

TNT Coach: Emily Conlon
Location: Los Angeles, CA

1. How and why did you become involved in TNT?

- I started my TNT journey in 2007 by signing up for the San Diego Rock 'n Roll Marathon. I had been a college athlete and, after graduating the year prior, I wanted the physical challenge of something as inconceivable as running 26.2 miles. I sought out Team in Training because of its mission. My mother is a pathologist who specializes in hematology – blood diseases are her life's work. My father is a cancer survivor, and I understand the spectrum of emotions that families face with a diagnosis. Signing up with the team made perfect sense to me.

2. Have you yourself participated in a TNT event?

- I've been involved every year since 2007 as a participant, staff member or coach. I completed the San Diego Rock 'n Roll Marathon (2007), the Honolulu Marathon (2007) and the Santa Barbara Half Marathon (2008) wearing a purple singlet. I'm currently pulling double-duty as a fundraising participant and coach on the Greater LA Ironteam, training for the Vineman Full Triathlon.

3. What do you enjoy most about being a TNT coach?

- Every weekend I am with the team – regardless of the workout, the month or even the sport – I have the privilege of seeing the power of the human spirit. It takes on different shapes and shades, but without fail, I get to see moments of hope and triumph over obstacles. Mission moments at the beginning of each practice set this tone. No matter their outcome or ending, they are filled with the kind of strength you don't witness on a daily basis. That tone is carried on throughout the day. Sometimes it's about helping a participant facing their fear of climbing a hill. Sometimes it's hearing a passerby thank us for our work because she's a survivor. Sometimes it's being a part of the "tunnel of love" the team makes as our last participant finishes his workout. To be a coach and be a part of the moments that are filled with such energy and hope is humbling and uplifting. I'm very lucky to be doing what I'm doing.

4. What is the difference between training/coaching novice athletes and experienced athletes?

- Novice athletes don't know what they don't know; so many times they arrive as sponges waiting to absorb anything and everything they can. Many first-time endurance athletes I've worked with truly do not believe they will be able to complete the event they sign up for. As a coach, it's a really rewarding experience to see them transform not only physically, but mentally as well. At some point during the season, it clicks – they start to believe they will be half or full marathoners, or triathletes or an Ironman. And the most amazing thing is that the shift that takes place isn't limited to only their athletic performance. When they realize just how much potential they have as people, they begin to live their lives that way. More experienced athletes usually have the comfort of knowing their abilities and the challenge of wanting to get faster and stronger and better than before. It's a slightly different head game that they play. To know your ability and know that, with enough dedication, you can push your boundaries farther is a blessing and a curse. Coaching returning athletes, for me, has been less about getting them to believe in themselves, and more about keeping them motivated when they start comparing themselves to their past performances.

5. How do you stay in shape?

- Sports are now just a daily part of my life. It's not an effort to keep active because running and biking and swimming are big parts of my social life. Team in Training has brought into my life some of my closest friends and surrogate family. All of these people are up for a workout any day of the year. It helps, too, that we live in sunny Southern California!

6. How do you help participants stay motivated and “up” when the going gets tough?

- Before I can help participants in those low moments, I have to get to know them first. As a coach, I have to fully invest myself in each teammate – learn about why they have joined the program, what they are looking to get out of the experience, and what their daily habits and struggles are like. Armed with that knowledge and a good relationship, coaching someone through tough moments means being a light for them – reminding them of their progress and purpose, reminding them how strong they are and how far they’ve come. Endurance sports, particularly the latter miles of a workout or race, are catalysts for ‘tough goings’ but it’s rarely the activity itself which is bringing someone down. More often, it’s a fear or a doubt or a burden they are carrying. Coaching and motivating is about identifying what that weight is, and then knowing which buttons to push and provoke to help the person lift themselves out, mentally if not physically as well.

7. What are the most common injuries you’ve seen among TNT participants and how can they be avoided or dealt with?

- Especially of returning participants, the too-much-too-soon-too-fast mentality leads to common injuries like shin splints, tendonitis and runner’s knee. Assuring that we build schedules that ramp up and step back accordingly, and continuously check in with folks who are developing injuries or trying to do “extra credit” is critical to keeping the team healthy. Imbalances illiotibial band (IT band) syndrome shows up frequently in participants who have weaker glute strength. Coaching them technically (modifying their stride to engage their glutes) and developing a consistent strength program for them is usually really helpful. We also cover injury prevention in one of our clinics early in the season so athletes are familiar with how to take care of their bodies during the training process.

8. What should TNT participants eat and drink during their training and the events themselves?

- Participants should eat and drink whatever worked for them in practice! It’s vital that, as coaches, we are reminding participants just how important nutrition is to a successful race day. It is something to be practiced in the many weeks leading up to the event. While there are rules of thumb that are common across all events (relationship between body weight and number of carbohydrates needed per hour; 16-20oz of water per hour; approximately 500mg of sodium per hour; include potassium and magnesium; avoid fiber and heavy proteins), an individual’s nutrition plan is just that – individual! For marathons, I recommend participants experiment both with “running foods” like gels, gummies and bars as well as “real foods” like nuts, nut butters, pretzels and potatoes. For triathlons, particularly for Ironman-distance, we focus a lot of our attention on liquid nutrition supplemented by real foods.

9. After a rigorous TNT marathon (or other endurance event), how should participants wind down?

- Following the immediate aftermath (Finish Line! Ice bath! Victory Party! Trip home!), we encourage participants to come out for a final post-season practice to share their medals and stories of the day. Sometimes this is also organized as a light workout. But generally, depending on the person’s race experience and the length of their season, I encourage them to put their workout clothes away for the week and spend their time relishing the accomplishment. We feel our muscles heal much more quickly than we know our ligaments and tendons are recovered and internal inflammation subside. Instead of working out, go out to brunch on the weekend. Sleep in! Rediscover the friends and family you used to wave goodbye to on your way to long training days! After a week (or two, in some cases), athletes who want to “reverse taper” back up to longer miles can do so. It’s in this window, too, where

we start chatting about future seasons with TNT. The “wind down” of this season is accompanied by the encouragement that they will ramp back up when another season starts.

10. How much money has been raised by the teams you’ve trained?

- I’ve been on 13 team with TNT, and I believe that each have raised between \$80,000-\$250,000. To date, the current GLA Ironteam has raised over \$300,000 and we’ve still got seven weeks until race day and an additional four weeks to share our stories with friends, family and other donors.

11. What is your fondest, stand out memory/ies and accomplishments as a TNT coach?

- At the end of each marathon, the TNT coaches, clad in green shirts, accompany the final program finisher across the line. I’ve been a part of this group multiple times and it’s an amazing feeling to see that person wrap up their day. It’s also a great ending to a season. As a first-time coach on the Ironteam this season, I’ve gotten to workout with people who are constantly setting new personal bests – distance or speed or overall life experiences. Short conversations, hugs or smiles are all that summarize these major achievements. I don’t know if there are more than a handful that stick out over the others. Rather, it’s a hodge-podge of laughs and nods and little moments that stick with me. In 2012 I came onto the Greater LA Coaches Committee to work with my peers on ways to improve coaching (education, communication, quality) across our community. Once a month, I got to sit in a room and talk about what we do, how we do it and how we can make ourselves and the program better. It was one of the greatest learning experiences for me to be surrounded by such passionate and caring people. Many of those coaches I consider close friends and mentors, and I’m grateful for TNT delivering them into my life.

12. Any final parting words about TNT?

- Beyond the fundraising and beyond sports, Team in Training gives hope to a lot of individuals and families who are going through difficult times. And one of the most amazing things about that is that when you are a part of an organization that consistently brings hope and support, you cannot keep it from yourself. As we help others, we also help ourselves. The experience transcends simple actions like asking for money or running a few miles. It’s so much more, and once you really feel that, you are in it until the end.