

Woman goes from ho-hum fitness to triathlete in two years

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By Chris Barber

A Penn Township woman who didn't own a bike, couldn't swim and was afraid of open water, snakes and frogs is now a triathlon athlete.

Jackie Stenta, 37, a mother of two who attended fitness classes at the Southern Chester County YMCA sporadically, hooked up with personal trainer Linda Jassmond Lanfear at the Y two years ago and has turned into a lean, mean athletic machine.

As Lanfear, a YMCA fitness instructor, tells it, she encountered Stenta in classes and at professional meetings occasionally and they discussed Stenta's desire to improve her fitness level. Although Stenta was not obese or terribly out of shape, her workout routine was sporadic, and she was not up on the fine points of nutrition.

"She took my kick-boxing and body sculpting classes, but she was sporadic. She like fitness, but she was having a tough time fitting it in," Lanfear said.

That's when Lanfear and Stenta met to discuss some goal-setting. To Stenta's surprise, Lanfear suggested she set a goal: to compete in a triathlon. That form of competition involves running, biking and swimming, and for Stenta, who did not own a bike and could not swim, it seemed a long way off.

One of the first things Stenta need to do was learn to swim. She engaged the help of YMCA staffer Kasey Nolan, who also does triathlons, and began to progress from her rudimentary sidestroke.

"I didn't like to get my face wet. Then I tried blowing out under water. I learned the basics from the lifeguards. They were helpful," she said.

Eventually, she not only learned to do the crawl stroke, but she added to it bilateral breathing (once every three strokes on either side), the form used in triathlons.

The next step was getting her a bike, which Lanfear helped out with, showing her two kinds of road bikes and an off-road model. She chose a light-weight road model and began working out on the cycling machines at the Y as well. She also ran laps at the Y track.

As time went by, Lanfear and Stenta worked on Stenta's schedule, which enabled her to fit in a daily fitness routine into her parenting and work duties. Soon she was arriving at the Y at 5:30 in the morning and making frequent visits at night as well.

Now, after more than two years, Stenta says that although her goal was merely to feel fit, she now feels strong. She has completed six triathlons, the first two indoors and the third outdoors at Marsh Creek in northern Chester County.

As Lanfear explained it, there are four levels of triathlon -- sprint, Olympic, half Iron Man and Iron Man -- and Stenta has competed in two. Stenta's competition at Marsh Creek involved a quarter mile swim, a 15-mile bike race and a two-mile run. She finished it, but didn't win.

Still, as she swam through the waters at Marsh Creek Park, she cared little about he former fears of frogs, snakes and open waters. "You don't think about these things when you're thinking about finishing," she said.

Lanfear, who has chronicled Stenta's progress in a new book, "Journey to Fitness," said Stenta is now learning the fine points of diet and the roles of protein and carbohydrates. And the two women agree that the road to fitness involves overcoming fears and engaging the help of someone else.

"You need someone. It's like teaching a baby bird to fly," Stenta said.



Jackie Stenta, left, and Linda Lanfear sit together at the Southern Chester County YMCA during the signing of Lanfear's book on Monday.

--Photo by Chris Barber