



Returning to running after having a baby requires patience and good time management.

Tiffany Bonasera speaks with three elite athletes about how they find time to juggle training and motherhood and improve on their pre-pregnancy race results.

IF YOU were fortunate enough to see Australia's Kerryn McCann win the 2006 Commonwealth Games Women's Marathon you'll still be getting goose bumps every time you think about it. Her courage, grit and incredible tenacity are inspirational and will be talked about for years to come. But the victory appeared all the more sweet for Kerryn because her family, including her two children, were in the crowd at the MCG that day and she was able to share the moment with them.

My point is; Kerryn is a great role model. She's proven being a mother doesn't mean the end of accomplishing your running ambitions; it's just the beginning.

But the road back to regaining and even improving on pre-pregnancy form, like Kerryn has, is not necessarily an easy one. Having a baby is a life-changing experience for new mums and their partners. There are new demands and responsibilities and your body is also in need of rest and recovery after giving birth. It's both an exciting and daunting time, and establishing feeding routines, nappy changing and managing sleep deprivation may mean resuming running is the furthest thing from your mind.

For many women, particularly those who have previously trained at a high level, the nine months or so of reduced mileage and intensity increases their appetite for running and they're keen to get started again. The type of birth you experience— natural or Caesarean — as well as your current fitness level will determine how long you'll generally have to wait. (Be advised by your doctor).

Three women who have had babies and returned to competitive running are 2006 Commonwealth Games Steeplechase bronze medallist Donna MacFarlane, 2006 Australian World Cross Country Championship representative Susan Michelsson and three-time Australian World Cross Country Championship representative and 2006 Australian World Cross Country assistant team manager Liz Miller. This article will consider their different experiences and offer advice to other new mums who are ready to lace up their runners again.

When to resume training

Mother-of-two Donna MacFarlane (Marcella is four, Gabriel is 18 months) was a talented junior athlete who retired from the sport at an early age when she fell pregnant with her first child. With no inclination to run at all during this time, it wasn't until after she gave birth to her second child in September 2004 that Donna started to jog again, motivated by the need to have some timeout from the demands of her growing family.

"I was a little bored being at home all the time after having my second child," Donna said.

"Running gave me the chance to have some space on my own and I just started really, really slowly."

Her program began modestly. The Tasmanian would go for two 15 minute jogs a week and cover around eight kilometres. She realised after a month or so of jogging on her own that this wasn't going to improve her social contact with people, something

she was missing with two young children.

She approached her former coach Max Cherry and asked if she could join his group. She has since gone on to represent Australia at the Ekiden Relay event in Japan at the end of last year, compete at the Commonwealth Games and was selected to compete for Australia at the 2006 World Cross Country Championships.

Like Donna, Susan Michelsson, who lives in Victoria, says her build-up to running competitively again after having Niklaus, now 18 months, was slow and steady. Susan says she started to move again when her son was 4 ½ months old and targeted the pram category of an up-coming Sussan Fun Run as her goal. Initially, her training program involved walking and then she introduced some running. Her motivation in the early stages was being able to keep up with her training group during their warm-up.

"I certainly had an appreciation of people who hadn't run before," says Susan. "But I could see the light at the end of the tunnel."

Sydney-based Liz Miller, a mother of three, concedes she started training too early after her first son Jack was born. Instead, she advises new mums to enjoy their babies and settle into a routine before embarking on a training program again.

"With Lucy (Liz's second child) I was more sensible," says Liz. "I took a long break and started running again after about eight weeks. Have a break and let your body recover because it's so much easier in the long run."

"I was a little bored being at home all the time after having my second child....Running gave me the chance to have some space on my own and I just started really, really slowly."

Be organised

If you've decided to resume your pre-pregnancy training routine, then being organised will help you fit a session into what is already a busy day. Training may have been your main priority prior to having your baby but this will inevitably change when your little one arrives. Liz says you quickly learn to be time efficient; squeezing training sessions into shorter periods of time.

Liz says she and other mums would meet in the park where they'd share babysitting duties if some of them had training sessions to complete. You can complete a quality session in half an hour if you need to, says Liz. One session, for example, was a five-minute warm-up, 20-minute threshold run followed by a five-minute warm-down.

The other way you can combine training with baby is running while pushing the pram (a jogging pram is ideal). According to Susan, she runs twice a week with the pram. When her son was a newborn, Susan says he'd normally fall asleep. Now he's a little older, he needs to be entertained.

Donna says being organised helps minimise the impact training has on family life. It means getting up for a morning run before her husband and children are awake and making sure the kids' dinner is prepared before heading out for an afternoon session so it's all ready to go when she gets home.

The good news is runners tend to be organised people even before falling pregnant, having long been faced with competing demands of training, work, relationships and maintaining any kind of social life. It'll certainly make the adjustment of including a new baby in the mix somewhat less of a shock to the system.

Training's a team effort

Training becomes a team effort after having a baby. While heading out for a run was once taken for granted, things become trickier with children to consider. That's where supportive husbands, grandparents, friends, neighbours, crèches and babysitters come into the picture.

Donna says she's now got a system in place to manage training and childminding but it's come after much trial and error.

"It's often very difficult to get to training," says Donna. "I've got a system in place with babysitters and my next door neighbour. I still haven't got it quite right and it can be a little costly."

Parents, friends and other running mums provided a valuable support network for Liz as well. But she also took advantage of the crèche at the local gym.

"I would use a crèche at the gym and would do a session on the treadmill," says Liz.

All three women agree, however, that being able to continue training, as an elite athlete, would be impossible without the support of their husbands.

Susan's husband Magnus is also a top athlete and she says since having Niklaus they've established a tag-team routine to accommodate both their training programs.

"It's just about timetabling," says Susan. "Magnus is a huge support."

Even if you've managed to surround yourself with a trusted support network, there will be times when baby needs you and you'll have to miss a session or change it. Susan says you've got to be prepared to be flexible in your approach.

"All of a sudden baby comes first and they're the most important thing. You realise you can have both. I think like anything in life, you just have to adjust," she explains.

Post-pregnancy race results

In Liz's experience, her performances over the longer distances (3000m and more) improved after she had her first child. One of the reasons Liz believes women tend to run faster after having a baby is because they've given their bodies a break from intense training during pregnancy and they're fresher when they come back. A more relaxed attitude to training and racing is another contributing factor.

Liz recalls that before having a baby she'd be very nervous on race day and spend the whole day thinking about it. After having children, there are many distractions and this proved to be advantageous for her. She remembers lining up for a 1500m event where she knew she wasn't fully prepared to run a fast time. But hearing her children cheering for her from the sideline before the gun gave her a sense of calm and perspective and she went on to come second in a smart time ahead of runners who she says were in much better shape.

For Susan, her post-pregnancy performances have so far been encouraging.

"My high point was between eight and 12

Quick tips from Donna, Susan and Liz

- **Listen to your body.** Liz advises new mums to take a sensible approach to returning to running and not make the mistake of coming back too quickly.
- **Susan advises new mums to give it a go and not be intimidated.** Despite your body changing through pregnancy, running is a great way to lose the weight. If you're also breastfeeding, this will further contribute to post-pregnancy weight loss.
- **Have a goal.** Susan initially targeted a fun run as a starting point to regaining her pre-pregnancy form.
- **Meet up with other running mums.** They'll appreciate what you're going through and you can all share babysitting duties.
- **Be considerate of your partner.** Donna says she tries to be as organised as possible and schedules training runs as to minimise the impact on her husband's leisure time.
- **Most importantly, enjoy your new baby and being a mum!**

months [after having Niklaus]," says Susan. By eight months it does get easier. I was waiting for the super hormones to kick in! He started eating solids and sleeping through too."

Within the first 12 months post-pregnancy, Susan won the 2005 National Cross Country title securing her spot on the 2006 Australian World Cross Country team. She also ran a quick time in the Stockholm Marathon finishing second in 2:42.

"In track I haven't (raced a) PB this season, but I did feel better than I thought I would and that was a real surprise," she says.

Enjoy your 'me-time'

Running enables mums the chance to have some 'me-time' in a period of their life when the needs of baby will certainly dominate. Unlike many other sports, running is relatively time efficient and you can get a good workout done without spending hours away from bub. There will also be some guilt attached to leaving your baby, even for a short time, made even worse when some non-running friends raise their eyebrows at you taking some timeout for yourself.

There's no crime in needing some timeout. In fact, running will help you feel better about yourself because you'll be making progress in reaching your targets while losing those pesky post-pregnancy excess kilos.

It's also a chance to get out of the house!

"It's a good social outlet for me," says Liz. "It's good to be a role model for the younger kids in the squad."

For all three mums, the prospect of going away on representative trips throws up (no pun intended) a new dimension. Donna says she looks forward to the break.

"[Parenting] is a 24-hour job," she says. "I enjoy the breaks as I am able to have some time away from the often mundane routine."

They all agree travelling is fun for short periods.

"The first few days are great, you can sleep-in and rest and it's especially great pre-race," explains Susan. "But I can't wait to get home post-race."

Finally...

Some people will never understand the mentality of runners and may not fully appreciate the reasons you're striving to incorporate running-time into your new routine as a busy mum. Their reservations may even temper your desire to resume training after having a baby. It's my hope that by Donna, Susan and Liz sharing their firsthand experiences about combining motherhood and running that it'll inspire you to resume your old training routine, knowing you can achieve your pre-pregnancy race results and even substantially improve on them.

Life may not be the same again after you've had a child but have confidence that running can be enriching and will contribute favourably to your wellbeing, which will ultimately make you a more balanced mum and athlete.

"Running is a selfish sport," says Liz. "When you have kids, you can't be selfish anymore." **RAYL**