

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

## A Runner, After Injury, Starts From Zero as a Swimmer

Wine executive Cristina Mariani-May jumped right into an unfamiliar sport with U.S. Masters Swimming and learned the value of cross-training



Working in the wine business, Ms. Mariani says, she often has wine-paired meals while on the road. Her regular routine of swimming and running allows her to indulge in gelato and multicourse lunches and dinners. *HEATHER WALSH FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

By JEN MURPHY  
May 30, 2016 2:01 p.m. ET

Like many obsessive runners, Cristina Mariani-May found herself craving an endorphin fix. She was recovering from a hamstring injury, so she jumped into the pool at her children's swim camp and started swimming laps.

"My kids were so embarrassed," Ms. Mariani says. "I wasn't in an appropriate swimsuit, and worse, I was trailing 9-year-olds." After two laps she says, "I was humbled in my athletic abilities."

Ms. Mariani is the 45-year-old family proprietor of Castello Banfi, a Tuscan vineyard estate, and co-chief executive of Banfi Vintners, a U.S. wine importer based in Old Brookville, N.Y., on Long Island.

Her work takes her on the road at least one week a month—whether to visit the family wine estate in Montalcino, Italy, or attend wine conferences—and until her injury, she always found time to run, logging 40 to 50 miles a week with no cross-training. “Running let me burn off the gelato and wine, and you can do it anywhere,” she says.

In July 2014, she was running a trail marathon in western Pennsylvania, and at mile 6 she felt her hamstring pull. “Looking back, I shouldn’t have kept running, but you train for so long,” she says. By the time Ms. Mariani completed the 26.2 miles, her hamstring was black and blue.

Not long after, she found herself flailing in the pool. Her children’s swim coach took her under his wing that summer. He encouraged her to join practices and even videotaped her technique. “Starting out at zero and seeing results was exciting,” Ms. Mariani says. “It’s a reminder that we continue to progress in life.”

In August 2014, the coach died. “I swore I would keep swimming for him,” Ms. Mariani says, and she did. She joined a U.S. Masters Swimming program and worked out with All-American swimmers and triathletes racing past her.

“I still get butterflies every time I get in the pool, but I’m not the slowest anymore and my marathon times have improved,” she says. “This was my body’s way of telling me: I need to cross-train.”

Since taking up swimming, Ms. Mariani has completed two more marathons. In races now, when her legs get tired, the rest of her body feels strong, she says, even when going uphill. “My core is stronger, and my breath stays even now.”

A triathlon is on her bucket list, but for now, she says being a mother to three children, ages 14, 11, and 9, and a CEO is enough. “I want to have a life, too,” she says. “I need balance.”

Her husband, Marshall May, a real-estate investor, is fit but has no desire to run. “It works out perfectly,” she says. “If we both wanted to run, we’d be competing to see who stays home. He’s like a built-in baby sitter when I train.”

## **The Workout**

Three days a week, Ms. Mariani wakes up at 5:15 to make her 6 a.m. Masters swim workout at Long Island University in Old Brookville. The 25-meter pool has eight lanes, and there can be anywhere from four to seven swimmers in each lane. The coach will yell out different intervals and paces. “You have to keep the pace so the swimmer behind you isn’t swimming on top of you,” she says. She hasn’t yet mastered her flip turn. “I still touch the wall with my hand then push back off with my feet,” she says.

Running is her default workout when she travels. “I can’t swim on my own. I don’t push myself,” she says. “When I’m in a new place, I can run forever, exploring and sightseeing. I’ve run through the vineyards of Tuscany and the streets of Rome.”

Ms. Mariani goes for a long run on weekends, usually on the trails of a park, nature reserve or golf course on Long Island. “Trails are more challenging, and it’s safer to be off the road, especially if it’s still dark out,” she says. One morning a week, she does interval and hill workouts on a treadmill at home.

She tries to involve her children in her races. Last September, the Adirondack Marathon in Schroon Lake, N.Y., fell on the birthday of her 9-year-old daughter. “She did the kids’ 1-mile race, and she won first place,” she says. “She was my inspiration for the marathon the next day.” Ms. Mariani finished in one of her best times, three hours and 27 minutes. “I wanted to show her females can be strong, proud and accomplish great things with the right discipline and mind-set.”

## The Diet

Ms. Mariani eats three eggs and toast after her swim. “I used to eat egg whites thinking it was healthy. Then my doctor told me I was missing out on all of the nutrition in the yolks,” she says.

When she travels, lunches and dinners are often multicourse wine-paired affairs. “When I travel, I indulge,” Ms. Mariani says. “If I’m in Tuscany, I’m going to eat pasta and drink Brunello.” She avoids snacking on the road.

At home, her diet is centered around chicken, fish and salads. She nibbles on almonds through the day. Running and swimming allow her to enjoy cookies, chocolate and wine without guilt, she says.

## Cost & Gear

Ms. Mariani wears Brooks sneakers. She has a FlipBelt, an elastic band that fits goes around the waist, with slots for gels, keys and headphones. Its costs \$29. It “is the greatest invention,” she says. “It comes in fluorescent colors, which helps me stick out when I run on the road.”

Ms. Mariani says racing swim goggles cut into her eye sockets. “I get goggle marks and show up to a presentation with swollen eyes,” she says. She bought Aqua Sphere goggles, which are larger. She swims in Speedo or [Nike](#) bathing suits. Her Masters swim program costs \$750 a year.

## The Playlist

Ms. Mariani listens to podcasts and business and inspirational books when she runs outside. Favorites include the TED Radio Hour, the Coaching for Leaders podcast by Dave Stachowiak and Adam Grant’s new book, “Originals.” When she runs on the treadmill, she watches TV shows on [Netflix](#) or Hulu.