

## MID LIFE ATHLETE **Becoming an Athlete in the Second Stride of Life**

by Ron Lichty

**I never thought I'd call myself an athlete, and I certainly hadn't expected it after I turned 50.**

Who would look into the future and predict that he would become an athlete for the first time in his mid-50s? Who would predict that, after a lifetime of relative inactivity, he would sign up to ski five consecutively more difficult cross country ski marathons in as many years?

Not me. Born onto an Iowa farm with asthma in the 1950s, I was hospitalized in an oxygen tent five times before I was seven. In high school, I had a permanent note on file to let me cut gym class when I felt asthmatic. Senior year, though I made it through most of our tennis coach's tough training, it had to have been sympathy that kept me on the team.

After high school, I didn't do anything remotely athletic until I was 25. Reporting for a Wyoming daily newspaper, I discovered the parks department was teaching adults to cross country ski. I loved it once we got through the classroom learning that drilled us how to avoid frostbite, hypothermia and avalanches. We rented wooden skis and drove up to the nearest pass in the Wind River Range, clipped in, clambered over 12-foot snowbanks, and broke trail in the lightest, driest snow in America. But the following fall, I moved from snow country to San Francisco.

By my mid-30s, I had become a computer programmer. Muscle spasms in my neck and back were direct evidence that being sedentary was a problem. A year of weekly yoga helped. So did starting a regular routine of aerobic walking and hiking. In my early 40s, I added a weight training regimen.

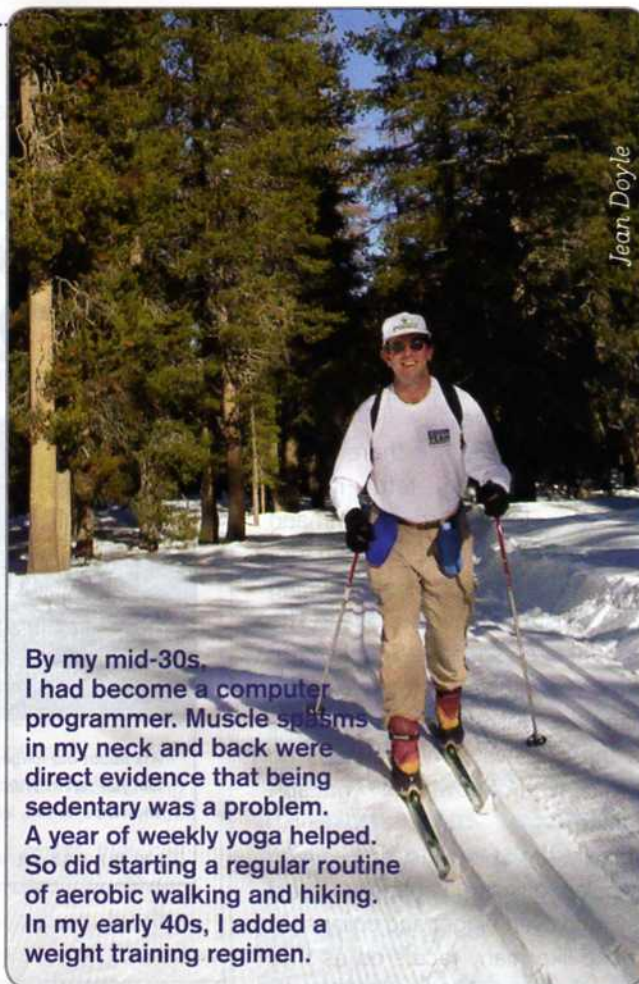
I didn't cross country ski again until our kids were out of college and I was looking for activities to share with my daughter. That led to a few scattered ski weekends over the next half-dozen

winters and to her inviting me to join her on her first backpacking trip, hoisting 48-pound packs over two 10,000-foot Sierra passes for 50 miles. I was still no athlete, but between one thing and another, I was beginning to become fit.

What took me from an every-other-year skier to training for endurance events was a cause. My best friends in Iowa had lost their son to leukemia. Our kids lost their step-sister to the same disease. Both victims were about 12 years old. My wife and

I had contributed to leukemia causes for decades when, in October 2003, I opened a letter from Team In Training (TNT) asking me not to donate but to participate — to join a fundraising team myself. Somehow it felt like it was my turn and my time. Among the options in the brochure was to cross country ski a marathon. A few days later, I committed to raise \$3,500 to cure cancer and ski 25 kilometers in the West Yellowstone Rendezvous in March 2004.

San Francisco is, at best, three hours from snow. Our snow training, which would include two formal lessons and coaching from five TNT coaches, would be sandwiched into just eight Saturdays in December, January and February. We would meet for dry-land training in Golden Gate Park's Kezar Stadium



Jean Doyle

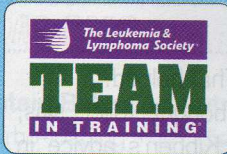
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*Back to classic in his second season after two days of skating convinced him he wasn't yet ready to skate a marathon. Ron Lichty, Dec. 19, 2004, Bear Valley.*

every Tuesday evening, starting in November, for an hour-and-a-half, split between cardio and ski-specific strength, balance and technique drills. Our coaches directed us to do additional cardio and weight-training sessions every week, as well.

Twenty-five kilometers had seemed like a big goal, but the TNT coaches exuded confidence from two previous seasons: they could take ordinary people — people less fit than I, people who had never skied and one or two who had never even seen snow — and get all of us across the finish line. The coaches started us off jogging on our skis, "sticking" our skis on uphill, herring-boning up and snowplowing down, playing with pace, feeling the power of pushing off. I gained efficiency, speed,

# TEAM IN TRAINING



control and stamina.

My teammates and I soon resigned ourselves that, for four months we were going to hurt. But as the season progressed, it got better. I found early in January that my knees would let me run stadium stairs once a week — my first running since not long after college. By January's end, I'd skied 20K in a day. I took an hour's spinning class at the health club to push my cardio. Four weeks before the event, I skied a 31K day. We climbed Bay Area mountains on the weekends that we didn't ski. Two weeks before the event, I skied the race distance without having to break to breathe.

I had just enough training to stride 25K in the West Yellowstone Rendezvous. It took me nearly three-and-a-half hours, putting me behind two of my 20-something teammates, but ahead of others. (This is for a higher cause; we're not competitive, right?) I was exhausted, but we finished, every one of us, 32 in all, the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society's All-Bay Area Ski Team.

Coming off the Rendezvous, I was in the best cardio condition I'd been in since my mid-20s. But I knew I needed an off-season ramp-up to maintain and improve. A teammate partnered with me to continue running stadium stairs once a week. I kept up the extra cardio. I worked on balance while I watched TV.

Going into my second season with now a year of cardio and balance work, I set a new goal of 35 kilometers. I felt inspired by Bill McKibben's skiing memoir, *Long Distance: A Year of Living Strenuously*. I bought a heart-rate monitor and began targeting long slow distance (LSD) as a training goal. I took all the advice our endurance coaches had to offer and pressed for more. And I kept running stairs after my second season was over — this time with a few more teammates.

My third season, TNT moved our  
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Team in Training, the organization that inspired author Ron Lichty to cross country ski a marathon on behalf of curing cancer, is the athletic fundraising arm of the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society. TNT is the oldest and largest endurance sports training program in the world.

The society uses at least 74 cents of every dollar raised for cancer programs, funding research to find cures for leukemia, Hodgkin's and non-Hodgkin's lymphomas, and myeloma — the blood cancers — as well as assistance with the sometimes enormous burdens faced by patients currently fighting blood cancers and their families.

Cancer treatments have improved dramatically. In 1949, the year the society was founded, children diagnosed with one of the common forms of childhood leukemia had a zero percent chance of survival. The society was founded that year by a family devastated by the death of their 16-year-old son. Today, that form of leukemia is considered the most 'curable' form of blood cancer. Despite the advances, though, someone is diagnosed with a blood cancer every five minutes, and half will not survive five years.

TNT was formed in 1988 out of the fundraising success seen when a leukemia parent pulled together a team to run the New York Marathon in honor of their daughter, who had survived leukemia. That first team of 38 runners raised \$322,000 for the society's local upstate New York chapter. Since then, Team in Training teams have raised over \$800 million for the cause and focused attention on the need for a cure.

Team in Training says that it is "about ordinary people who want to do something extraordinary for a day, helping extraordinary people who just want to feel ordinary for a day." TNT, with chapters in population centers all over the country, will this year train more than 30,000 runners, walkers, cyclists, triathletes and skiers who will participate in

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**ALASKA**

destination and I set a goal of striding the Tour of Anchorage's 50K race. I was not only doing the coaches' maximum training, but I was asking them for an individualized training plan and going back out after the rest of the team had come in. Midway through the season, my coach awarded me the stuffed moose for "finally learning to ski." For three years, he had watched me struggle with balance and weight-shift and getting on top of each ski, and now he was seeing me actually do them. My confidence was boosted by having eked out the event distance in a practice run two weeks before the event.

It took me just under seven hours to stride 50K in Anchorage,

I'd long admired the skate skiers, but a skating lesson in my first season with TNT had failed miserably. I promised myself that I would learn to skate in five years, and I'd done a little more learning each year. I was ahead of plan in 2006-7, my fourth season, when I set my goal to skate 25K. Just half my previous distance, it was by far the hardest goal I'd set. Unlike striding, which has a low gear, skating seemed to only have medium and high, and without technique, only high. My heart-rate was through the roof. I was frequently stopping to gasp for air. Hills were murder. The rigor was intense. But I was gradually getting inklings of aptitude.


Only half jokingly, I've told friends that I finally learned to skate during the 2007 Tour of Anchorage. The long flat section that had seemed to go on forever the previous year just flew by. But the last 8K in Kincaid Park, which I had relished as a strider for finally offering variation, was not just the one monster hill I remembered but a whole series of impossible hills. TNT had drilled us to remember, in times like those, the much harder endurance challenge faced by the cancer patients we

were honoring. That helped.

Last May, I bought roller skis, following Bill McKibben's advice in this magazine a couple of years ago. I've seen dramatic results, at least on asphalt. On our very flat, eight-mile-roundtrip Shoreline Trail, in just a few months I increased my aerobic capacity and technique enough to cut my time almost in half! I had skated 25K in Anchorage thinking I could not possibly set the bar higher. But I am now training to skate 40K in my fifth fundraising ski season this year. Striving for more, I even wonder if I could skate 40K in the time it took me to skate 25K last season.

I suppose I became an athlete a good year or more before I recognized myself as one. Using the word 'athlete' was just not part of my self-image. In fact, my friends recognized it long before I did. I realized the irony when I saw them ignoring all of what they'd known of my history of asthma and knee problems to ask if I'd always been an athlete!

**I'm lucky. Not every 50-something's ailments lend themselves to endurance training. I've been able to discover just how dramatically someone can change his life. My own body had always been a challenge, but I'd never used my body to meet a challenge. Now I have. On the way to curing cancer, I became an athlete.**

You can follow Ron's progress with his goal to skate 40K in the Tour of Anchorage this year at: [www.active.com/donate/tntgsf/RonLichty2008](http://www.active.com/donate/tntgsf/RonLichty2008). 

the world's major marathons, triathlons and century rides on behalf of the society.

Six years ago, the Greater San Francisco Bay Area Chapter pioneered a cross country ski team, training participants for 25K and 50K marathons. This season, the Washington Alaska Chapter will become the second to train a ski team.

**It's the unique mix of sport, coaching, car-pooling, cause and camaraderie that has drawn Lichty back to Team in Training for five consecutive years to ski five consecutively harder events. Now a software engineering executive, he says, "Training with TNT and fundraising to cure cancer has been one of the exceptional experiences of my life."**

By the way, the best way to get a smile from a TNT athlete (after supporting their fundraising campaign, of course) is to yell, "Go, Team!"

*Ron Lichty has managed software development and technology change at Apple, Fujitsu, Schwab, Berkeley Systems, Razorfish, Socialtext and Forensic Logic. He was in charge of Macintosh desktop UI development at Apple, was the VP leading Schwab's Java Technology and reuse initiatives and recently has led engineering on wikis at Socialtext and public-safety-agency collaboration and data sharing at Forensic Logic. He has been awarded three patents and has published four books and is presently completing a fifth. He has had hundreds of articles published as a freelance writer in New York and San Francisco and as a reporter/photographer for a Wyoming daily newspaper.*