

Ep #220: What It Means to Be a Fat Runner with Another Mother Runner Podcast



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Jill Angie

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Welcome to *The Not Your Average Runner Podcast*. If you're a woman who has never felt athletic but you still dream about becoming a runner, you are in the right place. I'm Jill Angie, a certified running and life coach, and I teach women how to start running, feel confident, and change their lives. And now I want to help you.

Hey Rebels, I have a really fun treat for you this week. So last month I was a guest on the *Another Mother Runner Podcast*, you know, just chatting with Sarah Bowen Shea and Elizabeth Waterstraat about what it means to be a fat runner. Oh my God. So it was such a great conversation that I actually asked them if I could share it right here on the *Not Your Average Runner* show.

Now the *Another Mother Runner Podcast*, or as I like to call it the AMR podcast, is one of the like OG podcasts about running. They have been around for like a decade. And way back when I was training for my very first half marathon I actually binge listened to their show on my long runs. And I mean, this show really got me through some tough times during that first half marathon training. And I thought to myself, "Someday I'd love to go to a race and maybe meet these amazing women."

And then voila, fast forward to 2021 and that wish kind of came true. So we had such a great time talking and I mean this is just like when I interviewed Dean Karnazes a few weeks ago. He was one of my heroes that got me through my first half marathon as well. You never know what's going to come your way, my friends, if you stay committed to your dreams.

So I'm digressing quite a bit. If you're not already a listener of *the Another Mother Runner Podcast*, please make sure you subscribe so you can find out just what a great show it is. And without further ado, here is the interview.

[The Not Your Average Runner Podcast](#) with Jill Angie

Ep #220: What It Means to Be a Fat Runner with Another Mother Runner Podcast

Sarah: I want to welcome Jill Angie, a running coach who specializes in helping larger bodied runners get started running. Jill herself is a plus size runner and triathlete, as well as a personal trainer and life coach. Jill is a mother of two cats. Jill's coaching business and podcast is called *Not Your Average Runner*. She also wrote a 2018 book with the same title and the most excellent subtitle, *Not Your Average Runner: Why You're Not Too Fat to Run and the Skinny on How to Start Today*.

I sense Jill has a lot to say on our topic, so we'll jump right in. Welcome, Jill, so glad you could join us.

Jill: Hey, thank you so much for having me.

Sarah: Good.

Elizabeth: So, Jill, I understand you've been a runner for over two decades. What's your running background? Tell us more about it.

Jill: So I started running to lose weight, which I think a lot of people do, when I was in my 20s. And I just kind of muddled through with it. I kept struggling to get the results that I wanted with weight loss, but also just feeling good about it. So I would start and quit and start and quit. But eventually I kind of figured out a rhythm that worked for me. And I sort of gave up on the weight loss piece of it and said, "Hey, you know what? I'm fat and I'm running and this is working out okay."

So, I mean, I think I was inconsistent for quite a while but I didn't have a coach, I didn't really have anybody to look to until, I mean, coincidentally when I was training for my first half marathon I discovered the Another

[The Not Your Average Runner Podcast](#) with Jill Angie

Ep #220: What It Means to Be a Fat Runner with Another Mother Runner Podcast

Mother Runner Podcast and would listen to you guys for hours and hours on my training runs.

But I think because I never really had the role models out there when I was getting started, I struggled a lot. And then when I figured it out on my own I thought, "Okay, I got to help other people do this."

Sarah: Nice.

Elizabeth: So was that how you got started in your coaching business, was just you wanted to help other people figure it out and inspire them as well?

Jill: Yeah, so I actually had a nine to five corporate job for many years and I was feeling sort of unfulfilled by it. And I thought I want to do something different, so I'm going to become a personal trainer and I'm going to work with plus size women.

And I started doing that. Quit my job, opened my own training studio, it was going really well. But I noticed that a lot of my clients wanted to learn more about running and I just thought, "You know what? That's actually kind of a niche market that nobody's really helping." And so it sort of evolved from there. I wrote a book called Not Your Average Runner and it just kind of blew up because it turns out there's a lot of larger bodied women out there that wanted to do this.

So, yeah, it all happened very organically. It was definitely not pre-planned, but I'm super happy with how it all worked out.

Sarah: That's how the best running businesses start is very organically and unplanned. Says the person whose business was just prompted by her

[The Not Your Average Runner Podcast](#) with Jill Angie

Ep #220: What It Means to Be a Fat Runner with Another Mother Runner Podcast

publicist saying, “You got to get out there and hustle, just do it. Just do it.” Okay.

Jill: Exactly.

Sarah: Okay, Jill, so let's talk nomenclatures. As I was writing the notes for this interview, I asked you and our next guest if you were okay with us using the word fat, as many of us know there's a movement to destigmatize that adjective. Which for a long time was used to discriminate people, and some might argue it still is being used that way. I loved your response, including the extra adjectives you threw into the mix.

Jill: So, I mean, yeah, I think I sort of reclaimed the word fat for myself a while ago because, I mean, it's a pretty accurate word, right? I'm five foot four, five foot four and a half on a good day, I weigh about 250 pounds. I'm not the fattest person I know, I'm definitely not the skinniest person I know. I'm just kind of like a medium sized fat person, I guess.

But I think, for me, once I just started like calling myself fat, then it really couldn't hurt me for anybody else to use that word. I'm like, “Fine, I'm just going to use it on myself.” But it's an easy word to say.

Sarah: You can spell it.

Jill: Yeah, exactly. But I do, I've asked my own clients a number of times what are the adjectives that you like to use? And a lot of people say, “Just call me fat. Just call me plus size.” Some folks are like, “I like fluffy. I like thick.” There's a million different words for it, but I think as I've been sort of reclaiming my own body autonomy and just saying like, “Hey, I get to be the size I want and I don't really care what other people's opinions are.” Then I've come up with even more adjectives.

Ep #220: What It Means to Be a Fat Runner with Another Mother Runner Podcast

And I mentioned before that I have this goal to deadlift my own body weight, which is 250 pounds. So that's a chunk of weight to deadlift. I've made it to 100 pounds, I'm really proud of myself. But as I've been doing that, I've been watching my butt get bigger. And I've always had a pretty big butt, but now it's like lifted and it's like really round. And so now I'm like, "Oh my God, look at my butt. It's just glorious."

Sarah: Yeah, I love that there's a photo of you, I guess it's on your website maybe, what does it say? It says something like, "I hope your day is as great as my butt," or something like that.

Jill: Yeah. Yeah, it's one of my T shirts, I absolutely love it.

Sarah: Nice.

Elizabeth: I love your perspective on this. I'm wondering, though, about your body. So physically being fat, as you say, how does that affect your body when you're running?

Jill: That's an awesome question. And I have so many people that are like, "Oh, but your knees are going to be destroyed." And here's what I have found, when I don't strength train my body, when I don't take care of the rest of my body outside of running, then yeah, I have had knee problems. And I have a torn meniscus on one side, I have osteoarthritis in both knees. And I've been to doctors and so forth.

And it wasn't until— But I've been to doctors who have said, "This is a terrible idea. You should not be running." And I'm like, "Okay, thank you. Next doctor, please." I refuse to take that.

Ep #220: What It Means to Be a Fat Runner with Another Mother Runner Podcast

But I also found that once I really dug into the strength training, went to physical therapy, and dealt with the imbalances in my body that were creating the problems, my knee issues have gone away completely. And so I know that's not absolutely everybody's experience, but anecdotally, like from all the clients that I've worked with and from my own body, I know that our joints are only as good as the muscles that are supporting them.

So I put a lot of time and effort into creating a musculature that can help me run at any size. And so, yeah, I don't really have any injury issues anymore since I've really kind of jumped hard into the strength training.

Sarah: That is fabulous. I love that, joints are only as good as the muscles that support them. That is a good way of looking at it.

So let's talk about speed and weight a little bit. So as I've been going to set some PRs for the half marathon or the marathon I've toyed with the idea of losing weight myself. I've read that, I'm sure we've all seen them, that there's results of studies that show a correlation between body weight and race times. And I've done the math a bunch of times, it says that a runner loses on average 1.4 seconds per mile per pound.

So then if you carry an extra 10 pounds, say you're adding 14 seconds per mile to your run. And for me when I was trying to qualify for Boston, literally every second counted. And as I'm five eleven and anywhere between 160 to 180 pounds, depending on what year it was, I've had weight that could be lost if I tried. So that's a long wind up to the question. I personally have never done it because I'm just like, 'No, I like my desserts too much. I like the way I eat, I'm not going to do it.'

So have you ever tried to lose weight to be able to run faster with the same effort?

Ep #220: What It Means to Be a Fat Runner with Another Mother Runner Podcast

Jill: I mean, 100% I have tried that in the past. And yes, when I've weighed less, I'm faster. It's for sure a direct correlation, it's physics, right? But I do find that when my brain goes to, "I need to lose weight so that I can run faster," it sets up a cascade of a lot of negative self-talk and a lot of perfectionist thinking that ends up in me gaining weight pretty much every single time.

And what I've decided is— And first of all, maybe part of the issue is it's really not that important to me to run faster. And I think that there's a growing faction of the running world that really feels that way. They're just like, "Hey, I'm just out there to feel the breeze and move my body and enjoy myself. And I really don't care if I come in dead last in a race because I just want to have fun."

And I think I'm more of that type of person. Although when you get to, "Oh, this is my dream race." Like, "Oh, I want to qualify for Boston," or, "I want to run this race and there's a five hour cut off for the marathon." Then yeah, that is a factor and you kind of have to make that decision.

But yeah, for me every single time it's just kind of like set up this cascade in my brain that ends up in me gaining weight. And so I've just said, you know what, screw it. I'm not going to do that anymore because I'm really happy with what I'm doing now and I don't want to mess it up any further, I guess.

Sarah: Yeah. Whereas I just get to the, "Yeah, I'm happy with what I'm doing," and stop there.

Jill: Yeah, I think that's exactly it. Because I think a lot of times we— A lot of my clients come to me thinking like, "Well, the whole point of running is so that you can go faster." And in every runner's life there's going to be that

Ep #220: What It Means to Be a Fat Runner with Another Mother Runner Podcast

day where it's your fastest run you've ever done. And it's never going to be that fast again, right? Because we age.

And so I kind of think if you're putting all of your expectations on I have to be getting faster so that I can feel good as a runner or as a person, you're really setting yourself up for failure. Because there's going to come a day when that's it, that's the fastest you're ever going to run. And it's downhill from there.

Sarah: No doubt. It's uphill from there, actually, yeah.

Jill: Uphill, yeah, exactly.

Sarah: Unfortunately, yeah. I'm going up that hill and it is very much uphill. Yeah. Yeah, exactly. Yeah. And as you say, it is not every runner's goal to go faster, and neither should it be.

So yeah, we got an email a long time ago from a listener who was like, "I don't have any desire to go faster. Stop making it sound like that's what everybody wants to do." And it really stuck with me. So, interesting.

Elizabeth: Jill, do you think that people misunderstand what it's like physically to be a heavier runner? Are there myths out there that you think need to be dispelled?

Jill: Oh, that's such an interesting question. Okay, so I've actually had this conversation with my personal trainer. Because I've said to her, "Well, I could go faster if I weighed less." And she's not my running coach, she's strictly a strength coach. But she challenges me. And she's very thin, she's super tall and thin.

Ep #220: What It Means to Be a Fat Runner with Another Mother Runner Podcast

But she has said to me, “Why do you want to put that limitation on yourself that your speed is a function only of your weight? And why wouldn't you say like, ‘Okay, well, this is how much I weigh, how fast can I get at this weight?’ If pace is something that you're chasing?”

And I was like, “Wait.” Because I think most people would say the heavier you are, the slower you're going to be and there's really not a lot of leeway. That the only way to get faster is to lose weight. But she's been challenging my thinking.

Which I realize is not actually answering the question that you had, but it was kind of like a reverse misconception that I personally had in myself.

Sarah: That's interesting, yeah.

Jill: But yeah, I mean, it is more physical effort to run when you're in a heavier body. I mean, if you weigh 150 pounds and you put on a 100 pound backpack, you're going to get a feel for what it's like to carry that weight around.

But I think the misconception is that just because you're heavier, you can't be a runner or that you can't do long distances. I have two clients right now that are larger bodied. One of them is training for the Bryce Canyon Endurance run, which is 100 miles. And another one, I can't remember the name of the race my other client is doing in October.

So I think there's that misconception that if I have a larger body that endurance running is not for me, and I can't go the distance. And I'm like, 100 miles, you're going to need to tap into some fat stores, so actually maybe you have an evolutionary advantage.

Ep #220: What It Means to Be a Fat Runner with Another Mother Runner Podcast

Sarah: Exactly, look at that. It's why women are sometimes beating men, a lot of times beating men in ultramarathons.

Jill: Yeah, exactly.

Sarah: Yeah, yeah. Well, let's talk about athletic apparel and running clothes. So I wear a 10 or 12 in work or casual clothes, which these days are the same thing. And I can barely fit into a Nike size extra large, which is the brand's largest size, or was the last time I looked because I stopped looking. What has been your experience, Jill, finding running gear that fits and works for your size and shape?

Jill: Let's just start out with saying I feel your pain.

Sarah: Yeah, oh my gosh.

Jill: I would say I'm about a size 20 to 22 depending on the brand. But I've gone to running stores and it's frustrating because you walk into a running store and you're like, "Yay, I'm going to buy some gear, I'm a runner!" And they're like, "Here's our shoes and our socks, they'll fit you. Here's some running fuel." So that's a little bit frustrating.

There are some brands that have started to embrace the fact that runners and athletes come in all shapes and sizes, and I certainly applaud them. I think that now there are quite a few brands that go up to a 3X in at least some of their sizes. Although honestly, I think 3X is not necessarily inclusive enough because I've got some clients that are very successful runners that wear a 4X and they have even more limited.

But I think it's just frustrating because I'm like, "Listen, I got money to spend on your clothes. And I would buy a lot of them and I would tell the world

Ep #220: What It Means to Be a Fat Runner with Another Mother Runner Podcast

about them if you would just make them in my size.” So there's work to be done. Progress has been made, there's work to be done.

There's one brand that I work with pretty much all the time and it's a company called Skirt Sports and they are very dedicated to inclusivity. And they make the cutest gear. So I got to put in my plug for Skirt Sports. But yeah, I don't know, it's improving but it's not great.

Sarah: Yeah. Yeah, I mean, you know, Oiselle, I think they carry up to 22 or 24 maybe, in a lot of their stuff. But I think it's a lot of online shopping.

Jill: Yeah. Yeah, that's very frustrating. I know Athleta now has all their sizes in store, but I don't think Lululemon does. And Lululemon only goes up to a size 20. And so some of their stuff is too small for me, which is, again, so frustrating because it's cute stuff.

Sarah: That must be new that they've gone up to 20. I haven't shopped in Lulu in a long, long time.

Jill: It's very new. It's within the past 12 months.

Sarah: Oh, wow. That's interesting. Yeah, because, I mean, sometimes they would just stop at 10. And it's like, “Oh, found a 12 woo hoo.”

Jill: Yeah, Agree. I had some thoughts and opinions about Lululemon for many years, which I will keep to myself.

Elizabeth: So what do you say when a client comes to you and they want to take up running with the expressed intent to also lose weight? How do you coach them through that? How do you set up the expectations?

Ep #220: What It Means to Be a Fat Runner with Another Mother Runner Podcast

Jill: Oh gosh. Yeah, I usually just say like, “Hey, running is a really bad weight loss strategy. And I know tons of people that can coach on weight loss and I'll certainly refer them to outside, like that's definitely not, it's clearly not my jam. But, I mean, I don't fault anybody for saying, “Hey, I want to lose weight.” I totally get it, there has been many times in my life where that has been my desire and wish as well.

But I think that there's this misunderstanding that running burns a ton of calories. I mean, unless you're going to go out and run 20 miles, in which case then you're so freaking hungry afterwards. You're like, “All right, I would like an entire pizza.” Right?

I think that weight loss is really done in the kitchen and in the mind. And I don't think running is a great strategy for it. I think it's great as part of an overall self-care, self-love program, for sure. I think running fits in really well. And if weight loss is part of that program, that's great. But anybody who's ever trained for a half marathon knows, you end up like the same or heavier at the end, unless you're super careful with everything that you eat.

Elizabeth: Yeah, I always tell my athletes that endurance sports is not a weight loss plan. In fact, it's a terrible weight loss plan because you can't be out there doing stuff for 2, 3, 4 hours and not get hungry or not be fueled for it.

Jill: Yeah, for sure. And I really think it kind of jacks with your metabolism a little bit too. It's a terrible weight loss strategy, which is such a bummer because if you pay attention to what the diet industry is saying, it's like, “Oh yeah, just go run three times a week and you'll drop 20 pounds.” It's like, no, that's not how it works.

Sarah: Yeah, I think it works sometimes for some men.

Ep #220: What It Means to Be a Fat Runner with Another Mother Runner Podcast

Jill: Mm-hmm.

Elizabeth: Yes.

Sarah: My husband is heavier and he can go for a whole bunch of three mile walks and he loses weight. I'm like, yeah, that's not fair.

Jill: It's not, agreed.

Elizabeth: So I like how you said that weight loss starts in the kitchen and also the mind. So let's talk a little bit more about the mental side of running. With your clients, many of whom I would assume are novice runners, I suspect you work on making them feel welcome in the running community. And so do you feel like that's a tougher hill to climb for fat runners?

Jill: Oh, that's such an interesting question. So I do think that it is. And I think back to when I first started doing races, when I showed it to my first triathlon and I was literally the only fat person there. I'm looking around going, "Oh my goodness, are they going to kick me out? Do I belong here?"

And so I think that, yeah, if you're on your own, if you're approaching running as a thing that you're trying to figure out on your own, then there can be potentially the impression that you don't belong, because there are— You know, when you go to a race most of the people are on the thinner side, that's just the way it is.

So I think with my clients and the community that I've built, I'm super welcoming. Because I post a lot of— I've pictures of myself in a bikini and all the things on my Instagram, because I want them to see a body like theirs and say, "Oh, if she can do it, I can do it."

Ep #220: What It Means to Be a Fat Runner with Another Mother Runner Podcast

And then when they start working with me we work a lot on their mindset and their thoughts about themselves, and their body, and their confidence level when it comes to running. So that they can feel proud of themselves, and feel like they belong, and feel like they have people around them that understand.

And I find that when my clients join my community and they see everybody else like, "Oh, she's the same size as me and she just ran a marathon." It helps shift their thinking from, "I don't belong, this isn't something for me," to, "Oh, maybe this is possible". And once you start thinking that way, you become more consistent with your running and you start challenging yourself more and you get really good results.

Sarah: Yeah, I mean, I think that's true for any group that feels othered. If they can see more of people like themselves in the running community, then it's like, "Oh, okay, there's other fat people, there's other Black chicks, there's other Latinas, there's other trans runners," whatever it is. Yeah.

Jill: Yeah.

Sarah: So has anyone ever directly made a negative weight or size related comment to you while you were running at a race or on the treadmill at the gym? I mean, have you had kind of haters spew stuff at you in person?

Jill: Honestly, not that I'm aware of. And I always say to people that I manage my own thinking and mindset about my body and how it fits into the running world. I manage that so well that I believe other people could come up to me and shout in my face, "You're too fat to be a runner." And I would just be like, "I'm sorry, I don't understand what you're saying." I would just be confused.

Ep #220: What It Means to Be a Fat Runner with Another Mother Runner Podcast

So I'm sure it has happened. I'm sure that people have said stuff and I just haven't paid attention. But, I mean, I'm trying to think, I've had people comment on my weight when I wasn't running. I've definitely had that happen. And it kind of has shocked me because I always think like, wow, I wouldn't go up to somebody else and say, "Hey, did you know you're fat?" But some people think it's okay to say that to other people.

But no, I really haven't. And I've had people cheer me on and say good for you. Or I had a neighbor once that was like, "Oh, I can tell you're losing weight." And I'd actually gained like 20 pounds. I don't know, even when people comment on my body, whether it's positive or negative, I'm just like, whatever. It's my body, it's none of your business.

Sarah: Right on.

Elizabeth: It's so odd. I mean, I'm a lighter weight person and I once had someone come up to me at a race and they said, "Oh, I know about you. I just expected you to be much taller and blonde." And I'm really short, I'm really small, and my hair is very dark. So I thought that's such an odd thing. What would compel someone to say that? But sometimes filters just aren't there.

Jill: They're not, they're not.

Sarah: So any takeaways you want to leave with lighter weight listeners?

Jill: Gosh, that's a loaded question.

Sarah: Bug off, mind your own business.

Ep #220: What It Means to Be a Fat Runner with Another Mother Runner Podcast

Jill: I know, right. I think probably two things, one is please don't assume that somebody who's larger bodied and running is running specifically to lose weight. And don't assume that they're running to lose weight, don't assume that they're unhappy in their own body, because it is possible to be fat and look in the mirror and just say, "Oh my God, you're amazing." It's totally possible.

So if you see somebody who's out there running, don't assume that they're trying to lose weight or that they're unhappy in their body. So that would be number one. And then number two would be if you see somebody who's plus size or larger bodied at a race or out running, don't assume they're a beginner. And I've had people come up to me, I'll be like my 10th half marathon and they're like, "Oh, so this is your first race?"

Sarah: Oh boy.

Jill: I'm like, "No, not even close." So don't assume that somebody who's larger bodied is just starting out, because it's possible that they have been doing this for 25 years and they just enjoy running in a larger body.

Sarah: That's awesome. That's awesome. Well, Jill, I encourage people to listen to your podcast to get more of your goodness, because you got a lot of it to share. So thank you.

Jill: Oh, thank you so much.

Elizabeth: Thanks Jill.

Ep #220: What It Means to Be a Fat Runner with Another Mother Runner Podcast

Oh, and one last thing, if you enjoyed listening to this episode you have to check out the Rebel Runner Roadmap. It's a 30 day online program that will teach you exactly how to start running, stick with it, and become the runner you've always wanted to be. Head on over to rebelrunnerroadmap.com to join. I'd love to be a part of your journey.