



Full House

Adoption activist, wife and mom of 12(!), Erin Henderson thought she was busy—then she started running marathons.

By Sarah Zobel

Erin Henderson

is out the door for her daily run by 4:30 a.m. She needs to get her miles in early so she's home in time to get breakfast ready for Nate, Ryan, Shane, Maggie, Sadies, Destinee, Benjamin, Amanda, Belane, Marcus, Solomon and Noah. If you think you don't have time to train for a marathon, Erin's life might prove you wrong. She's not a camp counselor or a nanny. Those are the names of her children—all 12 of them.

SMALL STARTS

"If you had told us a few years ago that we would have 12 kids," says Henderson, "we would have laughed. We never set out to have this huge family—it was never 'Hey! We don't have enough mouths to feed!'"

In fact, there was a time when Henderson, 35, thought she may never be able to have children at all. Due to a horseback-riding accident she suffered as a teen, Henderson was told she couldn't become pregnant. But after marrying her best friend Josh, the hopeful mother's dreams came true when she had her first child, a boy, whose birth was followed by two more blessings—both sons as well. It was the couple's decision to have a girl that changed their lives drastically.

Henderson was advised by her doctors that the lasting effects of her injury meant a fourth pregnancy might be too risky, so the couple decided to adopt. In January 2002, the Idaho native flew to Vietnam to bring home her daughter, Maggie. What Henderson hadn't anticipated was that she would be unable to forget what she'd seen in Ho Chi Minh City. In the orphanage, which was teeming with hundreds of children, she found Maggie tied to a crib she shared with two other infants who were similarly bound in place. Maggie's Vietnamese name was written on her leg in black marker. And like the other babies, her head was square and flat because she had so rarely been picked up.

"Up until that point, it was all about what we wanted," Henderson says. "We wanted a girl. We wanted one more baby. But all of a sudden I thought, *Never mind that I want a baby—there are all these kids who don't have parents!*"

GROWING FAMILY

When Henderson returned home, she and Josh decided they could make room for one more child. They've since adopted two daughters and one son born in the United States, one daughter from South Korea and another daughter and three sons from Ethiopia, in addition to Maggie. The couple chose children with

the most trouble finding homes, those who were older and had waited a long time to be adopted or those with special health concerns.

The youngest, Noah Biruk, had been brought to the U.S. from Ethiopia by a couple who decided they couldn't keep him because of his cerebral palsy and epilepsy. Even today, he's tube-fed, in a wheelchair and requires very special care.

"People always say, 'Those kids are so lucky,'" explains Henderson. "We always say, 'No, *we're* so lucky to have them.'"

The household is rounded out by a cat and two dogs, one of whom arrived recently from a shelter. She's a Boston terrier called Penny Newton, a nod to "those dang hills in the Boston Marathon."

MARATHON MOMMA

Qualifying for Boston is a lofty goal—even for seasoned runners with plenty of time to train. But Henderson proves that no matter how busy you are, if you make fitness a priority, there's no telling where your dreams will take you.

Last year, she qualified and ran the Boston Marathon for the first time, finishing in 3:37 despite soaring temperatures that forced organizers to issue an extreme heat advisory. Later that year, she won the Star Valley Half Marathon in 1:32 and ran a marathon personal record of 3:17 at the Pocatello Marathon. Not bad for someone who started running in 2009.

Although Henderson's family is unique, the story of how she started running is one many women can relate to. Three years ago, Henderson realized she was putting her own needs last, eating cereal for dinner after the kids were in bed and not bothering with exercise or anything that wasn't directly related to either her then 11 children or job working part-time from home for an international adoption agency.

Just after Christmas in 2008, Henderson decided to try out her kids' new Wii Fit. When she stepped on the Fit mat to be weighed, her on-screen avatar exploded. "It told me I was obese and made that little wah-wah-wah



Clockwise from top: Henderson never pictured a family this large, but now she can't imagine life without one; the mom of 12 poses in post-race bliss with her relay team after a "WE LOVE YOU MOM" sign helped push her through the finish; she earned her stripes in the form of a 2012 Boston Marathon Jacket.

noise," Henderson said. "I knew what I weighed, but just seeing it up on that screen was different."

Recognizing that she was on a path to physical and emotional misery, Henderson resolved to carve out an hour in the mornings to exercise using the Wii Fit once the older kids were at school. By April, she'd lost 25 pounds, but she was "sick to death" of jumping around her living room. The snow had melted and she wanted to get outside, so she decided to join some local women runners. Henderson says, "I thought, *How hard can it be?* And then a mile in I was dying."

But she stuck with it, and by September she'd shed a total of 50 pounds. After increasing her mileage and focusing on her diet, she lost an additional 30 pounds.

COUCH TO COACH

Today, Henderson runs an average of 70 to 90 miles per week, and the marathon is her distance of choice. She's working with a running coach to improve

her race times, and is also a USATF-certified coach herself. She helps a range of women, from one who's 60 pounds overweight prepping for a 5k to another who's a "super fit" ultramarathon runner.

Many of her clients are also mothers struggling with finding the time to run, and shaking off the guilt of taking time for themselves. But Henderson is quick to tell them to put that aside, to remember that in just 30 or 40 minutes they can become happier, healthier people while setting a positive example for their spouses and children.

"I really don't believe I'm any busier than any other mom," Henderson says. "We're all busy—whether you have two kids or 12, work from your home or outside it. I don't know any mom who says, 'I've got so much free time!'"

FAMILY AFFAIR

In her own house, Henderson encourages running for those who are interested. She explains, "We don't push the kids into anything. One of the beauties of our family is that we're all so different. I want

MAKING IT COUNT

The mom, marathoner and adoption activist's life by the numbers. . .

- 12 KIDS
- 16 YEARS OF MARRIAGE
- 12 MARATHONS (IN UNDER 2 YEARS!)
- 6 HOURS OF SLEEP EACH NIGHT
- 85 MILES RUN EACH WEEK
- 13 GALLONS OF MILK PURCHASED EACH WEEK
- 84 PANCAKES FOR SUNDAY NIGHT DINNER
- 20+ LOADS OF LAUNDRY (IN JUMBO MACHINES) EACH WEEK
- 15-PASSENGER VAN, PLUS 1 "COOL CAR," A MINIVAN

them to find for them what running does for me. I hope they see it's important to go after your dreams and work hard for what you want."

But the running bug is contagious. Last year, Shane, then 12, wanted to run a half-marathon, so Henderson devised a training plan for him. He finished just one minute behind his mom at the Star Valley Half. A few of her other children run track, and her husband Josh now coaches throwing events at the high school and has lost 60 pounds himself through running. All 14 Hendersons participated in a Halloween 5k this fall, with mom pushing Noah in a wheelchair, and Sadies, 17, walking while holding hands with Maggie, who's now 11.

"That's my favorite part of it all," Henderson says of parenting, "seeing them all there for each other." And her children support their mother, too. When Henderson took part in a 192-mile relay race in 2010, all 12 were on hand to cheer her on. At one of the exchange stations, Josh and each child held up a sign decorated with one letter, together boldly spelling out "WE LOVE YOU MOM." ■