

MIND *over* MATTER

Founder uses her expertise in sports psychology and running to create The Runner's Edge

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Even to the most optimistic observer, Cindra Kamphoff's goals for the Mankato Marathon last fall probably didn't look too promising.

The certified sport psychology consultant and associate professor at Minnesota State University was hoping to run a 3:17 marathon, a time that would've beaten her previous best — which she achieved five years and two kids ago — by more than 13 minutes.

She put in her fair share of training, but with about six weeks to go until the big day, an untimely injury sidetracked her routine.

Kamphoff started to develop hip pains after a 20-mile training run. After going to the doctor, she found out she had a stress reaction in her hip, an injury that commonly leads to a fracture if strained further.

Because of the injury, Kamphoff barely ran at all for the last five weeks before the race. The strategy of reducing training miles before a race — known as tapering — is nothing new for runners, but most only do it for 1-2 weeks.

It wasn't the best situation to be in, but Kamphoff didn't get discouraged.

"That's when my sports psychology really came to use," Kamphoff said. "I had to imagine myself still training and still running to feel confident in the race."

Whatever strategies she used worked pretty well.

An accomplished cross country runner in high school and college, Kamphoff ran the Mankato Marathon in 3:17:18 last year and would like to run a sub 3-hour marathon in the future. She is seen here running with Jeff Weldon of Mankato.



Photos by Alex Voigt

Aside from meeting with clients in an office setting, The Runner's Edge founder Cindra Kamphoff (right) organizes weekly runs that are open to runners of all abilities. At the beginning of each run, she gives a mental tip for runners to focus on. This particular group run drew more than 25 runners.

Kamphoff achieved her 3:17 goal, finishing fourth among women with a time of 3:17:18. She was also inspired by her success to start The Runner's Edge, a sports psychology consulting firm geared specifically toward distance runners.

"After that race, I decided that I needed to help people and increase people's awareness on the psychology of running because I got through that race literally by using my mind," Kamphoff said. "We do all this physical training, but we do nothing to train our minds, when really, that's what we need to be training."

Mental coach

In some ways, The Runner's Edge takes conventional methods of marathon training and flips them upside down.

Instead of focusing on grueling training runs and finding a running partner, The Runner's Edge is more about individualized assessment and asks runners

to train from within.

"It's all about forming strategies that are unique to the person," Kamphoff said. "What works for one person isn't necessarily going to work for somebody else."

Take Scott Stevens for example. A 43-year-old orthopedic surgeon in Mankato, Stevens was looking to qualify for Boston Marathon last year when a "disastrous" race experience left his qualifying time short and his motivation in shambles.

"I hit the wall right around the 21st mile, and the rest of it was pretty much a run/walk shuffle," Stevens said of the experience. "It was upsetting to train so hard for so long just to fall short like that. It kind of bummed me out all winter."

Stevens knew of Kamphoff through other runners and decided that a mental overhaul might be the way to go.

After Stevens gave Kamphoff some background on himself — he said they touched base on everything from his goals as a runner to how well he handles stress — she went to work on forming an appropriate mental strategy for him.

The key point of that strategy? The power of positive thinking.

"Instead of focusing on the pain I feel and the distance I have left while running, I'm trying to think about how far I've already gone and how the discomfort is going to help me reach my goals," Stevens said. "It's really something I have to work at and practice because this is stuff I never thought about before while running."

Jim Kalina, a 38-year-old dentist in Mankato and another client of Kamphoff's, said one of the strategies Kamphoff was most adamant about with him was setting multiple goals for a race.

"That way, you're not completely disappointed if things aren't perfect, and things are never perfect in a marathon," said Kalina, who qualified for Boston Marathon last December with a time of 3:13:21 at the Rock 'N Roll Las Vegas Marathon.

Kalina said a big part of what makes Kamphoff such a credible resource is her own experience as a runner.

"There's lots of people out there that have the book smarts to know that these are things you should do, but it's nice to have someone that can tell you, 'These are the things I did to make it work,'" Kalina said.

Study it, teach it, live it

Running is more than just an early-morning hobby for Kamphoff; it's an all-consuming passion.

An accomplished cross country runner in high school and college, Kamphoff earned her master's and Ph.D. in exercise and sports psychology at the University of North Carolina. She recently completed a study on how recreational marathon runners deal with adversity while training and competing and is currently interviewing marathon qualifiers for 2012 Olympic Trials on how they developed their mental toughness.

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RUNNER: Recent award received

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Kamphoff's research is starting to get recognized on a national level. In addition to appearing on several running-related forums and podcasts, she was recently awarded the Dorothy V. Harris Memorial Award from the Association for Applied Sport Psychology for her work in the field.

"It's exciting because I feel that I'm making connections in sports psychology that nobody else is making," Kamphoff said of her studies. "It's not just research; it's applied research that could really make a difference in people's lives."

Beyond *The Runner's Edge*, Kamphoff keeps herself busy with a variety of other running-related projects.

She is collaborating with Bob Pettitt, an exercise physiologist, and April Graff, a registered dietician at Hy Vee, to create RunSmart, a training program that combines the physical, mental and nutritional aspects of running.

Kamphoff is also working in coordination with the Mankato Marathon to form the Sports Psych Team for this year's race.

The team will be comprised sport psychology consultants, sports psychologists and counselors from around the country who will provide mental tips and encouragement to runners before, during and after the race. Kamphoff herself is planning on speaking at the expo the night before the race.

According to Kamphoff, the Sports Psych Team is based off a similar program she was a part of at last year's Toronto Marathon.

"I think it will go a long way in improving peoples' awareness on the psychology of running," Kamphoff said of the Sports Psych Team. "It's also going to bring another unique aspect to the marathon that will make it stand out from other races."

As far as the future is concerned, Kamphoff would like to expand *The Runner's Edge* beyond Mankato-area

athletes by way of Skype and other online means. She'd also like to expand the practice beyond distance runners, as she believes a lot of her mental tips are transferable into other cardiovascular disciplines.

Beyond career aspirations, Kamphoff also has some running-related goals in mind. She ran Grandma's Marathon this year — finishing in 3:19:56 — and hopes to eventually run a sub-3-hour marathon.

And if she reaches that goal, it will likely be thanks in large part to some of those same mental tips and strategies she gives her clients.

"Running is part of who I am and part of my identity, which is why I'm really excited about all the work I'm doing in this field because it's an extension of who I am and I'm doing what I love," Kamphoff said.

More information about The Runner's Edge is available online at www.runnersedgemn.com.