

TNT Coach: Natalie Dunbar
Location: Pasadena, CA

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

- Back in 2005, after being sedentary due to illness and a car accident, I started walking for fitness again, and to keep myself motivated, I wanted to set a fitness goal. I'd done 5Ks and 10Ks before, so I decided to shoot for a half marathon. I'd stumbled upon Active.com somehow, and started looking up races near my birthday - six or so months out from the start of my training program - and I found the Nike Women's Marathon was being held the day before my birthday that year. Not knowing anything about the lottery or how hard it was to get in, I set a reminder on my calendar to sign up. My son - an only child - was also graduating high school that year, and I was also looking for some "purpose" to support, something bigger than myself. I kept seeing ads for Team in Training and saw that I could not only register for Nike through TNT, but that I could receive proper training and have the logistics of my trip to SF taken care of. "All" I had to do was raise money. So on the last possible day to join the San Gabriel Valley team, I showed up on the last Saturday of May of 2005, trained with the team, signed the registration form and never looked back. Then my mom reminded me of not one but two relatives who'd fought blood cancers - one survived, and one wasn't so lucky. And that's when it became even more personal.

2. Have you yourself participated in a TNT event?

- I'd have to count my purple jerseys to get an exact number, but the short answer to that question is "yes." I have completed one full marathon and 18 halves, plus I was a member of a 12-person TNT team at Ragnar So Cal, a 200-mile relay to benefit the LLS. Out of the 20 or so events I've done, I think I've fundraised for about 10 of them, and have personally raised about \$16K for the LLS since 2005.

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

- I enjoy watching the transformation that takes place in both new athletes and experienced ones. The new athletes, whether they are pure walkers or runners, astound themselves, pushing past limits that they never thought possible. And the seasoned athletes, though experienced at running, find a new experience, training with a team towards a common goal - training with a purpose, for something bigger than themselves. There is a collective "a ha" moment that comes a few weeks after we take on our first double digit mileage, and then take a step-back week. No matter how many times I do this, as a participant, a mentor or now as a coach, I love how magical that time is.

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

- Novice athletes are usually "deer in the headlights" scared when they come to TNT. But something got them there, and when we remind them of their reasons - to fight blood cancers, to help others, to get or stay in shape, or even to push past self-imposed limits. I have a method I call "coaching past only" - I'm "only" a walker; I'm "only" doing a half; I "only" run or walk a 17-minute mile. I've said all of those things myself, and I try not to use the word "only" with new athletes, reminding them with each milestone to remember how far they've come, and their determination becomes palpable. More experienced athletes can be tough because, while they've usually joined TNT to support the mission, which is a GREAT thing, they also come with their own training methodology, which doesn't always match our program. They want to all out run and don't always willingly embrace run-walk intervals and other TNT methods. But then they see how others around them are improving, and they "buy in." Or they become supportive of the newer athletes, helping them along, waiting for them at the end of a training session and cheering them on. The playing field becomes level and the bonding happens. It truly is a gift to be able to see this happen.

5. How do you stay in shape?

- Aside from race walking and running, I take Brazilian Samba dance classes (not ballroom Samba), and I also practice yoga. Oddly enough, I am not a tall, lean marathoner. I'm short and stocky - but I'm strong. And all of the numbers that matter to my doctor - blood pressure, cholesterol, etc., are all good.

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

- I remind them of the goals they've set, fundraising and training, and remind them of the good they are doing for themselves and others. And I share my own personal journey with them. I've trained through illness and injury and have a lot to share. But I'm also very careful not to make it about me. It's about THEIR journey and they will have so much to be proud of when they look back on their season with TNT.

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

- Knees and IT bands, usually due to worn out or improper shoes, and perhaps bad form or not warming up properly or enough. After ruling out bad shoes as the culprit, we teach our athletes to do knee strengthening exercises. We also teach stretches to help with IT band issues, and also show athletes how to use a foam roller to work out IT issues as well. If all else fails, we teach them to aqua jog (running in deep water) as an alternative to hitting the road/trail, allowing them to maintain their training while giving their bodies time to heal.

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

- In the early phases of training, we encourage participants to first actually EAT breakfast - whatever their normal meal is, but nothing too heavy. Ideally there will be carbs plus a bit of protein. Half a bagel and a little peanut butter, or something along those lines. Then as the miles get longer, and more fuel is needed before and during training, we encourage adding a bit more carbs in the days leading up to long mileage/ Mind you, this doesn't mean eating huge servings of pasta in one sitting, but instead adding carbs to each meal of the day to gradually ramp up for the weekend. Then we encourage experimentation with gels, blocks, chews, sports beans, whatever they can stomach, along with proper hydration. By the time we're comfortably in double digits, we tell them to solidify their nutrition routines and stick with what works, and to be sure they can replicate it on race day. This goes for sports drinks as well.

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

- The usual prescription is 1 day of rest for every mile raced - so 13-14 days after a half marathon, and 26 days after a full. But "rest" shouldn't mean sitting on the couch and doing nothing. We try to make a "recovery schedule" for our participants, including easy walking or running for a short time or distance a few days a week, plus cross training (yoga, pilates, etc.). We don't encourage coming to a complete stop unless of course there is an injury to consider.

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

- Wow - that's a great question. I'm only on my second season as a head coach, and we've raised close to \$20K going into our 4th week so far. My previous season's team - my first as a head coach - raised \$81,550 or so. We were a smallish team (30 or so) with a short season, but we accomplished much!

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

- During my first season as a head coach, we had a mom and daughter join our team about three weeks before the official season started. The daughter, a young woman in her 30's, had had a non-cancerous brain tumor as a child, and had some disabilities to overcome - both physical and emotional. On the first official day of practice, halfway into a one-mile pace assessment, she broke down in tears. But she wanted to keep going, so we formed a tag team to help her. Sometimes her crying was due to fear, and other times she seemed to want a reason not to continue. And then one night at midweeks, about five weeks into the season, her mom pulled me aside and said, "Can you just get her to the start line? Whatever happens from there is OK. Just get her to the start." As a mom myself, I understood how hard it was for this mom to "release" her daughter to our care, but we also wanted the mom to have a good experience too. We had earned her trust, and that was HUGE. We watched as this young woman eventually tackled a tough 11 miler. And we listened as she reasoned that while she might not make the cutoff for Tinker Bell (requiring a 16-minute mile), she would do all she could to get to mile 7, and whatever happened after that she would be OK with. She went on to do just that, she made it to mile 7 before being picked up. And her mom? She finished in just over 4 hours and was never picked up. This awesome duo "re-upped" for another season almost immediately and just crossed the finish line at the San Diego Rock N Roll Half marathon in just over FOUR hours! Most heartwarming of all is that even though they have loved all of their coaches, they always come back to tell me how much our coaching meant to them. They'll be rejoining for winter and will take on Tinker Bell in January 2014!

12. Any final parting words about TNT?

- We all know that the work we do with TNT in support of the mission of the LLS is to help save and make better the lives of those fighting blood cancers (and their families). But we sometimes forget that TNT has the power to "save" us too, or to make our lives better with each participant and patient that we touch. Looking back over my eight years with TNT, I can't begin to tell you how many people have said at the end of the season, "I was going through a tough time all through the season - divorce, illness, job loss, you name it - and TNT saved me. No matter how hard it may have been to get myself out of bed on Saturday mornings, I always looked forward to being with the team." Now THAT's winning!