

RUNNING THE GAUNTLET

Slowly but surely, running in winter becomes more pleasure than pain, writes **Kimberley Rothwell**.

September is a month of revolution. As the evenings get brighter and daylight saving unwraps the cloak of dark from the end of the day, people emerge from winter into spring like buds on a tree. Runners suddenly pop up in ever-increasing numbers on Oriental Parade, they pass my house in Johnsonville, a frequently travelled dog-walking route, thumping the ground with their \$300 shoes. I see the ones who have just made some sort of resolution to start exercising, waddling along with iPods rooted to their ear drums, imagining themselves being Allison Roe or Peter Snell.

I was once one of them, but after running through two winters now – one complete with a snowstorm – winter is my favourite time of year to lace up my shoes.

I'm relatively new to running. I was always the kid at the back on runs at primary school, the girl claiming to have a headache or a sore foot come phys-ed time at high school. It never occurred to me that "running" had to be anything other than going flat-out for a long time, nor that "running" is a skill you build up over time – not until I was nearly 38.

Throughout that first spring and summer I stitched the runs together into a seamless half hour. And then, in winter, when it felt just a little unsafe to be running around in the dark, I joined a running group. There was one group that people from very different parts of my life said I should join – jog squad. Not, as the name might suggest, a crack team of running crime fighters, but a running group for women, from beginners to marathon hopefuls.

For someone who had been left at the back of the pack, and ridiculed for it many, many times, attempting to run and keep up with other people was putting myself out there in an enormous way. I expected to be treated like the slightly dicky kid I was at school, with the wrong

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brand of shoes, or the track pants that had only two stripes, not three. Before the first session I felt like throwing up for most of the day.

I was wearing the wrong kind of track pants – for a start they were track pants. It was a cold July night and everyone else was wearing sleek three-quarter-length running pants, tops made of fabrics NASA might be into, and \$100 jackets. But I didn't spot a single person looking me up and down and writing me off. Instead, people

greeted me, were friendly. I was out of breath in seconds while others chatted. My nose ran faster than I did. I felt lucky it was dark and no-one could see me. We ran a little bit down Oriental Parade and the others disappeared into the black night, silhouettes against the thin orange streetlights.

Duck, the indefatigably chipper trainer who led the group, never made me feel like I was the slowest runner she had ever met, although I had an inkling I was. She made me feel like I was some kind of superwoman simply for turning up.

Weeks passed and I got used to my place at the back of the

pack, finding my own pace, and seeing the others disappear in front of me. I tried to keep up with the three sisters who occupied the place just in front of me, and gradually, I started to catch up. My happiest night was when they absorbed me into their group, and we ran as a pack, me like their honorary sister, not letting on I was struggling to keep up. I bought a pair of three-quarter-length pants, I wore a proper running top. I began to be a Runner.

There's a kind of cosiness when you run in winter, as if the dark insulates you. I love stripping down to my short-sleeved top and shivering for a minute or two before the heat of running catches up with me. Being cold can be an incentive to run faster, wind can be an incentive to run faster, and, the first winter I ran, I found that hail spearing your face can be an incentive to run faster.

Remember the big snow of 2011? Jog squad has a policy of running in all weathers; freak snowstorms included. We headed up Hawker St to get warm, skated down Oriental Tce, huddled under a garage at the bottom, then sprinted back to Te Papa with shards of ice hitting us straight in the face. I don't think I have ever run faster. I was certainly not at the back of the pack that night. It was a short run, but the point was that we did it – and survived.

On most nights, we were treated to an almost empty Oriental Parade, the city's lights reflected in the still water of the harbour.

Anyone who has come down Mt Victoria at night after running up it will know how especially brilliant the city looks as you descend, having climbed that monster with your own two feet. The streets of Mt Vic, Thorndon, Wadestown and Roseneath looked quaint and idyllic under the unreal glow of street lights.

I loved glimpsing the uncurtained rooms where life was carrying on; dinner being made and eaten, laundry being folded, a woman feeding her baby. These little worlds going on under the yellow light, with me a fleeting, invisible, sweaty visitor.

