

# Sports

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## Girl power

Girls on the Run gets young women on track to be confident and healthy. By **Liz Plosser**

On an April afternoon, a dozen third- to fifth-grade girls are running laps around the playground of the Whittier School in Pilsen, when the gray sky suddenly opens up to release a serious downpour. But the rain doesn't trouble them: They shriek and smile as they bound toward the school building to finish their half-mile run in the gym.

The girls are prepping for the June 5 New Balance Girls on the Run 5K, the culmination of the spring season of the Girls on the Run program, which has been meeting twice weekly at schools across Chicago. There will be face painting, colored hair spray, games and more for the 3,000 or so girls expected to participate. (The race is open to all kids and adults.) "The day is all about the girls and making them feel like rock stars, because let's face it, if you're eight years old and complete a 5K, you *are* a rock star," says Betsy Armstrong, executive director of GOTR Chicago.

The group was launched in 1996 by Molly Barker—a Charlotte, North Carolina-based recreational runner who was struggling with low self-esteem—to encourage positive emotional, social, mental, spiritual and physical development in girls in third to fifth grade. The goal is to minimize adolescent pregnancies, eating disorders, depression, and drug and alcohol abuse.

"Running is a catalyst to get them to learn about themselves and their health," explains Darci Smith, a volunteer coach who's been working with the Whittier girls for ten seasons. The lessons nurture life skills on everything from nutrition to body image.

On this rainy April afternoon, Smith and co-coach Janel Palm greet the girls and Smith begins the lesson by asking them to articulate what the word *cooperation* means. "It's about being respectful of each other," ventures Maria, a fourth-grader. Then they segue into activities that require cooperation—like a group game of jump rope. There is a lot of giggling, but the point is made: Cooperation is crucial to completing the team-oriented task. "It worked best when we shared what worked well for us

as individuals with one another," says Veronica, a fifth-grader.

There are 160 GOTR sites in Chicago, which makes it the largest chapter in the country. Chicago was also the first city to host a 5K—now there are more than 70 races across the United States and Canada. In Chicago, girls pay a sliding-scale fee ranging from \$25 to \$165, which includes that season's race fee, snacks and handouts. Half of the participants are from high-risk areas and cannot afford to participate. "Last year we gave away \$300,000 in scholarships," Armstrong says. "We have waiting lists in most schools, and we want to open new sites."

To help expand the program, the org hosts two fund-raising events each year plus fall and spring 5Ks. At Whittier, where there's a long wait list to join and all of the students are on scholarship, Smith says she has seen quiet, self-conscious girls blossom into confident preteens by seasons' end. But she knows similar transformations are happening everywhere GOTR goes. "Low self-esteem doesn't discriminate by income level," Smith says.

## Give it a tri

If running isn't enough, kid-oriented triathlons and tri-training groups offer some additional challenges this summer.

### Iguanas Tri-Club Weekly through August starting June 8 at 4pm

Tri-Club helps youngsters prep for their upcoming triathlon (see options below) with weekly practices. Kids meet at the Foster Avenue beach house to bike (one to eight miles), run (up to 1.5 miles), and take a quick dip in Lake Michigan.

[iguanaswimming.org](http://iguanaswimming.org), \$75.

### All Kids Can Tri Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays for six weeks starting in mid-July

Kids 7-18 at all fitness levels can join this prep class for the Chicago Kids Triathlon (below). [allkidscantri.com](http://allkidscantri.com), \$150.

### McGaw YMCA Triathlon July 25

This tri for kids 14 and under takes place on the Northwestern campus. Participants race individually or as a relay team. Distances TBD. [mcgawymca.org](http://mcgawymca.org), \$38.

### Tri-Masters Invitational Kids Triathlon July 31

The Hyde Park event lets kids and adults race on the same morning. Distances TBD. [southshoretri.com](http://southshoretri.com), \$25.

### Chicago Kids Triathlon August 28

The 20th annual swim-bike-run competition has kids 7-10 compete in a 100-meter swim, 4K bike ride and 1K run. Lengths are doubled for kids 11-14. [chicagokidstriathlon.com](http://chicagokidstriathlon.com), \$45.—LP

