

UBER MOTHER RUNNER

30 years of the pregnant marathon – its history and safety

Posted on May 1, 2013 by TRACYHOEG

The first marathon run by a pregnant woman might have been in 1983. And, not surprisingly, it was unintentional. The Norwegian Ingrid Christiansen ran the Houston Marathon in 2:33:27 and was disappointed. It wasn't until two months later her coach, Johan Kaggestad, suggested she take a pregnancy test. She was 5'6", 106 lbs and used to infrequent periods. She called her coach crying. The test was positive. It wasn't that she didn't want to get pregnant; she did. But she also wanted to continue running.



Just to give a little historical perspective, in 1966, Roberta Gibb had her entry form for the Boston Marathon returned with a note that stated women were “not physically capable” of running a marathon. She ran anyway, thus disproving the theory of the author of the note.

Certainly there were women capable of running a marathon, though they were the exceptional few who had trained enough to be capable.

As early as the 1930's, scientists and physicians discussed the safety of exercise during pregnancy. Smaller studies were done on animals and women, but by today's rigorous research standards, nothing significant was deduced. In the 1980's, evidence escalated that some degree of exercise and/or running was acceptable and was likely to be beneficial. This was reflected in the ACOG 1985 exercise in pregnancy guidelines. And today women are advised they can continue training at the same level they trained at prior to pregnancy. Even heart rate limits are no longer considered necessary by most health care practitioners.

In 2012 more than 200,000 women completed a marathon in the United States alone (Running USA). This does not take into account the number of women who completed long-distance triathlons or ultramarathons. These numbers would not be of much importance except many of these women are in their child-bearing years and will be interested to know if they can continue this type of racing and training while pregnant.

A careful reader might deduce: if a woman is currently allowed to continue training at her current level when she becomes pregnant and she is in the shape to run a marathon prior to pregnancy, then she can run one pregnant.

Is it indeed this simple?

Once the words pregnancy and marathon are combined, the general public disapproves. Of course, they view the marathon through the eyes of a person who is not in the condition to run a marathon, perhaps let alone a 5k, so it simply *seems* too dangerous. And women who are pregnant read the thoughts of these people and get discouraged.

But in March of 2013, the American Journal of Family Practice became part of an official movement of not discouraging women from running marathons pregnant.



The above article (<http://www.aafp.org/afp/2013/0401/p471.html>) states recreational athletes can continue to train at their current level in a uncomplicated pregnancy.

The concerns about running a marathon pregnant are speculative and few.

- is there an increased risk of miscarriage?

- would the core body temperature of a marathoner rise to such a degree that it poses a risk to the fetus' central nervous system? And if so, at what point in pregnancy?

- does the transient decreased heart rate observed in fetuses while a mother is running pose a risk? Or does it in fact make the baby's cardiovascular system stronger and more resilient?

Studies with small populations and large epidemiological studies with multiple confounding variables have not been able to either confirm or debunk these concerns.

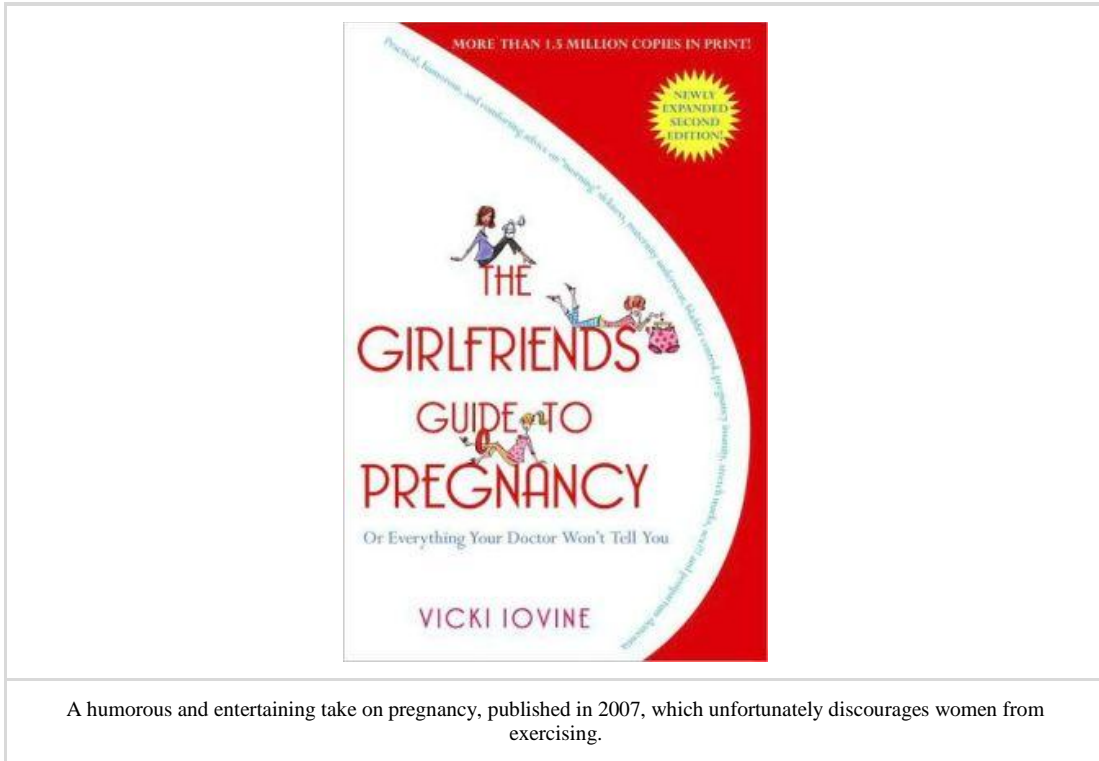
In the meantime women (many women) are running marathons pregnant. So why is it you may have only heard of Amber Miller and perhaps one or two others? Because actually, it's not really big news for runners. At nearly every large city marathon, there are one or more women there running it pregnant. They may choose to announce it on a blog, Facebook or simply tell friends. But the press rarely gets word.



Tara Zimliki 2008 on her way to complete the ING NY Marathon 8 months pregnant.

I love looking a pictures of pregnant runners. Is there another point in a woman's life when she simply glows? Some of the best running experiences I have had were when I was pregnant. The distance and speed you run at is up to you. Remember, there are so many health benefits for both you and your baby. Your own happiness is among the most important.

When I became pregnant in 2007, I just kept running- some 13 miles a day. I wrote about it on my blog – and only because readers started voicing concerns, did I start researching it. I soon learned that most of what you find online is women (and men) discouraging women from continuing to run because it is too selfish (this is a word that will break any pregnant woman's heart). Even *The Girlfriend's Guide to Pregnancy* by Vicki Iovine discourages women from engaging in any exercise whatsoever while pregnant.

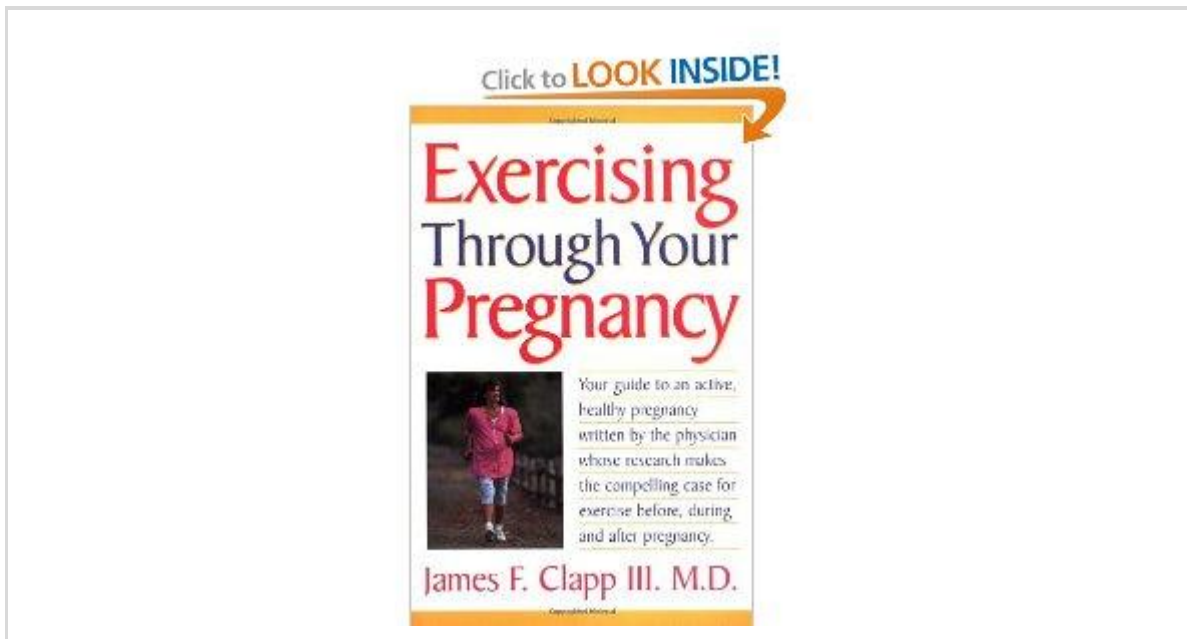


A humorous and entertaining take on pregnancy, published in 2007, which unfortunately discourages women from exercising.

These non-scientifically sound opinions are doing a true disservice to women athletes (and really all women), who are interested in having a healthy, happy pregnancy.

Subsequent to my pregnancy, I found a woman online who had run 7 marathons pregnant. Her website has now disappeared and I don't remember her name (she likely had threats from her readers of contacting the police, as I did on my blog). Then I heard about a woman who had reportedly run a Midwest ultramarathon 9 months pregnant. I heard it from two different people who don't know each other. Yet, I wonder if the legend created around her is larger than her belly got. This is just the nature of pregnant marathon "evidence". Women don't want to *brag* about running pregnant. They just want to do it and not cause any trouble.

By 2010, I had heard of or read about nearly 50 women who had run marathons pregnant. I never heard of complications. And I had read James F. Clapp III, MD's book "Exercising through your pregnancy"



“The traditional approach to an unknown risk is avoidance...[Recreational exercise] does not increase the incidence of either smaller than average babies or premature labor; and it actually may decrease the incidence of both.”
— James F. Clapp, *Exercising Through Your Pregnancy*

which demonstrated through elegant research, not only described how safe running while pregnant was, but the myriad of benefits to the mother and baby that go along with running during your entire pregnancy. These include much lower rates of pregnancy complications and health benefits for the child including better self-calming, decreased chance of obesity, improved motor coordination and higher IQ. So one is led to wonder:

- would running A LOT result in an ideal pregnancy and a super child? Or is there a point where it gets risky?

That same year, I was contacted by a Ms. S, who had read my running blog. She had a few questions and wanted to know about my experience running while pregnant. She went on to set a personal record (PR) in the ½ marathon 4 months pregnant in and then another PR in the marathon 6 months pregnant in 3:27. I was floored. Not only did running a marathon pregnant now appear to be safe, but running one at a higher speed than achieved pre-pregnancy was safe for at least this one woman. It should be pointed out, though, that she suffered a stress fracture late in pregnancy, and these are the types of issues that need to be further explored so women can avoid injury to their rapidly-changing bodies.

In the summer of 2010, I became pregnant again. I continued training at an intense level. I had a 50 mile race on my schedule when I was six weeks pregnant. I ran the race at a comfortable pace and felt surprisingly good the entire time. I had, though, run the race the year before an hour faster. The very next day, before I went to bed, I noticed pink in my underwear. By the next morning, I was bleeding so heavily that I knew it was a miscarriage. I blamed myself and the 50 mile race entirely. But I made the very wise decision to go to the hospital. They did an ultrasound there, which ended up making a lot more sense: the fetus had died 3 weeks earlier – it had nothing to do with the 50 mile race. Whether or not it had anything to do with a high level of training, I probably will never know.

But that fall, I got pregnant again. I ran 6 marathons during that pregnancy and gave birth to a healthy boy at 39 weeks. I ran the first marathon just 3 weeks pregnant (before the pregnancy test turned positive) and I was noticeably winded compared to my most recent marathon. My last pregnant marathon was the Copenhagen Marathon at 30 weeks pregnant, which I ran in 4:54. After that very strenuous effort, I had a long recovery and lots of Braxton Hicks contractions. I had to wonder how healthy such a fast marathon at 30 weeks was in retrospect. But in the end, I have no doubt that running while pregnant was the right thing for me, as it is for many, many other women.



Elaine Cooper, 1996, 31k Dunhill Drive Cross Country Race

And what about Ingrid Christiansen? What happened to her after all of those kilometers and a world-class marathon time 2 months pregnant?

She had an uncomplicated pregnancy and gave birth to a healthy baby boy. Just six months later, she went on to set the women's marathon world record in 2:24:26 in London in 1984. She lowered it again by 3 minutes a year later.

Improved performance post-partum is a less discussed "benefit" of running while pregnant, but worth mentioning for moms-to-be who want to continue running. In the small amount of literature written about the doping effect of pregnancy, young women athletes in Eastern Germany during the 1970's are mentioned and it was termed "abortion doping". Supposedly these women got pregnant simply to induce red blood cell production and then would abort the baby and get a boost in their training similar to what one would get with epopoetin (imagine training such a malignant environment!). This effect should not last more than 3 months, given the life of a red blood cell.

But time and again, I have witnessed and heard of women who have gone on to set personal records in running of all sorts of distances after (an entire) pregnancy, though not within the first three months post-partum. So there must be a more long-lasting form of "doping" and I think the answer must lie in muscle memory. The body simply adjusts to all of that extra weight and when that weight is suddenly gone, the mother's body is much more efficient at running. I do not know how long this lasts, but suspect it is between 1 and 2 years and is likely more pronounced the more you run while pregnant. And of course, if you continue to train, you can extend the benefits out for many years.

In the past, health care providers instructed women to wait six weeks after delivery to begin exercising. But in an uncomplicated, vaginal delivery, women may now begin running again within days of delivery – entirely up to their own level of comfort. If they can find the time...