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Ordinary Santa Cruz couple lands on owater sports drink label

By JULIE JAG

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Nick Balesteri and Nicole Perez admit that as runners go, they are nothing special. Both took up the sport just more than a year ago as a way to get back into shape. They've registered for a handful of races since, including the Santa Cruz Half Marathon, which they will run for the second time Sunday. They expect to finish, as usual, in the middle of the pack.

What makes the Santa Cruz couple ordinary, though, is also what makes them extraordinary, according to the makers of "infused owater," a nationally distributed sports drink. That's why the company has selected Balesteri and Perez --" known as "the Nicks" to friends and family --" to appear on the drink's label.

"That was actually my pitch to owater," said Balesteri, who wrote to the company seeking sponsorship to help offset the cost of entering races. "I was like yeah, you can go sponsor a professional runner --" a Kenyan or Moroccan who always wins --" or you can sponsor someone in the middle of the pack where most people are."

Spokesperson Amy Mueller said the Nicks fit in perfectly with the new flavored drink's every-man marketing campaign.

"We were very inspired by their story and decided to feature them on one of our owater labels in the hopes that their story might be motivating for others," Mueller wrote in an e-mail. "So, like Tiger Woods and Tom Brady, the Nicks now have their own sports drink. We think they're just as worthy."

Owater, based in Concord, Mass., has chosen about 30 athletes so far to grace the labels of its seven Infused varieties. Among them are: Maverick's surfer Grant Washburn of San Francisco, Denver ultra-runner Darcy Africa, a family that takes tae kwon do together and the San Francisco Nighthawks soccer team.



Drawn striding confidently down a coastal highway, the Balesteri, 30, and Perez, 25, look like they've been running their entire lives, not just a few months. Written alongside their

cartoon likenesses is the story of how the former Marine and the dental hygienist went from self-proclaimed couch potatoes to avid racers who hope to enter as many as 10 events this year.

Perez said people who recognize her from the bottles think she created the label herself, as is often done for wedding and party favors. She said people don't believe the bottles can be bought in stores.

Then again, she can hardly believe it herself. She told Balesteri he was dreaming to think anyone would want to sponsor them.

"I'm like, 'You're crazy,'" she said. "Who's going to want to sponsor an average runner with average times? They're going to want someone who makes their label look awesome."

The Nicks' label has just begun showing up in stores around the county. Their ambition, however, has already created a domino effect of athletic inspiration.

Shortly after the couple began regularly running half marathons --" Perez's personal record is 2 hours, 4 minutes for the 13.1-mile trek; Balesteri's is closer to 1:50 --" Perez said her mom took up a walking routine and lost 50 pounds. That, in turn, has inspired people around Perez's mother to get fit, Perez said. Balesteri said people at his work have also followed his lead and started getting in shape.

"I don't want to take credit for them changing the way they've done stuff," he said. "But, it's nice to see, when you do something, they kind of get the hint."

It's at that point where something ordinary can really become something special.

For more information on infused owater or the Nicks, visit owater.com/people.