Denise Sauriol

DENISE SAURIOL, 46, RUNS with the joy of someone who knows how easily the sport can be taken away. In preparation for the New York City Half Marathon in 2009, she was warming up in Central Park and focused squarely on what she hoped would be her PR. She came upon an intersection with a construction wall that made visibility difficult. After noticing a hose perpendicular to the sidewalk, she made a point to avoid tripping on it. Instead, she was hit by a car. She smashed into the hood and cracked the windshield. She never made it to the half marathon start line.

"We think we can control our lives by planning things," Sauriol says. "But anything can happen at any moment."

Sauriol recalls remaining conscious throughout the whole experience. "Thank God I could breathe," she says. "Thank God I could feel my legs. And thank God someone called an ambulance and I got attention right away."

Despite the fact that she was just hit by a car, Sauriol realized how fortunate she had been.

"I had broken five vertebrae, but they were at the end of the spine," she says. "The doctors at the hospital all told me to buy a lottery ticket because it was my lucky day."

Later that fall, while wearing a back brace, Sauriol walked the first mile of the Chicago Marathon that she had been training for. "Then I went back and cheered on the finishers," she says. "I was just so happy that I was able to be a part of it."

This fall, she'll be on the same course, running in her 57th marathon. But the sport is much different for her since that life-changing day in New York.

"I've gone as far as to call it my rebirth day," she says with a laugh. "Before the accident, I was focused on the finish time, not the finish line. I was so focused on trying to hit my times that I'd let it take precedence over everything."

Having run cross country in high school in Oak Forest, Ill., Sauriol was not considered one of the faster girls on the team. She then started working with coach Greg Demuntay, and gradually increased her speed. She ran a 3:15 marathon in 2006, followed by a 3:10 in 2007 at the Chicago Marathon, the same year the race was halted due to the heat. And in 2008, she was the top Illinois masters woman to finish the Chicago Marathon.

These days Sauriol, a coach for Chicago Endurance Sports and her own coaching program, Run for Change, is more focused on introducing people to the sport than on her personal finishing times.

"When I was growing up, running was used as punishment, and some people still think of it that way," she says. "They come to you with this deer-in-the-headlights look. But it's just conditioning your body. And then you start to feel better. And that look disappears. And you see someone transform." –JEFF BANOWETZ

HERE ARE A FEW OF HER FAVORITE THINGS

FAVORITE PLACE TO RUN
"The Lakefront Path before the sun comes up. Even in the winter it's beautiful."

FAVORITE WAY TO CROSS-TRAIN
"Climbing stairs in my office building ...killer."

FAVORITE RUNNING ADVICE
"The only people who are slow are the ones still on the couch. I tell all of my runners and run-walkers that whenever they say that they are slow, they have to add a mile to their weekly mileage. And have fun. This is our discretionary free time and it is a blessing!"

FAVORITE EVENT THAT YOU'VE DONE
Antarctica Marathon

FAVORITE CHICAGO-AREA RACE
Chicago Marathon

FAVORITE PRO ATHLETE
Steve Prefontaine

FAVORITE SHOES
Brooks Adrenaline

FAVORITE WORKOUT
10 by 1 mile repeats with 90-second recovery
"This is great to have under your belt at the start line of a marathon."

FAVORITE WAY TO UNWIND (BESIDES RUNNING)
"Live music, my other addiction."

FAVORITE POST-RUN INDULGENCE
Pizza and beer