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## 30-year-old bet still motivates runner

When Gordon Pleus' wife bet him \$5 he couldn't run a mile, he set out to prove her wrong — and changed his life in the process.

By Beth Behrendt for The News-Sentinel  
Monday, February 01, 2016 12:01 AM

Life altering moments don't always come with strangers ringing your doorbell, raining confetti on you as they hand over an enormous check with lots and lots of zeros on it.

Fort Wayne native Gordon Pleus remembers the day that a significantly smaller amount of money took his life in a new direction — one with bigger rewards than he could ever have imagined.

He and his wife, Kathy, were typical hard-working parents. He had a job in the factory at International Harvester and she was a bus driver for the school system. He'd just hit 40, was overweight by about 30 pounds ("I couldn't stand to see the kids leave food on their plates!" he says); and he smoked a pack a day to relieve stress and get some extra energy from the nicotine.

"One day I woke up and thought 'I just can't do it.' I said to Kathy, 'I feel awful. I can't even get out of bed,'" he recalls.

In the classic wifely reaction to a husband's complaints of physical ailments, she showed little sympathy. She pointed out that he was in terrible shape; no wonder he couldn't get out of bed. Pleus recalls, "She'd recently started running and she bet me 5 bucks I couldn't even run a mile."

The threat of losing that \$5, plus having to admit his wife was right, was enough to goad him into taking a shot at running a mile. "I started by just jogging around the yard." After a few days of that he worked up to a mile, then decided he might as well try for two. "OK, not too bad!" he remembers thinking, "Now I'll try for 4. ... But that was HARD!"

He soon realized it was easier to run if he wasn't feeling full from his typical heavy meals, so he cut back on his eating. Frequent coughing fits were annoying and interrupted his running progress, so he quit smoking.

A friend who had just run the Boston Marathon encouraged Pleus to keep at it. He gave Pleus some training tips and they began to run together. After about five months, Pleus was outpacing his friend. "I thought he was crazy, but he said I should try to qualify for Boston!" Pleus ran some local races, and by his second marathon was fast enough to qualify for the Boston Marathon himself.

Just shy of his 70th birthday, Pleus has now spent the past 30 years running races all over the country, including several Boston Marathons. He joined the Navistar "Masters" (the designation for runners over 40 years old) Running Team — "first I had to prove to them I was fast enough." No problem. He ran with them for 11 years, setting records at many prestigious races and often beating teams of younger guys. He says he "revamps" his running every decade, but still aims to run "at least one more good marathon" in his 70s.

In the three decades that have passed since the morning he couldn't even get out of bed, Pleus has logged more than 50,000 miles. But he strongly cautions that no one should put too much significance on total miles — that can quickly lead to injury. "Some years I log more, some years a lot less. Listen to your body and don't just be going for a certain number. I always say: 'It's not how many miles you run, it's how you run the miles.'"

Advice like that is what makes Pleus special to so many members of the local running community. Kevin Croy, owner of Fleet Feet Sports in the Village of Coventry, says Pleus runs with every training group at Fleet Feet. He



Pleus is shown here with the Youth Running Club he helps coach at Jorgensen YMCA. (Photo courtesy of Kevin Croy, Fleet Feet Sports)

### More Information

#### Tips and motivation from Pleus:

- Start by just moving around — get your heart rate up on a bike then move to running.
- You can never run too slow.
- Improving isn't always about running — for example, work out on an elliptical machine.
- Overtraining and going out too fast are the biggest enemies.
- Keep a log book or diary to track your progress.
- It always helps to have a partner.
- "The mind is the most important part of running."

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mentors both seasoned runners and those new to the sport: from adults doing a “Couch to 5K” program to middle school students in the Jorgensen YMCA’s Youth Running Club. “Gordy is one of the best mentors out there," Croy says. "He’s just so intuitive about what each individual needs. He makes every runner feel that what he’s doing is all about you, not himself.”

“I don’t ‘train’ anyone,” Pleus says. “We’re just working together for you to achieve your goal.”

It’s almost impossible not to be motivated by his positive attitude and his passion for helping others to achieve their fitness goals. Pleus exemplifies “it’s never too late”: “I wasn’t an athlete, even in high school. Just a farm kid!” And it’s never too late for something unexpected to take your life in a new, and better, direction. Serious for a moment he says, “I have no doubt that if Kathy hadn’t given me that challenge, if I’d kept on living like I was living — I wouldn’t be here today.”

Then he laughs. “And I still haven’t paid her that 5 bucks!"

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