



The Johnston family (Ian, Megan, Nancy, Martha and Rob) log some miles in London's Springbank Park.

# Running in the Family

A VETERAN MARATHONER TELLS HOW THE BEST RACES ARE NOT ALWAYS THE FASTEST.

» **NANCY JOHNSTON**

**M**y most memorable running experience was the 2001 London Ontario Forest City Marathon. I didn't win. Not even close. But I enjoyed that race the most because, in honour of Mother's Day, my three children and husband accompanied me as a relay team.

In 2000 we had all participated as volunteers and that's when

we got the idea to run the race together; as a family of five, we were a ready-made marathon relay team. I would run the first 8 km on my own, each of my three kids would join me for an 8 km leg, and my husband Ian would run the final 10 km.

It was a perfect race day weather-wise, and the first few kilometers went by easily. Before I knew it I was at the 8 km mark and there was my team waving and cheering. My 14-year-old son Rob joined me at this point. He runs with the London Western Track & Field Club, and found it difficult to reconcile 8 1/2 minute miles with the word "race". I had suggested that he might want to train with a little more distance than he was doing however he was quite confident that he could handle "mom's pace". And as it turned out, of course he could. At the 14 km mark, I hoped the runners behind us could clearly see the RELAY bib on his back, as he amused himself by leaping over the traffic cones as if they were hurdles. Rob was used to running on a track and was really impressed with the distance we were covering. We were about 1 km from the relay exchange point at University Hospital when he said with great enthusiasm, "We still have to run all the way to the hospital!"

Turning onto the hospital grounds, we saw the rest of the family, and at 16 km Rob passed the wristband to his 16-year-old sister Megan who would accompany me to 24 km. After about 30 seconds, Megan gushed, "Geez! I'm having so much fun already!" As a high school power cheerleader, Megan is in fabulous shape. Her team's conditioning routine is not for the faint of

heart. But she had never run more than 5 km and I had suggested perhaps a little training was in order. Of course, with the confidence of youth, she laughed and told me I was too uptight. She bopped along, chatting and waving to friends from school and of course had no trouble running "mom's pace".

At 24 km, Megan passed off to Martha, 13, and the only one of the kids to train specifically for this event. Martha was very concerned that she would be the one to slow down the team and ruin our time. (I did that without any help thank you very much.) So when I met her, after my first two bouncy companions, she was very serious and knew she had a tough job ahead of her. We ran in silence through Springbank Park, both working hard. It was a very quiet portion of the race and not many runners or spectators were around. Our only conversation was at the 7.5 km point of her run when she asked, "How much farther?" and I said, "Just around the bend." Martha later commented it was the longest time she had ever gone without talking. You have to know Martha to know just how hard that must have been. Martha ran her leg admirably and passed off to my husband Ian at the 32 km mark.

I was feeling really overwhelmed with fatigue at this point. Ian dared to mention that my pace had slowed and I snapped

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back that I didn't care about my time, I just wanted to finish. You have to have very broad shoulders to join someone at the 32 km point of a marathon. Ian has been there before. I ran my first marathon in Toronto five years ago and Ian ran the last 10 km with me. I was a wobbly, incoherent mess. He coaxed me to the finish line, where I celebrated my moment of glory by throwing up.

Hoping to avoid a repeat performance, he was gamely unwrapping mint candies and PowerGels, and carrying a wet sponge and a cup of water. I struggled for a couple of kilometers, but when we reached a stretch of road with a downhill grade I revived a bit and carried on reasonably strong to the end.

Making it a complete Mother's Day outing, my mother picked up the kids at the end of their relay legs and drove them to the finish line at the University of Western Ontario to wait for Ian and me. My mother had never been to one of my races before. It is amazing how great it is, even at my age, to make your mother proud.

Ian and I crossed the finish line at 4:01:47. It wasn't the time I had hoped to run but it would have been hard to have a better race. After years of watching my children's hockey and soccer games, skating competitions and ballet recitals, it was wonderful to have the family out supporting me for a change. And I think I gained new respect from my children who had never really comprehended what a feat it was to finish a marathon.

"Mom's pace" may not be fast, but it sure carries me a long way. «

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