had my kit all ready. I pinned my race number (directory enquiries 192) on with shaky hands, posed for a quick pre-race photo with the kids, then had breakfast, which was cold cross buns. Then we were back in the car getting closer and closer to the start line.

By chance, we managed to find an on-street parking spot near Victoria Park (the start area) so GH and the kids came to wave me off first, which was nice. It was a flat, grassy city park with trees round the edge. As we made our way to the park, I saw runners appearing from all directions with their race numbers on, walking with a purposeful stride towards the park. Ooooo! This feels a bit real now! Eeek! Once in the park, there were runners everywhere and long lines of blue portable toilets with large queues. It was a chilly autumnal day and I shivered.

I looked at my watch (not a sports watch). It said 8.50am, so I went to the area behind the start line. I felt a bit disorientated. There were signs for expected finishing times and runners were now forming a crowd. I decided to stand between the sub 4 and sub 4.30 signs. Someone I had known at university had done the London Marathon the previous year in 4 hours 15 minutes, so I decided to go for this time. She is ten years younger than me. But more importantly, I could feel 4.15 in my bones.

The starting gun fired and everyone moved forward, building up from a slow walk to a faster walk. I grinned nervously at GH and waved goodbye as I also moved away, and was soon engulfed by the crowd out of his sight. This was it. It was on. I started jogging, then running as we went

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through the starting archway. And then, it was off. Into the unknown.

I followed the crowd of runners. There were quite a lot at this point as the route of the half marathon and the full marathon were the same to start with. We ran through the city centre, then northwards through central Leicester along the straight Melton Road. And then, the most bizarre thing of all. We were suddenly running on the edge of a very large roundabout, then down on to the hard shoulder of the A607 bypass. This felt very hairy, not to mention odd, being in a place people are hopefully not! A line of orange cones was the only separator between us and cars going pretty fast. We got lots of beeps, though, and also a car full of about eight squashed people leaning out the windows whistling and cheering loudly, accompanied by the boom boom boom of beating music. They drove at a dangerously slow speed (given it was a dual carriageway), but it was good for us in that it slowed the other traffic down. I have to say it was a relief to run up the slip road to the next roundabout!

The split point for the half and full marathons was at the top. I had studied this point on the map over and over in the weeks before, worried I would go the wrong way. But the reality was that it was very well marshalled and signposted. The majority turned left and a small trickle of lunatics, including me, turned right. It was suddenly a lot quieter. With only a handful of people to follow, I prayed I would not get lost. The route potted around small residential streets on the outskirts of Leicester, until striking out along the road to Barkby across flat agricultural land. It was just before we left Leicester that I had my second surprise of the day. The guy in front of me stopped and, ahem, spent a large penny! Right there in front of me! In the broad daylight on

the pavement! I honestly didn't know where to look! I ran past!

The road through Barkby was nice. Barkby is a pretty village and there were a few nice, supportive locals out watching the race. There was a bit of uphill here. There was a water station being manned by the local sea cadets. There were lively shouts of 'water, water' as they held out bottles at arm's length. I didn't take any water as I had decided to run with my water bladder on my back. I wanted to be able to drink when I felt like it. Some of the sea cadets were shouting out 'high five', so I raised my hand and gave one a big high five. I later learned that High5 is a sports drink and they were handing them out.

It was then further country road through farmland, further villages and to halfway, where I decided I should take my gel. I felt such triumph at getting to halfway. All downhill from here. Closer to the end than the start. I sucked on my apple-flavoured gel, as I had done in training. Feeling mentally empowered from that, though physically no different, I carried on.

Now runners were even more spread out and I could see just one or two runners ahead here and there. We reached a level crossing over a railway line and had to stop for a train. A marshal was there relaying our race numbers on a walkie talkie to somewhere and the length of time we had been held up. That's organised.

There was a bluration<sup>1</sup> of many more miles of field land and unattractive grey suburbs of Leicester, where marshals were present to mark the route. Then we entered the nicer Watermead Country Park. After all the traffic, it was relaxing and comforting to be on a footpath. It is a nice, big

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1 Bluration: A moment of confusion.

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country park, too. Lots of ponds in marshland. Fishermen, dog walkers. A hopeful ice cream van. I was starting to struggle now. My pace had slowed and my legs were really heavy. But I refused to walk. No. I wanted to know I could *run* a marathon. At 22 miles, it might not have looked like running, more of a slow-motion movie with Tai chi-like arms trying to pull me along. The other part of me that was sore, which I was not expecting, was my lower arm muscles from holding my arms up for so long. Supermarket check-out people and hairdressers would be good at marathons, I think! I kept on going and passed a few runners who were now walking. I made a plan to take one mile at a time. These miles seemed really long. Out of the country park, through the houses of Birstall and along the River Soar passing the back of the Space Museum. I looked about to see if I could see my family, but it was all quite quiet.

Then through Abbey Park, which was full of busy children's play areas and families. This sudden activity was a very nice distraction. Then some rough underpasses and into the central shopping area. It felt weird running along a taped-off path in the middle of the pedestrianised streets that separated me from the morning shoppers. My knees were hurting from pounding the hard tarmac for so long.

Finally, finally. I was nearing the finish. I turned a corner back into Victoria Park but could not see the park for the line of spectators along the barrier. There was the finish arch in sight. Yes! Yes! Loud music and cheering people. Strangers to me, but cheering for me. My whole body ached as I tried to run faster through the arch. I stopped after the line. I did it! I did it! I ran a marathon! Once through the arch, I saw I was in the park. There was no one in the immediate area except for two tables about 100 yards

ahead. The tables were piled high with goodie bags. Two women stood with their backs to me deep in chat. I asked if I could have a goodie bag, and they quickly handed me one then resumed their conversation. I cared not. I had done it. This was my journey, not theirs, and I was proud of myself. I had achieved what I set out to do. And bizarrely, my time was 4.15, just the same as my old university friend. I then saw GH and the kids coming towards me. I gave GH a big kiss then sat gratefully on the ground. GH took some photos whilst I chewed tentatively on a glow-in-the-dark bright pink marshmallow from the goodie bag. It all felt a bit surreal.

### **The close of 2014**

At the end of November, Lisa mentioned to me that her 'couch to 5 K' leader was planning to set up a running group for mums in Durham. She was going to help out. She invited me to come along. I was pleased as I fancied a social side to my running now. The meet-up was at a sports centre café. I'm not sure how many ladies there were, maybe 30. Luckily, I could sense everyone was as nervous as I was. The run leader explained that the running session was to be weekly, on the track at the sports centre. This massively appealed to me, to be running on a proper track. Wow! Not sand, not gravel or grass, but a proper red track. It would be rude not to! The following week, the group met for the first session. The leader led a full warm-up, a track session where you alternated fast and slow running (intervals) to the blow of a whistle, followed by stretches (the cool-down). There was a lot of new terminology but I loved it. From then on, I went every week. The other ladies were so friendly. Most were mums like me, wanting to do something for themselves, so

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we had something in common immediately. About half of them brought babies or toddlers in pushchairs and either pushed them round the track or parked them by the side with the run leaders. The leader had three others helping her as well as Lisa. I brought my toddler a few times but found it impossible. My spirited toddler was not happy to sit still for more than three minutes and got scared when I pushed the buggy fast. It was not fair on her. Luckily, she was nearly old enough to start nursery, so it wasn't for long.

The sessions were always well planned. The leader seemed to have a long-term plan with her sessions, meaning she was building us up. Also, her warm-ups were very innovative. She would research or find out about new warm-up exercises and try them out on us. Maybe this was in part from her running leadership courses. It was great to try out new things hot off the press, so to speak. I became particularly friendly with two girls that ran at a similar pace to me. We would keep each other going and race each other sometimes. One of them wore a sports watch and we started to use it to see what pace we were going in the first interval, and then try to keep it going in the subsequent intervals. How she looked at her watch when she was running I did not know.

Another brilliant part of the track session was that it was mixed ability. Going round in circles meant that I found when I was in a recovery (rest between the fast running bits), I could chat to and get to know different people. It was an inclusive and warm group of ladies and we soon got to know each other. A lovely part of the session was going to the café afterwards. It was winter now and the group still ran, in snow, wind and rain. I worked my way through the flavoured hot chocolate menu in the café. It was nice to

socialise with the other mums, united by what we had just done.

Word spreads and spreads fast when it's something really good. In a few months, the group expanded. The leader got us to sign up and register as part of an official group, qualifying us for funding from England Athletics, which helped to train more run leaders. The group went from strength to strength. Monday mornings became my favourite time of the week. I felt such joy running on the track. I loved my new friends who shared this passion. I, along with all of us in this group, thank the leader with all our hearts for setting this up. It was a great end to 2014.