

# In My Dreams

**I lost consciousness as an athlete when I became a mother. Signing up for a race revived me.**

By Kara Douglass Thom

I nursed my infant daughter in the dim darkness; the routine of waking once, twice or three times before the sun rose was becoming acceptable. Growing accustomed to less sleep was like building mileage for an endurance race—the body isn't all that happy about it at first, but it adapts.

Her older twin sisters in the next room weren't quite two years old, so they weren't immune from night waking, either: angry molars searching for air, night terrors, or more likely, waking naked in a pool of poop or pee, which is what happened if we didn't duct tape their diapers before bed. And crib tents—that we had to safety pin close—kept them from climbing out to deliver their mess elsewhere. Naturally, as any good mom would do, I lost a little sleep over this, too; wondering how fast I could get them out if our house was on fire.

This not having a solid chunk of sleep is what sabotaged any possibility of working out. Sleep deprivation smothered the athlete in me.

Before children I had accumulated 10 years worth of road races, triathlons, one adventure race, six marathons and two Ironman triathlons. Training often required that I get in both early morning and evening workouts.

With newborns in the house getting up early to workout obstructed my primary need for sleep. No sooner would I get a baby (or two) back to sleep than my alarm would ring. Evening workouts weren't any better. Putting our brood to bed was a two-person job. Afterward I had no motivation to get on my trainer and ride my bike.

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And while I didn't like the idea of my athletic identity slipping away, I was immensely satisfied with what filled the void: kissing tiny toes; nuzzling peachy cheeks, sleepy breath against my chest. Even the mundane held me captive: wiping faces covered in oatmeal, the sensory sensations of bath time; the joy of fitting the right block in the shape sorter. I was witness to the evolution of newborn to toddler in three different children. It was a lot to take in.

I knew I wouldn't be gone from sport forever, although I realized I walked a slippery slope. For many, only a few missed workouts can translate into 25 pounds and a garage sale for unused sporting gear and apparel.

Exercise, mind you, (in the moving sense, not in the go-to-the-gym sense) was not a problem. The one thing that caught me off guard about



motherhood is the physical nature of the profession. Breastfeed and mop the kitchen floor? Yes you can! Change 20 diapers a day? Yes you can! Carry a 25 lb. twin in each arm up a flight of stairs a dozen times a day? Yes you can!

With three babies a double jogger is useless for running. I settled for walking, with the baby strapped to my chest, pushing the twins in the jogger with one hand and holding the dog leash in the other. Part of me knew there weren't too many moms that would go to this effort to get outside and move. Part of me also felt so "normal." After all, I was just walking.

While I so wanted to take off and run, I reminded myself to enjoy the moment, especially my small children who wouldn't be small for long. This sabbatical from sport was good for my body and mind.

But even when I felt physically and mentally ready to lace up my running shoes, I didn't. I couldn't get up early enough in the morning to workout before childcare was necessary and the day's demands left me drained. It made me wonder if I'd ever be competitive again. Did I care? I was certain I would run again. But I hadn't yet. Could I even call myself a runner or triathlete anymore? Only in my dreams. And then, only when I could sleep enough to dream.

What I wanted more than to train again was to sleep. With enough sleep I could reclaim my morning and the athlete inside. But in the absence of goals I couldn't find the motivation to get past the sleep deprivation, find the will to get up and get back to training.

All it took was one or two days of "sleeping through the night" to regain some clarity. It felt like a taper for a race, enough recovery to help me forge ahead. What I needed next was a goal.

I remembered watching the Twin Cities Marathon when my twins were six weeks old. I felt like an outsider. I had run 26.2 miles many times over, but standing there watching runners go by made me wonder if I had another marathon in me. Two-and-a-half years later, I was ready to find out. No better way to know than to sign up. So I did.

A funny thing happened. Nightwakings or not, when the alarm clock rang I tended to it with the importance of a crying child. My mind acclimated to less sleep and my muscles grew accustomed to more miles, just as my heart had expanded with more children. The body always finds a way to adapt.

*Kara Douglass Thom, author of the children's book See Mom Run (Breakaway Books 2003), finished the 2006 Medtronic Twin Cities Marathon in 3:53 with her three daughters at the finish line.*