

00:00:00

Relly Ladner: I think it was about halfway through maybe mile 14 or 15, and I was like, "I'm done. I can't do it. I'm done."

And they're just like, "Walk, you can do it. Just walk."

And I think in that moment, even just hearing the words walk was like, there was a time when I wasn't able to walk. I can walk right now, I can finish this if that means that I'm crawling. You know what I mean?

00:00:26

Rob Simmelkjaer: Hey everybody, and welcome to Set the Pace, the official podcast of New York Road Runners presented by Peloton. I'm your host, Rob Simmelkjaer, the CEO of New York Road Runners. I am flying solo. This week, Bees is out on vacation. Coming up, we are still flying high from the largest marathon ever, the 2025 TCS New York City Marathon. And in that spirit, our guest today is Relly Ladner, a member of this year's Team Inspire. Relly was diagnosed with Guillain-Barré syndrome, and she was told that she might not ever walk again. But not only did she go on to walk, she played Division I soccer in college. And on Sunday, November 2nd, she completed the 2025 TCS New York City Marathon, her third marathon.

Later in the show, Meb will be here with New York Road Runners member Felicia Pasadyn. Felicia placed 14th among all women in the marathon this year with a finishing time of 2:35:17 and that qualified her for the 2028 Olympic trials, and get this, Felicia is doing this as a medical student. That's right, so an incredible story there, and I can't wait to hear Meb's conversation with Felicia. And then finally on today's Meb Minute, Meb does a roundup of all things that you can learn from running a marathon that have nothing to do with running, so stay tuned for that.

Peloton's Cross Training Series is designed to be the ultimate marathon training partner. Now powered by Peloton IQ, their products deliver personalized cardio and strength training with adaptive plans, progress tracking and real-time insights, plus a variety of strength classes to build endurance as well as human coaching that keeps motivation high and form on point. Whether you're aiming for a first finish or a personal best, Peloton makes every step smarter, stronger, and more connected. Ready to elevate your race game with Peloton? Head to [onpeloton.com](https://onpeloton.com) to learn more. Peloton, an official partner of the 2025 TCS York City Marathon.

Imagine being a star teenage athlete one day and unable to walk the next. That's the reality that Relly Ladner faced at the end of her junior year of high school when Guillain-Barré syndrome left her paralyzed from the waist down. A few years earlier as a freshman in high school, Relly had

secured a Division I offer to play soccer at Dartmouth College. Go Green. But her diagnosis threatened to sabotage all her work and dreams. Relly's today because she fought her way back to health. She went on to play soccer with Dartmouth, and never took a single day on the field for granted. She was a member of Team Inspire, and she ran this year in support of the adolescent health organization, Grassroot Soccer. Relly, it is great to see you and I'm so happy you had such a great day on November 2nd. Welcome to Set the Pace.

00:03:23

Relly Ladner: Good to see you, thank you so much for having me.

00:03:25

Rob Simmelkjaer: Absolutely. And you and I had a chance to spend some time together in the run-up to the marathon. I saw you at the finish line on Marathon Day. I saw a lot of smiles at that finish line, none bigger than yours. Can you talk about what it meant for you to cross that finish line on November 2nd?

00:03:44

Relly Ladner: Yeah, I mean, being able to cross the finish line and then being able to cross the finish line with the bib that said Team Inspire was just inspiring to me. It was a surreal moment. And to do it in New York where I live is just, it doesn't get better than that. I've said I ran the TCS New York City Marathon last year and I said it was the best day of my life and this totally topped, it was for sure now the best day of my life. Just such an amazing day.

00:04:14

Rob Simmelkjaer: I've heard a lot of people say who'd run the marathon multiple times that this year felt special to them. Why did it feel special to you?

00:04:21

Relly Ladner: I think for multiple reasons. One, the weather was amazing, the perfect, perfect running weather. And I think just the atmosphere, the people, the crowd, it just pushed you through the whole time there was cheering nonstop. There wasn't a moment where there wasn't any sort of cheering. And I really think that even when the marathon gets tough like at the end, going up 5th Ave, just having the crowd there really pushes you through.

00:04:49

Rob Simmelkjaer: Yeah, no doubt. The crowds we know we've seen this year, they were just on another level to what we had seen before, so it was incredible. And I know obviously being on Team Inspire was a big change for you as well. I think a lot of our listeners know what Team Inspire is, but a lot probably don't. This group of 26 incredibly inspiring athletes each with unique stories, and you got a chance to be a part of that because of the story that I just talked about. What was that experience like being on Team Inspire for you?

00:05:21

Relly Ladner: It was amazing. I keep saying to myself that I think that my story was chosen to be on Team Inspire as an inspiring story, but I've left this experience being more inspired than ever, not only by my story, but by the 25 other amazing athlete stories. It really felt like I was doing the marathon not just for myself but for the team, and then also for everything that the people on the team are fighting for and have gone through.

00:05:52

Rob Simmelkjaer: They've gone through a lot of different things, and what you went through, each of these challenges and stories is unique. Let's talk about your story a little bit. You grew up in Vienna, Austria, and you played on boys' soccer teams as a young girl, how did you get drawn to soccer and how did that playing with the boys at an early stage affect you as a competitor, as a soccer player?

00:06:18

Relly Ladner: Yeah, I grew up in a very athletic family and my brother played soccer. He's two years older than me, so he was always my inspiration athletically so I just followed in his footsteps naturally. And then when we moved to Austria when I was in elementary school, I wanted to continue playing soccer. And quite frankly, the I guess girl soccer at that age was not up to the level that I wanted to play in so I played on the same club team as my brother a couple years younger. I think that playing on a boys team shaped me in so many ways at such a young age. And not only was it a boys team, but it was also a totally German-speaking team, which at the time, now I know German, but when I first moved there, I didn't know the language. So on top of being the only girl on a boys team, I also didn't know the language, so it was quite isolated. But I think one thing that I really learned was that sports in general bring people together. Quite literally, if you don't know the language, you can be able to play the same sport as someone. And I think that goes the same for

running, and also goes to show in the TCS New York City Marathon, there's so many people from so many different countries all doing the same thing, all with the same goal in mind. So yeah, I think that at a young age, playing on a team really just showed me that despite my differences and also I was so young, and that I was able to fit in just through athletics.

00:07:42

Rob Simmelkjaer: Yeah, no, sports are amazing that way. We see it at the marathon, I'm sure for you in a new country, being able to speak as long. As you don't call it soccer over there, you're fine, right? As long as you got to call it football, that's the number one thing.

00:07:56

Relly Ladner: Exactly. Strictly football.

00:07:58

Rob Simmelkjaer: Yeah. Once you've done that, you're fine. And you mentioned your family and all the athletics in your family. Your grandfather was a marathoner, your mom played college field hockey and lacrosse. You mentioned your brother playing soccer as well so this was something that was really in your genes if you will, from a young age. Did you have the marathon as something even when you were younger that you thought you'd want to do? Just because you did have your grandfather did it, and I know he did it a lot, he ran it 17 times.

00:08:30

Relly Ladner: Yeah, I grew up with obviously my grandfather and then also my parents, my dad's a big runner as well. I grew up always watching my family run. And for me, running when I was younger always felt like a punishment from soccer. If you didn't play well, you had to run or train for the beep test. And so I never really viewed running as a fun thing, for me, it was more a punishment. So no, I never thought up that running would be, well, would have such an impact on my life, but then a positive impact. But I would've never thought that I would be running marathons.

00:09:04

Rob Simmelkjaer: Yeah, I think when you're young, it's just not something that occurs to you. Who would want to do that when you're 16? And so many people tell me that story, and so many sports football, American football, soccer, whatever you want to call it, baseball, which I played, use running as a punishment, that it creates this negative mind reaction to the idea of running, so why would you want to just keep

doing that? But when did that change for you? And we'll talk about your story obviously of what happened to you with your illness.

00:09:38

Relly Ladner: Right.

00:09:38

Rob Simmelkjaer: But when was the first time you ever thought, "You know what, this running could actually be something I want to do for fun?"

00:09:43

Relly Ladner: I interned my junior summer of college in the city and I lived with a roommate who ran casually and we would go on runs together and it was a great way to explore the city. And I think that that really opened up my eyes to, oh, it actually is something fun, and it also allows me to do something other than taking the subway, or it allowed me to explore a lot of different areas of the city in a quick way. I think that was really the first time that it opened up my eyes to, oh wow, this doesn't have to be a negative thing. It's actually allowing me to explore and to see parts of the city that I wouldn't have necessarily seen if it wasn't for being able to run.

00:10:23

Rob Simmelkjaer: I always say running, especially in a city like New York is an underrated form of transportation.

00:10:29

Relly Ladner: 100%.

00:10:29

Rob Simmelkjaer: It's just a great way to get from point A to point B in a city where that's not always so easy to do.

00:10:36

Relly Ladner: Right. It's so funny when my family is planning a vacation because everyone in my family runs, it's strictly does wherever we're going have access to somewhere we can run? So it's just at such the forefront of my family.

00:10:53

Rob Simmelkjaer: 100%, yeah. All right, so let's go back to your high school years and so your end of your freshman year of high school, you committed to play division one soccer at Dartmouth, which I'm going to be clear is my alma mater too. Go Green. Love that. And you must've been very good, I mean to be recruited and already have a commitment to

play D1 at the end of your freshman year, that is more typical maybe these days than it was earlier in history, but still pretty impressive. So what was that like? And did that add motivation or pressure for you as you played soccer for the rest of your high school knowing that you already had a Division I offer locked in?

00:11:38

Relly Ladner: Yeah, thank you. No, I always say that I think that playing on a boys team growing up allowed me to become a lot more competitive. I was a lot more aggressive and that was my style of playing, and I think what attracted a lot of college coaches to me at such a young age was how aggressive I was, which was maybe a little bit different than the technical play that they taught here. And on my club team in the US, a lot of the players were technical and I was more of the aggressive so I think that made me stand out.

But yeah, committing at such a young age was, I mean it was my goal always to play at the highest level I could. And for me, it wasn't just about playing at the highest level, but also going to a college that academically was at the highest level. And so I think committing to Dartmouth was the combination for me of both the highest academics as well as the highest athletics I could get. So it was honestly, it was such a relieving feeling. It made the rest of high school, I was able just to enjoy it for the most part rather than having this stress of what is my future going to look like.

00:12:36

Rob Simmelkjaer: Yeah, absolutely. Take us to the day in high school where you started to feel something changing with your legs and the journey that would really begin from that point.

00:12:53

Relly Ladner: It was a warm day and I was playing with my club soccer team. We were in a tournament that we've played in every year and-

00:13:02

Rob Simmelkjaer: What year of high school was this for you, Relly?

00:13:02

Relly Ladner: This was going into my junior year of high school. I was playing in a game and like I said, it was kind of a hot day and my legs in the beginning of the game started to tingle. And then by halftime, I remember there's this picture of my friend shaking out my legs, but I just

thought it was a hot day, a little bit tired. And then by the end of the game, my legs were completely numb. I couldn't feel anything, so I went straight to the hospital with my mom and when I was at the hospital they did a bunch of tests all on my legs and they ultimately couldn't find anything. They just said, " You're probably dehydrated, tired from the game."

Because also, what I've learned through all of this, it was like an invisible disease and I think that that's almost harder for people to see when something's not visible. But so I was sent out of the hospital just on go home and hydrate and I woke up the next morning and the bottom of my feet were a purple color and I fell out of my bed. I couldn't walk. And so we called my pediatrician at the time, and she told me to go right back to the hospital and have them test things other than just my legs. So I went to the hospital and had a variety of tests, a MRI, a CAT scan, and while I was waiting for all the results on those, they did a reflex test where when you go to the doctor and they tap your knee and you're like.

00:14:26

Rob Simmelkjaer: With a little hammer, yeah.

00:14:26

Relly Ladner: Exactly. And your leg moves. I had no reflexes so my leg didn't move an inch, and that's where they started to think that it could be Guillain-Barré. I was sent into an emergency spinal tap and that's how I was diagnosed, so that's-

00:14:42

Rob Simmelkjaer: This all happened in a day basically.

00:14:42

Relly Ladner: From the day that I was playing, I went straight to the hospital, then I was sent home, and then I was back in the hospital within the 24 hours and I had a bunch of tests that took a while so it was an overnight, so it was within 48 hours that I was fully diagnosed.

00:15:02

Rob Simmelkjaer: And I'm imagining, correct me if I'm wrong, you probably had never heard of-

00:15:06

Relly Ladner: No.

00:15:06

Rob Simmelkjaer: ... Guillain- Barré syndrome, right? I'm trying

to imagine what it's like to be that age and be told 48 hours after everything was perfectly normal and fine in your life, right?

00:15:18

Relly Ladner: That.

00:15:19

Rob Simmelkjaer: That you have a syndrome. You've never heard of a rare autoimmune disorder and what you were told at that time by doctors, talk about that.

00:15:31

Relly Ladner: Yeah, I think it was scary for me, but it was even scarier for me to see my parents' reaction. At the time, my parents were still living in Europe, so my mom was there with me, and my dad had flown back but he wasn't there, so it was just my mom and I in the hospital for the initial day or two. And I think seeing her reaction and her uncertainty was what really scared me because as a young adult, I always relied on my mom to tell me that everything's going to be okay, and she couldn't tell me that. So I think that's what really scared me. And like you said, just my life changing overnight, and not just physically, I had lost all ability to move in my legs within a day. It was not like anything had happened. If you break a leg or something, you have an impact, something you can feel. It was like I couldn't pinpoint what I did wrong. So then how do I know what I had done?

00:16:31

Rob Simmelkjaer: What were the doctors telling you at that point about your future and your prognosis?

00:16:39

Relly Ladner: They were very uncertain as well. They actually had said that they had never seen anyone be diagnosed so soon, which was great that I was diagnosed so soon. I always say that it's because I know my body so well that I was able to catch it so soon. I think that a lot of people maybe would have just blown it off as their legs are tired from a game, whatever and not have gone into the hospital so quickly. I'm so glad that I did. It does spread up your body so it can start either in your feet or in your fingertips and can leave you paralyzed completely or on a ventilator.

I definitely was lucky to find it quickly, and that's what the doctors were so shocked about too, was that I was able to find it so quickly, and also that it happened in someone who was young and healthy. So I think that the doctors were

a little bit unsure of what to tell me in the beginning. How they stopped the spread of it is through blood serum transfusions. So I had two blood serum transfusions, and since it was spreading quickly, they rushed this blood serum transfusions, which-

00:17:40

Rob Simmelkjaer: What does that mean, a blood serum trans?

00:17:40

Relly Ladner: It's just what it like. It's in an IV and it's blood serum that goes in and stops the spread. I think it shocks the system and stops the spread and that, it normally takes eight hours for each blood serum transfusion, but they rushed it, so they put it in quicker to stop the spread quicker, which then caused aseptic meningitis, which is a migraine times a hundred so that was the worst feeling. And because I couldn't feel anything in my legs, that was what I had felt.

I don't know, I think there was so much that I had never experienced, and so many words that were being flown around that were so not on the level that I could comprehend that the doctors were saying and talking to each other that it was so scary that, and a lot of times the doctors were talking to each other and not to me, but what the doctors had told me early on was that there was a chance I was never going to be able to walk again. And I think that's what has stuck with me, and what stuck with me then the most was all of a sudden in 48 hours I went from playing soccer, like you said, being committed to Dartmouth, in my peak shape athletically, to being told by doctors that there was a chance I would never be able to walk again.

00:18:53

Rob Simmelkjaer: Yeah, I cannot imagine what that must have been like for you. Talk about the recovery. How long did it take, and when did you realize, Relly, that, or when did the doctors tell you that it looked like you were turning the corner and that you might be able to not just walk but get back to playing soccer, and who knows, someday running marathons?

00:19:20

Relly Ladner: After the blood serum transfusions, I was then in the hospital for a couple weeks. I was able to be discharged from the hospital when I was able to walk upstairs. So it was a big moment when I was able to walk down the stairs and walk up one flight of stairs or walk down the hall and walk up one flight of stairs. That was the day that I was able to be discharged. And then I was

in PT for around six months, and the PT was associated through the hospital, which was great because the doctors kept a close eye and I relearned everything. So I relearned how to walk, how to run, how to kick a soccer ball, how to climb.

It was really amazing and it was thorough. I was there most days of the week, and I think that I was, had this external motivation of wanting to play soccer. That was really what led me to push myself hard in PT and push myself to get better, and almost tell myself that I was going to get better rather than have it in my mind that I wasn't going to be able to, it was never really an option for me not to get better. I never told myself that and I think that's what kept me going.

00:20:24

Rob Simmelkjaer: From diagnosis to recovery, it sounds like a couple weeks in the hospital, and then maybe was it a few months before you were able to get back to some normalcy and start playing soccer again?

00:20:35

Relly Ladner: Yeah, it was a couple months and even when I went back on the field for the first time, for the first couple weeks, I would have to stop. And I think there was a lot of mental aspects went into it. I remember we were doing a running test and I had to stop halfway through and I don't know if it was because I was tired and not in the best shape, but I think a lot of it had to do with, I felt like my legs were tingling even though they weren't, but it was almost this mental block that was really hard to get through when I first started playing soccer again.

00:21:12

Rob Simmelkjaer: Yeah, no, it makes sense. I mean, before we go forward in the story, it's pretty remarkable that you are able to recover this quickly. Catching it early clearly was a really big part of that because this is a rare syndrome for sure, but it's not unheard of. I mean, I don't know if you've seen the film, Relly, but Final Finishers, the film that we put out about four members of the 2024 Team Inspire or some of the Final Finishers, I mean in the 2024 marathon. One of those characters, Michael Ring, was someone who also suffers from Guillain-Barré syndrome and still has a struggle running and moving and has braces and needs a lot of help. He manages amazingly and miraculously to run the marathon, but isn't without restrictions in terms of what he can do. I'm sure you look around and see others who've had this syndrome and realize how incredibly lucky you are to have caught it that soon and gotten that kind of treatment.

00:22:13

Relly Ladner: Yeah, for sure. No, I mean I tell myself every day how lucky I am and I think that that really goes to show and stories like that, and in any sort of disease where I still see people that aren't able to recover, I am thankful. I'm lucky that I was able to be in such a great hospital and have such great care too. I'm also lucky to have had such a good support system in my family, and I think having them have all been athletes too, they really also helped me push to continue to get to that next level rather than just maybe being okay with walking. I think that having that backbone of an athletic family also really helped me.

00:22:51

Rob Simmelkjaer: Oh yeah, no doubt. But I guess it's a message to people out there. When something seems off with your body and something really feels strange, don't waste time. Go get it checked out.

00:23:04

Relly Ladner: Yeah, 100%. Yeah, it's always better to be over cautious.

00:23:10

Rob Simmelkjaer: Absolutely. So all right, so you get back on the soccer field, Relly, and by your senior year you're playing an state championship game for your high school team.

00:23:21

Relly Ladner: Yeah, I think that I almost had this extra motivation to get back and to not only get back, but to have the biggest impact that I could. Being able to play for my high school at the state championship was just so surreal, so amazing, and really a full circle from when I was told that I wasn't going to be able to walk to winning a state championship, which was the highest level at my age that you could do at the time. So yeah, it was like the best reward.

00:23:55

Rob Simmelkjaer: Relly, you're being modest. You didn't just play in the state championship, your team didn't just win the state championship, you had a special role in that.

00:24:04

Relly Ladner: Yeah. Yeah, I did have a goal. I scored the lone goal in that game.

00:24:10

Rob Simmelkjaer: The game-winning goal, yes. It was one-nothing, you scored the one. Yes. Got to say this for you apparently. Yes. No, really good. And I mean obviously an incredible story. What was that like for you, for your parents? I, being a parent, I can't help but see this through their lens. What do you remember about that moment with them when you had that incredible victory and the role you played, but also what it meant for your journey and where you came from?

00:24:45

Relly Ladner: Right. I think that my parents have always shown me in different ways how proud they are of me, but I think this was different than proud. It was almost a relief to watch me be able to do what all my friends were doing and to be able to be so happy doing the thing that I loved was less of a proud moment, which I think that every other parent might've felt watching their daughters on my team win that game, but more so a relief that I was able to do it, I was able to get back, and also able to get back and accomplish things. Not just, like I said, not continue along a flat line. I was able to push myself and start to accomplish things.

00:25:33

Rob Simmelkjaer: You went on to Dartmouth, you were a defender up there, and what was that like? Obviously, it was your goal, right, so you got there, you majored in German, which makes sense for someone who grew up in Austria, that must have been easy.

00:25:46

Relly Ladner: Yeah, everyone says that it's so easy, but I always then say it's majoring in English. It's not just learning the language but reading the literature.

00:25:57

Rob Simmelkjaer: Good point. Okay, good point, I'll give you that. That makes sense. Absolutely. What was it like? I mean, did the experience you'd been through probably felt a little more, maybe in some ways mature than a lot of your teammates given what you'd been through?

00:26:13

Relly Ladner: Yeah, I think that there's a lot of politics and drama that can go into sports, especially at a high school level or at a college level. And I think that whenever something like that would occur, I would try to stay out of it and just tell myself that my playing time, whatever, you

know what I mean? I'm here on the team that I love, at the school that I love playing the sport that I love and able to do it so who cares if I play five minutes in a game or if the starter, I'm playing the full, you know what I mean? That didn't matter to me anymore. It was more so just that I was able to be doing what I loved. I think that I always felt like, yeah, that I had that different perspective that I wasn't, and it wasn't that I wasn't competitive with myself. I've always been competitive with myself, but it was a different type of, I let myself not be competitive in that sense and more so feel appreciative of just the everyday and being able to go out and play with my team.

00:27:22

Rob Simmelkjaer: I got to get to the question of what put the idea of running a marathon for real, really doing this into your head. I mean, soccer players do run a lot. There's a lot of running now. You weren't a midfielder, you were a defender, so I guess you run maybe a little bit less than a midi might run, but still, you know how to run, right? But those are short bursts and things like that. When did this really get in your head and say, "This is something I think I really want to do?"

00:27:50

Relly Ladner: I think after my junior summer when I interned and scored the city through running, I then went back my senior year of college and played the fall, and then it was just crazy. It was like one day, all of a sudden in mid-November my soccer was done, and then it was almost like the same feeling that I had had when I was diagnosed with Guillain-Barré. I was like, everything just stopped. Everything that I had worked for in my life just stopped and all of a sudden one day everything just stopped and I didn't want to stop. And so I went back to running.

And then it wasn't really until I moved to the city when I graduated in that summer that I really started to run again. I think for the same reasons. I also think that it's such a social thing, it can introduce you to so many people through run clubs, through races, through, there's so many different social aspects of that, which I've really enjoyed. But yeah, it wasn't really until I graduated that I started running and then I ran my first marathon, which was the Nashville Marathon in that following spring. So my first year living in the city, I ran the Nashville Marathon and I chose to do the Nashville Marathon because my parents had both done the Nashville half and they had told me how fun it is, there's live music the whole time.

00:29:05

Rob Simmelkjaer: That's the rock and roll. Is that the rock and roll marathon down there? Yeah, that's a, it's a popular marathon and half.

00:29:10

Relly Ladner: Yeah, it is. And for the first half, it was a ton of fun. Live music, and then the second half when it's, because it's one of those races where the marathon and half-marathon are going the same time and they split off. And then the second half, I was running through the streets of Nashville alone. It's not as big of a marathon as the New York Marathon or not nearly as big. There was times when I was running by myself and I was almost questioning to myself, why am I doing this? At one point I called my parents and I had definitely hit-

00:29:40

Rob Simmelkjaer: You called them in the race? Yeah.

00:29:41

Relly Ladner: Yes. Yeah, they were there cheering for me and I think it was about halfway through maybe mile 14 or 15. And I was like, "I'm done. I can't do it. I am done."

And they're just like, "Walk, you can do it. Just walk."

And I think in that moment, even just hearing the words walk was, there was a time when I wasn't able to walk, I can walk right now, I can finish this if that means that I'm crawling. You know what I mean? And I think that really resonated with me just like, yes, it doesn't matter. I can finish a marathon. But it was definitely extremely challenging for me, that marathon. I went out way too fast. I also, I was training myself and I didn't have a real training plan. I didn't know much. I thought it was kind of invincible. I was a college athlete, of course I can go out and run a marathon, and it was hard.

It challenged me in a lot of ways, but I finished, and I think finishing, it was almost like one of the bigger accomplishments that I had done since I was diagnosed with Guillain-Barré and able to come back from it. It was like I had gone through this hardship during the marathon and was able to come back from it and finish and I think that that's really what's then sparked my love of running after that, being like, "Okay, I can do hard things. I can put my mind to something and I can do it." Yeah.

00:31:08

Rob Simmelkjaer: Yeah, no, I can imagine feeling exactly that way. It's a lot to have accomplished by a very young age, obviously the recovery and then running a marathon. It's

interesting, Relly, we actually are seeing this trend with marathons now where the fastest growing demographic when it comes to people running marathons is people in their twenties. Marathons traditionally had been something that older people who are more middle-aged maybe would come to, maybe you'd run track as a kid and maybe you'd run but 5Ks and stuff in your twenties if you ran at all, and it was maybe in your thirties or forties that you decided you want to start running marathons. But now, there's this huge growth in people in their twenties running, very similar to you, graduating college and making it that rite of passage, next big thing after college. I'm curious, why do you think that is? Why do you think people like you these days want to run marathons?

00:32:11

Relly Ladner: I think a couple reasons. One is it's so accessible. Being able to run is, you can do it anywhere. You just really need a pair of shoes. And I think now there's so much that goes into it, so much more outfits, and that type of thing and fuel. But just really the basics of running is just having a pair of shoes and going out and running, so I think it's super accessible for everyone all over no matter where you are. I also think it's very social. There's a lot of run clubs and I think that it's almost become a trend like Running Now.

00:32:42

Rob Simmelkjaer: Huge on social media obviously. I mean, my feed since the marathon has just, it's been non-stop.

00:32:50

Relly Ladner: Yeah.

00:32:50

Rob Simmelkjaer: People who ran the TCS New York City Marathon, it's incredible, and I feel like that's playing into it a lot as well.

00:32:57

Relly Ladner: Yeah, and I think it's so amazing because it's, as popular as it's getting, which means it's harder to get into races and that type of thing, which is a little frustrating for someone who loves running. But at the same time, I think it's so amazing to see such a large community come together with something so positive. It's such a good thing for you and for the community and it brings together not only the runners, but also spectators and yeah. I think it brings together the community in such a healthy way, which is like you can't be mad that it's becoming such a big

thing because it's such a healthy thing. You know what I mean?

00:33:38

Rob Simmelkjaer: I tell that to people all the time, and thank you for saying that because, Relly, sometimes they do get mad, even though maybe they shouldn't. Sometimes they get mad that they can't get into every race they want to run in, they can't get into the marathon. I try to point out, this is actually a good thing, but I understand sometimes that argument doesn't resonate.

00:34:03

Relly Ladner: Yeah.

00:34:05

Rob Simmelkjaer: All right, so rough first marathon, not unheard of. We've all heard that story a bunch of times. You decided that you didn't want to go out like that, so you came back and ran New York in 2024, finished in under four hours. What did you fix and what was the difference for you in your second time out with a marathon distance?

00:34:25

Relly Ladner: I think two things. The biggest thing as humbling as it was to me was just go slower. I didn't need to sprint and to find a pace that I was really able to maintain and to also train in a way that I was incorporating a lot of different runs. I think that for me what was hard was I grew up where running was something I didn't always love because it was a punishment and it was a punishment in a way that was like you had to do sprints or something that was very exerting. I went into my first, to the national marathon having just casually ran. I ran long runs and stuff, but I never really pushed myself.

And so this, for the New York Marathon last year, I did hill workouts, I did sprint workouts, and I think in the beginning it was like, "Oh, why am I forcing myself to do this?"

But then ultimately seeing the result made it also worth it. So I think incorporating a lot of different styles of running and being okay with what I'm on a longer run, not being the fastest one out there. It's okay if people pass me on the West Side Highway. I think that is a big thing too for me was being okay that it's okay to go slower, which is I think what ultimately makes you faster, but.

00:35:37

Rob Simmelkjaer: They say run slower to run faster, 100%.

00:35:40

Relly Ladner: Exactly. And then I also think fueling, I really nail down a good fueling plan and I think for me, I had never really thought of using fuel.

00:35:54

Rob Simmelkjaer: Fuel.

00:35:54

Relly Ladner: Yeah, exactly. Using fuel and what works for me versus what could work for a friend is totally different. So really figuring out my fueling. And then I think also being in New York, just the atmosphere is so amazing. Having all my friends and family there to support me, but also just everyone, every part of the marathon is just packed with different people. And I think another big thing about the New York Marathon is you're never alone. You're always running. There's people in front of you and there's people behind you the entire time, so you really feel like you're a part of something.

00:36:28

Rob Simmelkjaer: I feel like the crowds, and the other runners in New York are worth a good 10 minutes of faster times. I really do believe that.

00:36:39

Relly Ladner: Absolutely.

00:36:40

Rob Simmelkjaer: A little less than say 30 seconds per mile. I mean, you don't want to go crazy, obviously. You learn the lesson of going out too fast and a lot of people do learn that in New York, it's not a course that a lot of people negative split on. They do tend to struggle in the second half just because the second half is so hard.

00:36:57

Relly Ladner: Yeah.

00:36:57

Rob Simmelkjaer: But I really believe that the energy can take 10 minutes off of your time. You got under four hours last year. What were your goals coming into the race this year? Did you have a time goal? I know you were obviously on Team Inspire, so you were part of your experience this year was going around and telling your story and being a media star and all of that, but did you have a specific time goal in mind?

00:37:21

Relly Ladner: Yeah, I did. In the 2024, so last year, I ran a marathon in 3: 57 and then this year my goal was 3: 45, so definitely cutting that down. I almost felt like 3: 45 was a little bit lofty of a goal. I was a little bit scared to tell people that because I didn't want to not get that, but I ended up getting a 3: 32, so definitely.

00:37:44

Rob Simmelkjaer: Whoa. 3:32, you were going for 3: 45, how did that happen? What got into you out there on the course to run that much faster than your goal?

00:37:57

Relly Ladner: I think a couple things. I think the first is a couple times in the beginning of the marathon I had, so I had my regular bib on the side of my shorts and then I had the Team Inspire bib on my back. And a couple of times people had passed me running and were like, " Whoo, Team Inspire," cheering. And it was so amazing to me that people knew what Team Inspire was and were so happy to celebrate and they had no idea of my story.

I was just someone running around the same time as them, which was just so amazing and really motivational too. It was almost like, " Yes, I'm wearing this." It almost felt like as I would think a national team player would feel to wear the flag on their jersey. It was like I was wearing something that I had to represent and I had to do well for myself to represent this team that I was a part of.

But I also think that I had known the course so I knew it was coming. I knew when it was going to get hard. I knew when I could go a little bit faster. And then right when I got over the Queensboro Bridge at mile 16, I had done this run. My brother just moved to the city, he goes to business school year now, and I had done this run I to him pretty much every Monday and it was a five- mile run up, five- mile run back, so 10 miles. And when I got off the Queensboro Bridge, I was like, " You're just running to George. You're just running your 10 mile, the run that you do every Monday." And I think that's what really pushed me to give a little bit more in those last 10 miles.

00:39:28

Rob Simmelkjaer: That's amazing, that's quite a day that you had.

00:39:31

Relly Ladner: Yeah.

00:39:31

Rob Simmelkjaer: At what point did you realize that this was just going to be an incredible time, an incredible day for you, given what you had accomplished? Was it later in the race when you looked at your watch and you were like, "Wow, I'm crushing this today?"

00:39:46

Relly Ladner: I knew that I was going a pretty steady pace the whole time, until I got to mile 18. That's when I faded in the 2024 marathon and I was a little bit scared that I was going to have, I don't know, the same, mentally I was going to feel like I was hitting a wall again or having the same. And when I was able to cruise through that, I was like, "I got this. I can finish strong." So yeah, I think the whole race was pretty smooth. And then when I got to 18 and was feeling good, I was like... There was no way I wasn't going to finish strong then.

00:40:17

Rob Simmelkjaer: Oh yeah, absolutely. And I saw you at the finish line, as I mentioned, an unbelievable smile in your face. How did it feel different crossing this finish line versus others that you had crossed?

00:40:29

Relly Ladner: I think a couple reasons. One, being on Team Inspire and like I said, having the bib on my back, I felt proud. I felt like I was able to inspire myself if not people around me. And I was just, I don't know, everything about the day was just so amazing. I was on cloud nine, I couldn't stop smiling. I was smiling for a couple of days after, I smile every time I think about it. It was just such a special day in so many ways, such a fun day. I think that one reason I love running is it just like when I'm having a bad day and I go for a run, everything just feels happier. It was just such a happy day.

00:41:10

Rob Simmelkjaer: Yeah, no, it was for you, and about 59, 200 others as well.

00:41:16

Relly Ladner: Amazing.

00:41:17

Rob Simmelkjaer: We're thrilled you had a great day. Let's talk about the charity you ran for Grassroot Soccer. Makes perfect sense given your background, what does that organization do?

00:41:27

Relly Ladner: Yeah, so it's an organization that helps adolescents through soccer and I think that's the main reason what attracted me to it. It helps adolescents to empower them and educate them on a variety of topics. One main one is mental health. And so I think that when I was young, soccer was such a big part of my life that it just made sense, the perfect organization to be running for an organization that was helping the youth through soccer.

00:41:57

Rob Simmelkjaer: And was that a team as well for you? Did you have a chance to meet some other people running for that organization?

00:42:04

Relly Ladner: Yeah, I did. And the person who runs the organization is, she's from where my parents live, so kind of a connection there. And also, the founder of the organization is a fellow Dartmouth alum too. So a lot of Dartmouth people run the marathon through Grassroot Soccer, which is a great way to bring together the Dartmouth community too.

00:42:25

Rob Simmelkjaer: Can people still donate to your run?

00:42:27

Relly Ladner: Yes, people can.

00:42:28

Rob Simmelkjaer: Where do they go?

00:42:30

Relly Ladner: I can send you the link. I have a fundraising page.

00:42:33

Rob Simmelkjaer: We'll put it in the show notes, absolutely. We'd love to help you raise more money. The fundraising continues even after the marathon for most people running for charity. All right. So Relly, what's next? You've had now I guess the three marathons under your belt. Your times are improving by leaps and bounds. I mean, when you're going from 3:57 to 3:32, there's more upside there for you. So what's your next race and what's your next goal?

00:43:01

Relly Ladner: Yeah, well, I'm trying to figure out my next race right now. I'm in the lottery for Berlin and for

Chicago so fingers crossed one of those come through. But I definitely want to do a spring race, so I'm just trying to figure out, right now. I'm thinking maybe the Vienna Marathon just because it's so close to home, but definitely a spring marathon. And I also, I started marathons as a fun thing. I didn't actually think that I would be going as fast as I am, and I think getting a 3:32 has made me realize that I really can push myself. So ultimately, my goal is to now Boston qualify, which is a couple minutes away and definitely will take a lot of work, but I think within the next year or two, that's my goal for sure.

00:43:48

Rob Simmelkjaer: It's a good goal. Berlin, Chicago, a little flatter than New York, so good places to give that a try as well.

00:43:55

Relly Ladner: Exactly.

00:43:56

Rob Simmelkjaer: I have a feeling you're going to get this, I really do.

00:43:59

Relly Ladner: Thank you. Thanks.

00:43:59

Rob Simmelkjaer: I mean, jeez, you're at that growth ramp where it just feels like you're going to get a lot faster given your athletic ability as well.

00:44:10

Relly Ladner: Thank you.

00:44:10

Rob Simmelkjaer: It was incredible watching you on Marathon Day. You did such an amazing job for Team Inspire for the organization. We just love being able to highlight these stories. I love that people were yelling that out in the race. I love that people recognize what that is. It's such an important part of the TCS New York City Marathon of what we do at New York Road Runners and you are a big part of it this year.

00:44:37

Relly Ladner: Thank you, yeah. I feel so lucky. I feel lucky every day that I am able to walk and I tell myself that, but especially this past marathon, I have felt, I've never felt lucky. I feel so lucky to be a part of this team

with 25 amazing other people that we're all still in touch and I feel like we could be lifelong friends. So it's really brought together a smaller community and in an amazing way with people that are so inspirational to everyone.

00:45:06

Rob Simmelkjaer: And you've been doing all these media appearances too, getting used to that?

00:45:11

Relly Ladner: Yeah. We were together on my first interview where I was definitely quite nervous. It's been a lot of fun.

00:45:18

Rob Simmelkjaer: Yes, you're a pro now. I mean, you do these interviews like you're running for office. Come on, you can do this rolling out of bed now. Absolutely. You're very good at it. Relly Ladner, thank you so much for being with us on Set the Pace. Congratulations. We wish you luck in your next marathon adventure.

00:45:36

Relly Ladner: Thank you.

00:45:36

Rob Simmelkjaer: And it's really been great talking to you, thanks.

00:45:38

Relly Ladner: Thank you. You too.

00:45:40

Rob Simmelkjaer: New York Road Runners is a nonprofit organization with a vision to build healthier lives and stronger communities through the transformative power of running. The support of members and donors like you helps us achieve our mission to transform the health and wellbeing of our communities through inclusive and accessible running experiences, empowering all to achieve their potential. Learn more and contribute at [nyrr.org/donate](https://nyrr.org/donate).

Felicia Pasadyn is a full-time medical student at NYU Grossman School of Medicine, currently applying for radiology residencies while working hospital shifts and aiming to graduate with her MD in 2026. Somehow, between rotations and exams, she's also become one of New York City's top sub-elite runners, coming seemingly out of nowhere to win this year's RBC Brooklyn Half. Six months later, not only did Felicia place 14th among all women. That's right, including all the pros at the 2025 TCS New York City Marathon. She

crossed the finish line with a time that qualifies her for the 2020 US Olympic trials. Felicia is a former Harvard swimmer turned distance runner, and here in New York, she's a member of the 212 Athletic Saucony Run Club. Here's Meb with her story.

00:46:58

Meb Keflezighi: Wow. What a resume. Felicia, welcome to the Set the Pace podcast, how are you doing today?

00:47:04

Felicia Pasadyn: Thank you, I'm doing well. Yeah, thanks for asking.

00:47:07

Meb Keflezighi: Little sore or no?

00:47:10

Felicia Pasadyn: Yes, I'm still quite sore, I'm not going to lie. It's getting better, but it's been tough to go down the stairs, for example.

00:47:17

Meb Keflezighi: Just amazing to be from a swimmer, which is 100 meters or whatnot, to 26.2 miles and finishing 14th at the TCS New York City Marathon. Can you just describe what that feeling is? How did you get started running?

00:47:32

Felicia Pasadyn: Yeah, so I will say I started running all the way back in middle school actually, but swimming, my identity was largely a swimmer all the way.

00:47:41

Meb Keflezighi: Not only a swimmer, all American swimmer though.

00:47:46

Felicia Pasadyn: Right, so in middle school and high school, sure, I loved running and I did it for fun with my friends and represented my high school. But I committed to swim in college and also swam during my master's degree at Ohio State, and that was my main sport. But I knew that when I finished swimming, my last meet I believe was NCAA's in March of 2023. By May of 2023, I had signed up for a half-marathon, so I knew I wanted to return to running. I loved it. But yeah, it wasn't a completely new thing when I did my first ever half-marathon. I had run a little bit when I was younger.

00:48:26

Meb Keflezighi: Well, great to have you back to running again, but balancing med school and marathon training sounds nearly impossible. How do you fit long runs and recovery into such a demanding schedule?

00:48:37

Felicia Pasadyn: Yeah, I'm not going to lie, it's extremely challenging. For example, whereas someone who maybe works an office job might start at 9:00 AM, oftentimes hospital shifts is in the hospital at 6:45 or 7:00. So I have this protected time between the hours of about 4:15 and 6:45 AM. I work out and then I lift. So that's either a run or a StairMaster combined with a lift. And then I shower and eat. I call it a military shower. I do about a two-minute shower. I eat breakfast on the way, and then I am in the hospital for most of the day, and then I try to go to bed very, very early to keep it all sustainable. But I will admit, it's challenging to know that everyone has the same number of hours in the day, yet it feels like I have so much to do. But if you want anything bad enough, and I do love running enough, you can get it done.

00:49:29

Meb Keflezighi: Just amazing. And balance is such an important component of life. It kind of remind me of Roger Bannister, the first guy to ever break four minutes for the mile. He was a medical student while he did that. So what message do you have for the people that say, "I just don't have time?"

00:49:47

Felicia Pasadyn: My message for that is if you look in your day and you think, what is the thing that I'm missing that I feel the most strongly about, my priority, you can shift your day around to really make something important to you happen. For example, maybe it's a call with your family members and you're having trouble fitting that in your day. I think if you slide around, you avoid things like doom scrolling or dilly-dallying, you can get those things done that you really love to do in your day.

00:50:14

Meb Keflezighi: Excellent. You have said that running gives you a sense of control during uncertainty of medical training. Can you tell us more about that, please?

00:50:23

Felicia Pasadyn: Sure. So I mean, something about medical school, especially once you get into rotations and you're on the wards, is sometimes your schedule is unpredictable. Not to mention that the actual patient care can be very

unpredictable. For example, I find medicine to be very rewarding, but there are some days where a patient case or a result comes back that you really weren't expecting. And emotionally, it can be very, very difficult. But running makes me feel extremely grounded. I know I can go to Central Park and run at 4:30 and I can get my 10 miles in and then I can do my lift and I can come back and shower and feel like I've lived almost a whole day before I even get on the medicine wards. And in a way, that just sets up my day and is so empowering when I don't know what the shift is going to bring. So it does give me that sense of home and control and grounding even in very difficult patient moments.

00:51:24

Meb Keflezighi: I'm pretty sure it teaches you a lot about time management before getting to that medical school. So you have raised everything from RBC Brooklyn Half to the New York City Marathon this year. What did all those experience teach you about yourself as a runner?

00:51:41

Felicia Pasadyn: I think I learned that imposter syndrome doesn't exist if you believe in yourself enough. For example, I found myself very in awe of the women around me in the pro field, but not in a way where I felt an imposter more in a way of the only outcome is for me to level up and accomplish something I didn't even believe was possible. And going into the Brooklyn Half, it was not on my radar. I thought maybe I could get top five women, it wasn't in my radar to win. But partway through the race, even in the most challenging of hills, or when your legs are burning or your quads feel like bricks, you just have to feel motivated by the women around you rather than feeling like you don't belong. And I think that, I mean half-marathons and marathons, mental is a big part of it. And once I adopted that mentality of if I believe I can do it and rise to the occasion, then I will. That's really been a game changer in terms of my performance.

00:52:44

Meb Keflezighi: Amazing. Believe in yourself and do the grind. Amazing results will come. Looking ahead as you move into the radiology residency, how do you hope to keep running part of your life?

00:52:57

Felicia Pasadyn: Yeah, I mean, it's unclear what the balance is going to look like given that radiology is a five-year residency that's extremely rigorous. It's quite a competitive

specialty and it takes a lot of very detail oriented, long training as well. However, again, as I've mentioned, if you want something bad enough, you'll make it happen in your day. So what I envision is no matter what city I move to, no matter what my schedule looks like, if I can get my runs in, if I can get my workouts in, I'd really like to potentially sign with a company, go pro, continue to work my way through the marathon majors and just see where it all takes me.

00:53:37

Meb Keflezighi: Well, you just finished 14th at the biggest marathon in the world and no doubt that you're going to be able to do it. Felicia, as we move forward to what is ahead by just qualify for the Olympic trials for the 2028, how do you feel about that?

00:53:52

Felicia Pasadyn: I'm absolutely beside myself. This a goal that I thought maybe in 2027 I could possibly accomplish, but I had heard so much about how difficult of a course New York City Marathon was, and it really wasn't something I believed I could do so to go a 2:35 and break that 2:37 standard on Sunday was absolutely incredible and reminded me a lot of the moment that I made my first ever Olympic trial cut in the 100-meter backstroke for swimming. And again, moments like that in your life, you'll never, never forget. Just a testament to how much hard work goes into it.

00:54:30

Meb Keflezighi: I know hard work is in everything, whether you're swimming or running, but how is that? To be Olympic trial qualifying the swimming I think would be different than running 26.2 miles.

00:54:41

Felicia Pasadyn: Well, I think, I'm not going to lie, every four years there are more female swimmers that make Olympic trials than female runners, and so I think this accomplishment might be even more niche and more special, but it's hard to compare them. I love both sports so much, and I think my swimming background really gave me the grit and determination and ability to push myself in the running. They kind of go hand in hand, and again, both of them are moments I'll never forget.

00:55:11

Meb Keflezighi: They go hand in hand with you. I know people have seen me run marathon and said, "You're going to be a great swimmer," and I'm not. So congratulations, that's just

incredible.

00:55:20

Felicia Pasadyn: Thank you.

00:55:21

Meb Keflezighi: Well done.

00:55:23

Rob Simmelkjaer: Thanks for joining us, Felicia, and for being a member of New York Road Runners. Now it's time for today's Meb Minutes.

00:55:32

Meb Keflezighi: Lessons from the marathon that have nothing to do with running. The marathon is a mirror of life. It tests patience, humility, and perseverance. You learn how to manage discomfort, not just physically pain, but also self-doubt and setback. Marathon teaches us to do hard things and how to handle it. It's always going to be a challenge, but if you're severe, great things will happen. Marathon training teaches us time management showing up daily even when it's not convenient. That's what I tell people. If you have somebody to meet up, you're going to show up and it's going to help you get easier. It's all about controlling what you can control and let it go what you can't control, a skill that applies everywhere in life.

Gratitude for the miles, for the people that cheer you on, and for the body that carries you from 13.1 miles or 26.2 miles. Make sure you have a gratitude for your body. The marathon remind us that the goals that take time. Consistency beats intensity every time, and then learning to recover gracefully from a disappointment and miss a PR or bad race or a bad weather or injury shows resilience. I really think that it is important to know about patients and also to be able to just recover because race is a race. Injuries happen, and you might not hit your goal, but at the same time, keep chugging away. I always sometimes say the end of one race is the beginning of another, so you discover a lot of things about yourself, but also, you discover about the community. You might have a bad race, but there's so many people that had a great race, be a positive team player and be able to encourage others to keep going.

The finish line is always magical every time, even when you have a disappointment, so make sure you appreciate it and don't dread your disappointment for a long period. It's okay to be disappointed for an hour or a couple hours, but after that you have to realize you just did something incredible to get to that cross the finish line. Everything in life is one day after another, one challenge after another. You have

to take a day to day and make sure you appreciate the small victories in life and in marathon. There's no shortcuts. There's no instant gratification, but if you work hard, you're going to be all right.

I remember one time, sometimes in a race in 2013 at the TCS New York City Marathon. I wasn't having a tough day, but I have to refocus, get to that finish line. Even though you are 19 miles or 20 miles, they don't feel like you're going to go, but you just have to make a new goal to say, I'm going to get to that finish line even if it means walking. But before you're realizing that you're going to start jogging, get to that finish line, get to that 5K to go, and then the crowd would going to carry you through it, and the camaraderie and the friendship that you make, like I did that year with Mike Cassidy, still friends to this day, even those 12 years later.

00:58:24

Rob Simmelkjaer: All right, well, that does it for another episode of Set the Pace. We want to thank our awesome guests today, Relly Ladner and Felicia Pasadyn. If you like the episode today, please subscribe, follow it, rate it, leave a comment so others can find it too, and so that we can hear from you. Thanks for joining us everybody. Hope you're enjoying that post-marathon glow, those of you who ran. Enjoy the miles, we'll see you next week.