

# Run- ning with the GIRLS

**GIRLS ON THE RUN HAS SPENT NEARLY 30 YEARS HELPING GIRLS FIND CONFIDENCE, CONNECTION, AND—SOMETIMES—A LIFELONG LOVE OF RUNNING.**

by **Meredith Sell**



Girls on the Run founder Molly Barker with the original team

#### **WILL YOU RUN A 5K WITH ME?**

On a near-monthly basis, Falon Doutrich answers some version of this question with an unequivocal “yes.” The 36-year-old Girls on the Run (GOTR) volunteer coach has seen the girls she coaches fall in love with running—so much so that they don’t want to wait until the end of the GOTR season to run a 5K, when it’s customary. If their parents won’t run a race with them, it’s only natural to ask their coach. And Doutrich almost always says yes. Over her 11 years with the program in rural Pennsylvania, she’s run turkey trots, school fundraiser 5Ks, even a 10K with her girls.

Last August, Doutrich ran the Honey Run 5K in Landisville, Pennsylvania, with a 10-year-old. The girl had a finish time in mind. “You set the pace. I’ll stay with you,” Doutrich told her. Partway through the course, the girl wanted to take a break, but not for long. She pointed to a tree and told Doutrich she’d walk a little

when she reached it. Doutrich was proud of her for speaking up, and giving herself a break but still pushing her limits. They ended up finishing the 5K in just over 28 minutes, beating the girl’s goal.

These races are extracurricular to the actual GOTR program, which despite its name, is less about running and more about empowering girls. Aimed at tweens in grades three through five (some locations include sixth graders), GOTR equips girls with social and emotional skills in preparation for the challenges of middle school. It takes place after school in locations across the country. Doutrich’s chapter, which meets twice a week at a park in Paradise, Pennsylvania, gathers girls from two elementary schools—fifth and sixth grade in the fall, third and fourth grade in the spring—and often has a waiting list.

“We are a high-poverty school district,” Doutrich says. “Currently, I have a girl who’s homeless on my team, and last





Girls on the Run coach Falon Doutrich with two of her girls, Nyilah and Kaiah



For Doutrich, racing alongside her girls comes with the territory.



Doutrich runs the Hot Cider Hustle with one of her girls, Karlie, marking Karlie's first 10K.

**"You're learning how to pace yourself running, but we also talked about learning how to pace yourself in life."**

spring, I had a girl who lives in a single-wide trailer with nine people in the middle of a field and has a hose running for water. We don't turn anyone away, and I love that because otherwise, some of the girls may never get the opportunity."

Every session includes a lesson with exercises to apply their learnings. In late September, Doutrich talked to the girls about happy pace, a concept GOTR has covered since its early days. "You're learning how to pace yourself running, but we also talked about learning to pace yourself in life so you don't get burnt out," Doutrich says. The girls discussed how the lesson might apply to school, activities, and friendship. And then they did some running. Or skipping. Or walking. Whatever fit their happy pace.

Running was never actually the point of GOTR. When Molly Barker started the program in 1996, the former elite-level triathlete sought to help girls gain the confidence they needed to avoid shrinking themselves in the face of societal expectations—what Barker referred to as the "girl box." Running, which became Barker's exercise of choice after she started doing it with her mom at age 13, was an easy way to integrate movement and an early sense of body positivity into the program. "Prior to Girls on the Run, I think most running or [physical education] programs were all about weight loss or appearance," Barker says. "We didn't—I still don't—care about that."

Barker held the first season of GOTR at Charlotte Country Day School, a private school in Charlotte, North Carolina, that she attended as a child. She made a flyer with a letter to girls on one side and a letter to parents on the other, and the school distributed it to every girl in third and fourth grade. Thirteen girls signed up.

"I have these vivid memories of this track that was on Carmel Road," says Katherine Eringhaus Edelshain, 39, who was in fourth grade that first season. "It was this dirt track. I remember sitting in that dusty dirt with papers everywhere."

Twice a week, GOTR would meet on the track, Barker with a binder containing the lesson she'd written for the day (often the night before), the girls with folders for the worksheets they collected over the season. Every session

involved different activities. One day, they'd analyze magazines and discuss whether the photos and messages were boxing girls in. Another day, Barker would bring a list of statements that the girls would agree or disagree with and they'd talk through their answers. There was always some sort of running: laps or relays or short sprints.

"You'd get popsicle sticks to show how many laps you'd run, and we'd do activities where we would stand on one side of the field ... and when a statement applied to you, you'd go to the other side," says Alex Marchyshyn, 37, who was a third grader at the time and now works as strategy director for women's sport at Nike.

Not everyone loved running. Some girls walked all of practice, others walked or ran depending on the moment. A few, like third-grader Margaret Lucas, would have skipped everything else to run the whole time. "I was always very much, 'We're gonna run around, right?'" the now-39-year-old says.

Barker was in the dirt with them. "I think that's why I remember the dirt track," says Edelshain. She recalls Barker cheering them on during their laps, stretching her arms out for hugs, running alongside them. "She wasn't like the other adult women I knew who dressed the part and did all the things that you were

supposed to do," she says.

"I thought she was so cool," says Marchyshyn. "Her enthusiasm, her zest for [GOTR], her care and attention, the stuff that she taught us was just so cool."

When the end of that first season came, all the girls entered a local 5K. Barker ran with Lucas, who was nervous and excited for her first race. "It was the first competitive thing that I was doing because playing on a soccer team called the Blueberries, that's not competitive," Lucas says. "Having this person who I just thought of as an incredible athlete run with me was awesome."

The next season, twice as many girls signed up, and Barker recruited a friend to help coach. Word spread through Charlotte about the program, and Barker brought it to the local YMCA and a public school. She started attending PTA meetings. "[I was] trying to get people to understand what this was, that it's not just a running program. It's got this other element about empowerment," she says. Halfway through the second season, she quit her other jobs to focus on GOTR. She wasn't getting paid, but she knew the program could be more.

In 1998, *Runner's World* selected Barker for their Golden Shoe Award. They ran a small piece about her and the program, with a photo of Barker, then pregnant with her daughter, and a few of



Margaret Lucas, far left and inset (current day), Barker, and several other GOTR teammates in 1996



PHOTOS COURTESY OF MARGARET LUCAS

PREVIOUS PAGE: PHOTOS COURTESY OF GIRLS ON THE RUN INTERNATIONAL; THIS PAGE FROM TOP TO BOTTOM: PHOTOS COURTESY OF FALON DOUTRICH (3)





the girls from GOTR. Soon after, Barker heard from women in Denver, Atlanta, Charlottesville, Virginia, and Johnson City, Tennessee, all interested in starting GOTR programs in their communities. They came to Charlotte to learn from her.

More media coverage over the next few years led to subsequent bursts in interest and professionalization. In 2000, GOTR became a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, and Barker hosted a three-day training session for coaches at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts. Organizers from New York, Maine, New Hampshire, Ohio, Kentucky, and Boston attended. By 2003, GOTR was in 82 communities in 17 states, serving more than 5,000 girls. The organization had established a model where local GOTR councils had their own 501(c)(3)s and did their own fundraising, but the national organization provided all curriculum, training, and marketing materials. GOTR hired its first CEO, while Barker continued traveling to train new coaches and council directors.

The empowerment focus struck a chord with the women she trained. “The thing I think people had in common was

this feeling of having to shrink themselves in order to fit in,” she says. “The program was as impactful on them as it was for the girls.”

In 2004, Barker was traveling so much that she decided to stop coaching. “I really loved coaching. That was my thing,” she says. “But I realized I was doing a disservice to the kids by not being there as I had promised.” Soon after, New Balance, Kellogg’s, and Goody independently reached out about sponsoring GOTR. The sponsorships enabled GOTR to hire more staff, including Liz Kunz, who became the first chief operations officer in 2006 and, in 2008, became CEO, a role she still holds today.

By 2012, GOTR had councils in 47 states serving 120,000 girls. The following year, Barker left GOTR to explore different pursuits, but the organization kept going and growing, a source of pride for those who had been involved in the early days. “It was crazy to be across the country seeing that this program—that I participated in [when it] was a tiny little pilot—has expanded so broadly,” said Adelaide Martin, one of the original 13 GOTR members, who was living in San

Francisco and volunteering with the local GOTR chapter, coaching and running races with the girls, around that time.

Edelshain, who volunteered with GOTR in New York City from 2010 through 2012, was stunned by how many girls turned out to the organization’s 5K on one cold, rainy November day. “I was so proud that this thing had grown so huge,” she says.

Since 1996, more than 2.7 million girls have participated in GOTR. Today, the program serves more than 177,000 girls each year in all 50 states and in Canada. It uses an evidence-based curriculum that’s more evergreen than Barker’s original lessons. Girls learn to communicate their feelings, stand up for themselves, and resolve conflicts. “Whether you’re a girl in an affluent family in a private school or you are a girl living in a homeless shelter, this curriculum is meaningful,” Kunz says. The heart of the program remains the same: empowering girls to embrace their unique potential.

For many, this includes running. Lucas, who ran her first 5K with Barker, now competes in triathlons and qualified for the 2025 Ironman World



Margot Morales (right and inset) with her sister, Sydney, and Barker, learned to love running years after participating in GOTR as a child.



On your mark, get set, go! This Girls on the Run team is off to the races.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF GIRLS ON THE RUN INTERNATIONAL

PHOTOS COURTESY OF MARGO MORALES

**The heart of the program remains the same: empowering girls to embrace their unique potential.**

Championship in Kona, Hawaii. Many of her contemporaries run recreationally. Margot Morales, a GOTR Northern Virginia participant who hated running as a kid, got into running when she coached GOTR in Philadelphia; she now races 5Ks for fun. Linde Fonville, a senior on Yale’s cross country and track teams, first ran in GOTR at Charlotte Country Day School, almost 20 years after the inaugural GOTR season. At least two members of the U.S. Track and Field team for the 2024 Olympics—Elle Purrier St. Pierre and Juliette Whittaker—did GOTR as kids. Every female runner at Doutrich’s local high school did GOTR, and Doutrich’s own running passion ignited after she started volunteering with the program. In 2019, she qualified to represent the U.S. as an amateur in Switzerland at the International Triathlon Union (now World Triathlon) World Final Triathlon Championship.

Charlotte Tomkinson, who did GOTR from 2011 through 2013 at San Carlos Charter Learning Center in San Carlos, California, started her college career running at Duke University and is currently using the rest of her eligibility at Georgetown University while earning her master’s degree. Her GOTR coach became her high school running coach and continues to mentor her. When Tom-

kinson qualified for the NCAA outdoor National Championship for the first time last year, her coach came to cheer her on in the 1,500-meter race.

This mirrors how Doutrich relates to her girls. Over the summers, she volunteer coaches middle school cross country to help her runners transition to competitive training. She goes to her girls’ meets and stays in their lives as much as possible—even if they don’t take up running. When one of her girls lost her dad to an overdose, Doutrich helped her find clothes for the funeral, provided support for her grandmother to win custody, and helped the girl get into an elite private high school. One of her former GOTR kids is now in middle school and running cross country; every Saturday, Doutrich runs with her on the family farm. The local Amish know Doutrich as the woman who’s always running with a girl who isn’t her daughter.

Doutrich has turned down opportunities to coach for the school or coach the middle school GOTR program. “I just look at them and I say, ‘Well, who’s going to coach these girls?’” She stays because she sees the difference it makes, whether their goal is to run fast, to walk, or to make a new friend. The fact that some of them discover a love for running is a bonus. **1**