

Irene Hale trades in pink ballet slippers for sneakers, runs 230K race in Costa Rica

Irene Hale's fellow racers did not have much confidence in her. Judging from her manicured nails and dangling earrings, participants in the Coastal Challenge, a 230-kilometer race around Costa Rica, bet she would be the first to cry out on the course. But Ms. Hale is not as delicate as some believe. The 36-year-old aerobics instructor from Spring Lake finished fourth among some 20 women participants in last month's six-day race.

Ms. Hale's athletic prowess is not to be contested, spanning the art of dance, the disciplined world of body building, and now, the endurance-driven sport of long distance running. Growing up in a Greek Orthodox family, Ms. Hale, a natural athlete, was discouraged from participating in soccer and track and field. Fearful that their daughter would be injured in more combative sports, her parents instead promoted Ms. Hale's involvement in dance.

Ms. Hale, who spent many childhood summers in Greece and speaks the language fluently, followed her parent's advice and became a modern, ballet and jazz dancer.

Dancing was a constant in Ms. Hale's life up through college, attending a performing arts school in Red Bank and governor's school at Trenton State College. She described her time at the governor's school as "Fame school," comparing it to the 1982 hit dance film.

The Neptune native, who now resides in Spring Lake, went on to study dance at Philadelphia's Temple University and later graduated with a degree in athletic training.

"I switched to athletic training to have a 'real-job' back up plan," Ms. Hale said.

Already a natural performer from her experience in dance, Ms. Hale's hobby of weight lifting briefly carried over into the competitive realm.

"I started lifting weights in college and liked the way it shaped my body," she said. "And a friend said why don't you

compete."

So she did.

Though her weightlifting stint was brief, Ms. Hale maintains an incredible level of strength, mainly through long distance running.

A non-competitive runner for the past 15 years, Ms. Hale described herself as a "put on the music and go along" sort of runner. But after having three children — Matthew, 6, Nathan, 4, and Melanie, 2 — with husband Edwin, 42, she decided to take the sport more seriously.

"Something happens when a woman turns 35," Ms. Hale said. "After three kids, I wanted to be Irene again."

Within a year, Ms. Hale went from being a recreational Spring Lake Five participant to the first place finisher among borough residents.

"It was a good ego-booster," Ms. Hale said of finishing at the top in her hometown race.

Ms. Hale went on to compete in the 2005 Jersey Shore Grand Prix, a series of five, five-kilometer races in Monmouth County — the Spring Lake Five, George Sheehan Classic in Red Bank, Belmar Five Mile Run, Asbury Park 5K and Pier Village 5K in Long Branch. Racers are awarded points depending on where their placement is in each of the Grand Prix runs and Ms. Hale placed third overall among women.

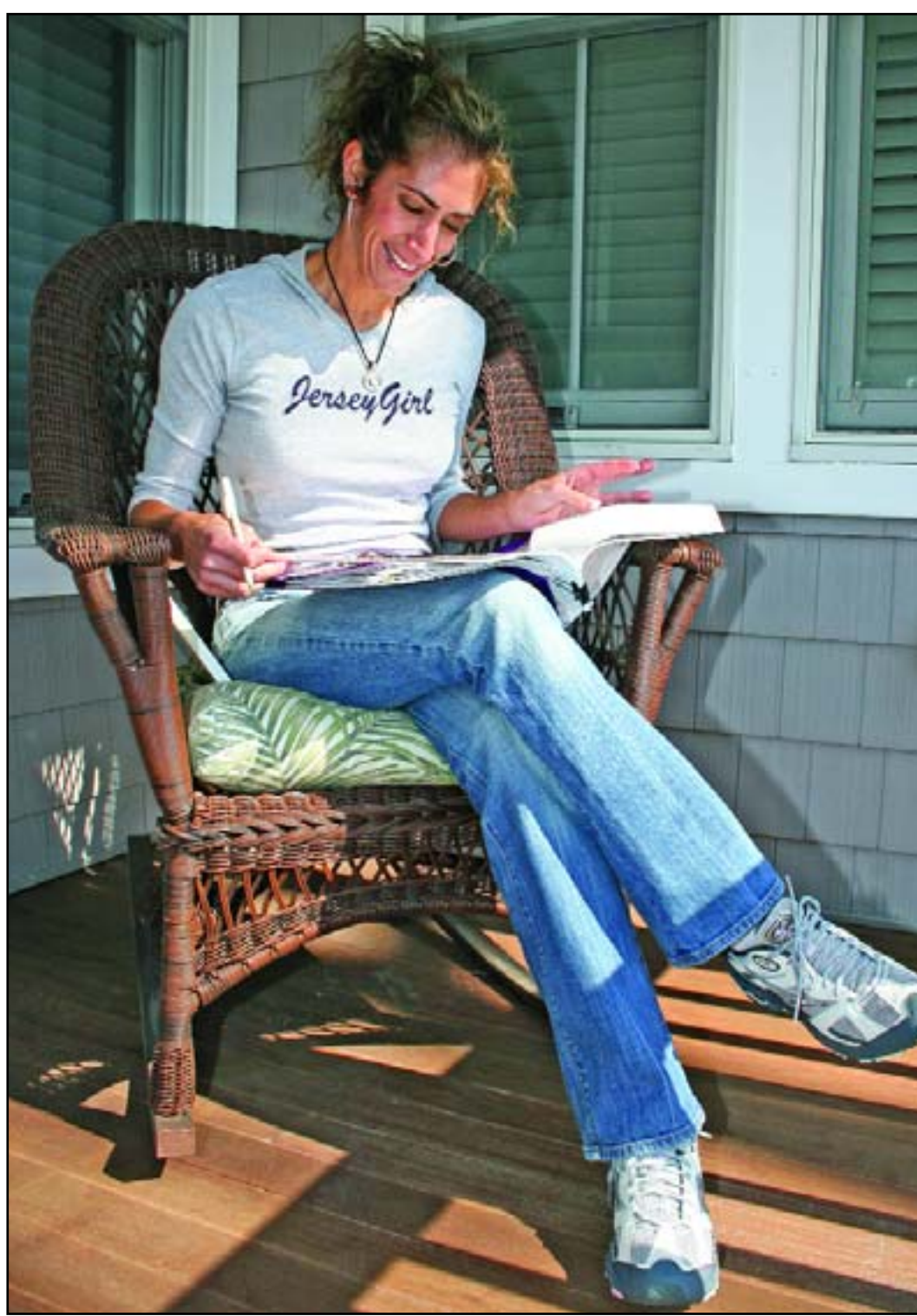
Having nearly mastered shorter distances, the next stop for Ms. Hale was marathon running. She began in Chicago.

"I hit the wall at 19 miles and walked the rest of the way," Ms. Hale said of her four hour and 24-minute finish in the Windy City's marathon.

She then went on to run the Jersey Shore Marathon. Ms. Hale's three hour and 45-minute finish in her home state qualified her for the storied Boston Marathon, which she plans to run next April.

In 2006, Ms. Hale ran the Turkey Swamp 50K in New Jersey and finished second among female racers.

With such a strong finish behind her, Ms. Hale returned



LAUREN PARKER, The Coast Star
Irene Hale relaxed on her front porch in Spring Lake. This "Jersey Girl" is ready to run to the ends of the earth to test her strength and endurance. Ms. Hale proved just that when she finished fourth among some 20 women participants in last month's Coastal Challenge in Costa Rica.

STORY BY
MEGHAN BERRY

to Chicago that year and shaved nearly an hour off the previous year's marathon, finishing in three hours and 39 minutes.

"Getting past the 20 mile point was the big thing," Ms. Hale said of her second Chicago Marathon.

After such rigorous competition, Ms. Hale began shopping around on the Internet for a yoga retreat.

"Yoga came into my life two-and-one-half years ago," she said. "It de-stresses me, makes me more flexible in mind and body, and it's a great workout."

But now an accomplished runner, Ms. Hale was not des-

tinued for relaxation. It was online that she discovered The Coastal Challenge, a 230-kilometer adventure run through Costa Rica's dry northwest, volcanic region, lakes, highlands and the tropical forest.

Once she decided to take on the challenge, training for an even longer distance run on varied terrain required Ms. Hale to step up her weekly mileage. The bulk of her 55 miles run each week was completed at the Manasquan Reservoir. The loop around the

Reservoir, Ms. Hale said, is a little more than five miles. She explained that each week park rangers would joke, "How many laps are you doing today?"

In preparation for the Coastal Challenge, Ms. Hale ran for one hour every weekday and three- and one-half to five hours over the weekend, which she combined with strength and conditioning training.

Ms. Hale took a "boot camp" style class, she said, at CrossFit Jersey Shore in Avon-by-the-Sea. Ms. Hale credits her five months in the class, which included rope climbs and push ups, with much of her success in Costa Rica.



Irene Hale raced past windmills (left) six hours into the second day of the 230K race, when she reached the third and final checkpoint before the finish line. At age 35, Ms. Hale, (right) a mother of three, has a body that has been sculpted and toned from years of dance training, weight lifting, aerobic workouts and long-distance running.

Photos Courtesy of Irene Hale (left) and Keith Davis (right)



"I look at what Irene did, and think, 'I can do anything.' She didn't quit, so I'm not."

— Moira Horan
Tri-athlete and friend
Spring Lake Heights

"You don't really see a lot of women like her that transform themselves this late in life. She's got it all now."

— Mike Stehle
CrossFit Jersey Shore
Avon

"I wouldn't have made it up the hills," had it not been for CrossFit," Ms. Hale said.

Mike Stehle, one of CrossFit's owners, agreed that Ms. Hale's weight training gave her "a bit of a kick" in the Coastal Challenge. He explained that many runners train by running and do not consider working on strength and conditioning.

Of Ms. Hale in the gym, Mr. Stehle said, "She is very receptive, always asking questions. Whatever you told her to do, she did. Irene is very coachable. If you told her to climb the side of the building, she would. That's the kind of people we love."

Ms. Hale employed a week-day nanny and a weekend babysitter in order to get through her training.

"Training gets to you. It becomes a job," she said. "I'm very lucky that I was able to do that."

Moira Horan, a tri-athlete from Spring Lake Heights and Ms. Hale's friend, witnessed firsthand the personal challenges of Ms. Hale's training.

"She does a lot with her kids," Ms. Horan said of Ms. Hale. "It wasn't easy for her to find the time and inner strength [to prepare for the race]."

But Ms. Horan also believes that her friend's discipline sent a positive message to Ms. Hale's three children.

"She really showed her children that she's a strong person," Ms. Horan said.

Despite her extensive preparation, Ms. Hale remembers having the feeling that she actually had not trained enough when she first arrived in Costa Rica. Fellow competitors were rattling off their "running resumes," many of which included 100-mile races, Ms. Hale recalled.

Regardless of who had run how far before arriving in Costa Rica, all 68 Coastal Challenge participants, of which 41 completed the full race, began at the starting line on Feb. 4.

With 17 miles of open trail ahead of her, Ms. Hale ascended a log-covered hill. She remembers looking ahead at runners and only seeing knees flying up from underneath them, she said. Ms. Hale persevered through mud and rain and finished the first leg of the race in just under four hours.

The second day, Ms. Hale explained, pushed her body to its physical limits.

"If you came for a life-changing experience, day two was it," she said of the 45-mile leg of the race, which she completed in nine hours and 23 minutes.

The second day also challenged Ms. Hale's patience and

sense of direction.

"You're on your own and no one is coming to get you," she explained.

The Coastal Challenge course was marked by orange ribbons, which were only placed in areas where runners were required to make a turn. Without mile markers to provide any indication of distance travelled, Ms. Hale was completely alone for hours at a time without any idea of how far away the finish line might be.

Six hours into the second day of the race, Ms. Hale reached the third and final checkpoint before the finish line. She began walking down a winding white road, passing large windmills. Still alone, the "whooshing" sound of the windmills' rotating arms filled the air.

More and more hills laid ahead, Ms. Hale recalled, many of which were covered with rock.

"I'd run ahead and then slide back," she said of running on the rocky terrain.

Tears welled in Ms. Hale's eyes as she ascended what seemed to be another endless hill.

"Just get up there, Irene," she told herself, but inside, she confessed, she was beginning to doubt her ability to finish out the day.

Yet, Ms. Hale found another glimmer of encouragement when she passed a fellow racer, and later, a Costa Rican man on a donkey who gestured that she was headed in the right direction.

"I was never so happy to see the Coastal Challenge banner," Ms. Hale said of spotting the second day's finish line on the horizon.

"That's the furthest distance I had ever accomplished and I did it on my own," she said beaming.

What might seem like an impossible feat for some was the "recovery day" that followed. Ms. Hale placed third on the third day of the Coastal Challenge, completing an 11-mile distance in a little over two hours.

"I felt no pain that day," she said. "I finished the run in two hours and had the rest of the day to hang out."

By the third day, Ms. Hale was missing some of life's simplest amenities, namely a hot shower and junk food. Each night the racers camped — in a soccer field on the third night — and all the runners had to share one cold-water shower.

Ms. Hale, who had been running with nutrient enhanced water on her back, primarily survived on Fig Newtons and Gu, an energy gel, on the trail.

"It got to the point, where I

See HALE PAGE 33



LAUREN PARKER, The Coast Star
Ms. Hale lives with her husband, Edwin, 42, and three children, Matthew, 6, Nathan, 4, and Melanie, 2, in Spring Lake. Ms. Hale runs the Spring Lake Five, George Sheehan Classic, Belmar Five Mile Run, Asbury Park 5K and Pier Village 5K.



Photos Courtesy of Irene Hale
Ms. Hale persevered through mud and rain and finished the first leg of the race in just under four hours. On the second day of the race, Ms. Hale pushed her body to its limit. "If you came for a life-changing experience, day two was it," she said.



No terrain too tough for Spring Lake's Hale to take on

— FROM PAGE 33 —

thought, 'I can't eat any more Gu,' she exclaimed.

At the campsites, Costa Rican chefs prepared rice, bean and meat dishes for repast, but Ms. Hale most vividly recalls one snack, a Snickers bar, that was generously donated to her by a fellow competitor.

And it was these other runners, in part, who transformed the Coastal Challenge from a race to an experience for Ms. Hale.

"I met the most incredible people — from 16 different countries," she said. "Now I have friends from India, Ireland, from all over."

Ms. Hale was in awe of the diversity of the group, members of which were mostly in their 30s and 40s, and noted one man in particular, an 80-year-old who completed the entire race.

"It was amazing to sit down and learn from these people," she said of the evenings at the campsites.

On the third evening of the

Coastal Challenge, race organizers let runners read the "shout outs" posted for them on the race's Web site. Ms. Hale found inspiration in her friends' comments, including Ms. Horan's, who tracked her friend's progress in the race through daily updates on the Web.

Despite having already proven herself on the trail, Ms. Hale said she had to work to shake her "so cute" image. She was playfully teased for having a fresh set of clothing to wear each day.

"You're fresh every morning,"

she said some of the runners would tell her.

Other women in the Coastal Challenge thought Ms. Hale "looked like a cute aerobics instructor," she said.

She is a "cute" aerobics instructor at the Atlantic Club in Manasquan, but her peers learned cute does not always mean weak.

Ms. Hale's agility was of particular use on the fourth day of the race when she had to swing on ropes, jump from rock to rock, and swim through a rapidly-flowing river four times.

The fourth portion of the Coastal Challenge was 35 miles in length and Ms. Hale completed the run in just over seven hours. At the end of the leg, she pushed herself beyond another strong female competitor, she proudly explained, and was rewarded with the "best shower of the race" in the sunshine that afternoon and a cold Coca-Cola.

"We were in heaven," Ms. Hale said. Before setting out for the fifth day of the race, a 20-mile distance, the runners enjoyed a decadent pancake breakfast. Ms. Hale recalled, but something was amiss.

"I knew my ankle wasn't right," she said. Ms. Hale wrapped her right ankle before setting out that day and, due to her discomfort, walked the second half of the fifth day's distance, finishing in four hours and 46 minutes.

The sun was beating down as she walked the remaining 10 miles to the finish line on the fifth day. Ms. Hale used what little Spanish she had, "agua por favor," to ask Costa Ricans for water.

The fifth leg of the race finished on the shore and the group of competitors camped oceanside that night.

"Now this is vacation," Ms. Hale remembered thinking as she sat down in the sand to admire the blue sea water.

That evening, she watched a

sunset that seemed like "a picture out of a movie" and observed newly hatched baby sea turtles slowly-maneuver their way from the sand to the ocean.

Ms. Hale, who left the comfort of her Tuttle Avenue home in Spring Lake to run 128 miles in Costa Rica, said, "That's a long way for a baby turtle."

Coastal Challenge competitors were just 12 miles away from the finish line — and a resort — on the sixth and final day of the race, which Ms. Hale finished in a little over two hours.

That last portion of the race was a blur for Ms. Hale, but she ran the entire time, finishing fourth and 23 minutes ahead of the fifth place woman.

At the finish line, Ms. Hale said she was "stunned."

"I was not happy or sad," she said.

But later, in the comfort of her own hotel room, the magnitude of Ms. Hale's accomplishment hit her.

"I sat on the bed and started crying," she said.

She continued, "I had done all my training on my own. I had read books and took somewhat of a risk. We don't have an ultra running club [in this area]. The race changed my outlook on everything."

Ms. Horan, along with many other admirers of Ms. Hale's accomplishments, are "looking forward to watching her do more," Ms. Horan said.

As her dedication to running would dictate, Ms. Hale already has another goal in place — November's JFK 50-miler in Washington County, Md. Leading up to the fall, she plans to, once again, take on the Turkey Swamp and try her sneakers at the Big Sur Trail Marathon in Andrew Molera State Park, Big Sur, Calif.

But spectators will not have to leave the state to see Ms. Hale in action. Come May, she will be leading the pack in the Spring Lake Five.

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— PROJECTS —

From Page 20

to, and when they were questioned as to why they did so, they said there were no clear markings of where their boundaries were.

The ordinance, he said, has prevented clear-cutting from occurring at the pace in which it once was in Wall Township.

Committeeman Thomson replied that the board may "implement measures that require them to stabilize the site," when asked

what can be done to ensure the builders do not work outside of the area approved by the board.

He said that clear-cutting has "increased because the sites being developed are more commercial" in the township.

Mr. Rubino said there have been "a couple of developers who didn't go along with the representation in the course of what they've submitted" to the planning board in their application to build.

Mr. Rubino did point out that neither the Wall Planning Board

nor the Wall Board of Adjustment can police or enforce actions against developers who do not comply with the terms of their approvals, only township inspectors have that ability.

Mr. Rubino said he is currently conducting research to see if some language could be attached to the approved applications so development will follow the rules of the application and have something to "worry about" if they go beyond the scope of the approval.

Citizen of the Month Students Recognized



Photo courtesy of Lori Mathews

One student from each grade at Spring Lake Heights Elementary School was named a "Citizen of the Month" for March. Students are selected for setting a good example by exhibiting caring and respectful behaviors, not accumulating any disciplinary points, finishing their assignments and being randomly kind to others.

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