

## CHAPTER ONE

# ENTER THE DIET, ENTER THE EXERCISE

If there is a cornerstone to my health, fitness, disease prevention and treatment program, it would have to be nutrition. After all, never did my very positive mental attitude, my belief that it could never happen to me, and my years of running prevent my developing cancer. Yet how I changed my diet happened by chance.

Shortly after my diagnosis of cancer, I saw a tiny notice in a Honolulu newspaper that read:

*Breast cancer and diet study being conducted. Those who have or have had breast cancer are invited to join a study to determine the benefit of diet in the treatment of cancer...*

I couldn't believe my eyes. If the notice had read, "to determine the benefit of cosmic radiation in the treatment of cancer," I would have been on the phone in a flash. I had a feeling of total desperation. Only the slightest hint of salvation is enough to send cancer patients like me into orbit if that's what's promised. I can easily understand why "quack" cures are grasped at so desperately because that's how I felt. (You can read more about this in Chapter Three.) I'd also thought and been told that there was no way diet could have any influence on cancer. But here, at least, was hope!

I did not hesitate a moment. The advertisement told me to go to the office of Dr. John McDougall. When I got there, newspaper clipping in hand, Dr. McDougall explained to me why he thought diet was important to cancer. I learned that breast cancer rates in countries with a low-fat diet are low, while in countries such as the United States, where diets are high in fat, breast cancer rates are high.

So here was the answer to my question: "Why me?" I found out that the typical American diet consists of thirty-seven to forty-five per-

cent fat, placing it among the fattiest in the world.<sup>1</sup> I also discovered that when women from countries with a low-fat diet migrated to countries with a high-fat diet, their breast cancer rates soon approximated those of their new country, if they adopted that country's diet. In other words, genetics did not seem to play a role in these incidents of cancer. Nor, so it seemed, did age. There was an increase in incidence of breast cancer in all age groups.

Even more important to me was the finding that when women in the low-fat diet countries got breast cancer, they lived much longer.<sup>2</sup> This fact really got my attention! Here was hope. Here was a chance to extend my life.

Was there any question about my changing my diet? None! Absolutely none!

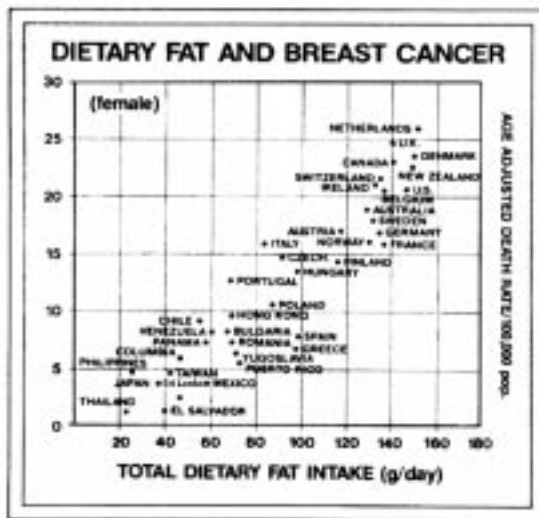


Fig. 1. Breast cancer rates are highly correlated with the amount of fat consumed in the diet.

### No Chemotherapy and Radiation

There was a little “catch” though. Dr. McDougall advised me not to have chemotherapy and radiation. I was quite surprised, because I thought that in my case, considering the size of the tumor and the signs it had spread, it would be necessary. He explained that chemotherapy and radiation permanently damage the immune system and that I was going to need to have that system in excellent shape to

stop my cancer reoccurring. He stated emphatically, "If you want to save your life, change your diet!"

I was confused. Whom should I believe? Which side should I go with? This was pretty scary now. There was one factor that made a big difference. Dr. McDougall pulled out the studies that supported what he was saying. The other doctors didn't.

I was now totally convinced. I changed my diet literally overnight and refused chemotherapy and radiation.

### The Vegan Diet

The implementation of Dr. McDougall's meal plan was easy: If it was of plant origin, I ate it; if it was of animal origin, I didn't. This diet is called "vegan," but you needn't worry about terminology. I know you will have lots of questions: Aren't chicken and fish good for you? What about milk? What about protein and calcium? What about iron? What do vegans eat? Don't worry. All these questions will be answered in the course of the book.

Let me just say for now that the effects of my dietary change were immediate. In just twenty-one days, my blood cholesterol dropped from 236 mg/dl to 160 mg/dl. At the next test six months later it was 128 mg/dl. And the one after that was under 100! This practically eliminated my risk of heart attack, a result I hadn't even considered. When Dr. McDougall had seen my initial reading, he had told me I was at as great a risk of having a heart attack as I was of dying of the cancer. Here was another health shock because, as a marathoner, I thought I was immune to heart disease. (This was before one of the most famous of all runners, Jim Fixx, died of heart disease.)

I was shocked my cholesterol was so high, since I'd long before given up eating "red meat" and was a heavy exerciser. What I didn't know then is that chicken and fish have just as much cholesterol as beef and pork. I had not done my body any favors by switching the source of cholesterol.

It's not surprising that people think they're eating more healthily by choosing chicken and fish instead of beef and pork. The meat industries hide their cholesterol levels in chicken and fish through not mentioning them at all. Here, for instance, is an advertisement for beef that ran nationally in a popular magazine:

*Cholesterol: perception vs. reality. This should make headlines: lean, trimmed beef has no more cholesterol than chicken—without the skin.*

A fast-food chain advertised that: *Our mouth-watering ribs are as low in cholesterol as chicken and fish.*

The beef and pork industries must be hoping that their verbal manipulation gets past the public's awareness that cholesterol must be the same in all animals. "Low" means "high" in this case, about twenty-five milligrams of cholesterol per ounce of muscle—regardless of what animal it comes from.

We will discover more benefits of a vegan diet in later chapters.

<b>Cholesterol Content</b> (based on portion size)	
<b>Food</b>	<b>milligrams/100 grams</b>
Beef	70
Pork	70
Lamb	70
Chicken (skinned)	60
Turkey (skinned)	82
Halibut	50
Haddock	60
Tuna	63
Mackeral	93
Crab	100
Shrimp	150
Lobster	200
Cheese (Cheddar)	106
Liver	300
Egg	550
All plant foods	0

Fig. 2. Cholesterol Content (based on portion size)

### Enter the Exercise

A vegan diet was one aspect of my new health regimen. Training for the Ironman triathlon was another. (I will explain what the Ironman triathlon involved a little later.) As well as a lowered risk of stroke, colon cancer, and diabetes, one of the factors that most convinced

me to become a vegan was that my race times started to improve. I was knocking off large chunks of time in every race I did. I concluded that my circulatory system had opened up, that my muscles were getting more oxygen and nutrients, and the waste products were being carried away faster. I could feel the benefits, and I knew that I was running, biking, and swimming a whole lot faster.

Other than the running that most children did, I had not been particularly athletic when I was younger. I ran my first road race in 1973. It was a three-miler, the Turkey Trot in Springfield, Ohio. It was small enough that I could start pretty close to the front. As I looked around, I could see nothing but men, and I smiled to myself, feeling pretty smug.

When the gun went off, I was nearly trampled. To avoid getting run over, I ran all out and almost died at the half-mile mark. My chest and lungs were screaming in agony, my legs turned to lead, and I felt as if I was dying. I had no choice but to slow down to nearly a walk. Slowly, I recovered enough to get back up to a halfway decent pace and hang on for the rest of the distance. I completed my first race and collected my very first trophy.

I would not forget those excruciating pains for a long time. My next race was over a year later, and although it was a four-miler, it was essentially a repeat of my first race. But again, I was rewarded with a handsome trophy (no other women, again). Having survived twice now, I entered a ten-kilometer (6.2 miles) race and noticed that the same sequence occurred no matter what the distance.

Races could be divided into a beginning, middle, and end. Beginnings were always great. All those horrible pains in my chest and legs signaled the end of the beginning. The middle began as I slowed my pace a little and the pains subsided. The end began as I saw the finish line and then it was trying to just hang on until I crossed it. In every race the sequence was the same—except in a longer race the middle began later and lasted longer.

It was another four years before I attempted a half-marathon. And guess what? It was exactly the same sequence! By then I'd had enough experience to realize that any distance I'd tried had the same ending: I crossed the finish line dying, with not much left. I did not realize then that this was the way it was supposed to be!

The leap from a half-marathon to a full one was a greater psychological battle. It was only when I was working in an all-male military office and saw these guys, many of whom were admittedly ten to twenty years younger than I, completing marathons with much less training, that I thought I could do the full marathon. I decided to break through those sex and age barriers. I just kept extending my long runs, gaining confidence along the way that I really could do it.

As I crossed the finish line at the end of my first marathon, I realized that I'd gone through the exact same sequence of beginning, middle, and end with nothing left.

Four years later I began to train for my first ultra-marathon (defined as any race longer than the standard marathon distance of 26.2 miles). Once my goal became an "ultra," the marathon seemed almost easy. That was an exciting discovery because I knew then that I could set any goal, and anything less than that was do-able, almost easy.

### Running the World

Have you ever watched the amount of activity in a colony of ants? Do you notice how purposeful the ants seem to be? Each member of the group seems to know where he's going, what to do, and when to do it. These ants' entire lives are wrapped up in accomplishing genetically programmed goals.

Now look at humans. Some people seem to know what to do, how to do it, and when to do it. I never felt that fortunate. It seemed as though I was always looking at a whole bunch of options, found myself wanting more than one, then looking back at the choices I'd made, and wishing I'd done something else.

With the diagnosis of cancer, all that got swept away. I saw the crystalline blue of the ocean and lush green of the trees as if for the first time. Suddenly, just being alive was the essence of my life, and everything else was secondary. Then came a new and exhilarating sense of reckless abandonment and exciting opportunities.

I looked back at my life and saw where I was one of those ants just following the trail of the ant in front of me. I'd not dared to strike out on a trail of my own making. Cancer did for me what I was unable to do on my own. It plucked me from this trail of conventionality and dropped me in another place, one that seemed unique. Yes, other people

had been diagnosed with cancer, but it seemed to me that they were in a different situation. My first two years after the diagnosis were spent assessing the illness and, after it appeared that I was not going to die immediately, I was free to plan the rest of my life.

Running has taken me all over the world. It is an exciting way to see new countries and meet people of different cultures who share a love of running. Planning a trip to China the year following my cancer diagnosis, I created and realized a fantastic dream: I ran the Great Wall of China. Well, not the whole length, because so much of it is in a state of disrepair. But I ran enough of it to get to experience the feeling of doing something so close to impossibility when compared to my old frame of reference.

Running along that magnificent, ancient creation was a joy in itself, but watching all the Chinese people watching me was the real thrill. Most of them had never seen a tall, fair, Western woman in a running singlet and shorts, and they must have thought I was crazy. After all, why would anyone want to run when they didn't have to?

Waves of drop-jawed Chinese parted and gawked in awe as I threaded my way through the crowds. They pointed at me, and then smiles played around their eyes. Then their lips widened, and their whole faces beamed. One elderly gentleman playfully ran alongside me, laughing uproariously. He was saying something in Chinese, and I was talking back in English. We communicated soul to soul perfectly, and I know we enriched each other's lives for a precious few moments.

After my return from China, I decided I wanted to backpack across Haleakala, the 10,000-foot volcano on the island of Maui known as the "House of the Sun." I scampered down the shale of the inside of the crater of the extinct volcano, hoping the vulcanologists were right in their assessment that it really was extinct. I peered down seemingly bottomless crevasses, saw two spectacular sunrises, and ran up the far side of the crater in a quarter of the time usually allotted for people to climb out.

As in China, I felt that this was really living, and wondered why I had waited so long to start! I had not yet even conceived of doing the "Run to the Sun." The following year I did it: running the 36.6 miles from the bottom to the top of Haleakala, completing it in seven hours forty-seven minutes and winning an age-group first place.

I have continually set myself new challenges. The fourth year after the cancer diagnosis (1986), I ran fifty-one races and placed in almost every one of them: thirty-three first places; nine second places; three thirds; and six races that were “fun runs” with no times or awards. These races ranged from a one-mile all-out sprint to three Ironman triathlons, and included numerous course, state, and international age-group records in running, biking, swimming, and triathlons.

In 1987, the fifth year after my cancer diagnosis, I did fifty-two races, again ranging in distances from the mile to the Ironman, with even more first place awards. In 1988, I changed my focus a little and ran the Moscow Marathon plus races in Kiev, Kharkof, Sochi, and St. Petersburg. Our interpreter there told all the Russians we met about me, this fifty-three-year-old “cancer patient” who does Ironman triathlons. I will never forget the looks of amazement on their faces. They wanted to know everything about my diet, training schedule, and how I got myself to do all these things. I delighted in the opportunity to talk to these people about the importance of diet, exercise, and a healthy lifestyle.

The Moscow Marathon was one of the more exotic marathons, and it was certainly one of the most memorable. This was before the Berlin Wall came down, when there were still animosities between the Communist countries and the West. What I found in running through the streets of Moscow was that the Soviets were intensely curious about Americans. They were extremely friendly and usually knew enough English to carry on a limited conversation. I spent so much time talking to foreign runners during that marathon that I had a terribly slow time, a P.W. (Personal Worst). But do you think that mattered? Being able to communicate with hundreds of people with immensely different backgrounds was hugely rewarding for me.

Since I wanted to take the “Aloha” spirit to the USSR, I carried, as part of my baggage, 5,000 Hawaiian orchids, which were distributed to the spectators along the course. The expressions of surprise and delight on the faces of the Russians were wonderful to behold. Even more wonderful were the soldiers from the Russian Army who’d been recruited to serve as course marshals along the 26.2-mile route. They stood at rigid, stone-faced attention. It was pretty exciting to see the stern, cold faces melt into smiles and big eyes as they realized what I

was handing them. Being from Hawaii, I wanted to tell them how far I'd come to run in their marathon. That was when I discovered that they did not understand the word, "Hawaii." They'd just look at me totally puzzled, because there is no "h" sound in their language. When I found out that the Russian pronunciation for "Hawaii" was "G-vai," they all of a sudden understood, nodding their heads, eyes dancing, and big smiles on their faces. Ah, the importance of communication!

In 1989 I spent three weeks in Thailand and Nepal, doing every race I could find. Again, it was a similar experience. There were many opportunities to mix with the people, share my experiences, and tell my "story." People there could hardly believe that anyone would exert any effort that wasn't really necessary for survival. The concept of "exercise" is hardly necessary when you're at heavy labor all day long every day.

This was especially true in Nepal where people are so poverty-stricken that it seems almost criminal to waste any of the body's energy. What I saw was that food there was such a limited commodity and life so hard that there was no need to exercise or even have any choice in what to eat. The Nepalese already had an extremely low-fat diet and they "exercised" all day long and half the night—seven days a week, at that.

I also saw stress levels that were extremely high. I mentally compared their types of stress with the stress that we in America face with our deadlines, traffic congestion, noise, etc. These people worked long, hard days with no "coffee breaks" and rarely any days off. Even with all this heavy labor, some were not even making a subsistence-level living. Many could hardly feed their children, much less themselves. I can't imagine any greater stressor than seeing your children go hungry.

Ironically, the Nepalese, on average, were very healthy and lived to ripe, old, active ages. Obesity didn't exist. Neither did heart disease, nor most forms of cancer, ulcers, diabetes, osteoporosis, high blood pressure (hypertension), and arthritis. There went the theories that ulcers and high blood pressure are caused by stress, that lack of dairy products causes osteoporosis, and that arthritis is caused by "wear-and-tear." (See later chapters for more on these subjects.) As a result of the very positive changes in the way I felt and looked, I came to believe that diet plays an extremely important role in survival, health, and sports competition at any age. I think diet was at least partially responsible for shooting me into the international sports arena.

Extra! Extra! Read all about it!

My picture on the front page of the *New Zealand Herald* the day after my first place in the Ironman there attests to the excitement felt by others. The headline across the top read, "Ruth, A Woman of Iron!" There was a similar reaction in Japan, Russia, Thailand, and Nepal. The headline in the *Asahi Shimbun* read, "American Woman, 54, Conquers Cancer, Conquers Ironman."

My races continued to increase year after year with my feeling stronger and faster. I have now won over 700 trophies and medals. I was even invited to the world-famous Cooper Clinic in Dallas, Texas to try and set a new age-group fitness record. This entailed getting on a treadmill that started out slowly and increased in both speed and incline, following a standard protocol. When you reached exhaustion, as everyone will sooner or later since the machine always wins, your time was noted and compared to others in your age group. This was a fantastic opportunity for me to demonstrate the importance of both diet and exercise to fitness. I first broke the fifty-five to fifty-nine group record in 1990, broke my own record the following year, and went back when I turned sixty and broke that record. It almost makes one anxious to get older. (Well, not really, but at least there are some rewards!)

In May 1998, *Living Fit* magazine sponsored a contest, seeking the "Ten Fittest Women of 1999." When a friend suggested I enter, I thought I wouldn't have a chance because I was so much older than the models seen in most fitness magazines. But, because of my long-term commitment to daily exercise, I felt I might have a chance and also wanted to prove that age does not necessarily deter fitness. Needless to say, I was pretty excited when notified, first by phone, and then by official express delivery letter, that I was one of the ten.

At last, as a "mature" woman (I no longer consider myself old, by the way) I feel as though I've come into my own. No longer could I consider myself an ancient relic to be put on the shelf or in a rocking chair, but one to be reckoned with in the sports world. Who'd have dreamed that anyone could go from that devastating cancer diagnosis to world champion triathlete and one of the fittest women in the world?

But what is the Ironman? And how did I get involved in it?