Optimizing Life for Busy Pros: Pediatrician Gets Coach, Runs Marathons Transcript

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Introduction to Dr. Michelle Quirk

Welcome to the bio optimized summit where we are exploring the next level of physical and mental health you can achieve through targeted and intentional optimization.

I'm your host dr AMY and today I have with me Dr Michelle quirk, she is a pediatrician and she, she discovered running and marathon running of all things and she has become a certified coach in the road runners club of America and she is passionate about bringing this, this whole life and lifestyle to busy professional women Who can use that to prioritize their well being through running in fitness.

She loves to develop the customized training plans for every type of runner, especially the beginners, because that's where she started at one point she found running in her early 30s and quickly fell in love with the sport.

And so she started mindful marathon and it loves to celebrate the fitness and wherever that person is starting, even if they're starting at mile zero, being able to celebrate with them and create a customized plan to get them where they want to be with their well being. Thank you Dr Michelle for joining me today.

Thanks for having me, hmm. So I really wanted to have you come on and speak to us on this summit, partly because of just how much running exercise has played a role in my life and and I have run five marathons in my lifetime, Thank you the first, the first marathon Was the one that I trained the most for and I remember hitting mile 18 for me was where I hit the wall and I have never felt so awful in my life. Probably not true, I have definitely felt awful some other times in my life, but uh it's an experience to go through a marathon and I love how you have created this mindful marathon and use it in order to really enhance your well being, given that you are a busy professional, you work, you have a family and then you have this part of your life.

So tell us, how, how did that happen for you? How did you get started with running?

How Running Became a Lifeline

Well, I didn't have um you know, I wasn't a runner when I was younger, so I came to running a lot later than a lot of people, but um I was always very active and interested in fitness and I was, I did ballet and tap and danced when I was younger.

And um I was actually a zumba instructor for a couple of years, so I've always kind of been interested in fitness and wellness and I found running um at a particularly difficult time in my life, which is common, I think for a lot of runners who start later. Um my dad was going through treatment for lung cancer and I had just finished my residency and moved to a new area.

I was newly married, new attending job studying for pedes boards, like everything was happening all at once and I decided to start running as a warmup before my zumba class interesting enough and I would just, you know, run around the block for five or 10 minutes as a warm up or on the treadmill at the y where I was teaching and I found that it cleared my mind and I was able to put myself, you know, get all that other stuff going on out of my mind and put myself in the right framework to be able to teach my class and you know, recall the choreography and everything while I was in front of the front of the ladies at the y so that's actually how I started. Um it's just an interesting story, so then from there I enjoyed how it made me feel and I just kept up with it, you know, a little bit longer and a little bit farther every time.

And about a year after I started running just, you know, short amount of time like that, my husband and I ran our first five K together, so that was like our first official race, um and that was about nine years ago, so that's how that's how I started running. And I found the longer distances just over time, I kind of worked up to it, I found um you know, a rhythm with my training and being consistent with it. And I constantly wanted to try, you know, different

races longer distances and push myself.

So that's how I got started with the longer the longer distances and half marathons and my body tends to do much better with the longer distances, I've noticed that for me that mental clarity really happens about mile four, between four and six and so and until then I just feel like I'm going through the motions.

But then when I hit that, that spot and I'm assuming, you know, the endorphins that dopamine all of the changes that are happening in my body, that mental clarity comes and it's priceless, right?

It's it's what, when everything is going on in my day and I feel uncertain about things. I crave that clarity that comes with the running or the exercise because I also do a lot of biking now as well and I crave that point in which everything just seems to become organized in my system, in my thoughts and and there is like there's this uh improved memory that comes with the exercise. And so for you, it was remembering the choreography with the zumba and for me it's been many other things right?

Like being able to remember, especially things when I'm studying for boards, like it really enhances that cognitive a liveness that comes with the exercise.

So how did you then transition from just running and enjoying this yourself to now coaching other people? Um I have to say that I have to thank my coach for that.

So I started working with a coach in 2017 and you know, at the time I thought I was actually very afraid to reach out to a running coach, I just thought, you know, I'm a slow slow runner, fairly beginner.

Um what, you know, what would he do for me or what would a coach, you know, help me with? And I was remember sending and e mailed to him and just feeling like, I don't think, I don't even know if this guy will want to help, you know, and really have to credit him with um really I got an education that that's what happened. I realized that there was a much more scientific and physiological way to go about training and I realized that I was going way too fast and not like, and that, you know, by slowing down, I actually enjoyed it so much more and I made greater strides a lot more quickly than I had been doing on my own.

And so I really credit him with that.

From Beginner Runner to Marathoner

And um that's when I started, you know, reading more about running and run physiology and how to structure training plans and asking him, you know, why I'm doing this workout and what that's doing for my endurance and my training and he's really um who inspired me to think about the marathon distance because before that, I really, it was not even on my radar, you know, when I started running, if you had told me I would even do a half marathon, I would have said you're crazy, you know, and I'm just going around the block to warm up for the zumba class. Exactly, yeah, like marathon, no way. You know, I would never last um so really, um I became a student of the sport and I think after the marathon really I started, I was just talking about running all the time, it was clearly a passion of mine and you know, I started talking about it at work and people were asking me, they're running questions and I was reading and reading and dabbling in writing some training plans for some family and friends and just, you know, little things to get people going and um at that point, you know, I decided that perhaps I could, I could do this, that I could coach others, it seemed like I was attracting beginners and I was able to get them started successfully. So um I ended up taking the coach certification course with the roadrunners, um that was over a year ago last summer and um got the coach certification and started mindful marathon then, so I had sort of a steady progression from, you know, being a runner and then tackling longer distances, being coached myself and and then becoming a coach, I did not know that about you, Michelle, I did not know that you had actually reached out and found a coach for yourself at the beginning, I love that about you.

Yeah, you know, um so what the question that opened Pandora's box, I had been using a very popular run walk method, you know, Jeff Galloway and the run walk run method to run pretty much anything longer than about five or six miles. And so the half marathons that I had done prior to working with my own coach, I had used that method

and I had signed up for the Broad Street run, which is a 10 mile 100.2 point run in philadelphia where I live and super fun.

And my question to him was, do you think that I could run? I really want to run it continuously. There's nothing wrong with run walk. But I just want to see if I can do it.

And that was the question that sort of set everything off. You know, It was like, well, let me learn a little, It was like taking the history really like let me learn about your running history and what your goals are and why do you want to do this in the first place? And anyway, and that's how we started working together and really working with him just changed everything.

Mm hmm. And many people don't reach out for a coach ever in their running process. And so the fact that you reached out to one somewhat fairly early on, um like I love that about you because it really speaks to this whole idea of being very intentional and targeted in optimizing your running right? And whatever it is that we're doing, if we're going to really optimize some something, anything in our life, we really need some someone looking in from the outside perspective because we don't see it all, we're not going to be able to see those hidden spots.

And and yet someone looking in can really give us that feedback and make such a big difference and accelerate the process to becoming um, just arriving and going to that next level, whatever that is.

Yeah, I think I had a lot of trouble trusting him at first, um maybe trusting myself really that the key to all of this was to slow down and that I didn't have to work so hard and it just, especially as physicians, you know, I think we're taught like the harder you work, the more benefit you will reap and that's not always the case and that's not always the way to optimize your fitness for sure.

And I was just as guilty of that. I remember many, I mean, yeah, most of my life, even up through residency where it was that mindset of, we're gonna work hard and then we're gonna go play hard, which, you know, like go exercise until you feel like you're dying because one you have to fit it in. And so if you only have so much time to exercise, you better go hard to get the most out of that exercise time.

And somehow this has turned into the idea that that that is what is healthy and that is what our bodies actually do best with and that's not true and I had a crash in my health because I was pushing myself too hard in every area of my life and using exercise than to um to almost numb feelings and stress rather than rather than using it in a mindful way and listening to my body and the pace and the rhythm that my body would do best with, and it sounds like that's really what you found for your body is is the pace and the rhythm that allowed it to do its best.

Coaching, Mindset, and Training Smarter

Yes, I think celebrating someone's current fitness is really is really what it comes down to and it doesn't, it's sort of trying to shed all of the thoughts about who is a runner or what comes to mind when you think of a runner and that you have to be fast or that you can't walk or that, you know, that only means someone who races on the road or someone who only does marathons or someone who qualifies for the boston marathon, like there there's a whole gamut of of runners and it's okay if you're slower, it's okay if you're not a size zero, it's also okay if you are a size zero, but you know, I'm just I'm trying to change that, that thought for people when they think I'm not a runner, but but you can be and it doesn't have to be painful and it doesn't have to hurt. I mean, sure you can do speed work and get it to hurt if that's what you're going for, but if you're going for health and to beat your own times and not someone else's, then it can be really enjoyable and quite lovely.

But, you know, I'm very of course, in a race, I'm competitive to them as competitive as the next person, but I'm not going to win the race, you know, I like to joke about that. My niece asked me, you know, auntie, are you going to win the race? Like No, I'm going to get a medal, but certainly not going to win, but, you know, I'm trying to beat my own times and that's really what it comes down to is just pushing yourself to your limit and what is what is the best that you can do on that day.

So, I I really, I I think I've also learned this with cycling also, we got a peloton um in february, and I love it, but I'm a

huge fan of the Power Zone training because it's just it's just that it's taking your current fitness and training to where you're at whether rather than trying to always, you know, crush it on the leaderboard with these other rides.

I just I like that, it's designed for personal training. Mhm. And what I love about sports, but it's specifically like running and cycling is how much of our psychology really does influence our ability, our performance, our energy, and even that I'm going to start this um because it is it's so much of the preconceptions that we have of ourselves our limits, who we are. I'm not a runner, right? I'm not that, because I don't look like that, I don't have that. So I I'm not this, I'm not that and those preconceptions really limit us and this really is all of life too, right? Like, we can look at those same preconceptions and I can see people applying those and limiting themselves in other areas of their life, if I see them limiting themselves in their area of fitness.

So, for you, for you, how how is a marathon? Like, life, wow, I always compare life to the marathon and I'm sure a lot of marathoners do this, but I've done that, I think it's that, you know, it's a reminder that we can do really hard things and that we have it within ourselves, that even when things get tough, you can always find another gear, like, somehow, you know, when that finish line came in sight, I got faster, you know, and I was I was done a couple of miles before that, but seeing the finish line in view, I went faster, so, you know, physically, I think um you know, we know that we we do the training, but but mentally is really you can push yourself so much further than you think you can and I think, um, yeah, crossing crossing the marathon finish line, I mean you just feel like you can do anything. I think that's probably the closest to a superhero that you get to feel, but I really think after that, you know, I, I had so much more confidence in myself and in other aspects of my life and since then, you know, I've made changes in my, my job, my physician life, I've become a run coach and started this business and it just seems like crossing that finish line was the start of so much more and I really would have never thought that it was possible.

It really does, it really changes your perception of what you're capable of, of the amount of training that you're able to put into something, the amount of dedication that you're able to have, what you're able to push through what your, you know, and then that feeling when you cross the finish line and to be able to then apply that to other areas of your life. When something is hard, you know, that when you get to the end of that, you're gonna have that great feeling of accomplishment that you had with crossing the finish line for the marathon.

Yeah, I think, um, I didn't hit a physical wall in the marathon, but I definitely hit what I would consider a mental wall around mile 18 to 20 and I like to joke about this now, I really had, like almost a philosophical debate with myself.

Like I really didn't think I could do it and I was going back and I don't know how I spent three miles thinking about that, but like somehow three miles went by And I thought, you know, your coach knows you can do this and you prepared for this and you planned for it and you put yourself in the best position and you're already at mile 20, you're doing it, why don't you believe you're doing it?

And it just, it's just funny to look back and I don't know how the miles went by, but they did. And that's what I thought about for at least three miles. Yeah, and that's kind of the great thing about running or cycling as well, where you can let your mind do its thing work out what it needs to work out and the next thing, you know, you're three more miles down the road.

Exactly, yeah. There's something about the body moving, the muscles moving that really helps the brain work out whatever it needs to work out. Yeah, I think sometimes I have I've definitely been able to feel my mind go blank, like sort of a meditative kind of state on a long run or a long ride.

And then other times I feel like I get my best thinking done on the run and can work things out. I would say that more often than not, it's working things out. Like the thoughts are always there rather than the quiet, but when that happens it's really nice.

It is, yeah, and there's that full spectrum, that's, that's possible. Which is the cool thing, right? Like you can really use the running or the exercise for several different situations, that it can be that resource for you.

Exactly, yeah. So in terms of even getting a coach then for your training and then he was the one who kind of pushed you into thinking that you could do a marathon and then leading you through that process.

How is that similar to other areas of life, where having that coach in areas of our life that we would not have even thought of getting a coach for that area, but how how is that translated into real life from the marathon world for you?

Marathon Lessons for Life and Work

Yeah. You know, I think he was probably my first coach really. I mean, I had my, my dance teacher growing up, but I was never really involved in team sports, so I never experienced a coach before, but since then I've worked with lots of coaches and you know, I had an injury um, shortly after the marathon, completely not running related, I tripped in my garden. It was just a very dumb thing and hurt my foot and I couldn't run for a while. And so I had to swim and I don't know, I was swimming all of these laps and I thought, you know, I always wanted to do a triathlon, maybe now's a good time.

Right, So, okay, right. I'm swimming all these laps in the pool, staring at the black lines and this is what I come up with. So I love the way I'm telling you, we we are sisters separated at birth.

That's just funny. And so yeah, so I did, but I don't know what, you know, I don't know what I'm doing. I didn't have a bike, I didn't really know how to swim really. I was going through the motions but not going anywhere. And so I hired a coach to help me really learn how to swim for the triathlon. And I mean she taught me how to ride a bike really. I mean, I knew how to ride a bike from being a kid, but she taught me how to ride a road bike and you know how to clip in and clip out and so, um, so yeah, fitness coaches and then also, you know, mental coaches and I worked with a life coach and um yeah, like coaches are just invaluable and I think they've really helped me, I say to identify my blind spots because sometimes you just, you don't see it yourself like sure I could, I can write myself a training plan for something um and follow it just fine by the math, but having someone else look at it and someone else to go over, you know, your hurdles and in your thoughts and in your fitness and just to keep you on track. So I think the coaches are invaluable in all aspects. Mhm. And what's coming to my mind is how, when we're especially using exercise and we're busy, we've got lots of other things, maybe we're thinking about whatever else while we're running and we haven't worked with a coach, we are so much more accident prone because we're not really paying attention to the actual form and running, we're using it as a stress release and that stress is gonna kind of turn into wear and tear on our joints if we if we haven't paid attention to that, if we haven't been mindful about that.

And so yeah, talk to talk to us a little bit about the danger of injuries for professionals who are using exercise in this way and haven't yet made that step to work with a coach to show them and work with their form and their pace.

Yeah, I think a coach can definitely help to keep you to keep you healthy um to your point earlier, I definitely was guilty of thinking, you know, I only have 20 minutes or a half hour to work out at the gym, I better pound it, you know? Um and I think we're just guilty of that because there are so many things and people competing for our time, but um the nice thing about, and this is what my coach taught me working with a coach, you can kind of say, hey, this is my, this is my weekly schedule and this is my goal and let's come up with something reasonable just so that running or whatever type of exercise it is, isn't going to take over your life, but it's really fitting in and enhancing the rest of your life. So if you, You know, if you do have 20 minutes or a half hour, how are we gonna spend that? And when we look at a week of training, you know, we have to build in rest and recovery and maybe maybe that's a day off, maybe that is a day of walking, but we say, you know, keep your easy days easy and your hard days hard, so there may only be, you know, one or two hard sessions in a week and the rest is really all about building your endurance and making it feel good for you, and it takes a little bit of time to get by in about this.

I definitely have had to um work hard to convince people that, you know, try it for a month or two and see, and you can still get the same results and um you may feel you end up feeling better in the end, whereas um, you know, pounding all the time can make you burned out and injured and then have to take off, you know, a lot of months as opposed to treating your body a little bit a little bit more helpfully and mindfully and, and then you can, you can still, you can still reach your goals. Um, there's just a different way to get there.

It doesn't always have to be hard all the time. That makes me think of a cartoon that I've seen where a physician is telling the patient, well you can take 15 minutes a day to cook a healthy meal or you can be dead 24 hours out of the day, which would work better for your schedule, right? It's this idea of, we don't think we have the time to do to

do the preparation, right? Even the stretching, even, you know, working with the coach going at a slower pace, we don't think we have time for that. And yet that's, that's where the gold is, like, that's really where the value is for being able to create something that's going to promote our well being and not turn into an injury, not turn into burnout, not turn into these other things that then we won't be able to do what we enjoy for a long time because we have to, we will be forced to take that recovery time. I think that's the key for consistency and longevity because especially for beginners, they have a lot of amazing motivation at first and um, and that's why we're all guilty of going out a little too fast and a little too far and you know, it, but it doesn't last, you know, maybe we can keep it up for three weeks, four weeks.

Injury Prevention and Sustainable Training

Um, but but in the long term, you know, things come up, life comes up, we realize this is not sustainable, It's the same with a diet, you know, And and then we go back to our old thought patterns and our old ways.

So I think the key for longevity is really trying to find the joy in it and the joy is in slowing down. It really is. And that's just one more reason how like a marathon can be related to life and teach us these life lessons because if we start out at a fast pace that is not sustainable for 26.2 miles.

So find you're going to need to find a rhythm, find a pace that is where you're at right now with your fitness level, that is sustainable for you. That will actually be something that your body enjoys because you're going to need to find some enjoyment if you're going to do this for 26.2 miles we're in this for the long haul.

All right, and that quick, quick excitement of, oh, you know, let me start this race, let me start running, let me start this project, let me start whatever it is we have in life and then that can fade out.

That's really where life is like a marathon, right? Like you've gotta, you've gotta find that pace, find that rhythm that is sustainable for you. Yes. And I think a lot of us are are on the treadmill going pretty fast most of the time.

Yeah, we were like hamsters on on their wheels until until we burn out. Right. And that and that for you was a big kind of motivation to start running in the first place. Was all the stuff that you had going on in your life and using this as a way to avoid burnout. And that's what I would want to encourage other people to use it as not as another thing that will only lead to an increase your burnout.

Exactly. And not another thing that you have to do on your list. Right? Not another performance thing or not another thing where you're pushing your body more than what you're able to nourish it and give it what it needs in order to be able to perform that.

Well, what's, what's your next race? What's your next run? Oh, goodness! Well, with the pandemic, a lot of the races have been canceled or postponed and so we had originally been signed up to run the Broad Street run, which was supposed to be in May, but got postponed and now canceled and it will be virtual, but I think I'm actually going to right now.

I'm just kind of working on my base building the base and just enjoying running and cycling and Um but I'm thinking about doing maybe working on a 5K for thanksgiving like a Turkey trot. Probably it will be virtual, but just to switch things up and do a training cycle because I haven't really done a training cycle for running in a while because of the pandemic, but that's okay.

I mean, I at the beginning of this, I just thought, well, you know, this is a great time to just focus on my easy pace and enjoying running for the sake of running and that's what I've been doing for a while.

So no race on the calendar. Yeah, no, I get it. And that's that's exactly where I've been at two, we're using this time where there's not as many events to build my baseline, build my baseline.

Yeah, yeah. And enjoy it for what it is and how, how it makes us feel. Yeah. And knowing that this is part of the preparation for future events, right, the better baseline you have then the more you're gonna be able to give in an

event.

So if we've got people listening and they're like, all right, you've convinced me that I want to try this running thing out. I'm not ready to maybe commit to a marathon, but it would be cool, maybe one day where would you encourage them to start?

What tips would you have for them to get started. Um I think I'll give three of my favorite tips. One is to, you don't even need running sneakers yet, but just write down what your, why is like why, why you are motivated to do this?

If if you are thinking like that, you know, that sounds like something I might want to do, just take a couple of minutes and think, you know, why do you want to start running or cycling or whatever it is with fitness, what goals might you have?

You know, maybe a marathon is a couple of years out or far in the distant future, but a race goal, a time goal, just, you know, consistency, Maybe I would like to set a goal to be active three days a week, something like that.

Getting Started and Finding Your Pace

So I would start with a pen and paper and then um I always advise my beginners to start low and go slow and that just means picking a very doable goal for yourself, even if that means five minutes a couple times a week just to walk around the block, if you're starting from couch or you know, start with the run walk method, something that is easily attainable. Like if you come from the couch and say, well I'm gonna run for an hour today, you'll probably come back feeling a little bit defeated and disappointed and potentially quit. So to, to start start low and build up from there and go slower than you think you should go. Just, yep, we try to find what we call easy pace or conversation pace, where you could, you know, talk with your friend or your dog, sing a couple of bars of a song while you're jogging.

That that's a pace that is sustainable for quite a while. In theory, all day, maybe not all day, but for quite a while and if you can find that um running will become a lot easier. So those are my those are my usual tips for the beginners. And what I love about this is that like those are the exact same words that I have said many times just this week to some of the clients that I coach with rewiring their nervous system from stress, trauma and even attachment and secure patterns in their nervous system go slower than what you think you even need to because the body has its rhythms, the body has its pace and if we go faster than what it's ready for, that's that's where we will injure ourselves and so like yeah, like I love that we didn't even plan this plan to, you know, have our our work so in sync, but it really is and this is where like marathon and running really is like life and these lessons, you can apply to every other area of your life and that's really where this sense of well being and connection and cohesiveness comes from where the clarity of this is this is how I do it.

Like this is how I find my rhythm, this is how I listen to my body comes from that running and we can take that into these other areas of our life. And I think it's okay that, you know, you you think about it and it won't happen overnight and that's okay and you're you're in it for the long term, like there's no rush about it, you know? Um That that's a hard thing to kind of wrap your brain around. But if you if you decide you decide you're going to make the change and you have time to do it.

You don't you don't have to do this in a week or a month or even a year. Mhm. Yeah. Like this is this is the new you yes, this is the new you for the rest of your life and you're you're stepping into that and and not needing to rush things and do everything now and expecting that change to happen now.

Exactly. That's hard for us. It's hard for us. It is so hard for us. It's something that that yeah, I've had to develop that patience with myself. It did not come here actually.

I'm still working on it. All right, Well, one of these days we'll need to get together and do a run, do a bike ride. Maybe even do that try out because that's on my list as well to do. So maybe we'll have fun.

Yeah, maybe we'll have to do that together. Good. Where can people find you dr Michelle? Where can they find

you? You can find me on my website which is mindful dash marathon dot com.

And on facebook, Mindful marathon and on instagram at mindful dot marathon. Great and thank you for taking the time today. Doctor Michelle, appreciate it. Thank you.

This was great. A great talk and thank you for joining us on the bio Optimized summit. Be sure to purchase the discount while it is still available because once that is gone it is gone forever.

And I would love to see you inside together. Let's find that next level of health and a liveness.