

LIFE GETS IN — THE WAY

Powering Through
Adversity with Grit
and Grace



SALLY KALKSMA

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www.sallykalksma.com

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GENESIS

June 12, 1967

Dear Diary,

***Today I ran to the beach with Marion. I didn't stop once!
Mom said I ran a mile. I can't wait to go again. It was fun.***

Love, Sally

Whoever came up with the theory that the eldest child in the family is the smartest while the youngest seeks rebellion by attention must have studied my family. It's really funny that they seldom mention anything about the middle child, especially if there is more than one. And in my family, there are three.

Being the youngest caused me to seek a lot of attention, aka rebellion. Luckily, to save me from being a total derelict, my four older siblings were great role models. I wanted to be just like my big sisters. I did everything they did—which was good and bad since they were a lot older than me. I grew up fast. And what I lacked in brains I got in street smarts, which I believe is a higher form of intelligence that can take you just as far if not farther than a 4.0 GPA. I would never have told my three children this while they were growing up, but since they were all student athletes who have achieved post-graduate educations, I can say this now. You know, the old “do what I say, not what I do” way of parenting.

September 1, 1969

Dear Diary,

I won the 50-yard dash and the pie-eating contest at Field Day. I like blueberry the best. I got two blue ribbons.

Sally

When I was younger, I wanted to be a lawyer and write a book. Well, since I lacked that smart gene, I choose the latter, and at the age of fifty-five, I've shed my inhibitions and started to share what I wrote. Age has never stopped me from doing what I wanted. When I was too young, I did it anyway. When people tell me I'm too old to do something, I still do it. Why would I let anybody or anything, especially a number, stop me? I love to challenge myself. People say I'm competitive, and maybe I am. But I'm most competitive with myself. I always want to better myself. And when I feel I have mastered something, I look for something new. Some people also confuse conceit with self-confidence. I'm not self-centered; I just have a high self-esteem.

I learned two important lessons at a young age; the first was to train my brain. If you say you won't or you can't, your brain will send receptors out to the rest of your body, and it will not do it. I trained my brain with lots of repetition, just like anything you want to master. I just kept telling myself over and over that I could do something until my body did what my brain told it to do. I trained my brain like I trained my muscles. The workout was to be positive—to only emit positive thoughts so my brain could only send positive receptors out to the rest of my body. Like any workout, I had good and bad days. Sometimes it didn't work, but I would try harder the next time.

I started to train my brain at a young age when I started running. I wanted to run because all my sisters ran. I told myself if they could do it, then I could too. Instinctively I trained my brain to be positive physically as well as mentally. Being positive now comes naturally.

I decided that I would only think and speak positively. Think of it like using the present tense and the past tense. Present tense is positive. Past tense is negative. I never use negative words when I'm trying to accomplish anything. When running a race, I do not say, "I am NOT going to let her win." Instead I say, "I AM going to win." By using the positive present tense in everything I do, being positive now comes naturally. Try it—you'll see that it works.

RUNNING DIARY

DATE: May 3, 1975

EVENT: Junior Olympic One Mile Run

COMMENTS: 2nd place; I couldn't catch Joetta Clark.

Don't give up. Do it now!

This mindset gave me the ability to excel in running at a young age. But I also had to learn how to lose. No one is ever going to be on top forever. When I was twelve, I learned how to lose gracefully when I came up against my biggest competitor to date. I'll never forget that day. I checked into the paddock before the one-mile run at the Junior Olympic Championship and saw a tall, lean girl walking very confidently. She had spikes thrown over her muscular shoulder. No one my age had muscles defined like that, let alone wore spikes. I was instantly psyched out. I didn't know it then, but this was someone I would have to run against and lose to in every big meet for the next six years. Being second to three-time Olympian Joetta Clark taught me to be humble, something I sorely needed. She and her father, the famed high school principal Joe Clark, featured in the true 1989 movie *Lean on Me*, inspired me.

The running boom of the seventies had just begun, and I was part of it. Although the women's movement helped Title 9 in college, youth sports and high schools didn't quite recognize girls' running as much. My father decided I needed a coach, so he contacted a former student of his, marathon great Tom Fleming. My mother had to drive me all over New Jersey and New York to compete. My sisters Pat and Sue started the girls' cross country team their senior year in high school. When I entered the following year, there were not enough girls in the sport, so I had to compete on the boys' JV team. I earned the number-one spot. That spring I was only allowed to run the one mile in track, as anything more was considered too taxing on the female body. As a freshman in high school, I made it to the Meet of Champions.

Running gave me the attention the youngest child craves. But remember, along with that attention comes rebellion. I swear (and I don't swear), if I were in high school now and did just one of the things I did when I was younger, I probably would be in juvie. Thank God (and I'm not religious either), it was the seventies and you could get away with a lot as

long as your parents didn't find out. It's not a coincidence that I'm sharing some of these stories now that my parents are deceased.

Our generation was probably more afraid of our parents than the police. At one point my parents threatened to pull me out of Glen Ridge High School, located in the beautiful upper-class small town located just fifteen miles west of New York City, and send me to Point Pleasant Boro High School, in the Jersey shore town where my parents owned a summer home. You would never think that I was born in Newark, New Jersey, and spent the first four years of my life in East Orange, New Jersey, until my father had the foresight to move his family out of there before the race riots hit in the 1960s.

For many growing up is not easy, and I was no exception. Not only was I in the shadow of my four talented sisters, but I was also the daughter of a great football player and coach. My dad was a man who played in the era of leather helmets and coached at a time when an adult had the authority to discipline and was respected for it. My dad was inducted into the New Jersey High School Coaches' Hall of Fame alongside Vince Lombardi.

I can thank my mother, who modeled in her twenties, for my legs, but I thank my father for giving me the grit to use them. That grit gets me through every obstacle I encounter, whether I have chosen that hurdle or it is thrown out before me. Grit is the power to turn the switch in your brain so it puts your body into another gear. Grit is what makes you tough. I trained my brain to be tough. That gave me grit. You can use grit in sports, and you can use grit in any adverse situation you need to get through. In high school I used this grit to run races, as well as to run from the police once or twice. Now I channel this grit into tower running, facing health issues, and dealing with tough mental situations.

When you use grit enough times, it becomes an instinct. At the age of ten, grit got me to pedal my bike home a mile away with the bottom of my foot slit wide open and bleeding from the base of my toes to the heel. A year later I instinctively used grit to save my life when I fell off the end of the jetty into the Atlantic Ocean. I just clawed my way back up the slippery algae with the rough waves slamming my body between the rocks. I didn't say to myself, "It's time to use grit." I just made it happen. When your brain is trained, you can turn the switch in your head and your body will obey. Grit took over after I was hit by a car. I am not saying grit gave me super-human powers to deflect the vehicle making an illegal turn, but it did give

me the power to not let this setback destroy my spirit to get better and eventually return stronger than before.



I think I had the same look on my face whether I was running a race or running from the police back in high school.

I have to thank my father for not raising any “daddy’s little girls.” In fact, I was an accident, and I was also my parent’s last hope for a boy. I was even named after my father, Salvatore. No, my real name is not Salvatore, but Sally is the closest feminine version to it. It’s no wonder my biggest fantasy was not to be a prima ballerina, but to be a kicker in the NFL. Maybe that’s in part due to the fact I wasn’t one of the daughters given dance lessons.

RUNNING DIARY

DATE: May 20, 1978

EVENT: State Finals

RACE: One Mile 5:25

COMMENTS: pb, school record, 4th place. I was disqualified for cutting in too early. I hate running!

The second lesson I learned at a young age is that only I have the power to change myself and my circumstances. I found this out the hard way when I kissed a boy, and he not only told everyone but exaggerated the story and gave me a reputation I did not deserve. From that moment on I knew I had to be with good people if I wanted good things to happen. To this day I stay clear of toxic individuals. Life is too short and valuable to be disrespected and depreciated. Never listen to passive-aggressive people who put others down to make themselves feel better. Stay away from negative people and those who talk bad about others, as it is a sign of their weakness and insecurity. But do not be too quick to find fault with others, as it does not make you appear smarter, only sinister.

Not everyone has to go on to college to become successful. You just need to become a productive part of society, not a problem. In fact, the most accomplished classmate of mine decided to pursue his dreams instead of furthering his education. Tommy Mapother—or as I nicknamed him, The Kentucky Kisser (I really don't think I need to explain much more than that he had moved from the Bluegrass State to our town)—went on to become Tom Cruise. He was good-looking, athletic, talented, and most importantly, a nice person. He said he wanted to be an actor, and he did it. I have no doubt he has grit. He did not listen to other people who doubted he could succeed in such a competitive field, something that I regret. (No, I didn't want to be an actress.)

I didn't want to go to college either. I wanted to join the army, but I didn't have a choice. I had to listen to my father for once. My father, the son of Sicilian immigrants, was the first in his family to go to college, thanks to a full football scholarship. He made sure his five daughters all went to college. He also wanted to see all five of his daughters get married. He was able to witness four weddings before his death. Can you guess who he didn't walk down the aisle? Anyway, I begrudgingly went off to Glassboro State College, while many of my friends from our upper-class hometown went off to schools like MIT, Boston University, and Wellesley. My high school boyfriend even attended West Point Military Academy. Not serving my country is one of my biggest regrets.

Not only did I not want to attend school, I no longer wanted to run. I gave up on the authority figures I thought were supposed to mentor me. The teachers and coaches I had in high school did not fight for me, and I felt they kicked me when I was down. Therefore, I did not fight for them when I got on the line to run a race. By my junior year in high school, I no longer tried. I could still win, but I didn't care to. Why should I kill myself for someone who didn't fight for me when I was disqualified in the State Finals track meet? Why should I kill myself for someone who didn't help me when the authorities found Jack Daniels and rolling paraphernalia in my possession as a setup? I lost any chance of a track scholarship, and they didn't try to help me. Rebellion at its finest set in. Again, I knew only I could make my life better. I felt it was me versus the world.

RUNNING LOG

DATE: July 28, 1980

EVENT: Lakewood Roller Rink

RACE: First speed skating practice

COMMENTS: More like roller derby, not sure about this

In college, I found it wasn't just me against the world. It was me fighting the world, and I suddenly realized I no longer had to. I let go of the built-up anger I had inside. Once I did that, I was immediately happier. I started to enjoy running again. I was coerced into joining the cross country and track team by a coach, Nancy Buhner, who believed in me (and therefore I believed in her), and I ran well. Like anyone who works hard, I was rewarded; my reward was being named captain of both sports my junior and senior years.

Don't let this fairy tale fool you, though. I still had my appetite for fun. When I wasn't running, I was out having a good time and causing mischief. I excelled in my classes, too—partly because my parents said I had to pay for half of my education, and partly because I took classes I was interested in. My senior year was a far cry from my first week as a freshman when I was almost thrown out of school for “accidentally” trespassing in a factory one night trying to find my way back to my dorm from a party that was broken up by the police. I learned a lot in college, and it wasn't all in a classroom. I got higher education courses in street smarts.

During this time, I forged friendships with three women who would turn out to be my closest friends for life. Pam (Okilita) Caucino, SueAnn (Glester) Carurso, and Linda Schlachter are the type of friends that are there no matter what, like family. We all need friends like that, both male and female. Women take note: never lose your girlfriends! A man isn't going to tell you to put baby powder in your pumps when the sides rub against your feet too much. Only a woman can give you tips like that. You know what a man will say? "Buy more comfortable shoes." And men, here's some advice for you, too: don't ever lose your male friends either, because most women don't want to talk about car chassis unless you're repairing it for them. True friendships are invaluable. Like all types of good relationships, they must be nourished so they can flourish. Give them attention and love, yet space to grow on their own. If you neglect or abuse them, they will go away.

Another thing happened in college: I met someone who would constantly change my life for the next thirty-plus years and test my will. Testing my will was not a challenge I was prepared for at the age of eighteen, but with time and repetition I learned to adapt and persevere. Little did I know that spring day of my freshman year when I was working out in the college weight room that Pete was overcoming the removal of a neurogenic tumor on his lung. Nor did I know he would end up being my husband.

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