

## Gaining Perspective in a 5K Race

from Susan Richman

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My husband Howard is a pretty dedicated runner, getting outside almost every morning to run on the worn 'track' through our front yard, around our house and up the driveway loop and back again, logging up 4300 steps on his pedometer during most runs. He likes to take part in several 5K community races each year, and I usually tag along to take part in the *walker* division. I don't run ever. I certainly do get my exercise in these events and work up a bit of a sweat even, and sometimes even manage to pass a walker or two up ahead of me. But I do not run.

However, this past weekend it turned out that the small 5K race in Freeport PA was just for runners. I only gradually realized this as I somewhat nervously began asking the few older women hanging to the back of the starting line near me if they'd be walking or running. All of them even one woman who was 74 and another woman who definitely looked like she was too heavy to ever run even a block told me they'd be running. There was no walkers' division at all. I would be on my own.

So I had a choice I could walk or I could at least start out pretending I was a runner. When the start signal cracked out, I started.... jogging. Call it peer pressure.... call it inspiration... call it gaining perspective on what I could really actually do but there I was, jogging and not walking (I can't call what I did that day quite *running*...). I thought I'd just jog to the first turn in the course, down a few blocks of the town. But when I reached that point, I could actually still keep on going, and I was also having a nice conversation with the woman jogging slowly along with me. I actually jogged most of the first mile, only going into a fast walk during a slight hill. I continued to jog and walk intermittently for the rest of the race and I was astonished I could actually do this. I literally hadn't run this far in many, many years. I ran the last stretch of the way to the finish line, with everyone (including Howard, who was amazed to see me running!) cheering me on. I felt jubilant.

Now, I actually came in third to last in the race only a somewhat paunchy dad and his little 6-year-old son were behind me. I wasn't exactly a record-setter (that 74-year-old woman beat me by about 10 minutes!). For most of the race I was going solo, with no one around me at all so I had lots of time to reflect and think about what was happening... and with how this might all relate to our kids when we're homeschooling.

I began thinking that gaining perspective on what we might actually be able to do by sometimes putting ourselves in situations that we might not have really felt ready for can be good for us, and for our kids. So often we can get just *comfortable* in the ways we go about homeschooling and the level of work we are expecting of ourselves and our kids.

Our kids might sometimes see a certain level as *what they can do* and as there are most day few other 'racers' setting a stiffer pace just ahead of them, they can start to feel that this might be *all* that could be reasonably expected of them. They walk, they don't run. They read these easy books, they don't go for the longer, harder ones. They just do their math textbook, they don't stretch themselves by going for math competitions. They just read a

science textbook with boredom and answer short answer questions, they don't compete in a science fair or complete a personal project of real interest. They just fiddle around on their instrument, they don't learn to play well enough to perform for or with others. They only very occasionally do community service work, they don't put in regular hours at it. They get by, they don't go for it with everything they've got.

How to get out of this mindset? And how to gradually find ways to *up* your personal goals -- and those of your kids? I suggest making firm plans to do at least one thing this coming school year -- or better, each month -- that involves real personal challenge: something different, something that will put you and your child into an event *with others* who are really pushing themselves, so that you will all learn to set your pace at least a bit to these higher achieving peers.

Now, I'm not saying to toss kids into fiercely competitive activities where they are in no way prepared to participate. If I had suddenly found myself in the Pittsburgh Marathon I wouldn't have made it -- I would have been like the one person who dropped out part way through my little 5K race, and I would have probably injured myself to boot. And if I hadn't been getting quite regular exercise doing my morning 'aerobic dancing' and beginning weight-lifting and lots of walking (including a few pedometer days up above 16,000 steps!), I would have been winded and unable to keep up the pace I managed to eke out.

And one of the things that was so nice about this race was that everyone was so very encouraging to me -- folks sitting on front porches cheered me on as I slowly jogged by, the mile-timers and safety folks along the route called out that the race was all about doing my best and not about beating others. Racers who finished way before me took the time to stand along the final runway as I made my way to the end and smiled and cheered-- and they did this again 5 minutes later when that dad and his little boy came in.... and I made a point of going up to offer my personal congratulations to them, too. Find events with this sort of encouragement for your kids. Don't put them in situations where they'll feel defeated just for trying.

I also made it a point to use the after-race time to meet other runners and find out about how they had trained and if they ran regularly -- and this is something I don't usually do. I'm working at using every situation I'm in to learn more and to show interest in other's stories -- and this was my way to do so right then. One woman, who was also 51 like me, shared that the previous year she'd made it a personal goal to actually run in a marathon. She'd bought a book to help her train -- a reasonable book, for the 'older athlete', that recommended *walking* for at least one minute in every single mile of the race. She worked hard for six months, following the guidelines in this book -- and she actually competed in the New York Marathon, and finished! This woman was just a normal, average local woman, who didn't 'look' like an athlete, let alone a marathon runner -- but she'd set a high goal, and did the necessary work day-by-day over time to meet it. She celebrated her 50th birthday in real style for sure! Talking with this nice woman helped me set some higher goals for myself -- and I think if our kids can put themselves in situations where they meet and talk with others who are aiming just a bit higher, they'll feel a new sense of commitment too. They'll find out it's not magic that gets these higher results -- it's day-to-day legwork... or day-to-day 'babysteps' to put it in FlyLady talk (see <http://www.flylady.net/> for more on this).

I also thought a lot while jogging and walking along the lovely Allegheny River, with mist and sun and bird sounds and river sounds that morning in Freeport, about what it means to win in a race like this. It can mean getting a medal for overall top finishers, or a medal in your age group (and Howard was pleased to get 3rd place in the 50-59 men's category). But it can also mean just finishing. It can mean putting yourself into the race *at all*. I thought quite a bit about the fact that although I was finishing third from the last in this race of 92 runners... that I was indeed way ahead of everyone who chose not to take part at all. Reminded me of the pep talks I used to hear at the state level competitions for *MathCounts* with my kids -- the group was told many times that although just four official winners would emerge from the day to go on to the national competition, that everyone there was a real winner for even making it to the state level competition. And then I'd think back to how really in that sense every student in our little homeschool group who had had the guts to take part in the very challenging year-long coaching program and actually try out at the regional level was a winner. They'd set a goal for themselves, and risked *not* winning -- and they'd finished that race, doing their personal best and really gaining new abilities and new insights into what they could possibly do mathematically.

So make this a year of taking risks in your homeschooling -- of setting at least one higher goal that you never thought you'd go for in the past. Find out how to take the 'babysteps' to help you and your child meet that goal. Talk to others about how to go about it. See if you just really might be able to break into at least a slow jog after all -- and finish a new race you never thought you'd even run.