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point of view

How I Became a French Quarter Character

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Out Running. Or How I Became a French Quarter Character.by [George Koschel](#)

Recently some friends and I had breakfast at La Peniche, a neighborhood restaurant in the Marigny Triangle, the area adjacent to the French Quarter. As we gathered our belongings to leave, another patron walked into the restaurant and told us how his lover had just dropped him off while he looked for a parking space. He further enlightened us that it was a new lover as he had recently split with his old lover.



Patricia Nell Warren (foreground) with four members of the New Orleans Frontrunners.

This being New Orleans, you get used to hearing a stranger's life story while waiting in lines at the grocery, the bank, or upon entering and leaving restaurants.

One of my friends, my former therapist who lost everything in Katrina (but that's another story), looked at him and rather bluntly asked if he knew us. He pointed to me and said, "I've seen this one jogging in the French Quarter for years."

I was a bit chagrined, but also a little flattered to realize I had, maybe in my own small way, become a minor Quarter character. "I've seen this one jogging in the Quarter for years," reverberated in my head.

My coming out is intimately connected to Patricia Nell Warren's novel *The Front Runner*, and, as a result, my romance with running. The novel tells the story of an out-of-the-closet runner, Billy Sive, who competes in the 1976 Montreal Olympics only to be gunned down by an assassin. Romantic hokum assuredly, but it changed my life.

I was madly in love with the person who loaned it to me in 1976. I'd had furtive sex with men before, but this was the first time I felt something emotional. The same age as I, twenty-eight, he was a lot more cognizant of the mores of gay life than I.

More than a lover, he was a means of coming out of the closet. No doubt, he sensed my desperation and neediness, which, in part, drove him away. My relationship with him segued into friendship.

Still, I devoured *The Front Runner* much the same way I did Gore Vidal's *The City and the Pillar* eight years earlier. However, the latter left me with a feeling of isolated melancholy while Warren's book gave me a feeling of hope despite its tragic ending.

I took up running. It was a nice legacy to take from my coming out romance. I bought my first pair of running shoes, and began running at the YMCA, fourteen laps to a mile. I would obsessively count off each lap.

Running didn't make me a new person, but it enabled me

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to cope with the anxiety I encountered in my life, be it my parents' late-in-life divorce, the ups and downs of my professional career, or my inability to find a romantic partner.

Five or six days a week I would diligently run at the Y or outside on the streets of New Orleans. I became compulsive about it, feeling bad if I missed a scheduled running day. A few times I twisted my ankle on an outdoor run and had to stop until I recuperated. That was agony.

My first foot race was an easy two miler along Lake Pontchartrian in the late spring of 1976. I had no strategy. I only knew I wanted to be first. When the starter's gun went off, I took off with a burst of energy. In less than a mile, I had to start walking.

So much for my romantic notions of being a front runner. Still I persisted. I knew I was committed to running when I was able to maintain a training schedule through that first summer in New Orleans.

My first running high happened the following October. A cool front had dropped out of the north into New Orleans. It was a Friday afternoon and I decided to run up St. Charles Avenue.

The air was crisp and clear; I began with an easy pace. Shortly into the run I felt as though I could keep going forever. I didn't feel winded or tired, just very relaxed. It was as though I were experiencing something metaphysical. Over thirty years later I still remember that day. I have had running highs since then, but none better.

Despite my less than stellar performance in my first two miler, I began competing in races. I collected a whole closet full of tee shirts.

At first I wasn't aware of my time. My strategy was only to conserve enough energy so I could put in a good kick at the end and fly across the finish line.

Gradually things changed. Just when, I don't know.

I continued running on the indoor track at the Y. To deal with the monotony of lap running, I started setting time goals for myself. I still ran outside and periodically enjoyed the occasional running high.

What I enjoyed most, however, was running against the clock at the Y, especially when I did better than I had anticipated.

During my early running years, there were two races I always participated in: the Turkey Day Race held every Thanksgiving and the Jackson Day Race held every January to commemorate the Battle of New Orleans. The former is a five miler and the latter a 9K.

Beginning in 1985 I started keeping records of my times. In that year and in the following year I ran the Turkey Day Race in under thirty-five minutes. I realized that if I saved up energy for a kick at the end then I wasn't running efficiently. If I kept up a steady fast pace, I ran better.

In the late summer of 1991, I read a personal ad in the local gay newspaper. Someone was trying to establish a local chapter of Fronrunners. I called the number. The group was going to meet on Saturday mornings.

I figured this might be a good way to meet gay people who liked to run. As a result, I went out to Audubon Park and started running with the local chapter of Fronrunners.

It would be nice to write that I met the love of my life there but that did not happen. I did, however, meet a number of people who added immeasurably to the quality of my life, not the least of which was a straight woman whom I met on the AIDS hotline. I invited her to join us and she

became one of my closest friends. She is also a skilled SCUBA diver, and, as a result, my ability as a diver increased too (but that's another story).

Usually on Sundays, I always did what I liked to think of as a long run. In the summer it was usually five or six miles; in the cooler months, seven, sometimes eight, miles.

Once when it wasn't any more hot and humid than it usually is for a summer day in New Orleans, my body gave out on Esplanade and Galvez. As usual my clothes were soaked with sweat, but my body was excreting salt. I sat down, my legs splayed in front of me, my back slumped against a telephone pole.

A fellow runner has pointed out that compulsive behavior can be a healthy behavior ratcheted up a notch or two. His compulsive behavior is reflected in his home. I could walk into it at any time and it would look like it is ready for a shoot for *Architectural Digest* (but that's another story).

Sure, my compulsive nature had fueled my desire to run, which I viewed as being healthy. But this wasn't being healthy. This was being stupid.

No more outdoor long runs for me during the summer months. On the indoor track, I fooled myself into running distances. I'd listen to music and run for an hour, thinking I had run five miles.

Regardless of how much time I ran or the actual mileage I accrued, the times for my races progressively worsened. My last year for running in the Jackson Day Race and the Turkey Day Race was 2008. My respective times were one hour three minutes and fifty nine minutes and forty seconds.

On that last Turkey Day Race, I had two more miles to go, but I could hear the announcer reeling off the times of the people who were finishing in the stadium. At mile three I was at thirty-five minutes. Twenty-three years earlier I was crossing the finish line. Running in races ceased being fun.

When I first started running I heard someone say that if you did a mile in less than nine minutes you were running. Anything over that was jogging. Where that bit of running lore came from I don't know, but I incorporated it into my psyche.

Looking back on my times, I guess you could say I ran from 1976 until the edge of the new millennium, and then I jogged until 2008.

Now as I have become comfortably established in my sixth decade, I do what I like to call "slogging," or slow jogging, usually on the air conditioned indoor track at the New Orleans Athletic Club (the YMCA closed, but that's another story), or, if the weather permits, through the streets of the French Quarter.

A reasonable person might ask why I still do it. Simple, it's cost effective. My body feels like it gets more of a workout if I slog three or four miles as opposed to biking or swimming. To get the same benefit from swimming or biking that I do with my slogging would require hours. So I slog.

Anyway, I can't quit now. I'm a French Quarter character. And that's my story.

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[George Koschel](#) is a writer who lives in the French Quarter of New Orleans. A retired city employee, he is the contact person for Frontrunners of New Orleans. He is a volunteer for NOAIDS, doing HIV test counseling, and an assistant editor of *New Laurel Review*. He has published a number of short stories in literary journals and has contributed entries on the following topics and individuals to [gltbq.com](#):
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