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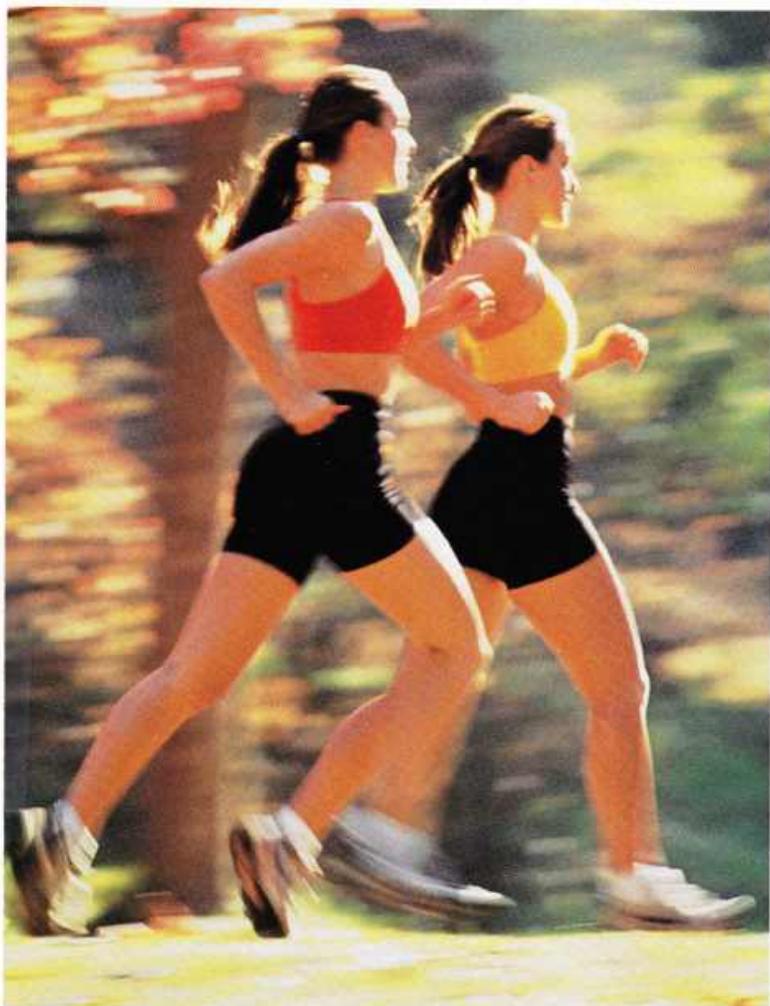
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Running Mates



NOT LONG AGO, MY RUNNING BUDDY AND I celebrated our three-year anniversary.

Every Saturday morning, Cindy and I would meet to share a run of eight—sometimes ten—miles. We'd start out circling twice around a lake near our homes in Austin, Texas. Whether clad in singlets and clutching water bottles under the brutal Texas-summer sun or layered in Lycra and sweats against frigid February winds, we tramped along at a mutually comfortable training speed; our sporadic conversations ranged in tone from the absurd to the intense. What we were really doing was giving each other 90 minutes of camaraderie, support, and inspiration.

We didn't celebrate our anniversary with champagne or a post-run brunch. We were logging in yet another Saturday run, when somewhere between

miles five and six the significance of the date dawned upon us, and we simply said, "Thanks."

We thanked each other mostly for being there, for providing the incentive to complete our most challenging run amid a typical week of hurried four-milers, when we each trained alone. We thanked each other for taking turns pushing the pace when one of us was having a case of the lazies. We acknowledged the support and companionship we'd given each other in races over the years—the friendly competitiveness of a neck-and-neck sprint to the finish; the unselfishness of waiting for the other to fumble with a spiteful shoelace as the race pack stampeded past.

As we ran along the lake that day, we reminisced about the training tips we'd given each other and the ready understanding we always had whenever the other was late for a practice run. We reminded each other how gracious we had been when business or family commitments forced a rare Saturday cancellation. We thanked each other—in advance—for the continuation of our weekly partnership for many Saturdays to come. And then we sealed our verbal contract with a resounding high-five.

Naturally, we assumed that our companionable circuits of the lake would continue indefinitely. But circumstances soon changed. I became pregnant with my first child, and Cindy, a computer programmer, was transferred to California on a two-year company assignment. She trained solo on the West Coast while I stayed put, tramping along at a pregnant pace.

Running alone, with more time for introspection, I came to realize that a buddy is like no one else in a runner's life. We shared a more consistent chunk of quality time than I was able to give my family, friends, and co-workers during the week. My running buddy was often the empathetic ear to my innermost feelings, fears, frustrations, and dreams.

We're back together now, running our favorite course around the lake nearly every Saturday. Cindy has started a family of her own, but we cherish our time together more than ever. She'll always rank as a "significant other" in my life. Hallmark doesn't make special greeting cards for running buddies to exchange, and the florist industry has not yet created a Running Buddy Day. But maybe that's not such a bad idea.

The mother of two, freelance journalist Anne Lang treasures her running time more than ever these days. A lifelong horsewoman, she also writes for equine publications.