

TRY-ATHLETE

by Jill Seidenstein

Recently people have been describing me with a word I am unused to having associated with my name: athlete. There are many names I have been called or described myself as, but athlete has never been in my repertoire.

When I was in high school, the athletes were the people who seemed to have all the social power. They ran the clubs that organized events like prom and homecoming; they carried the weight of their triumphs around eagerly, proudly and loudly proclaiming their wins, rattling the rows of lockers and adding to the general cacophony in the halls.

I was an anti-athlete. I trudged through my days, my backpack filled to bursting with textbooks and notebooks, my brain crammed with strategies for surviving the transitions between classes.

The closest I got to organized sports was hanging out with my fellow mathletes. This required waking at the butt-crack of dawn on a Saturday to meet in the chilly crepuscular light of the high school parking lot. From there, we rode on a school bus filled with green, crackly vinyl seats carrying a bunch of acne-ridden teen boys and the few odd girls to participate in math competitions. Pencil-pushing was hardly considered a sport, although I had a mean callus on the inside of the top knuckle of my middle finger from all the years of resting a writing utensil against it.

I can remember team selections from as far back as kindergarten - no one wanted me on their team, even if it was only Red Rover or Duck, Duck, Goose. As the games required more coordination and ability, my desirability as a team member continued to plummet. I was often one of the last kids selected, and then strategically placed somewhere on the field where I could do the least amount of damage. In elementary school, we would often play tag with the neighbor kids; I hated getting tagged, because my turn to be "it" seemed to last forever. The other kids were more agile, quicker and easily slipped just beyond my frustrated fingertips. The same could be said for the games we played in the pool - Sharks and Minnows or Marco Polo.

When I was in middle school I faced the Presidential Fitness Test. It was the first test I had come up against that I didn't immediately excel at, nor could I study for it. I am certain I did the lowest number of sit ups, I couldn't hang off the bar to save my life, and whatever running was required has long since been suppressed. We were ranked according to our scores, and those with the highest scores got to sit lowest on the risers in the gym. Needless to say, when the results were in, I was nearly at the top. I worked my way down by doing extra credit in gym - only so I could avoid getting a dreaded C.

Jazzercise and other forms of choreographed dance routines led by a teacher were the mainstays of my athletic engagement through college. When I moved to Seattle, all forms of exercise took a backseat as I struggled to find gainful employment and support myself. After several years, I was able to return to a classroom. I had walked past the Seattle Yoga Arts studio for years. I finally considered attending a class when I felt both my mind and body tightening. I feared turning into a bitter old woman before I hit 30, let alone 40, and I knew yoga was good for addressing both.

As I have just rounded the corner of age 36, I'm training for a triathlon. This would make me not only an athlete, but a triathlete (or try-athlete as I think of it) to boot. Yoga has been integral to my training. I have been approaching my training with the mindset of a yogi, paying attention to the small changes in my body, trying to notice what happens if I slightly shift this way or that. Years of practice balancing my skull over my spine has trained me to know what the correct alignment of my head to my pelvis is, even if I'm not sitting quietly on a mat with my back in an upright position. Skull loop has been my constant companion, especially in the pool and on the bicycle. I get to ride with my breath on every stroke cycle in the water, focusing on the exhalations and inhalations, just like a vinyasa, when we move through Downward Dog into Plank and then Upward Dog on the yoga mat. Running is especially challenging for me. I just found this week that by focusing on "inner body bright" I feel lighter and less heavy. My training isn't focused on how much effort I can exert, how much further or faster I can go, but on my internal experience and monitoring my internal experience. It's about finding an edge, as Denise talks about, and playing with it; not about exhausting myself to the point where I'm drained, but rather pleasantly tired so I can recuperate and be energized to go out and do it all over again. And my dedication to my yoga practice has carried over to my training, too. Even when I don't want to go out and run or cycle or get in the pool, I remind myself of my intention and put on my shoes, or my suit, or get on my bike and after a short while I find that the resistance I had has melted away.

My sister-in-law, who ran cross-country when she was in high school, recently complimented me on my athleticism - both for my kayaking and downhill skiing. I was speechless; I couldn't figure out how to silence her or disabuse her of the notion. I wanted to reach out and cram the words back in her mouth. I couldn't be an athlete! That was for those other people, the ones who left me behind or more humanely just ignored me. But looking at my activities, I have started to see what she sees. I have backpacked for four days across the Olympic mountains, covering around 40 miles; I have hiked down and back up the Grand Canyon and through the High Sierras, and I have practiced yoga twice a week for over 7 years. I have to admit, I have discovered a new pleasure of the

flesh, and it feels good just to move and feel my body respond as I put it to new tests.