



THE JOURNAL OF YOUTH RUNNING

STRIVERS

Running Club for Girls

In 2009, Colleen Phelps, a veteran runner and race organizer in Natick, Massachusetts (the Greater Boston area), created the STRIVERS Running Club for Girls. In a region rich in running history and with stars on the starting line for even local races, STRIVERS has earned a place at the table; an identity that makes STRIVERS stand out among youth running programs everywhere.

Rather than us telling the STRIVERS' story, we decided to interview Colleen, so she could tell it herself.



Q. Colleen, let's start with the big picture. What exactly is STRIVERS?

A. "STRIVERS is about teaching young girls the lifelong sport of running through building confidence and self-esteem and, along the way, an appreciation for the community they live in. With running as the foundation, STRIVERS allows girls to discover what they are capable of, whether it is in sports, school or socially."

Q. Where does the name STRIVERS come from?

A. "I was searching for a name that would really balance what we do and what we hope to achieve, while also being a name that the team could get behind and want to be known as. 'STRIVERS' sums up our quest to strive for athletic confidence, personal growth and community leadership."

Q. Your numbers and the local support you enjoy show your program is a great success. Why?

A. "I believe STRIVERS is successful because of the values upon which the program was built around. We, meaning the other coaches and I, look at running not as an individual sport but as a team sport where the girls support one another, a sport where young girls are free of the pressure of having to "try out" for the team.

"STRIVERS offers two six-week programs in the spring and two in the fall. Eighty-five percent of our girls run with us more than one year and 75 percent run for three years or more. In the program we focus on individual goal setting which allows girls who return to our program year after year to move **seamlessly to the next level, to their next goal.**

"Success is also being up front that there will always be faster girls and slower girls but every one of our girls focuses on self-improvement as she will have run farther or faster by the end of the program."



Q. You mentioned goal setting. How do you approach that with young runners?

A. "We take the time to really get to know our girls and ask questions that ultimately lead to defining what their goals are without making it too structured or intimidating. A lot of what we do happens running side-by-side with the girls and assisting each one in a way we know will promote their success and ultimately achieve their goal."

Q. STRIVERS does not emphasize the aspect of competition. Instead, it offers girls an introduction to running as a life-time sport, built around being part of a team, of belonging, and entering events where personal goals are the prime motivators. Am I right?

A. "Exactly! STRIVERS is designed so girls in middle school compete only against their personal goal, not against each other. There is time enough in high school for runners to compete for a spot on the varsity and then again against their rival teams."

"Once they reach 9th grade, many of our girls do run cross country or track. Great! But seeing our graduates on the starting line of a local road race is also great. Both tell us that STRIVERS is succeeding."

Q. Where do your runners come from?

A. "Most of the young girls who join our team come from other sports like soccer, lacrosse and basketball, wanting to stay fit or to build their speed or endurance. We acknowledge those goals and really help this group to reach those goals through building core mileage and working in 'pick-ups' during their runs. To no great surprise, many discover running is more fun than just chasing a ball around."

"Others have never participated in a sport before or are involved in an indoor sport with very little carryover to running (i.e., gymnastics or dance). Our goal is to introduce them to running as a sport, to work on building cardiovascular strength and fitness, to teach good running mechanics, and to make them feel part of a team; to feel a sense of belonging."



STRIVERS

RUNNING CLUB FOR GIRLS
Natick, Massachusetts

A Journal of Youth Running
Five-Star Program



"The young STRIVERS are role models for so many young runners, not just because of their team spirit but for their drive to help the community. What Colleen and her group have created is magical!"

Uta Pippig

**Three times winner of both
the Boston and the Berlin
Marathons**

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Q. The foundation of STRIVERS is helping girls discover running, but from the testimonials of parents and runners, there seems to be much more. Tell me about that.

A. “Part of it is having our runners work together on a project that will positively impact the community. We want the girls to realize the power that runners can bring to a community when they work together to make something positive happen. One season it could be collecting back packs or food for our local service council or assist in fundraising for a cause the girls understand as being important.

“We also bring healthy female role models to speak to our teams. This shows the girls where their running may lead but also how they too can follow their dreams and be successful. In a world filled with images of how girls should look from Instagram posts to bad TV reality shows, we want to help our girls grow and be strong enough to recognize that these stereotypes are not important nor realistic.”



Q. You talk about preparing, i.e., training, for an end-of-the-program race. Can you be more specific?

A. “Our ‘training’ takes place for six weeks and we meet twice a week. My goal is to make this experience real for them as if they were training for any race. For new girls, we introduce them to all the elements of running from dynamic to static stretching, core exercises, trail running, hill workouts and cross training. We even talk about water stops and runner’s etiquette during a race. We, of course, start out easy and gradually increase the distances. We even have a carb-loading pasta party the night before our big race.”

Q. Walk me through a typical race day?

A. “On race day each girl knows why she is at the starting line and what she wants to have accomplished when she crosses the finish line. Those individual goals are then supported and celebrated within our team environment. The best example I can give is without the coaches suggesting it, many of the STRIVERS who finish early in the 5K races will then wait for their fellow teammates to approach the finish line and jump in to offer moral support to get these girls through the last few meters.

“Race day is always so emotional for the girls, their parents and me. Showing up at a race with over 40 girls in purple shirts is a proud moment for all of us. Fellow participants and spectators are always so positive when they see our team and that positive energy flows over to the girls.”

Colleen Phelps started running when she was in 5th grade. “It was on a whim that I entered a local five-mile race. I hadn’t trained for it. I remember loving the feel of running, but also being incredibly sore the next day. My parents were baffled as to why I just signed up and ran.”

Although she continued running, it wasn’t as much a part of her life as it is today. The real love for running came later. It was something she and her husband discovered together.

Today she runs with an all-women’s running club. She is a qualified Boston Marathon runner, has run eight marathons, and competes regularly in half marathons and 5K races. She is a United States Track and Field Level 1 coach and is CPR certified.