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MAY 06

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# "I Raced My Way to Fitness"

Evia Nelson also lost 35 pounds and met her husband in the process

**I** was only 20 the spring I met my first husband, Charles. I was working in a restaurant and attending North Carolina State University, studying architecture. We were engaged by October and married the following July. I was the thinnest I ever was—weighing in at a mere 135 pounds—and it seemed as if my picture-perfect life had begun.

After the wedding, we moved 45 minutes from campus, away from all my friends. Charles worked nights, which meant I'd come home from school to an empty house, with the television, soda, and chips as my sole companions. Before I knew it, my marriage was unraveling—and my figure was ballooning.

We tried to make it work, but in May 1996, I graduated and became more serious about my goals. He didn't. Our diverging paths never reconnected, and by the following February, we'd separated for good.

I snagged a great entry-level position in Raleigh as a project engineer for a mechanical contractor, but inside I felt like



before



Evia, in 1999, before losing

a failure. I was only 23 and already had the *divorce* label tacked to my forehead.

To ease the pain, I'd shovel in whatever food seemed most soothing. I'd speed-dial Papa John's and devour a large pizza and several beers. I ate tons of fast food and drank milkshakes like crazy. At first I didn't realize how much weight I was gaining, and by the time I reached 195 pounds, I just didn't care.

After all, this wasn't the first time I'd been heavy. I was raised in the South on fried okra and fried chicken, and I was 5-foot-4 and a solid 170 pounds when I joined the high school basketball team. Back then the weight came off easily. I got down to a size 12 and soon

“I crossed the finish line with my arms in the air, as if I'd just won the whole race”

became one of the fastest players on the team. That seemed like a lifetime ago.

## The Awakening

About a year and a half after my divorce, I stumbled on an article about an overweight woman who'd run a marathon. I immediately identified with her story. Although it had been 3½ years since I'd last laced up my sneakers, I set a big goal for myself: running the May 2000 Pittsburgh Marathon. (I chose it because I wanted a flat marathon far enough away for a weekend trip.) I'm goal driven, so

Biking mates:  
Nelson and  
hubby Tim



giving myself 5 months to get in shape seemed the perfect kick-start to change.

Friends and family had one reaction:

“What are you thinking?” I understood their skepticism, but I mapped out my training, starting with mile 1 and working up from there. I was

so terrified of failure that even when we had a blizzard—rare in Raleigh—I had a friend drive me to the gym in his Jeep so I could run.

## Energy In

I began training my butt off, but the scale didn't budge. My mounting frustration led me to a 12-week diet-and-exercise group that met once a week. In addition, we worked with a nutritionist and a personal trainer.

The nutritionist analyzed our food journals. When I began my training,

I'd tried to limit myself to just a few grams of fat a day—the latest in a long line of weight loss efforts. Appalled, she convinced me that I needed fat to stay healthy. She also noticed that I was taking in enough calories to feed a team of elephants. I was eating three times the recommended serving size of pasta and drinking well over a cup's worth of sugar in my tea every day.

I reduced my portions, added back healthy fats, increased my fiber intake, swapped sweet tea for water, and—although it wasn't dramatic—began to lose about half a pound per week.

## Finishing the Marathon

It took me 5 hours and 36 minutes to discover that Pittsburgh isn't flat. I crossed the finish line with my arms in the air, as if I'd just won the race. I knew this was the first taste of a new passion.

I reached my current weight about a year after my first marathon, but I believe my greater success has been in keeping my weight off for 5 years. I've done it by preparing simple, healthy dishes at home like salads and chicken with pasta and green beans, and by continuing to engage myself physically.

I completed my second marathon 7 months after the Pittsburgh event. I was 20 pounds lighter and beat my time by almost an hour. Since then, I've added biking to my sports repertoire. This new passion has led me to increasingly challenging races and adventures, including 17 mountain bike races, 16

running events, 15 road bike races, 6 adventure races, 3 duathlons, 2 international triathlons, a half Ironman, and my first official Ironman last November, which I completed at 160 pounds, my lowest weight in 8 years.

## Meeting My Match

I first spotted Tim in 2000 while mountain biking with a local group. We never actually had a first date. Instead, we began riding a 21-mile loop together twice a week near Blue Jay Point County Park. Afterward, we'd talk for an hour or more in the parking lot.

Our relationship took a long time to evolve. It was almost 2 1/2 years before we shared our first kiss. (I told him, "It's about time!") Still, I'm glad we took things slowly. After all, since my first marriage, I've learned that all good things worth having—a healthy body and a partner worth spending your life with—take time.

—Reporting by Stephanie Forte

## vital stats



**Evia Nelson**

**Age 31 Height 5'4"**

**Weight 160**

**Pounds lost 35**

**The moment I knew I was a success**

**When I finished running my first marathon. That opened the door to everything else.**