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Health/Science

FITNESS

Preparation is key for grueling events

BY JOHN HANC
Special to Newsday

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For Jen Bertalon, the Great Saunter turned into a prolonged stagger.

Bertalon, a 33-year-old high school biology teacher from Seaford, was intrigued with the idea of walking 32 miles around Manhattan. So she signed up for the 2005 Great Saunter, an annual event held by the hiking group Shorewalkers, in which participants - 200 of them last year - walk clockwise around the rim of Manhattan, starting at South Street Seaport and passing through 20 parks and many rarely seen nooks and crannies of the city.

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"Experience New York City like you never have before!" is the event's promise. If that experience includes trying to walk the last 14 miles with blisters and muscle cramps, then Bertalon certainly got what the saunter advertised. But, as she was quick to point out, she also got what she deserved.

"We didn't train properly," she admits. "My longest walk was nine miles . . . the previous September." In the weeks before the saunter, held the first Sunday of May, Bertalon was able to do no more than 3-4 miles on the treadmill at the gym.

There were other miscues: The turkey sandwiches she had brought for lunch went bad, she opted to drink soda instead of water ("what was I thinking?"), and when the cross-trainers that seemed comfortable enough at the health club began to feel like iron boots at mile 18, she realized she was in trouble.

Bertalon staggered to the finish near the Brooklyn Bridge in a little less than 12 hours. Because the blisters had forced her to shift her normal walking gait, her calf muscles were in spasm. That Monday, at Farmingdale High, she said, "My students asked me if I had been hit by a car . . . that's how bad I looked walking around."

Walt Wright, coordinator for the Great Saunter, laughed when he heard this. "She completed it - I give her credit for that," he says.

Finishing is one thing. Feeling good when you do is another. As Bertalon learned, preparation is the key, not only for the saunter, which this year is being held on May 6, but for the other events that make up the New York area's biggest outdoor fitness weekend: the Five Boro Bike Tour and the Reckson Long Island Marathon/Half Marathon, both on May 7.


The good news is that if you're registered or interested in each of these, there might still be time to train (or, in the case of the half marathon, to complete your training properly).

Want to get ready to roll in the 42-mile Five Boro Tour, the largest recreational cycling event in America? "The number one thing is to do a couple of training rides," says Steven Taylor, the tour's director. "What we typically see is that this might be the first ride of the year. Someone that's out of shape can go the distance, but in terms of having an enjoyable experience, it's certainly better to have done a few rides beforehand."

Taylor recommends using the next two weeks to do some rides, preferably 20-40 miles, along a route in which you'll encounter some hills. "Remember, the 42 miles is not flat," he says. "The bridges represent significant hills, and they're quite a challenge." (Especially, he notes, the steep span of the Verrazano Narrows Bridge, which riders climb at the end of the tour.)

Taking the bike out for a couple of long training rides between now and May 7 serves another purpose: It'll test your bike's fitness, as well as your own. Getting a flat or having mechanical problems in the middle of 30,000 other riders is a sure way to ruin the day. So make sure your bike's tires are properly inflated; check the brakes, and clean and lubricate the chain and the gears.

Unlike a 42-mile bike ride, going the distance in a half (13.1 miles) or full (26.2) marathon foot race requires months of

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