



Wondergirls

Umbrella covers the WonderGirl 5k run on the morning of June 3rd, 2006

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It was nearly a quarter to nine on a Saturday morning and Tony the Tiger and Sky Guy, the mascot for the WNBA team Chicago Sky, were leading a crowd of preteen girls, their parents, teachers, and coaches through warm-ups for the second annual WonderGirl 5K Fun Run at Montrose Harbor.

Over 650 girls between the ages of eight and twelve participated in the race sponsored by Girls on the Run, an international non-profit organization based in Charlotte, NC. The girls came from all over the Chicagoland area, from as far south as Olympia Fields and Alsip to the North Shore suburbs of Highland Park and Winnetka and everywhere else in between. Including parents, coaches, and adult volunteers who ran with the girls, there were more than two thousand people who signed up for the race.

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As the girls lined up for the start of the race, they formed a sea of pink tee shirts and foam tiaras. Many of the adult runners—including a few men—also wore pink or purple tiaras. The 5k route snaked along the lakefront starting at a the parking lot near Montrose Avenue and going up to Foster and back down again. By the time the girls reached the finish line their faces were shiny with sweat, but they looked happy and proud. Some ran through the finish line, while others walked or jogged to the end. A few girls held hands. Their parents stood waiting for their children with camcorders and cameras in hand.

Near the finish line, volunteers handed out water, Gatorade, fresh bananas, apple sauce, and medals to the runners. DJs from Radio Disney played games with the girls and all runners received gift bags from the race's sponsors.

"The organization is about more than just running," said Kelly O'Brien, executive director for the Chicago chapter of Girls on the Run.

O'Brien, who was also a coach at Hawthorne Scholastic Academy, said that during the ten week long training program preceding the race, the girls played games while running and followed a curriculum that explored self-esteem, teamwork, gossip, and other topics relevant to pre-teen girls.

Sara Feigenholtz, state representative for the 12th District of the Illinois General Assembly, introduced the race. "I think it's really important that girls empower themselves at really young ages," she said.

Debbie Sheriff, a reading specialist at Edward Jenner Academy of the Arts, came to the race with eleven girls from her school. She said that the students from Jenner Academy, which is located near the Cabrini-Green housing projects, do not have many opportunities for exercise and that there are few programs in the neighborhood for girls in third through fifth grade.

Sheriff has seen a major improvement in the girls' physical fitness. "All of the girls completed without sitting down once," she said.

The coaches and their friends donated money for the girls to participate and sports retailer Fleet Feet provided free shoes, but students paid half of the entry fee themselves. "They don't know that they get their money back if they finish," Sheriff said.

The Girls on the Run program has become popular at Jenner Academy. "We're at a point in our school where the boys are like 'Why don't we have Boys on the Run?'" Sheriff said.

More photos, visit out [photo gallery page](#). For more information on Girls on the Run, visit www.gotrchicago.com.