

# A marathon celebration for Virginia's 70th

MOST people celebrate their 70th birthday with a party, but Virginia Pawlyn wanted to do something different. So she celebrated hers by running a marathon!

Until she took up running, five years ago, the last race she had entered was the egg and spoon race at school.

"I was never sporty at school but in later life I did keep fit once a week, either with yoga, aerobics or dancing - whatever fitted in with my family life and full time work as manager of the citizens Advice Bureau in Evesham," she explains.

Virginia's running career started in early 2006, when several of her friends were training for the Evesham 5K.

"They wanted me to join them but although I regularly used the gym at Evesham Leisure Centre, I could barely run around Badsey recreation ground," Virginia recalls.

***"My endorphins were really flowing - and I was hooked"***

That spring she went on cruise and discussed the idea with the on-board fitness instructor, herself a keen runner. She explained to Virginia how she had built up her running skills at home by running and walking, alternately, from lamp post to lamp post.

So, back on land in Evesham, Virginia began to practice a similar technique.

By the summer she was able to join her friends in the Evesham 5K, which she completed in 37 minutes.

Tara Cooper, a fellow exerciser at the leisure centre, told her about a new running club that met in the Trumpet, on Merstow Green, and suggested she go along.

"I joked that she must be barking mad. I wasn't a runner and I definitely did not want

to turn out for training on cold winter nights," smiles Virginia.

But the following February she read an article on the club in the Vale Magazine, which increased her curiosity and she went along.

"I was welcomed enthusiastically by experienced runner Jane Hale, who invited me to run with her group. I thought I would be at the back, panting, but on our first run Jane called 'Slow down, you're running too fast for me!'

"When we got back my endorphins were really flowing - and I was hooked!"

At a meeting in March 2007, it was decided that the running club should become affiliated to UK Athletics.

Virginia, with her managerial experience both at the CAB and in helping Quaker Meetings, countrywide, to become registered charities, was able to help the club

become formally established as the Evesham Vale Running Club.

By May 2007, she was ready to run the Crowle Gun Powder Plot 10K. "Well, I ran and walked some of it and it took me 64 minutes," she reveals.

"What was nice about that race was that you ran round the villages and doubled back on the same road. I could see there were still quite a few behind me, and that was a real boost."

Virginia also discovered an added incentive - after a race everyone gathers for lovely home made refreshments.

During the next two years Virginia entered a number of races and ran her first half marathon in Coventry in October 2008.



*Virginia Pawlyn in gear.*

By now other club members had progressed to running marathons and the seed was sown...

Virginia began to wonder whether she too could undertake the challenge of running a race of 26.2 miles.

"My 70th birthday was approaching so I decided I would celebrate by doing something different," she says.



*Virginia and Dan run the course at Lake Garda.*

Having family connections with Jersey, Virginia entered the Standard Chartered Jersey Marathon in October 2010.

"But I knew I couldn't do it without the help of a personal trainer," she admits.

"I was very specific about what I wanted: someone with a holistic approach, covering diet and exercise and who would be a hard task master."

She Googled her requirements and discovered Cheltenham based Dan Fivey.

"When he read my email saying I wanted to celebrate my 70th birthday in this way, he thought it was a friend having a joke," laughs Virginia.

Dan began by giving Virginia a programme of exercises to build up and strengthen her leg muscles. Then they went out running, and he would seek out the steepest hills.

"Over the 12 week intensive training schedule I did 59 hill reps and ran 411 miles,

my longest run being 21 miles.," says Virginia. "It wasn't easy. There were days when I was so terrified by the prospect of trying to run a marathon that I could have pulled out. But I couldn't because friends and family were going to Jersey and flights had been booked."

Virginia was 70 in the July and was ready to compete in the Jersey Marathon on October 3.

"Friends from Evesham came with me and ran it as a relay and it was a really great weekend," reports Virginia, who was delighted she completed the whole 26.2 miles in four hours 26 minutes.

"I was amazed. If I had done that time in that year's London Marathon, I would have been the fastest woman in my age group."

This result enabled Virginia to apply for a Good for Age place in the London Marathon 2012, which she has now achieved.

But she did not want to go for the next 18 months without keeping up the momentum of long distance running. So, in October this year, she completed the Lake Garda Marathon in Italy, with Dan running with her as her support and pacemaker. She succeeded in knocking off nine minutes from her previous time, completing the race in 4 hours 17 minutes.



"Now I feel fitter than ever and I have a great circle of running friends," she says.

"Eleven years ago, as I approached 61, I would never have dreamed it was possible. But I could never have done it without the encouragement of my friends in Evesham Vale Running Club and the support of my personal trainer, Dan.

And Virginia's message to others in their sixties, or even seventies?

"It is never too late, whatever your age. It gets you out of your comfort zone, builds up your fitness and is always beneficial," she says.

"Running has changed my life!"

MAUREEN BUTLER