

GOING THE EXTRA MILE,

by Rick Politio // Marin Independent Journal * Sunday, July 14, 2002

Chris Chorak has no memory of the three most important days in her athletic career. She was in a coma.

Somewhere near mile 21, in the marathon-distance run section of Ironman Canada, the sodium level in the Mill Valley physical therapist's blood dropped dangerously low. She'd gulped enough water to slosh around "like a little Michelin girl" and developed a condition known as hyponatremia. Her system crashed. A grand mal seizure set in, and her parents spent many anxious hours at her bedside, Chorak's legs still stoking in a twitching semblance of an endless run.

On the third day, she woke up. And started learning about sports nutrition. She read the books, quizzed the experts and soaked up every piece of information in the medical journals. "Sports nutrition," she says, "is my thing."

These days Chorak, 37, is the physical trainer and kinetic force behind Presidio Sport & Medicine, a storefront one-stop athletic fix-it shop with 30 physical therapists, masseuses, bike-fit consultants, orthotic experts and athletic trainers fine-tuning a parade of triathletes and weekend warriors who sweat through the 2,200 square-foot office six days a week. It's a tight active fit.

"We can't hire anybody with wide hips," she jokes, sliding her 5 foot 4 inch, 124-pound bouncy frame through a narrow doorway. That should change soon as Chorak has secured a lease for clinic space in the Presidio itself. It could be the ideal location for a woman who lives and works a fitness ideal.

The product of an athletic upbringing in the central Midwest, Chorak remembers bringing home straight-A report cards and watching her dad lapse immediately into coach mode. "He'd say, 'That's fine, but let's talk about that back stroke flip turn.'" She studied athletic training at Purdue University and went straight into the Physical Therapy program at Northwestern University's medical school, finding time to squeeze in some of the shorter "sprint" triathlons around the Midwest.

Soon after a job brought her to San Francisco, the city's Dolphin Club got her into the Bay and open-water swimming. She still remembers that first swim out of Aquatic Park. "I was euphoric the rest of the day," she recalls.

Soon she was competing in longer triathlons —she finished second for her age group in the most recent Escape from Alcatraz triathlon —and helping athletes in the really long triathlons. It was at a Hawaii Ironman in 1993 when she was assisting another competitor that she met her husband, Paul Lundgren, a pro-athlete and gear distributor. She'd seen him around the fringes of the event and kept trying to meet him with no success. Then she got on the plane. "His seat was next to my seat," Chorak says.

The live together in Mill Valley now, with a garage full of titanium bikes and wet suits and a schedule filled with training rides and long-distance runs. It's more than simple shared interests. It's all encompassing. They make an effort every so often, Chorak says, "to go out with people who don't know what 'triathlon' means."

But it was triathlons, the Canada Ironman that gave Chorak an edge in her profession.

The coma was an ironic wake-up call. She's pushed herself to be an expert on sports nutrition and took on physical therapy for the triathlete specialty. Tiburon triathlete Terry Taylor turned to Chorak when his dream of competing in last year's Ironman Triathlon World Championship in Hawaii was threatened by a knee injury and surgery just nine weeks before the race. "She worked on my knee and designed an alternative training program with weights, water running and physical therapy," Taylor says. "On race day, I had done only one run of over 8 miles and a few short off the bike runs to get the legs used to being tired."

The program worked. Taylor completed the 2.4-mile swim, 112-mile bike and 26.2 mile run on a savagely windy day that sent much of the pro-field packing. Chorak was there to cheer him across the finish line. "She was able to design and coach me on a system to get me through Ironman Hawaii in its toughest conditions," Taylor says.

Chorak has gone back to face her own toughest conditions. After the coma, her family begged her to swear off the Ironman races. It didn't work. She trained a little smarter. She ate and drank a little smarter, too. Her hard-earned expertise brought her the results.

"I was very excited," she says, "when I passed mile 21."

Here's what else Chorak has to say about triathlon training, being fit and staying motivated.

Chorak: I think there is a percentage of Marin that is fit and there is a percentage of Marin that is not fit. Also if you have to walk up and down the hills just to get to your house, just people being outside walking makes Marin fit.

I don't see the huge obesity that I see in other California towns. There are so many different levels of fitness. Being an Ironman Triathlete isn't always healthy. Being healthy and being (ultra) fit are two different things.

Marin IJ: What mistake do you see most often coming into your practice?

Chorak: Too much too soon. Very rarely do I have the people that I have to say, "All right I really want you to do this exercise." It's more often, "All right, let's lessen the intensity and let's progress at a gradual state." So many people, especially the runners, go too hard at first. So they need to back off a little bit, cross train. Pay attention to what their body is telling them. A lot of people don't know the difference between normal pain and injury pain.

Marin IJ: What mistakes do you see most often on the bike path or in the gym?

Chorak: Probably form. On the bike I call it S.P.S., sloppy pelvis syndrome. I'll be riding behind somebody and their hips are going up and down, up and down. In cycling, you really want to be quiet from the hips up. That is one of the biggest things I see on the bike path. People push too hard and they forget about paying attention to their form. First establish good form and then from there increase intensity. The same thing in the gym.

Marin IJ: How do you stay motivated?

Chorak: I think it's because I have a thirst for things. Either I want to know more about racing nutrition, or I want to know more about the body. Or I want to know more about physical therapy. I want to know more about running this business better. I think it's trying to be the best for my patients, which keeps me on top of things.

Marin IJ: What's the one piece of advice you'd give weekend warriors?

Chorak: Probably a warm-up. If it's cycling, it's easy to start off nice and easy and then increase your intensity. If it's a team sport —people who either do softball, or soccer or basketball —they don't give themselves time to warm up. Take 10 to 15 minutes, maybe even 20 minutes to either walk fast or jog before you get to your activity so your body is ready to perform.

Marin IJ: Can active people convert their sedentary friends and relatives?

Chorak: I think so. People like to be told what to do. The first step is getting them to find somebody who knows what they're talking about. Friends and spouses can't motivate but they can say, "Hey why don't you go see Chris" and Chris will sit down and talk about the benefits of it. The other thing I've learned is that most people don't change behavior unless they have a consequence linked to it, which means if you don't exercise you're not going to have a healthy lifestyle as you get older. If people have consequences they change behavior. What I need to do is understand your life, understand your time restraints and understand what you like. We try to find things that make it fun and make it a process of feeling better.

Marin IJ: What is your favorite athletic memory?

Chorak: I'd probably have to say the Dolphin Club Escape from Alcatraz; I think it was '92 or '93. I didn't have anybody come out to support me for this race, and I'd never really won anything. But I won that race, and I broke the course record for women. I came out of there, and I was really excited but I didn't have anybody there saying, 'Oh, good job, good job.' So I found a pay phone at the end of the double Dipsea. I called my mom and dad, and said, "I won, I got first place," and my dad says, "You know what? I had a dream that you won first place."

Marin IJ: What do you tell your patients about pain?

Chorak: The "no pain, no gain" thing, I'm not really into that. If you are exercising smart, you should have a little stiffness, a little muscle soreness, but you should not have joint pain, muscle pain or headache pain at any time because then you're not going to do it again. It's like stretching. I see these people making these goofy faces when they're stretching. So why are people not going to stretch? Because it hurts. Everybody has different levels of pain. I've had people in here with broken bones that don't feel pain, and then I've had people in here that I barely touch them, and they hop off the table. No matter what, you have to address what that person is perceiving.

Marin IJ: What would you change about the way athletics and fitness are presented to children?

Chorak: Fun, it has to be fun. I think that it comes from the parents. So many athletic things are cut out of the schools nowadays. I think the family needs to encourage that —hiking in Yosemite, having team sports. I don't have kids yet so its kind of hard, but try to limit the amount of television, try to encourage team sports. My dad was very big on me getting out there. My mom always thought that active kids don't get into trouble.

Marin IJ: If you had the power, what fitness product would you take off the shelves?

Chorak: Maybe the Healthrider. I like things that are more sports specific, things that are functional that are going to help you in your daily life. I've just seen a lot of injuries with the Healthrider. I think you have to have really good form with it. I've seen a lot of low back pains from it and a lot of neck patients. It puts the body into a lot of flexion where we need to maintain our neutral spine.

Marin IJ: What would you put on all the shelves?

Chorak: I mention the Thighmasters. What's really good for walkers, hikers, runners, and pivotal sports people such as tennis, soccer and basketball is that inner thigh muscle. WE use the more updated version, which is the Pilates Magic Circle, but the Thighmasters is a simple, nice way to get that inner thigh exercise. I think it is a very functional muscle, and it's great at stabilizing the trunk. While you're doing that, you can call in your butt cheeks and your abs at the same time.