

# Running for her Life



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Ana Fidelia Quirot was born in a small town in the east of Cuba. She was a happy child and from an early age she loved running. Sports were important to her family and they were important to Cuba, too. The Cuban government wanted to produce the best doctors, the smartest teachers, and the strongest sports players in the world. There were special government schools for intelligent young scientists and for children who were good at sports.

By the time she was ten years old Ana could run very fast. Soon she was winning races-often without shoes! She wanted someone from a government sports school to see her. Ana knew that only Cuba's best students were chosen. So she practiced hard every day. At last she heard the news that she was waiting for. At thirteen she had a place at a government sports school. "If I work hard," she thought, "I can be the fastest girl in Cuba."

The other children at Ana's new school were tall and strong. But Ana's body was changing. She stopped growing taller and started growing fatter. She felt heavier too, so she practiced less often. Ana's future did not seem bright and exciting to her now.

But when Ana's school asked her to leave, she thought very carefully.

She realized that she loved her school and her life there. It was her dream and she did not want to lose it. Luckily, Blas Beato, one of Cuba's most famous running teachers, knew about Ana. She was heavy, but she was strong and fast. Beato could see that. "Try the 400-meter race," he said. "I think you can be the best."

It was not easy, but with Beato's help, Ana quickly became thinner. She pushed her body hard, and began winning races at school again. Soon she was the fastest girl in Cuba at 400 and 800 meters. Her mind became stronger, too. She learned to fight against pain and to believe in her dreams.

Ana finished school and practiced harder and longer every day. In 1987 she won two gold medals at the Pan American Games' in Indianapolis, in the US, and in 1989 she won all of her 800-meter races. Ana was very proud to run for her country. Now her name was famous around the world.

Four years after her double gold medal success in Indianapolis, Ana was ready to run again in the Pan Am Games. These races were very important to Ana because the Pan Am Games were coming to Cuba. She was Cuba's most famous runner-and her country was watching her.

Ana's races were fast and exciting. She ran faster than the other runners in the 400- and 800-meter races-two more gold medals! Ana looked up at the crowd. Thousands of happy Cubans were calling her name and smiling. Ana turned and walked slowly toward her country's president, Fidel Castro. Then she took one of her medals and placed it around Castro's neck. It was her way of saying "thank you" to Cuba, her country. She felt proud of the past and excited about the future. But early the

next year, Ana's dreams were destroyed before they started.

On January 23, 1993, Ana was washing some clothes. She was washing in the Cuban way, in a large bowl on top of a stove. She carefully added a little alcohol to the washing to make the clothes fresh and bright. But some alcohol fell onto the stove. In seconds, fire covered Ana's body. She moved away from the stove and tried to pull her sweater off, but the fire quickly reached her skin. Ana's body burned with heat and pain. She fell heavily to the floor.

The doctors at Havanas Hermanos Ameijeiras Hospital worked hard to save their famous patient. People all over Cuba listened carefully to the radio news. Ana's friends and family hurried to her bedside. Bad burns covered 38% of Ana's body and she was close to death.

A few days later, Ana woke up. Fidel Castro was by her bedside. "I will run again," she told him. Then her eyes closed.

Ana spent five long months in the hospital. Slowly she became stronger. First, she began walking around her room. Sometimes she cried with pain and sadness. "You must rest," her friends told her. But Ana did not listen. Every day she walked a little farther. She refused to stop fighting.

Only a month after her accident, Ana began walking around inside the hospital. After two months she was running up and down the hospital stairs- fifteen floors! Next, she asked for an exercise bike in her hospital room. The doctors could not believe their eyes. Ana Quirot was winning again-winning against pain. "If I don't run again," she said, "I will die."

The skin on Ana's hands, arms, and stomach was very badly burned. She could not move the top part of her body freely. It was very difficult for her to walk without pain. It was almost impossible to run well. But Cuba's best doctors carefully repaired her body. It was hard, slow work.

Ana went home and started running outside, but the sun's heat was too strong for her. Her skin was weak and it burned very easily. She could only practice very early in the morning and late at night. This problem did not stop her.

Ana worked hard that year. She wanted to run for her country again. But she was in her thirties now-too old for an international runner, people said. Ana did not agree. In 1993, the same year as her terrible accident, she ran at the Central American and Caribbean Games in Puerto Rico. Ana was not able to move her arms or head easily at this time, but she surprised everyone. She ran well, and won a silver medal in the 800-meter race. The crowd loved it. "She won the silver medal in the race," Castro said, "but she won a great gold medal for courage."

By 1995 Ana was running internationally. That summer she won the gold medal for 800 meters in the World Games in Stockholm, Sweden. She was one of the fastest women in the world-again! "In my most difficult times," she said, "I didn't think that I could come back so strongly."

Ana raced many strong, young runners in 1996. At thirty-three years old she was often the

oldest woman in her race. But now it was almost time to rest her body and mind. There was one more important race to run. "If I can run in the Olympic Games again, I will be happy," she said.

The 1996 Olympic Games were in Atlanta, US. Some of the fastest women of all time were there: Maria Mutola of Mozambique, the American Meredith Rainey, and Svetlana Masterkova of Russia. The early races were very hard for Ana, but she ran fast and well. Now, in the finals, she could race against the world's best runners at the Olympics one more time. In her mind, this was her last big race. The other women were younger and stronger. Ana was happy to be with them. "I will run as fast as possible," she thought. It was a difficult race, but Ana won the silver medal-she was less than a second behind Masterkova!

Ana walked off the airplane at Havana into the warm Cuban air. It was good to be home. She was Cuba's most famous, and favorite, runner. "Running, and my country, saved my life," she explained. "When I started running again, that gave me life." Ana Quirot's fight against pain and illness is an example of courage for us all.

- THE END -

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