

# I Almost Missed the Marathon: Self-determination, Injury, and Sport Termination

by

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There is an old German proverb about manhood stating that a grown man should have built a house, fathered a son, and planted a tree. In the sports' world, it is often also added that a man should have run a marathon by the age of 40. In the 1970s the automaker Porsche used this as the basis of a German advertisement substituting the phrase "planted a tree" with "driven a Porsche." While not a widely circulated ad campaign, it put a new spin on an old saying that was familiar to many Germans. Little did Porsche realize that this ad would deeply move a German man named Fritz along trail, road, and waterway.

*"With 40, a man has to have built a house, have fathered a son, have run a marathon, and driven a Porsche. I only missed the marathon." F. Jähn (personal communication, April 4, 2015).*

As a youth, Fritz Jähn was an accomplished athlete. He participated in a wide variety of sports including soccer, swimming, basketball, hockey, sailing, horseback riding, and skiing. But as is often the case, with adulthood came responsibilities of career and family and many of Fritz's athletic pursuits fell to the wayside. He remained a driven and goal-oriented man, completing medical school and becoming an anesthesiologist, husband, and father. By his mid-thirties with career and family life established, Fritz could have been satisfied with his accomplishments. But that one Porsche advertisement re-ignited a spark within him, setting him on a path to fulfill the one aspect of the proverb he had yet to complete—running a marathon.

At age 35, Fritz began to run regularly. During the winter months at the North Sea, it was too cold for wind surfing. His initial goal was to keep fit for the summer, but motivated by the proverb, he began to create his dream to compete in the Berlin Marathon. Building up stamina and endurance for the distance of 26.2 miles, he began his training in 1997 and realized his goal of running the Berlin Marathon in 1999 at the age of 40. Marathons quickly became Fritz's passion until he discovered another form of endurance sport: triathlon. He eventually competed in the ultimate of triathlons, The Ironman. The cornerstone for his athletic career was set, and success followed. For Fritz Jähn, his passion for endurance sports, especially triathlon, started with a simple slogan that got his head in the game.

As we contemplate the extent of Fritz's accomplishments, it is helpful to explain what The Ironman competition entails. Competitors engage in a total 140.6 miles of swimming, cycling, and running. The breakdown is as follows: 2.4 miles swimming, 112 miles cycling, and 26.2 miles running (marathon). The maximum time period to complete the entire race is 16 hours. Fritz Jähn completed this challenge five different times, on five different continents.

Being inspired by his talent for extreme distances, Fritz also began to compete in the half distance referred to as Ironman 70.3. Competing in the Ironman only allows for about one competition per year to prevent overstrain or injury. Adding its half distance enabled Fritz to compete in a second competition per season without damaging his body and the Ironman 70.3 also provided additional training for body and mind. This consideration displays the attitude of minimizing the risk of injury that has shaped Fritz's career.

It is safe to say that every career is shaped by highs and lows, by successes and by failures. Fritz's athletic career is no exception. He had the opportunity to compete around the globe and represent his home country of Germany as a member of the German team in the Ironman 70.3. He also placed first in his age group in the Ironman 70.3 in Malaysia and, most important to him, beat his personal best time. His successes illustrate the bright side of competition. They were the payoff for the intensive training and the sacrifices he made. His successes motivated him to keep going, look to the future and set new goals. These factors were critical in overcoming adversity, e.g., injury and post-injury depression, and failures experienced along the way.

Injuries and balancing family, work, and training were obstacles Fritz Jähn worked to overcome. In 2004, right before his first Ironman, he suffered a severe bike accident in which he broke several ribs and his clavicle. Months of recovery made it impossible to start at the Quelle Challenge Roth causing Fritz to postpone his start for another year. Then, at the peak of his triathlon career, a hallux-valgus deformity (a condition of the foot which causes inward deviation of the great toe and leads to misalignment of the bones of the foot) became too painful to continue the sport he loved without surgery. Unfortunately, the surgery did not have the desired effect and left his operated toe stiff for another year. Competing or even training was impossible for some time. Simply walking without pain or numbness became a daily challenge after surgery. Compounding his setbacks, Fritz also began suffering from considerable knee pain. The resultant effect of these injuries proved to be the end of Fritz's triathlon and other athletic pursuits.

Despite the unfortunate and sudden termination of his athletic career, Fritz consistently demonstrated the essential ingredients for the "secret" recipe for success: persistence, motivation, and (social) support. Fritz Jähn faced adversity throughout his athletic career, but he also fought it off by standing up again and getting ready for the next season. He endured hours of training, running at 5:30 in the morning, riding his bike to work 30–45 km (19–28 miles) and he maintained a balanced diet despite temptation and fatigue. He used his successes as motivators for additional accomplishment and set further goals to keep him going and to overcome obstacles along the way. One particular motivator that Fritz especially cherished was the knowledge that his children would be waiting one mile before the finish line and would run the last of the race alongside their father. That particular motivator is one that Fritz said encouraged him to run even faster and set new personal bests as he crossed the finish line.

Clearly, Fritz's athletic pursuits were a core part of his life and gave him a great sense of fulfillment. Training and competing were part of his identity and purpose and much of his daily routine was based around his athletic life.

The sudden termination of his athletic career was difficult for Fritz. His situation changed overnight as he realized that his days of competition were over. Within a very short time, Fritz Jähn lost the sport he loved, the competition he loved, and his daily routine that had accompanied him over the years. As one might imagine, there is a very real grief response that accompanies such a loss. The physical challenges of pain and loss of ability are significant in and of themselves. Additionally, the psychological impact of losing something so intrinsic to one's identity can be overwhelming. Fritz was forced to face these issues with little time to prepare for these realities.

However, Fritz did not let this dramatic change in his circumstances end what he loved. In time, his persistence, optimism and resilience eventually won the fight over his adversities. Facing adversity and injuries is not easy. Emotions are high and people's reserves are taxed when something valuable is taken from their lives. Fritz cites a change in perception as the essential factor in his recovery. He learned to accept his new circumstances and began to look forward instead of dwelling on the past. Although the journey was a difficult one, he persisted and eventually was able to compete again. But as he learned to accept his new reality his focus shifted. The importance of personal bests and placing in the races were replaced with goals of making it over the finish line hand-in-hand with his children and being grateful for his chance to race once again.

Today, Fritz Jähn has accepted the fact that his competitive years in running and triathlon are over. However, Fritz not only recovered physically from his injuries, he also recovered emotionally from the difficulties he experienced. He strengthened his association with family and social support. Even though reality sometimes is difficult to process, he has redefined his understanding of success and has realized that it was always a race against himself instead of others.

Fritz Jähn has come to terms with his abrupt career termination by focusing on the things he had been able to enjoy in life: to have built a house, fathered a son, driven a Porsche, *and* to have run a marathon. And even better, to have competed in eight Ironman and Ironman 70.3 competitions around the world as well as running over the finish line together with his children.

### Questions

1. Fritz was inspired by a German proverb and Porsche advertisement. What proverb, ad, or cultural statement has inspired or motivated you? Why?
2. Describe Fritz's motivation; more specifically, identify aspects of his intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. Which was stronger, and what evidence supports your answer?
3. How did his injuries affect Fritz's identity as an elite athlete? How did his thoughts, behaviors, and emotions change as a result of his injuries?
4. What activity is important to how you define who you are? Describe how you might react and adapt to a sudden end to that activity.

### Resources

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