

She's Going the Distance

50-year-old record setter tells how she has improved with age

By John Hanc

KATHY MARTIN'S first foray on the road to fitness lasted all of 10 minutes.

Martin, then 30, had decided to go out for a jog with her husband, Chuck Gross, a regular runner. She barely made it a mile before she had to stop, so exhausted that she actually lay down in the middle of Clark Drive in East Northport.

"I remember lying in the street, gasping for breath," she recalled, "and Chuck standing over me, saying 'Get up, a car's going to hit you!' And I said, 'I hope it does.'"

For many people, that might have been both the beginning and the end of the road. Not for Martin. She came back the next day and the next and the next. Not only did she succeed in staying upright, she managed to go a little further every time.

"I guess I never knew I had a competitive spirit or a strong drive," she said. "But that's when it started to show."

Indeed. It's been 20 years since that inauspicious debut — and today, Martin is one of the fastest women in the world for her age. She proved it again at the USA Track & Field National Masters Indoor Championships, held last month at the Reggie Lewis Track and Athletic Facility in Boston. Competing in four events — 800 meters, the mile, 3,000 meters and as part of a 4 x 800-meter relay team — Martin set two world and seven American and Canadian (she has dual citizenship) national age-group records. Her time for the mile was 5 minutes, 22.74 seconds, a world-record time for women age 50-54.

She says her friends say, "I don't know how you do it." "Well," she says, "you put one foot in front of the other, and get out the door. It doesn't matter what you're doing. It doesn't have to be running. Get out and walk . . . get out and play with your kids."

This from a woman who has won about 20 national and international titles while raising Zack, now 18, and Christopher, now 37, a son from her husband's first marriage. In between, she works — sometimes more than 50 hours a week — as a Century 21 real estate agent.

Martin has little patience for that most frequently cited excuse for not exercising — lack of time. "If I had one thing to impart to people," she says, "it's that it doesn't have to take a lot of time. For me, it's only an hour a day."

For her, that hour is first thing in the morning, when Martin — who stands 5 feet, 1 inch tall and weighs 106 pounds — runs 5 to 8 miles on the track at Harborfields High or the hills at Sunken Meadow State Park. (In addition, she works with a strength coach regularly.) "I'm not just trudging along out there," says Martin, whose next major competitive goal is the 13.1-mile Long Island Half Marathon on May 5. She



Newsday Photo / Jim Peppler

Kathy Martin and her husband, Chuck Gross, run at Sunken Meadow State Park.

'It takes a certain amount of discipline, but if you stick with it, you can see dramatic results.'

— Kathy Martin, 50, fastest miler in her age group

has already finished that race in second and third place four times, behind women about half her age.

Some might say it's easy to train every morning if you've got Martin's innate talent, even if it took a little while for that talent to show itself. But her husband, who is now also her coach, doesn't think talent alone has enabled his wife to achieve what she has. "You have to have your desire systems in place," says Gross.

What got Martin out the door initially was an awareness, even at the relatively tender age of 30, that she was locked in a pattern of inactivity. She grew up in small town outside Toronto, born into a non-athletic family. (Her mother still smokes, and Martin describes her three brothers as "couch potatoes at their finest.")

After marrying and moving to New York with Chuck (they met on a ski vacation in 1974), she quickly fell into a sedentary lifestyle. Six years later, she found herself lying on the aforementioned street in her adopted hometown, gasping for breath. That experience, Martin says, "was a wake-up call. I said, 'What am I going to be by the time I'm 60?'"

Today, she says, "I'm in the best shape of my life." Not many others 50 years old can make that claim. But, Martin insists, regular exercise can make a difference for anyone, of any age. Take it from a runner who has reached the heights of her sport, after starting out flat on her back: "It takes a certain amount of discipline, but if you stick with it, you can see dramatic results."

As if to punctuate her point once again, early this month Martin competed in a popular local road race, the Nationwide Insurance 10K "Run For Aspire" in Plainview, and was the first woman and 38th overall finisher, out of 649 competitors. She covered the 6.2-mile distance in 37 minutes, 33 seconds.

"She's truly unique," says Sue Polansky of Plainview, president of Long Island Track & Field. "For someone her age to finish first in a road race and to be setting these kinds of records, it's amazing." ■

Fitness writer John Hanc is a regular contributor to Newsday.