

RETURNING TO HER RUNNING ROOTS

By Meredith Parker

Everyone in Atlanta seems to have an AJC Peachtree Road Race moment. Maybe it's the chills during the flyover at your first running, or the year you finished with your best time up Cardiac Hill. For Atlanta Track Club's newest staff member, Madison Hafitz, the "Peachtree moment" dates back to 2002, when she ran Peachtree Junior with her Arbor Montessori second-grade classmates.

"My school started a morning running club where a couple of days a week we would arrive early and run laps around the playgrounds," said the 26-year-old Kilometer Kids and Youth Running program manager, who took over in September. "We participated in an actual race at the end of the year to celebrate all the laps we had run. Turns out my first race was Peachtree Junior."

This positive youth running experience sent Hafitz into a deep dive of sports: "Soccer, tennis, basketball, track and field, cross country, dance, gymnastics, ultimate frisbee – you name it, I probably tried it."

While in middle school, Hafitz ran cross country and track, but it was the soccer field rather than the starting line that stuck with her competitively. After four years of varsity soccer (and two of basketball) at The Paideia School in Druid Hills, she played collegiately for Tufts University while pursuing her B.A. in Community Health and Anthropology.

"Playing at that level is not the path for everyone," she said, "but I know I would not be the person I am today without the values and life lessons I learned on the field, on the court, on the track, etc. at a very young age."

After finishing at Tufts, Hafitz completed two years of National Service with AmeriCorps' City Year Boston program, supporting Boston Public School students. In 2020, she graduated from the University of Michigan with a Masters in Health Behavior and Health Education. To no surprise, in her free time she doesn't sit still; instead, she's traveled to five continents, 22 countries and 38 of the 50 states.

Now she's back in Running City USA to lead Kilometer Kids, a free 11-week afterschool program that gets kids moving every day while promoting lifelong healthy habits.

"Being an athlete is where I found community; it's where I learned about the importance of teamwork, resilience,



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commitment, and truly how to feel confident in myself," Hafitz said. "I am passionate about instilling those same ideals in young kids because I believe in the transformative power of sports and believe everyone should have the experience to grow and learn about themselves."

As a noncompetitive program, Kilometer Kid is not about running the fastest or winning races. Hafitz said her hope for kids who enroll in the program is that they develop a positive relationship with movement, put in their best effort and have fun while doing it.

Hafitz embodies the Club's vision of engaging with the Atlanta community throughout their running and walking lifecycles.

"It's starting to sink in that I have the opportunity to actually work for an organization I already have this amazing connection to," said Hafitz, who ran Peachtree Junior twice more after her debut as a second-grader. "You can't describe it as anything other than full circle. It feels like such a special opportunity."

Photos: Meredith Parker, Courtesy of Madison Hafitz