

StarTribune

Souhan: Goucher runs past doubts

Article by: JIM SOUHAN

Star Tribune

July 23, 2012 - 6:34 AM

PORTLAND, ORE.

It's National Running Day, but that doesn't seem to be why every imaginable demographic has gathered this morning at little Dunwiddy Park, a no-frills track tucked into the hills overlooking downtown Portland.

Homeless men voice unheard soliloquies. An elderly gentleman wearing Bermuda shorts, black socks and dress shoes struts around the track as if imitating a pigeon. Joggers circle, eyeing the small clock installed by Nike, and a mother pushes a stroller as if imitating Sisyphus himself.

Amid this quintessential Portland scene, two of America's best marathoners drive up, park, and begin a regimen that would leave most humans attached to an IV bag -- but one that doesn't dampen their running conversation.

Kara Goucher, the Olympian from Duluth, runs stride-for-stride with Shalane Flanagan, the United States' most accomplished marathoner. Today, like most days, they have chosen to work as a team, ignoring the solitary nature of their discipline and the knowledge that either could take an Olympic medal away from the other.

After a long warmup, they jog to an intersection at the bottom of a long, steep, hill. As trucks grind through lower gears on the road next to them, Goucher and Flanagan run vertical 200- and 400-meter sprints as if their shoes are filled with helium.

They never stop talking, or teasing their coach, Jerry Schumacher, the former University of Wisconsin distance guru. Mostly, though, Goucher and Flanagan make running look effortless and pleasant, and their collaboration seem natural.

None of which is true for Goucher.

She wasn't born to become an Olympic marathoner. She grew up in Duluth without a father, playing with American Girl dolls, wishing the world could be painted pink and accompanied by an endless loop of Beach Boys music. When Goucher came home from middle school and told her mother she wanted to join the cross-country team, Patty Wheeler thought, "Yeah, we'll see how long this will last."

Goucher's path to the Olympics looks more like an obstacle course than a track. She overcame real and perceived slumps, a series of injuries and coaching changes, uncertainty about her chosen event, an eating disorder, thoughts of quitting and constant self-doubt.

Goucher's collaboration with Flanagan never seemed likely. Training in the same city for years, they worked under different coaches and avoided one another, Goucher fearing she would give her rival an advantage if she even ran on the same track.

When Goucher reached the finish line at the Olympic trials in Houston in January, Flanagan was waiting with a hug. Flanagan set a trials record, 25.38 minutes. Less than 16 months after giving birth to Colton Mirko Goucher, Kara finished third, in 2:26.06, as the top three qualified Olympics.



Kara Goucher — a former state cross-country and track champion from Duluth East, but a marathoner only since 2009 — has her sights set on a medal in the London Olympics.

Tim LaBarge, Special to the Star Tribune



Kara Goucher used to avoid rival Shalane Flanagan, left, for fear of a competitive edge. Now they are close friends, train together and the marathon in London.

Tim LaBarge, Special to the Star Tribune



Kara Goucher (right) and fellow Olympic marathoner Shalane Flanagan (center) stretched before a training run under coach Jerry Schumacher.

Tim LaBarge, Special to the Star Tribune

"Houston was her coming-of-age moment," said Goucher's sister, Kelly Grgas-Wheeler. "Very few people thought she would make the team. She'd been injured, had switched coaches. Everybody thought she was crazy or overrated.

"That was a huge day for her. Now she's going to the Olympics not as a tourist or participant, but to medal. Nothing less."

A rough start

Before Goucher turned 4, her father, Mirko Grgas, was killed by a drunk driver on Harlem River Drive in New York City. Patty moved the kids to be near extended family and, given the circumstances, the six Wheeler kids enjoyed an idyllic existence. Living near the woods, they built fort often could be lured home only by the promise of Wheeler's world-class desserts.

"We have a really close family," Kelly said, as her voice began to break. "When you have the tragedy we had early on, it shapes who you are.

"We had a fantastic childhood, but later in life you begin to understand what you miss without a father. But we are who we are because of it. Kara probably isn't a great runner if my dad doesn't die. It's terrible but true. And now her dreams have become all of ours."

Kara was the prissy sister. She loved dancing and cried when she couldn't find the right outfit for school. "She was a strange kid," Kelly said.

Her grandfather coaxed her into running her first race, an annual Mother's Day event in Duluth. She was 6.

Near the start, Goucher fell and scraped her knee. Her grandfather figured she would run straight back to her dolls.

"My knee was all bloody, and I was such a wimp," Kara said. "My grandfather was like, 'Great, we're not even going to be able to run.' And instead said, 'Let's do it.'"

"He loves to tell that story, because it shocked him. Because I was the little girl who wore the pink jeans with my hair perfect all the time. But I was not quit."

She would start running competitively at 12, for Woodland Junior High, and suddenly gold medals adorned her pink room. Goucher pasted pictures of every runner she admired to her closet door. When she woke up, Jackie Joyner-Kersey and Carl Lewis were waiting.

"It's funny, you would think she was just a big wimp, but she is so tough," said her sister, Kendall Schoolmeester. "I'm not nearly the girly-girl she is, but none of us could have put ourselves through what she put herself through to accomplish all of this. I still remember her putting all those pictures on her closet door, and telling us she was going to be in the Olympics someday. Now she's met all of those people."

In the seventh grade, Goucher made the Duluth East varsity track team. She would win four state cross-country and track titles, but Kelly remembers her fretting during her senior year, perhaps the beginning of Goucher's chronic self-assessment.

"She really struggled with some stuff during her senior year, and some schools turned away from her," Kelly said. "She was so frustrated."

Goucher chose Colorado over five other schools. She would become an All-America -- and a psychology major. "Maybe that's why I'm always trying to analyze myself," she said with a laugh.

At Colorado, she won the outdoor 3,000 and 5,000 meters and became an NCAA cross-country champ, yet found herself envious of older runners who would starve themselves before running personal bests. So she imitated them, losing 10 pounds. "That lasted until I went home, and my mother saw me and said, 'You look terrible -- you are not going to do this to yourself,' " Goucher said.

Goucher and her husband, fellow CU distance runner Adam Goucher, eventually moved to Oregon so Kara could train under legendary runner coach Alberto Salazar.

After years spent trying to overcome injuries, she broke out in the mid-2000s. In 2007, she ran the fastest woman's half-marathon in U.S. history at 1:06.57, and became intrigued by the idea of becoming a marathoner.

At the Beijing Olympics, she finished 10th in the 10,000 meters and ninth in the 5,000 meters. She had begun 2008 with a victory at the Millrose Games mile; in November of that year, she made her marathon debut in New York, finishing third.

Her weakest performance came in Beijing, and she stood in the interview zone after each race, pouring forth her emotions.

"She's the same way with her family as she is with the press," Kelly said. "She lets you know whatever is going through her mind."

Breaking through

Most athletes hide their doubts beneath a veneer of confidence, if not arrogance. Goucher worries and vents. She credits Salazar with helping work through her latent fear of competition. She would get so nervous before meets that she couldn't eat, and Salazar forced her to compete even when she was out of shape or reluctant, helping her learn to learn from each race.

In recent years, Goucher felt she had plateaued. She met with Schumacher and he urged her to join his group. She worried about Flanagan. "I girls are weird," she said. "Women from other countries train together, but not Americans."

Goucher was attending a running event when she got a text from Flanagan reading, "We need to talk."

"I thought, 'Uh-oh,' " Goucher said. "We met and the first thing she said was, 'You would be stupid to let anybody else coach you, and you would be stupid to run with any other group. We're the best. Don't you want to train with the best?' "

Flanagan has become a de facto Wheeler sister. "It's great," Flanagan said. "It's the opportunity to train with one of your best friends. The beauty of this is that it's somewhat unique. ... Even when we race, I find it comforting, because with Kara there it can feel like a workout situation, and that comfort takes away the nerves of a big stage."

Goucher says motherhood has added to her resolve, that Schumacher and Flanagan have given her a competitive edge, that she is experiencing a rare mixture, for her, of contentment and ambition.

"Sometimes I feel overwhelmed by how much I've gotten from this sport," she said. "That's why I sometimes have struggled with confidence, because I'm just this little nerd from Duluth, Minnesota. I just want to sit at the lake and go fishing and hang out on my mom's screened-in porch. I don't want to be flying all over the world and have people ask me for my autograph and be on the cover of a magazine."

She's sitting outside a diner in Portland, smiling and joking, yet hinting at an internal monologue that would make Woody Allen sound like Stuart Smalley.

"I think, 'When are they going to realize I'm this total dork?' " she said. "That's something I'll always struggle with, because on the one hand I'm capable of great things, and on the other, I think I'm a nobody. It's a constant battle in my head."

She used to work with a sports psychologist. Now she leans on Adam, Flanagan and an iPhone app that keeps her in constant contact with her coach.

"For years all of this was my secret," she said. "I'm learning how to deal with all of that doubt now, and I feel like I'm in a really good place."

"I'm proud of what I've done, but I feel I haven't knocked it out of the park yet. I believe London will be the best marathon I've ever run. I believe it's right, something big could happen."

Jim Souhan can be heard Sundays from 10 a.m. to noon and weekdays at 2 p.m. on 1500-AM. His Twitter name is SouhanStrib. • jsouhan@startribune.com

© 2011 Star Tribune

[Sign In](#) or [Sign Up](#)

[HOME DELIVERY](#) [DIGITAL MEMBERSHIPS](#) [PLACE AN AD](#) [JOBS](#) [CARS](#) [REAL ES](#)

12:13 PM EDT

Monday, July 23, 2012

87° F

[HOME](#) [LOCAL](#) [WEATHER](#) [SPORTS](#) [BUSINESS](#) [ENTERTAINMENT](#) [LIFE/FAMILY](#) [HEALTH](#)

[ORLANDO MAGIC](#) [OLYMPICS](#) [SOCCER](#) [VARSITY](#) [GATORS](#) [KNIGHTS](#) [SEMINOLES](#) [RECRUITING](#) [BASEBA](#)

TRENDING: | [James Holmes](#) | ['Bachelorette'](#) | [Penn State](#) | [Teen Choice Awards](#) | [Ernie Els](#) | [Aurora Victims](#) | [Usher](#) | [UFC](#)



Ads By Google

Church

You Think You Know The Bible Well?
Test Yourself With Our Trivia Game

www.BibleTriviaTime.com

Job Openings

Search For Job Openings. Apply For a
Position Today!

www.findtherightjob.com



[Home](#) → [Collections](#)

Jenny Barringer Simpson's per marks Olympic journey

George Diaz, COMMENTARY

8:17 p.m. EST, July 22, 2012

[Comments](#)

0

[Recommend](#)

58

[Tweet](#)

The first step of Jenny Barringer Simpson's athletic career began as a third-grader competing in a mile race around a [soccer](#) field. She finished second to a girl named Brittany Baxter.

Brittany went to become a cheerleader at Oviedo High School.

Jenny went on to become a 5-time state champion in track and 3-time state champion in cross country at the same school.

Ads By Google

Mitt Romney and Bain

Turning around failing businesses Get the facts ab

www.MittRomney.com

Real Estate Appraisals

COLUMNIST



George Diaz

Recent Columns and Bio
Email

RELATED

Olympics



Photos: The 2012
London Olympics



Graphic: London's
Olympics security
measures

STORIES

Country	Gold	Silver	Bronze
1. United States (USA)	0	0	0
2. Canada (CAN)	0	0	0
3. Australia (AUS)	0	0	0
4. Belgium (BEL)	0	0	0
5. China (CHN)	0	0	0
6. France (FRA)	0	0	0
7. Germany (GER)	0	0	0
8. Mexico (MEX)	0	0	0
9. Netherlands (NED)	0	0	0
10. Russia (RUS)	0	0	0

Medal Count: 2012
Olympic Games

ALSO

Former Oviedo runner Jenny Barringer
Simpson wins world...

Track champion Jenny Barringer Simpson's
roots extend to...

Oviedo's Jenny Barringer Simpson makes
U.S. Olympic track...

Mccarty On International Soccer Circuit

No. 3 Winter Park Girls Standing In Way Of
No. 2 Rams

Final Lap

Time

Denver Metro residential ASAP Fast, confidential a
www.appraisals-asap.com

"It's funny," Barringer Simpson said last week. "You see h
you in life,"

She is chatting via phone from a hotel room in Monaco, w
weekend. The moments and the memories from the third
memories of a 25-year-old woman about to step on the gr

She is back for her second Olympic tour, after competing
and placing ninth. Although her time set an American recc
footnote.Barringer Simpson was competing in an event th

Her return, this time in London, is markedly different.

The 1,500-meters is one of the glamour events in track an
from the United States has medaled in the event, putting a
medalist in the 2011 World Championships.

You could say that Barringer Simpson shocked the world.
who hadn't placed in the top 10 during the season winning
28 years?

"I think I've proven throughout my entire career that I'm wi
whether I belong there or not," she said. "I've had races in
front but I put myself in the best position to make somethir
was focused on the task at hand. When I got to the final la
from me.' I think my competitive will is my greatest asset."

Her mom figured that out 24 years ago, when Jenny was
John, who was two years older. They played the hand-ove
prize. But it was Jennifer who figured out how to play the
when it ended.

"I remember sitting there going, 'did she just do that?' recc
Oklahoma. "...she was persistent."

So maybe it's best to mark Barringer Simpson's career as
pushed her to become such a dominant athlete at Oviedo
two-mile, 5,000 meters, and three-mile, before racing for t

She had been on 'the radar' since middle school. Jay Gett
roommate, who was coaching Jennifer at the time. "This g
Kenny,' " Rohr said.

Ads By Google

Church

You Think You Know The Bible Well? Test Yourself Wi
www.BibleTriviaTime.com



Getty coached Jenny at Oviedo during her freshman year. But all the while, he became sort of a special consultant to her career.

One of the things they did was keep Jennifer to 'medium' mental burnout. Instead of 60 to 80 miles a week, they kept what we needed to get done without tearing up the body," "...she was never driven to the ground."

That was evident in 2009, when Barringer Simpson ran 3: marking the third-fastest time in U.S. track and field history.

It's been ages since this an American had a legitimate shot have to go back to Mary Decker-Slaney in the mid 1980s.

Now three decades later, Barringer Simpson joins Morgan Americans vying for the podium.

Not bad for a little third-grader who fell short in her first race.

"This is by far the best part," Barringer Simpson said last year feel the sacrificial job is in the bank.

"The hard, cold winter runs are over and I get to sit in a beach chair."

The next hopeful step is a podium in London.

Read [George Diaz's](#) blog at OrlandoSentinel.com/enfuegc

Ads By Google

Mitt Romney and GST Steel

Trying to save a closing plant Learn the truth about GST Steel www.MittRomney.com

Real Estate Appraisals

Denver Metro residential ASAP Fast, confidential and reliable www.appraisals-asap.com

Copyright © 2012, Orlando Sentinel

POPULAR STORIES

Kissimmee woman missing for 3 days

Teen girl's car splits in half, catches fire on I-75

'This is an emergency': Florida bird may soon be extinct