



PETER McCABE THE GAZETTE

Jill Barker stretches before jogging in Pointe Claire. Of all the changes to her regimen after a knee injury, she says, her pre-run routine is the most helpful.

FITNESS JILL BARKER

Change can ease the pain

INJURED RUNNERS may be reluctant to alter a routine, but you have to be flexible in order to regain flexibility

One year and more than \$1,000 worth of treatment later, I'm running again. I've lost speed and the knee isn't perfect, but I've learned a lot in the last 12 months.

To rewind: Last August I was felled by knee pain that flared up while running, swimming and walking down stairs. I spent the fall and winter rehabbing my knee and getting in as many workouts as possible given the circumstances. I started with visits to the osteopath and expanded to a team of professionals all geared toward the same goal: to get me up and running again.

Truth be told, the knee had been bugging me off and on for a while, but in true runner's fashion, I ignored it until even walking hurt. There were lots of small contributing problems, but the main issue was weakness in my gluteus medius (the outside of my hip) that destabilized my hips, causing my right knee to drift inward with every stride.

The weakness in the hip inflamed the iliotibial band – a long, thick tendon that runs along the outside of the leg between the hip and knee. With each stride, the IT band was rubbing against the bony protrusion on the outside of the knee, which, after thousands of strides, caused pain.

When I first wrote about my injury back in the fall, I got lots of well-intentioned advice from readers.

Some offered suggestions and assistance, while others advised me to give up running altogether. The advice was helpful. The suggestions to quit were not.

So I embarked on a journey to get my knee back in shape. I started by putting the running shoes in storage for two months and hopped on a bike for exercise. Even that had its challenges. Never much of a cyclist, I toppled into a concrete planter while waiting at a red light and bruised my ribs. Coughing and sleeping on my left side hurt for months.

By late October I was ready to start running, but only on the treadmill, alternating between one minute walking and running. Over the next few weeks I slowly increased my running intervals until December, when I was up to 30 minutes of consecutive running on the road, but no hills.

During this time, I was seeing osteopath Xanthi Gazetis every two weeks along with occasional tune-ups from Leslie Larson, a specialist in Hellerwork (a deep-tissue, hands-on therapy). This was followed by a core and lower-body strengthening routine designed by strength and conditioning specialist Faye Abulraman.

It worked, for a while. Two weeks into my new running routine, the knee started to talk back. So back to the osteo. Back to Larson. And back

to the drawing board.

First to go was my shoes. A couple of years ago I switched from Asics to Nike. But the theory was that the hands-on therapy and strength training were working, but the shoes weren't. So goodbye Nike, hello Asics.

Next to transform was my commitment to change, which I admit I'm still struggling with. I had to give up some of my beloved cardio to spend time in the weight room. And I had to get used to moving slower, especially at the start of my run, and avoiding lacing up my shoes on back-to-back days.

One of the hardest things to give up was running on Mount Royal. Part of my rehab was giving my knee a rest from running downhill, which means hilly runs were out.

Also new was a pre-run routine that helps warm up the knee. Of all the changes, this one has been the most successful. The mix of static and dynamic stretching helps ease the discomfort that plagues the early minutes of my run.

All that said, I'm still struggling to get back to my previous form. The knee acts up every now and again, so I have to be smart and back off. Combine that with the heat, and it's been more swimming than running this summer.

Now that the weather has cooled off and the knee has been healthy, I

am heading up the mountain again. But all is not perfect. I should have alternated running on the hills with running on the flats. Too much hill too soon has caused a flare-up.

But I'm not ready to give up. Gilbert Ayoub, a triathlon coach, has offered to evaluate my running technique and offer suggestions on how I can ease the strain on the knee. Changing my stride and how my foot meets the ground is the next step in my revamped running routine.

Even after all the expert care and advice, I may never get back to my former routine. But maybe it's time to switch things up. Like many runners, I don't do change well. And like many runners, I often ignore the signals my body sends and wait too long to seek help.

So the take-home message for all you change-resistant runners is to realize that if you want to keep pounding the pavement, you have to be flexible with your routine and take care of your body. Running can be a lifelong activity as long as you use your head as well as your feet.

JILL BARKER IN ACTION



Find this story on our Life page to see a video of Jill Barker's post-injury warm-up for runs: montrealgazette.com/life