

Ep #290: Couch to 5K Program Review



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With Your Host

Jill Angie

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Welcome to *The Not Your Average Runner Podcast*. If you've never felt athletic but you still dream about becoming a runner, you are in the right place. I'm Jill Angie, your fat running coach. I help fat women over 40 to start running, feel confident, and change their lives. I have worked with thousands of women to help them achieve their running goals and now I want to help you.

Hey, runners. Well, it is 30 degrees outside on the day that I'm recording this, and yesterday it was 70 degrees. So welcome to springtime in Philadelphia. Actually, it's not even springtime, so welcome to winter in Philadelphia. It's unpredictable AF.

I grew up in western New York, just outside of Rochester in the 70s. And so, to me, winter means several feet of snow on the ground for a few months at a time. But down here in Philly, it's all over the place. And I am not complaining because we have not had to get the shovel out once this year. So yay. But my goodness, it's a different experience.

Anyway, now that we're rounding the corner into spring, a lot of you are going to be thinking about 5K training. And a really common way to approach 5K training is to download a free app like Couch to 5K. And so today, I thought I would actually break down that program for you and explain how it works.

So, the original Couch to 5K running plan was created by a man named Josh Clark in 1996. He was in his 20s back then, he wrote it to help his mom start running. And if you Google Josh Clark Couch to 5K Mom, you can actually see a picture of her, she's totally adorable. But anyway, he was in his 20s and he had just started running himself because he was, I don't know, he was going through a rough time in his life and he started running to deal with it, right, to manage his emotions.

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And he wanted to help her get started as well so that she could feel as good as he did. And he explains the Couch to 5K program as a program for everyday people written by an everyday person, okay? And this premise is awesome. He really wanted to bring running to the masses and show everybody how easy it can be to be a runner. And I cosign this 100%. And how it works is pretty simple.

So each week you warm up with a short walk, like three to five minutes or so. And then you run a little and you walk a little for either 20 minutes or 30 minutes, depending on the day. The program tells you how much to run and how much to walk for each workout. And then over a nine week period, it progresses from mostly walking to actually running for 30 minutes without stopping.

And I'll tell you, with that kind of promise that you could go from couch to running for 30 minutes without stopping in literally two months, it became a wildly popular program. And he eventually sold it to a company called Cool Running. They created the app that everybody knows about. And then I think they might have sold it, I'm not sure what happened to it after that. But it did become wildly popular, and is still today.

The Couch to 5K, which I'm not sure if it's even trademarked, but it is kind of, like you know how when you want a tissue you say hey, give me a Kleenex? You actually refer to the brand name even though you're talking about the item. It's kind of become that way, like so many people have come out with their own Couch to 5K programs. But the actual Couch to 5K program is about, gosh, it's almost 30 years old and it has a very specific progression.

Now, according to Wikipedia, my source of all facts, right? As of 2016, so that's, what? Seven years ago, the Couch to 5K app has been used by over 5 million people. And I'm sure it's obviously way more, who knows, it might even be double that by now.

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And I did use the program, but it was, of course, way before the app came out because it was back in the late 90s when I started running. I found it on the internet, but there were no such things as apps back then. And so I'm not one of the 5 million who used the app, but I am definitely one of the many, many, many millions that have used the program itself.

Now, again, in theory this program is absolutely brilliant. I love the idea. Unfortunately, there are a few problems with the Couch to 5K and sort of similar programs. Not that they're bad programs, again, but for most fat beginning runners they're not the right choice. And if you use them without understanding some of the issues that these programs have, you could end up getting discouraged and quitting, or even risk getting hurt, right?

You may have already experienced this and felt like running just wasn't for you because the app that was supposed to help you go from zero to 5K, if that didn't work for you, then what are you supposed to do? So if you've already experienced this, I got you. We're going to talk about it today. And I know, again, I know that Josh envisioned this, and I think these are his exact words, a gentle program to help people start running without injury.

But what he didn't consider, and in 1996 from a 20 something year old guy, I totally get it, right? What he didn't consider was that lots of people, lots of people wouldn't be able to do it even close to how it's written. So when he says this is an everyday program written by an everyday person, I don't think that's accurate.

What he means is, I mean, yes, it might be an everyday program, but it was not written from the perspective of an everyday person. It was written from the perspective of a very young, slim male who already had some sort of fitness level.

So Couch to 5K, for sure, is right for some people. I just think that the slice of the population that it's right for is way, way, way, way smaller than you

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might think, okay? But I do need to say I'm deeply grateful to Josh because his program helped me start thinking the thought that running could be possible for me.

Now, the Couch to 5K program didn't make it happen, but it started me thinking, "Hmm, maybe running is a thing that my body could do." And this is the first step, right? Without that belief, I never would have started. So even though I didn't use his program to train for my first 5K, I did use it to kickstart myself. And that led to me creating my own process that I teach in my Run Your Best Life program.

And, honestly, if Couch to 5K had worked for me, I would not be here right now talking to you because I wouldn't have had to figure anything out for myself, right? I would have just finished the plan, gone on to do more running, probably never even thought twice about it. So double thanks to Josh because in a weird way he helped launch Not Your Average Runner, and I should probably send him a thank you card.

Anyway, if you are a Couch to 5K drop out like me, I want to help you today. And maybe you didn't make it through the program completely, maybe you gave up at week three like I did so many times. Maybe you lost motivation because there was nobody there to help you stay focused. Maybe you pushed yourself through to the end and you got really, really injured.

So if any of that sounds familiar, I want you to know that there is nothing wrong with you. You are fine. You just need the right approach to running. We just need to find the right fit for you. And trust me, I have been coaching fat runners for 10 years. I know there is no reason we can't get you up and running with the right program.

So, first, let's talk about the features of Couch to 5K that might make it not the best choice for you. And then we're going to talk about how you should

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move forward. But the first thing I'm going to do is kind of review what's probably not going to work for you. And again, I cannot stress this enough, this is not a slam on the plan, right? It is just an assessment of what might be missing from it to make it something that truly everyone can actually use, right?

And because of the issues I'm going to talk about, you may have struggled with it. You may have even given up. I've actually identified five specific things that will likely get in your way and what you should do instead.

So the first reason that Couch to 5K might not be the best choice for you is that it starts out at a more advanced level than many "everyday" folks can handle and it ramps up really, really fast. So in your first week, you're going to be running for a minute at a time, okay? And you're going to run for a minute, and then walk for two minutes, and then run for a minute, walk for two minutes, and so forth.

And that might not sound like a lot, but when you are trying to last through that minute, it feels like forever, okay? So 20 to 30 seconds, maybe even 10 to 20 seconds is a much more inclusive starting point. And it would be so great if there were instructions in the plan like, hey, start out with 20 seconds and see where you're at, rather than just jumping right into that minute at a time.

But even if you are, you know, you're going to be running three times a week, even if you are able to gut out those first three runs in week one with those one minute intervals, in week two you're going to be running for a minute and a half at a time. And then in week three you're going to be running for four minutes at a time. Are you fucking kidding me?

This is where I would drop off the program every single time because week three is really hard. Most new runners need a lot more time to go from running for a minute to running for four minutes straight, and Couch to 5K

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gives you two weeks. It is too much, too soon. And what happens is you either give up on yourself or you get injured, right? And both of these things result in you not running, which is the opposite of what the program is supposed to do.

Now, the second issue is that the workouts in this program are either 20 or 30 minutes long. And from the perspective of making it accessible to new people, for sure, right? Like 20 minutes, I can do that. Most people can go out and do some sort of run/walk activity for 20 minutes. It might not be running for four minutes and walking for two minutes. It might be running 20 seconds and walking a minute or something. But 20 minutes is, for a lot of people, totally manageable. 30 minutes is totally manageable.

But here's the issue, if you are brand new to running it might take you that whole 20 minutes just to cover a mile, okay? So this program doesn't really give you what you need, which is building up the stamina to go 3.1 miles because when you're brand new and running, it might take you an hour to go 3.1 miles. It may even take a little more than an hour. And if all of your training runs are 30 minutes or less, you're not going to be trained on race day. At 30 minutes you're going to be like, why have I not finished my 5K? What do you mean I'm only at a mile and a half, right?

So the end point of this program is not just that you're running a 5K all the way through, which, again, is challenging enough. But you're supposed to do it in 30 minutes. And that is just under a 10 minute mile, that is very fast. It is unrealistic for somebody just starting to run, especially my fat women over 40 who are listening to this podcast, right? It's not that that's an unrealistic goal in the future, but for your first 5K, yeah, unrealistic.

So the people that I personally know who can run 30 minute 5Ks, my husband is one of them, he can do it in 25 minutes. He's fairly slim. He's been running for a while and he trains hard to be able to do that. He works his ass off to be able to do that. It's not casual like, hey, let's see what

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happens if we try training for a 5K the first time, right? That's not it. His first 5K was longer than 30 minutes, right? And he's worked really, really hard to bring that time down, okay? But that was not his experience the first time out. And he's a pretty fit, in shape dude.

So I'm not saying in any way that it is not possible for you to run a 5K all the way through or for you to run it in less than 30 minutes, okay? That's not the point here. The point is that Couch to 5K is not the program that is going to get you there, okay? And it's not going to happen on your first 5K either, even if you use a different program. It's going to take dedication, focus, patience, and a lot of training, okay? You've got to be willing to take the time to make it happen.

Now, issue number three is that there's no talk of just using the run/walk approach for the entire race. This program assumes that your goal is to run straight through and finish in 30 minutes, and there's no option for anything else. But the majority of runners that I train in Run Your Best Life actually prefer the run/walk method. They don't want to train to run straight through, they don't give a fuck about running a 5K in less than 30 minutes.

And this program sort of low key implies that the only way to run is to do it without walking at all and to do it as fast as possible. And that's just not true. There are many, many ways to be a runner. There are many, many ways to complete a 5K. And, again, it was created from the perspective of a 20 something man in the 90s, and the fitness world has evolved a lot since then. So I get why it was written the way it was written, but it does not seem that the Couch to 5K program has really evolved with it, okay?

Now, issue number four is that there is no strength or flexibility component. And so that means if you have any muscle imbalances or weaknesses, right, maybe one glute is stronger than the other, maybe there's something weird with your biomechanics. If you've got those imbalances and then you're taking this plan and ramping up way too fast, well, any issues in your

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body are going to come out as an injury when you ask it to do more than it is ready for.

And again, injuries mean not running for a while, which sucks, okay? So you're likely going to end up thinking that you're just not cut out to be a runner, when really it's that the plan has failed you by not helping you build the necessary strength. And trust me, when I did not strength train regularly, it was one fucking injury after another. Oh my God, I've had them all.

Once I committed to some simple strength exercises, like really, really committed, I began to see fewer and fewer issues. And, I mean, I have arthritis in both of my knees. One of my meniscuses, menisci, has a tear in it. But my knees are fine, okay? So despite every troll on the internet telling me I'm going to need a knee replacement before I turn 50, and I always laugh because I'm 55, my knees are fine. And it is truly, truly because I do a lot of strength training, okay?

And so this is something that is missing from almost every free running app that you're going to find on the internet. They're not going to teach you how to strength train your body. And, again, it doesn't have to be complicated, lots of options out there. And it's going to make a huge difference, all right? And a lot of women are scared of strength training, they don't know what to do. They think it means going to the gym and hanging out with the gym bros and stuff.

And no, there's so many options that are going to work great for you and fit into your lifestyle that are not going to require you to stand at a gym and listen to dudes grunting and dropping weights. So that's issue number four, I think.

And then issue number five is that there is no coaching or support, right? There's no coaching or support in this program. Now, I'm not expecting that

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Josh is going to personally coach me when I'm struggling. But I do think that the program needs to help runners with their mindset because running is hard, right?

And if you're a fat woman and you've started running and you've lived your whole life being told either face to face or behind your back, or reading magazine articles, that you're too fat and you need to lose weight and that real runners don't take walk breaks. If you've spent your whole life being given those messages, then yeah, you might struggle with running, right?

You might have a lot of thoughts about your body, about your pace, about your fitness level, about all of it. And so I think that this program is missing an opportunity to send out the message that running is for everybody and that there is a way for everyone to find a method of running that works for them.

And a lot of what I teach in the Run Your Best Life program is how to get past those mental challenges, how to keep going when it's really difficult, how to keep going when you lose confidence in yourself, how to feel better about what your body looks like, how to learn to love your body, because that is where the magic is. Like 80% of running is mental. And there's none of that in the Couch to 5K program.

So, if any of these issues have caused you to fail with Couch to 5K, we're going to talk about how to solve them now so that you can finish your first 5K and feel really good about it and really proud of yourself.

So, the very first thing I want you to do is to make sure you can comfortably walk 3.1 miles. That's how far five kilometers is 3.1 miles. If you cannot currently walk 5K, you need to make sure you can do that before you start training to run it, it's going to make your life so much easier.

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And now if you can comfortably walk the distance, figure out how long it usually takes you, okay? So then you're going to take maybe 10 to 15% off of that and it'll be a good prediction of how fast you can do it with a run/walk approach, all right? So, if you could walk a 5K in, say, 60 minutes, you will likely be able to run/walk it in 54 minutes.

And this is just a rough estimate, of course, but it will get you in the ballpark. You might be faster, and that's awesome. You might be slower, and that's also awesome, right? Like we're celebrating everything. But let's err on the side of caution and instead of doing 30 minute workouts, you're going to work yourself up to 54 minute workouts if your 5K time is 60 minutes when you're walking, okay?

And then maybe even once a week you would do an hour. You would do an hour of run/walk. You would do a little bit more than you think you might need on race day. That's going to get you extra prepared, okay? It's going to set you up for success.

Now, I know the next thing you're wondering is, all right, well if the run/walk intervals in Couch to 5K don't work for me, what should I do? Here's my advice, for your first 5K I don't want you to think about running the whole thing. I want you to run/walk the whole thing, okay? And you can run/walk every single race for the rest of your life if you want to. It's like I said before, this is my method of running. It's how I train everybody who works with me and it is an amazing running method. I just can't say enough good things about it.

Now, I am not here to tell you that you should be training to do the whole thing with run/walk, or that you should be doing the whole thing without any walking, right? You get to decide what your ultimate goal is, that's totally cool for you. But for your very first one we're taking the pressure off, you're going to plan to run/walk the whole thing, and then after that you can decide what you want to do.

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Now, what does this mean for you? Well, I want you to find a ratio of running and walking that feels good and sustainable, okay? It's not going to stress you out. It's going to be a little bit challenging, but you're like, yeah, I could do that for three miles. And that might be, I don't know, 20 seconds of running and a minute of walking. It might be two minutes of running and 30 seconds of walking, right?

I want you to play around with it, see what works for you. There is no wrong or right way to do this, there is just the way that works for you. And let's say you're at that 30 seconds of running and a minute of walking. That's your current interval ratio right now and that feels good. You're like, my heart rate is getting up, I'm definitely working. But also, I think I could sustain this for three miles, I want you to just be okay with that, right? You don't have to try and increase the amount of running to prove anything.

This is your first 5K. We're going to train to finish, train to feel good, train to feel proud, okay? You don't need to set a PR. You don't need to be the fastest person. If you come in last, it's fine. Absolutely fine. I just did a podcast a few weeks ago about coming in last, make sure you listen to that if you're worried about that particular circumstance.

So you figure out your ratio of running to walking, and then you're going to train with that same ratio every week, right? Instead of the way Couch to 5K does it, every week you're running more and walking less. You're just going to keep training with that same ratio and you're going to increase the amount of time, the distance that you're going, okay?

So you're going to increase your endurance, the length of time, the distance that you're training, versus the intensity, which is the amount of running to walking that you're doing, okay? And again, that ratio might change in the future when you're on your third 5K or your first half marathon, I don't know, okay? But when you are training for your first 5K,

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the last thing you need to be worrying about is if you're running enough, okay? Or if you'll be able to do the next week's progression.

I want you to feel confident that no matter what, you can keep the current ratio that you're using and that you'll just be able to add a little bit of distance on every week. That's it, okay? Think about getting stronger and more consistent and building endurance with the run/walk ratio that works for you right now.

So we're going to take off your plate worrying about running longer intervals. We're just going to focus on getting better at doing the distance, all right? And then I want you to start thinking about strength training, okay? And this doesn't have to be, like you don't have to go out and join a CrossFit Vox or get P90X or whatever the cool kids are doing right now, okay?

I'm talking simple strength training, because a strong runner actually does go faster. A strong runner definitely gets less injuries. So I want you to pay attention to your legs, and your glutes, and your core in particular. And make sure you're stretching after every strength workout, okay? I recommend twice a week.

Inside the Run Your Best Life program that I run we have tons of strength training videos for you to do that you can do in your living room, you don't even need to go to a gym. If you want to go to a gym, that's fine, but you don't have to. And what it's going to do is make a difference in muscle soreness and just overall body conditioning, right?

So strength training is a game changer. And it's fascinating to me, once a year in Run Your Best Life we do a whole month where we just kind of focus on the particulars of strength training. We do strength training all year long, but we spend one month a year just kind of like going into the details of why it's so important. And we kind of use it as a jumpstart.

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And I'm always amazed at how people are like, oh, well, this was my pace on day one of strength training month, and then on day 30, suddenly, they're running faster because they've really, really been focusing in on building up their strength. And so then they can take those skills and use them for the rest of the year and it has a lot of payback.

Now, finally, I'm going to want you to work on your mindset, all right? So we've talked a lot about the physical stuff, and that's very important. But if your brain is not on board, you're not going to run. It's like you could have the best, fastest car in the world, and if there is no oil in the engine or there's no gas in the gas tank, it's not going to go anywhere, right? This beautiful, beautiful car is not going to go anywhere without the right setup, right, without the right ingredients.

So running, again, is 80% mental, at least. Maybe 90%. So you've got to pay attention to your thinking and notice when it's tending towards thoughts like, this is too hard for me, or I'm not making any progress, or everyone else is faster than me, right? Because those thoughts are going to take you down. They're going to destroy your motivation and they're going to replace it with frustration and shame and apathy.

So you got to notice them. Notice those thoughts. Reframe them to something that creates motivation and determination and commitment, and a healthy dose of compassion for yourself. And then you're going to be all set, all right?

And if you need help with that, well, first of all, this whole body of work that I've created in the *Not Your Average Runner* podcast is all about how to manage your thinking. But I have one episode that's very specific, it's called How to Coach Yourself, it's episode 33. It'll give you my framework for how to take your shitty thinking and turn it into helpful thinking. And, of course, we do a lot of that within the Run Your Best Life program, it's very, very powerful work.

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Now, if you follow everything I just explained to you, you're going to have a great training experience, I promise. It's going to be amazing. And if you're just starting out on your running journey and you're like, I'm thinking about training for a 5K but I've never been a runner before, I'm not sure what to do, I'm going to encourage you to join Run Your Best Life.

Just do it, okay? Because what happens is you'll join, and the first thing you'll do is you'll start out with my 30 day learn to run program. That's going to give you a good base, it's going to teach you all the basics, okay, and get you kind of in a nice routine for those 30 days.

And then after that, you'll graduate to my eight week 5K training program, okay? And again, this is a training program that solves all the issues that Couch to 5K has. And within that program you'll be able to get the help and support you need from me, from my team of coaches, and from all the other members of the group. It's amazing.

So if you want to learn more about that, go to runyourbestlife.com, all of the information is there, all right? I hope I see you there. And that is it for this episode, all right? I love you. Stay safe. Get your ass out there and run and I will talk to you next week.

Real quick before you go. If you enjoyed this episode, you have to check out Run Your Best Life. It's my monthly coaching program where you will learn exactly how to start running, stick with it, and become the runner you have always wanted to be. Head on over to runyourbestlife.com to join. I would love to be a part of your journey.