

Waddling on with John

In his early 40's, John Bingham was an accomplished musician and college music teacher facing a host of health concerns due to obesity, excessive drinking and smoking. He began to turn his life around when he got active with running. His personal journey led to the birth of a completely new career and what makes this former couch potato stand out among the rest is his sincere desire to share his anyone-can-do-it attitude with everyone.

Since his mid-life remake, Bingham has run more than 40 marathons and countless "K" races, authored four books, pens his own column in Runner's World Magazine, started a race event company, and recently came out with a DVD called, "Run for Fun". The working title for his fifth book due out next Spring is called, "Running for Mortals", geared toward beginning runners. He feels there is a lack of usable information out there for people just starting out and the books that are on the shelves "condescend" rather than talk "to" people about getting active. And that is exactly what John "The Penguin" Bingham is all about – helping people get active in their life.

CWM: In your biography you say, "Nothing in my experience was as powerful as crossing the finish line of my first race. With that single step I overcame a lifetime of unkept promises to myself." What kind of promises were you talking about here?

JB: I'm talking about the kind of promise I think we all make to ourselves that we're going to lose weight, get in shape – whatever it is that we know at some level is or isn't the right thing to do. And in my case, having so many bad habits, there was plenty to choose from. I was the kind of person that was cyclical. I would quit something only long enough till I'd get tired of it and go back on again. I was never able to complete anything, like I was that first race. There was a starting line and a finish line. It was a powerful experience because of that.

CWM: Is it running that brings you this gratification or exercise in general?

JB: For me, it's sort of a combination of it. One, I just love the community. It was a big shock to me that the running community wasn't populated by a bunch of skinny, fast people. And so I think once I took that first step of running a race and finding that the race community was such a supportive group, then I was hooked; hooked as much on the activity and sport of running as on the community of running.



Photo courtesy of John Bingham

When John Bingham and his wife, Coach, Jenny Hadfield, sit down to write a book they pick a "spot" first. "Last time", says John, "when we did Marathon for Mortals, we were in Bellingham, Washington. This time it was the Comfort Inn in Madison, Wisconsin. We just spread out over a couple of couches...it's like dueling laptops."

CWM: Describe your evolution in overcoming your bad habits; did you do it cold turkey or gradually?

JB: I describe it more like a metamorphosis. The biggest mistake most people make and one that I did most of my life was trying to change everything at once. I just don't think any of us are wired to do that. Now there may be some people who can, but it's the rare person who can wake up one morning and totally change their life and never go back. I started with just trying to move a little bit more. I didn't do anything else but try to be active. I did a little biking and walking and then moved into running. And what happened to me, was this metamorphosis, all of a sudden I was thinking more about what I was putting into my body. Do I really want to carry around these cheese fries with me the next time I go out to ride my bicycle? Then about a year and half into my running, I started thinking, as I was sitting there smoking, 'this probably isn't helping my running at all.' Those changes, and then the drinking after that, all came one at a time and they came because there were some positive reasons to make those changes.

The single thing that I did do was start measuring my food. I came from an overeating background where I never knew what a serving size was. Like when it said there was serving of pork or chicken, I thought that meant the chicken. A serving of chicken was going to KFC and getting a barrel. It took me a long time to get that part figured out, to find out what a portion size really is. I snuck up on them [changes] and I really encourage people to do that. That's what scares people off. If you say listen, 'Once you start an activity program, get some exercise and get going on this,' etc., the first thing they think of is, 'Oh, my god, I'm going to have to

stop doing all the things I like to do'. And I say, 'No! No, no, no, no, no, no, no. Let's just start by getting off your butt and out of your house three to four times a week. Let's see how that goes first, with a routine of activity in your life for a month, or six or eight weeks and then we can start talking about this other stuff.'

CWM: How do you eat today?

JB: I eat about the way I always ate I just eat less of it. In other words, there's nothing I don't eat, I won't eat or completely avoid in my diet. For example, on our way back from a bike ride we stopped off at Cheeseburger in Paradise and I had a hamburger – not a cheeseburger. I had just about two thirds of my hamburger and about a tenth of the fries. So if I'm going to a restaurant called, Cheeseburger in Paradise, I'm not going to go in there and order low fat cottage cheese with pineapple. But I'm also not going to go in there and have that thing loaded down with extra cheese or bacon on it.

I eat a lot of grains and cereals, I'm good about that kind of stuff, but I'm not a big veggie guy. You don't see me loading up on broccoli. If I go to a Chinese restaurant, I have beef with broccoli and that's my idea of eating my veggies. I'm a normal guy and I want running to be fun. I don't want exercise to be something I hate. My message is you start out being active and inactive, number one, that's it. It's just as simple as that and if you get more active, then these other things begin to make more sense.

CWM: How did your personal journey evolve then into a business?

JB: I wish I was smart enough to

have had a plan or an advisor to have given me some advice. Really, what I've done is just chase my passion. And the passion at first was just the running and the walking. And then I started writing about it a little bit on the internet back in 1994. There was a group called the, Dead Runner's Society, and I was submitting emails, just like race reports. A person from the group sent five or six of these emails to the editors of Runner's

World Magazine. So the editor called me up and asked, 'Would you like to do eight columns for Runner's World?' And what happened is there was a readership out there, these people were out

there and they had been invisible up till then. When they got such a warm positive response to the columns, they asked, 'Could you do another year's worth?' And we were really on a year by year basis and all of a sudden the thing just blossomed. So when you have a column in Runner's World, you start getting invitations to go to other races and do other things.

CWM: And now, there's over 10 year's worth of columns...

JB: Everybody's amazed by that, including me. It's a job that I'm probably the least most qualified for of any job I've ever had. I don't have a background as a writer, I don't have a background as a runner, or a journalist. The only thing is that 10 years ago I didn't try to make them any better than they were. When they started off as emails, they were letters to my friends and I've never tried to make them anything more than letters to

I try to get to the finish line before they take the clock down – that's my idea of racing against the clock.

– John Bingham

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