

April 16, 2001

Massage therapist puts injured runners back on track By JENNIFER ROY Hopkinton Town Crier

Michelle Kohan has been sidelined with injuries to her hip and knee two times since she started training for her first-ever Boston Marathon.

After months of pounding the pavement, she was told she may not be able to participate in the race she has been training so hard for. Just when it was within reach, the world she had known for months was about to come crashing down.

But with the help of Hopkinton massage therapist Anna Gammal, she will have the opportunity to cross the finish line today, hopefully, feeling exhilarated and pain-free.

" I came on strong too late, but I feel fine now, " Kohan said just days before the big race, as Gammal worked out the kinks in her sore muscles, using La Stone Therapy — warm stones used to relax muscles — at her Wood Street business, Body & Beyond.

" Anna told me in January that I may not be able to run. I cried on the table, " said Kohan, a former high school track athlete, as she made faces while Gammal kneaded her sore, stiff muscles. " But massage and chiropractic care has helped me out. I didn't want to get this far and back out. I just want to do it without getting hurt. I don't want to end up in one of those little white tents along the way. "

She said she is aiming the complete the race in 4:30.

" Anything after 15 miles is uncharted territory to me. If my body tells me to stop, I'll stop, " Kohan said.

Tony Belisle said he uses Gammal's massages as his recovery runs. The long-time Marathoner is recovering from a back injury.

" Some people will just run slow to recover (from a long run), but that is not satisfactory. Massage releases toxins (lactic acid) which speeds up recovery. You really need someone to go in there and dig it out, " said Belisle. " Anna just massages it away. "

And the pain, described as " torturous " the first time you experience it, now, hurts so good, according to the pair who have used Gammal's services once a week since November.

" You don't realize how much damage you have until you come here, " said Belisle. " It hurts the first few times you come, but it is worth it. "

Gammal said many people don't even realize how sore their muscles are until she digs in. " We have fun. It is about fun and feeling good and relaxing, " she said of her relationship with runners. " Although it is painful, it is good in the end. "

And she should know.

Gammal, who moved to Hopkinton from her native Greece when she married in 1994, was a gymnast and a track and field star throughout her life.

" In Greece, we don't have the luxury of massage, " she said. " It is not like America, there kids have to find their own things to do. "

From the time she was 6 years old, Gammal -- a championship marathon runner -- trained intensely, seven days a week on the Greek National Team.

It wasn't until she tore her Achilles tendon that she decided to stop running and devote her time to helping runners recover from their injuries instead of giving up their dreams.

" That is how I understand how people and athletes work. I have been there. I feel for them, " said Gammal, who still runs in her spare time and teaches aerobics. Her goal, she said, is to run the Marathon next year.

" I have (Michelle and Tony) to push me and Margie (Blackmore, an employee) to massage me, " she said. " Somebody once asked me, 'if you could be born again, would you do the same thing?' I said I wouldn't change a thing. "

Gammal entered the healthcare profession in 1997, and opened her business after graduating from Bancroft School of Massage Therapy in 2000. In 2004, she will be part of a team of massage therapists who will travel to Greece to take care of Olympic athletes.

" My goal is to make people feel good, " she said. " There is a lot of pain and stress out there. Massage helps to improve flexibility and range of motion. "

And that is precisely what she does, said Belisle, who is hoping to cross the finish line in 3:10.

" No one thinks they can do it, " he said of running the entire 26.2 mile course. " You just take the longest run you can, add two miles every time and before you know it, you are at 20 miles and you can't believe it. "

He first went to Gammal with what he thought was a muscle problem in his back. The injury was much more serious, however. A vertebrae was out of place and pinching a nerve. After a little prodding from Gammal, Belisle went to a chiropractor who fixed the problem.

" I finally went and wished I had gone sooner, " he said. Gammal said massage and chiropractic care complement each other. Massage therapists, she said, are only responsible for the muscles and not the skeleton.

" Any serious runner will incorporate chiropractic, stretching and massage, " said Belisle. " Running overuses the same muscles and they become tight. "

But no matter what therapy is right for what ails you, Gammal recommends getting a massage throughout the training period and a few days before the Marathon, but not right before unless it is simply for relaxation purposes to " wake up " the muscles.

" Massage increases circulation and decreases the chance for injury. It also helps the runner psychologically. If they feel good, they have more energy when they go out and train, " she explained. " It is also very important to get a massage after, to reduce the swelling. "

Gammal and Blackmore will be busy in the days following the race, when runners come in one after the other to work out their sore, stiff, tired muscles. Among them, Kohan and Belisle.

" It is very important to get some type of massage as soon as possible after the Marathon to flush out the toxins, but not a deep tissue one, " said Gammal.

" It is like a workout itself. I am sore the next day, " Belisle said of a deep tissue massage.

Body & Beyond is open Monday 12 to 6:30 p.m., Tuesday 11 a.m. to 6:30 p.m., Wednesday 8 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., Thursday 8 a.m. to 3 or 4 p.m., Friday 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. and Saturday 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. Call (508) 435-5656 for an appointment.