

Running club empowering girls

Guardian Angels group's supportive environment drawing more and more members with each passing year

By Steve LeBlanc
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Progress over prosperity. Camaraderie over competition.

That's the heartbeat of a Guardian Angels Catholic Elementary School running club, which aims to empower its young participants with an all-girls environment and a 'I believe in me, I believe in you, we believe in us' motto.

Open to students in Grades 5 to 7, the group has almost tripled in size since its 2011 inception — with 42 returnees and newcomers now part of the 10-week spring session.

That growth is the only number coach/mentor Heidi Nelson is concerned with, as finishing times and club rankings never come into play.

"We're all different. It's about the girls encouraging each other and feeling good about themselves," said the child/youth counsellor, who began running herself just a few years ago as a prelude to starting the group and hoping to become a positive role model for the school's female population. "We try to build confidence. There's no negative talk...



Above, members of the Guardian Angels' girls running club deliver a group chant before heading out on the run. Inset, coach/mentor Heidi Nelson offers some advice to a group member. *Stacey Newman / Special to the Champion*

just what we call green thoughts." Having to miss the annual season-ending 5km run to attend a swim-

ming competition in her first year with the team, seventh grader Amanda Apputhurai was more than a little excited to test the improvement she'd made when last year's race finally rolled around.

"I felt pretty good about myself," recalled the club veteran, who had done a little running on her own before the group was formed. "I like the all-girls atmosphere. Sometimes the boys can be too competitive."

Many of her club-mates — including Grade 5 student Maya Coniker — feel likewise.

No stranger to running, having spent many a Saturday morning doing lengthy jogs with her seasoned long-distance running father Rick, Maya came to the group with more experience than many newcomers.

But she admits she still had plenty to learn. "I've definitely gotten better. I can run faster and further now."

Fellow fifth grader and newcomer Sabrina Belmonte echoed those sentiments.

"We've learned things like proper posture and breathing," said Sabrina, who recently began making regular trips to the Milton Sports Centre walking/jogging track with

her mom Lisa. "And I've gotten support from the older girls."

That's particularly encouraging to Nelson, who along with weekly running sessions incorporates elements like positive affirmation, proper diet, healthy body image, building confidence and developing effective problem solving and coping skills into the club's curriculum.

"The key is to inspire the girls," said the club coach, who leads one of many all-girls running clubs across Halton, and is trying to convince a male staff member to start a boys group. "Yes it's (running) a challenge, but we can do it together."

That team concept was part of why Grade 5

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