

GO! Vegan Triathlete

By Sally Anderson

As the 240 male and female triathletes set out to compete in the Bassman Half Ironman on October 4th, in Tuckerton, New Jersey, some injuries and falls were expected. When Jennifer Clark, a 33-year-old competitor, wiped out during the bike portion of the race, she didn't let it faze her. She got back on her bike, with fresh road rash and blood, and trekked on to finish her second multi-sport race, coming in 31st place overall and 3rd out of the women.

This was Clark's second triathlon, even though she only took up swimming earlier this year. Now she is setting even higher goals: she aspires to complete a full Ironman triathlon by next year. The half Ironman consists of a 1.2-mile swim, a 56-mile bike ride and a 13.1-mile run; the full is a 2.4 miles swim, a 112-mile bike ride and a 26.2-mile run.

"With this race under my belt," says Clark. "I am gaining a lot of confidence in doing a full Ironman.

She is certainly a tough competitor today, but she wasn't always an athlete. Clark started working out when she decided to try out for the rowing team in college. The coach saw promise in her and she has been competing in athletic events ever since.

Her running career began in 1999 as a way to keep in shape after college. Despite her own personal doubts as to whether or not she could run 26.2 miles, and despite her family's doubts that she could do so on a vegetarian diet, Clark finished her first marathon. The following year, she ran in the Philadelphia Marathon and finished in less than four hours, beating her previous time by 20 minutes.

Although she continued to work out, she didn't compete again until 2008 when she once again ran the Philadelphia Marathon. This time she ran with Team Vegan Philly on a diet free of all animal products.

"I felt great becoming vegan and eliminating eggs and all dairy," says Clark. "This required attention to detail in my diet, but I think it paid off because I ran my best marathon ever in a time of 3:43, which was just three minutes shy of a Boston Marathon qualifying time."



She trained for and competed in both of her triathlons as a vegan, eating mostly "spinach, broccoli, tomatoes, whole wheat bread, brown rice, all kinds of beans, peppers, onions, peanut butter and as much fruits as [she] could eat."

"I think being vegan is definitely giving me an edge. People don't realize that animal products may seem like the best sources of protein but they also contribute to acidic blood chemistry, which can inhibit the absorption of important nutrients including calcium and iron. A vegan diet forces you to go back to the important basics that we all know are good for health – fruits, vegetables, rice, beans, nuts and complex carbs."

On November 22, Clark ran in her third Philadelphia Marathon, her second one with Team Vegan Philly. Even though she has several great athletic accomplishments under her belt, she still fondly reminisces about her first race:

"I still remember the day I finished my first marathon, how much of a rush that was and a culmination of a lot of training. That moment made me realize that a lot of things are possible if you commit to making them happen."



Sally Anderson is the projects director for the Humane League of Philadelphia and a recreation leader for the city. She is also a certified fitness instructor with a special interest in health and nutrition.