



# Catholic Herald

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## Half marathon proves 'Power of Divas'

*Nine St. Thomas Aquinas Academy grads compete in Hawaii*

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**P.O.D.S. (Power of Divas), nine 14 year old girls who graduated from St. Thomas Aquinas Academy, Milwaukee, in June run their half marathon through South Milwaukee in early June in preparation for a second half marathon which they completed in Hawaii later that month. (Catholic Herald photo by Jim Bovin)**

**MILWAUKEE** - In an era when teen girls are commended for their rapid-fire "txtng skilz" and encyclopedic knowledge of "Sex in the City" trivia, nine high school freshmen are showing a different side of the empowerment of young women.

The girls, runners from the Bay View area, picked themselves up by their Nike laces with the goal of running a half marathon - 13.1 miles. They call themselves the P.O.D.S., short for "Power of Divas ... through shaping and conditioning," and inspired by the iPods to which they often listen while running.

"We try to make a different name for 14-year-old girls," said Christina Rembalski, 14.

A year ago, Deanne Halwas, a parent and running enthusiast, proposed a class for St. Thomas Aquinas Academy to better prepare female athletes in junior high before playing more demanding high school sports. She led a five-month program that included running, keeping food journals, fitness education, and writing letters to themselves, ending with a 5.5 mile run. Most girls wanted to continue training, and they formed a group with the goal of healthy eating and conditioning in order to empower themselves and become examples for other young women.

Halwas agreed to coach the girls and train them for a half marathon. The girls formed committees to select an event to run and generate fund-raising ideas. They chose an international event in Kona, Hawaii, that is part of the course for the Ironman Triathlon, and they utilized a myriad of fund-raising strategies to get there.

In addition to car washes and letters, the girls agreed to run up to five miles to any donor's house to collect donations. The P.O.D.S. also organized their own half marathon to help raise money, dedicating the run to a teacher who lost her baby shortly after birth.

For a year, the girls ran an average of three to four days each week, and gradually increased distance until they could run a total of 40 miles in a week.

"These girls trained when there was three feet of snow on the ground!" said Halwas.

They continued to keep food journals, but Halwas added some extensive cross-training, like belly dancing, hip hop and weight training, to the P.O.D.S.' routine to help prevent injury. The 16 weeks leading to Kona built the girls' endurance safely and tapered off in the final two weeks, with no running the week prior to the late-June half marathon.

The race began in the early morning. The course was hilly, the weather was steamy and the girls were sunburned, but their times didn't suffer. Parents drove to each mile marker and held signs to cheer on the girls. The announcer excitedly called out their names whenever a pink-clad P.O.D.S. girl crossed the finish line. The first of the P.O.D.S. to finish were Amanda Wolf and Maddie Wernsman, both finishing at two hours and 30 minutes. All of the P.O.D.S. finished the race in less than three hours.

Back in Milwaukee, the girls have not stopped conditioning. They continue training and entering races, and are mentoring 25 eighth graders into the P.O.D.S.

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