



# A RACE

*to remember*

When Victoria Seahorn  
Lost Her Best Friend to  
Breast Cancer,  
**She Found Meaning  
in the Running Shoes  
Left Behind and  
Has Inspired Others  
to Do the Same**

[ WRITTEN BY HEATHER KW BROWN ]

**It** TOOK ABOUT NINE HOURS, but she did it. And when Lindsey Gabe crossed the finish line of the Boulder Backroads Marathon in September of 2004, fellow racer Victoria Seahorn was there, anxiously waiting to place a well-deserved metal around her best friend's neck. Ultimately though, it wasn't the metal from that race that mattered, as Seahorn and Gabe had run many races together, racking up an impressive pile of alloy over the years. What mattered most was that despite the diagnosis and its grueling treatment, Gabe hadn't given up — not on running and not on life. Doing a marathon

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### Victoria Seahorn

in the best of health is tough enough, but putting one foot in front of the other for 26.2 consecutive miles during a battle with breast cancer is flat-out defying the odds.

When Seahorn lost her close friend shortly thereafter in January '05, she set out to ensure that Gabe's spirit as well as her footprints would never be forgotten. In doing so, she has defied her own set of odds — as a friend, as a mother and as a runner — by creating opportunities for those in similar shoes to cross a finish line of their own.

#### A Reason to Run

To date, Seahorn has run 29 marathons, countless half-marathons and short-distance races are an educated guess, even for her. Not bad for someone who admittedly smoked two packs of cigarettes a day prior to changing her lifestyle.

"I thought with my type-A personality, why start with a 5K, let's just run a marathon," Seahorn joked of her epiphany. "I played tennis and ran track in high school, so it's not that I wasn't athletic — I just wasn't driven to run marathons."

Perhaps that drive came from the confidence and preparation she received through the Galloway Marathon Training Program, where she first met Gabe in the spring of 1993. A world-class athlete and member of the '72 Olympic team, Jeff Galloway created an incredibly popular run-walk approach to racing that has enabled former non-runners to successfully complete marathons and half-marathons while turning many average runners into faster ones.

From their weekly group runs in the spring to running their first marathon, the Marine Corps Marathon in Washington, D.C., together that fall, Seahorn and Gabe made strides in their fitness as well as their friendship. They became group leaders the following year and after initially volunteering for Galloway, Seahorn decided to

do what she loved full-time.

"I worked with [Galloway] for many years. As the national program director, I traveled with him to all the cities — about 48 programs [at that time] — to make sure they were on the right page in terms of training," Seahorn said. "I got to know a whole lot of people in the running community and it just became a way of life for me." What became a way of life for Seahorn had already become a passion that she wanted to share and her enthusiasm rang true for many people.

"I never thought I could run a marathon and once I did that, I did a lot of things I didn't think I could do in my life," said Becky Rentz, who first started running in '95. "My sister and I were both overweight, smoked and never exercised. Victoria was originally our group leader and she was very encouraging to the average runner. She and Lindsey always kept it fun; the two of them were responsible for a lot of people running marathons."

Less than a decade later, Seahorn and Rentz found themselves in a running group together again, only this time they were rooting for Gabe, who had resorted to walking instead of running due to the chemo that by then had taken its toll.

"I just thought she was invincible," Seahorn admitted. "When she started chemo, we had this awesome hat party and you never knew if she would have fake red hair, purple hair or hair with extensions. Lindsey was always the type that could see something positive in any situation."

When asked by Gabe's husband if she wanted to say something at the wake, Seahorn took a cue from her close friend. "That particular year, I was turning 50, I had a 4-year-old daughter and my best friend had just passed away ... I wanted to do something, so I stood up and told everyone that I would put on a race as a legacy to Lindsey."

Essentially, what she did then was follow in the footsteps of Gabe, overcoming the odds to turn a dream into a reality.

### A Visionary Fills the Void

If the 54-year-old runner has learned anything over the years, it's that life is a marathon. Using her daughter's playroom as an office in their Decatur home, Seahorn kept her promise by dedicating to Gabe what has gone into the record books as the second largest inaugural marathon and half-marathon race combination of all-time, according to Running USA.

Born in Tennessee and raised in Ohio, where her two sisters and two brothers still reside, Seahorn has called Atlanta home for more than 20 years. "I love it here. I wanted to showcase who we are because Atlanta really is a great city. [The race] was just one of those things that snowballed and people got excited," she said.

Nowhere was that more evident than at the starting line of the inaugural ING Georgia Marathon in March 2007, when nearly 15,000 people jostled for position in the city's first springtime marathon. Seahorn spent two years in preparation for that race, traveling around the country to shadow race directors, volunteering, and ultimately mapping a course through diverse Atlanta neighborhoods to ensure both a fun and challenging run. She also recruited the sponsors, getting corporations like Norcross-based Mizuno and ING to believe in what she wanted to do and why. As with any labor of love, anecdotes abound and the humor in them is found only after the fact. Daunting as it was, Seahorn successfully rerouted the finish line and relocated the popular pre-race expo after a tornado ripped through downtown Atlanta two weeks prior to the 2008 race.

"I remember speaking to her when she had to change the finish line [in 2008],"

said Mike Cosentino, owner of the Big Peach Running Co. "It was a gargantuan task but Victoria has a genuine passion for the communities in and around Atlanta and she is someone who can make things happen."

The ING Georgia Marathon was an

important race for many people. For runners, it filled a longstanding void on their calendar, and for Seahorn, it paved the way for future endeavors. While she enjoyed her role as race director, she sold the race after ensuring its success in 2008, citing the fact that it had become too consuming and

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Victoria Seahorn



Seahorn with daughter, Maddie

*“Unfortunately, I’ve had a lot of people in my life pass away and each time someone does, I’ve had an epiphany to change my life because of it. I truly think things like that make you appreciate what you have. My daughter is the best thing that has ever happened to me and I cherish every moment with her.”*

VICTORIA SEAHORN

perhaps more importantly, it was only the beginning of the trail she intends to blaze, not just for Gabe but for her daughter.

A thin, blonde, soon-to-be 8-year-old spitfire, Maddie loves to dance, has recently perfected the cartwheel and has already held her own title as race director. “She enjoys running, but when we had the [ING], she was the race director for the Tot Trot. I asked her, ‘Don’t you want to run?’ and she said, ‘Mom, race directors don’t run.’”

Oh but this one does and when Sea-

horn, a runner in race director’s clothing, isn’t running after a ball of energy like Maddie, she’s always preparing to log more miles for herself and for others — both on and off the road.

#### **Gods, Goddesses and Georgia**

Inspired to do a race in Colorado Springs where Gabe passed away, Seahorn recently teamed with Xterra to create a trail race (marathon and half-marathon) that will debut this month. Also brewing in the back of her mind was a foundation

in Gabe's honor for women who have survived cancer and are eager to move on with their lives.

Enter Robyn Benincasa, one of the world's premier adventure athletes. Founded by San Diego-based Benincasa along with four other amazing female athletes that have survived life-affirming struggles, the Project Athena Foundation (PAF) is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to help women live their athletic dreams by granting adventure-oriented wishes, also known as "Athenaships," to those that have experienced medical or traumatic setbacks. Appropriately enough, the men and women who donate to these worthy Athenas are considered gods and goddesses. Word among the gods and goddesses is that doctors and scientists can cure the body — Project Athena cures the spirit.

“Project Athena was just the kind of organization I was looking for to help [women] get their groove back, so to speak [from] not just breast cancer but any kind of traumatic condition,” said Seahorn, who has been working with Benincasa to put together a series of nationwide 5K races in 2010 and 2011 to complement the once-in-a-lifetime experiences typical of PAF. The duo realized that while one recipient might choose to climb Mt. Kilimanjaro, many more have the equally important dream of diving into the arms of loved ones at the finish line of a 5K race.

With running and Georgia always on her mind, Seahorn has been giving speeches and making things happen locally as the event planner/logistics chair for the American Cancer Society's (ACS) DetermiNation. Unlike Relay for Life, the



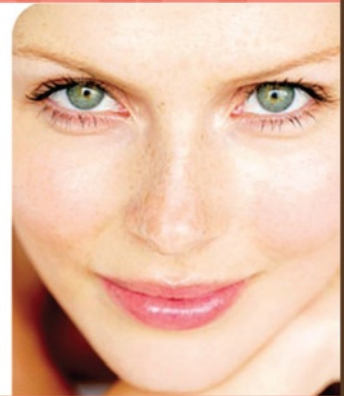
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## DetermiNation™

signature event for ACS, DetermiNation is an endurance event (half-marathon, marathon or triathlon) to raise money, and this is the first year it will be in Georgia,

which means the money raised locally, stays locally.

“The goal is to recruit at least 200 runners who will receive training through Get Fit Atlanta for the ING Georgia Marathon on March 21, 2010,” said Endurance Events Project Manager Tiffany Hubbard.

“Everywhere I looked, Victoria’s name came up and when I finally contacted her, she said she’d love to volunteer.”

It’s hard not to wonder if Seahorn is privy to more hours in the day or if she owns a cape that cuts down her commute between current and future race locations. No superhuman tricks to report as of yet; Seahorn’s drive to keep moving simply comes from her own personal story and a genuine passion for others.

“Many people get credit for inspiring me,” Seahorn said. “We can call them The Lindsey Gabes of the world and I’ve had the pleasure of meeting a lot of them ... people like Lindsey inspire me to keep going. Unfortunately, I’ve had a lot of people in my life pass away and each time someone does, I’ve had an epiphany to change my life because of it. I truly think things like that make you appreciate what you have. My daughter is the best thing that has ever happened to me and I cherish every moment with her.”

Sitting among the rings with Maddie in Centennial Olympic Park, which serves as the start/finish line for the ING Georgia Marathon, Seahorn looks every bit the part of a seasoned athlete down to the Mizuno running shoes, lululemon athletica gear and her whimsical necklace of a female runner dangling around her neck. But rather than waiting to present a shiny metal to someone she admires, Seahorn is busy creating opportunities for someone else to cross the finish line. After all, what matters most today as it did years ago is putting one foot in front of the other and inspiring others to follow. **PN**



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