

Running & Pregnancy Part 1: REAL-LIFE INSIGHTS & USEFUL ADVICE

by Tiffany Bonasera

Being a mum-to-be doesn't mean you have to abandon your training routine. Tiffany Bonasera speaks with two elite female distance runners about their experiences in combining running with pregnancy.

I'M 30. Yes, the big 3-0. I can't believe it. It's taken me about six months to feel comfortable telling people how old I am and I'm not really sure why. It probably has something to do with all the things I thought I would be doing, or would have done, by the time I turned 30. Admittedly, having children by now is one of them. I'm in that age group where conversations about hangovers and late night antics have been replaced by talk of babies - who's having them, due dates, names, ultrasounds, and so on. It's happened like the flick of a switch and here I am worried about my next training session! Inevitably, my well-meaning friends turn to me and ask when we're planning to start a family and I find myself unable to give them a straight answer.

Like many female runners, for me, the joy of potentially having a baby is coupled with feelings of anxiety when confronted with the prospect of a long layoff from my regular training routine and timeout from competition.

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Typically, runners are addicted to the high that training and racing gives them and being pregnant offers a challenging scenario: on one hand you would like to keep running for your own sanity, and on the other hand, there's the desire to do the right thing by your unborn child. The dilemma is quite a unique one because people who are not accustomed to regular training fail to really understand why one would want to maintain a running routine when pregnant and this is likely to weigh on the conscience of any mum-to-be.

Being pregnant has an enormous physical impact on women, including an increased heart rate, lung and oxygen changes, temperature regulation, different energy requirements, loosening of the joints and ligaments and an altered centre of balance as the baby grows.

Two women who have first-hand experience with running when pregnant are three-time Australian World Cross Country representative, the amazing Liz Miller, and the winner of last year's Canberra Marathon and the Melbourne Marathon in 2004, Billinda Schipp. This article will explore some of their experiences in an effort

to dispel some of the myths about running while pregnant, as well as offer some practical advice and interesting insights.

Training challenges: everyone's different

According to 42-year-old Liz Miller, who 13 years ago was pregnant with her first son Jack, there was little information and no real precedent about the impact of running on mums-to-be, particularly at the elite level. She says she was determined to maintain her fitness as best she could and credits her running-friendly obstetrician with giving her the confidence to continue a modified training program.

However, her idealistic plans were quashed because she suffered terrible morning sickness in the first trimester and was forced to reduce her mileage significantly from the outset. "I just felt revolting," says Liz. "The only time I felt good was when I was eating and when I was doing gentle exercise, which was a 45-minute run at the most."

In the beginning she was unable to run with intensity but substituted her quality running sessions with pool running. One of Liz's sessions would include a 500m warm-up followed by running efforts in the water - like a fartlek session - and a 500m warm-down. "It meant that I was never overheating and it was non-weight bearing," says Liz. "It was more about feeling good. But my arms got really strong!"

Resigned to the fact her training was going to be different while pregnant, Liz says she even attempted an aqua aerobics class designed specifically for pregnant women. But when everyone was asked at the end of her first class to take their heart rates, the teacher commented to Liz that hers wasn't high enough. That was the beginning of the end for Liz, who retorted that they weren't working hard enough for her heart rate to climb very high: "Pregnancy and aqua aerobics just didn't work for me," she laughs. Instead, Liz says she got into a routine of running one day and swimming/pool running the next. She managed to keep swimming until the day Jack was born.

Due to give birth later this year, 31-year-old Billinda Schipp has luckily experienced a morning sickness-free first trimester. "Before I knew I

was pregnant, I was coming back from a stress fracture and I found myself really short of breath and my heart rate was going up really quickly," admitted Billinda. "At first I thought it was just because I was lacking fitness. But looking back, it had more to do with the pregnancy and the adjustment of hormones."

It has also been a big adjustment period for Billinda, who says she's been torn between wanting to run and looking after the health of her unborn baby. But her obstetrician, who is supportive of her training, has encouraged her to continue exercising as long as she listens to her body. "In the first three months I was really anxious because I was hoping I was doing the right thing. But after three months, literally to the day, I started to feel better," she says.

Being pregnant during summer, because of the extreme humidity Billinda has had to reduce her running mileage more than she would have anticipated. She's finding that for someone who could comfortably run for three hours prior to being pregnant, a 40-minute run is quite taxing. "It's terrible. It's a constant feeling of being unfit," she says. "As my husband keeps saying, 'Welcome to my world,'" she says.

Now into her second trimester, Billinda says she often wakes in the morning, forgetful of being pregnant. But reality quickly kicks in. "I wake up feeling good and somehow expect to feel good when I go out for a run, but 10 to 15 minutes into it and I feel terrible!" While she is still cross-training and getting out for runs when she can, Billinda is learning to have patience and adapt her training to how her body feels. "Everyday I have to play it by ear. After I run I am finding I am quite fatigued. Regardless, I am very, very tired by the end of the day so if I run, I have to go in the morning," she says.

Being a competitive athlete before falling pregnant is both a blessing and a curse says Liz. As an athlete, you tend to have a mentality that you need to train no matter what. It can be tricky trying to curb that mindset as you begin to get bigger throughout your pregnancy, and training becomes increasingly difficult. "You have to be very careful, especially when you get bigger, because it's easy to lose your balance and fall because your centre of balance changes," Liz explains. "So you really have to make a conscious decision to slow right down."

Body image: coping with changes

Distance runners are generally lean before falling pregnant, which makes the inevitable weight gain an added concern for many would-be mums. It's something that's particularly tough for many runners when they're dealing with a reduced training load at the same time.

Liz, who is now a mother of three (Jack, 12, Lucy, 10, Eleanor, 2), concedes that she was

worried about her body image initially, but soon learnt to let go and started to embrace a commonsense approach for her own wellbeing and that of her baby. "It's out of your control, there is absolutely nothing you can do about it," she says. "In the scheme of things, I think I put on around 10-12 kilos. You think you will lose it straight away. But you don't, and that's okay."

Like Liz, the idea of putting on weight has been something Billinda has struggled with but she ultimately wants what's best for her baby. "It's a mental battle, definitely," says Billinda. "I've got to keep reminding myself that there's a reason for it. In my case, I'm treating my pregnancy as a forced break [from running] because I really believe that things happen for a reason."

Practical advice: things you'll be pleased to know

While Billinda describes her first trimester as a dream run because she wasn't affected by morning sickness, she says her breasts were extremely sore and recommends would-be-mums who plan on continuing running to invest in good sports bras. "You need to get some really good sports bras," she says. "Crop tops just don't cut it anymore and it can become really painful, especially in the first three months!"

Pregnant women also need to go to the toilet more frequently than usual, which can be problematic when you're out running. Billinda suggests sticking to running loops you're familiar with and where toilets are readily accessible. She says she's become very forgetful since falling pregnant, which is another reason not to venture too far from home when running because you might not remember how to get back! "It's best to tell someone where you're going when you're heading out for a run," she says. "Your memory becomes so bad!"

Pregnant women are advised not to over-heat, so wearing appropriate clothing, staying hydrated and monitoring your heart rate are all very important.

Pilates and non-impact training can compliment a reduced program of running. Swimming and pool running are great alternatives to going for a run.

Why you should enjoy the experience

Having been through three pregnancies, Liz says she became more relaxed about her training each time. Rather than stressing about the training she wasn't doing, she focused on being active but also giving herself and her body time to rest. In her opinion, rest from a demanding training routine is the reason runners are able to come back better than ever after having a baby.

Moderation is something quite foreign to many distance runners who are used to putting their bodies through enormous amounts of pain (which is good preparation for labour!). For Billinda, the last few weeks have been a turning point and she's starting to really enjoy the experience - though she still misses her long runs! "There really is something nice about going out running and realising there is now two of us here," she says.

Current research certainly indicates that healthy, fit women with normal pregnancies, like Liz and Billinda, may begin or continue a program of regular exercise during pregnancy. But of course, every pregnancy is different, which means every training program needs to be tailored to each individual and monitored carefully by a healthcare professional.

The key is having supportive family and friends who understand your training intentions throughout your pregnancy. Remember, not everyone will agree that running while pregnant is good for the baby - despite your convincing argument to the contrary. Liz's husband accompanied her to obstetrician appointments throughout her first pregnancy, and learning that gentle running wasn't going to harm the baby, gave them both much comfort.

The days of treating pregnancy as an illness are long gone (thank goodness), which is great news for women wanting to continue to run while pregnant. Liz describes herself and

You can expect to put on weight, but don't let it get you down, it's only natural!

the other elite runners who had their first children around the same time, including champion marathon runner Lisa Ondieki, as "guinea pigs" who simply "felt their way through". But they've given the rest of us who are yet to have children the confidence that with the right attitude and guidance, running while pregnant is achievable.

More and more elite runners are returning to the highest level after having a baby, including

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Manchester Commonwealth Games gold medalist and recently named marathon representative for the up-coming Melbourne Commonwealth Games Kerryn McCann, Olympian Sue Hobson, and relatively new mum, steeplechaser Donna MacFarlane.

In the next issue of R4YL, we'll have part two of this story, which will take a look at getting back into training and competitive running after having a baby.

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