

Deseret News

Amy Donaldson: Coach has watched Utah Olympian Shalaya Kipp embrace obstacles, find success

By Amy Donaldson , Deseret News

Published: Sunday, June 30 2013 3:55 p.m. MDT



Shalaya Kipp has enjoyed considerable success since she ran for Skyline High in the mid 2000s. (Larry C. Lawson)

The fact that Shalaya Kipp was a freshman when she showed up at Skyline High's cross-country practice in August 2005 was about the only thing that made her stand out.

"In the Granite District, we don't get a ton of freshman because the junior highs have cross-country programs," said Skyline cross country and track coach Thomas Porter. "She didn't act any different than any other freshman — kind of scared and didn't say much."

It wasn't until Kipp started running that Thomas realized he had something special on his hands.

"You saw right off the bat — the girl was good," he said.

But the girl was also an aspiring skier.

So while she clearly had talent as a runner, her heart was set on navigating icy mountainsides with the world's best. Her goal of making the U.S. ski team meant as soon as the high school cross-country season ended, she started skiing, while the rest of the country's top runners participated in regionals, nationals and rigorous indoor seasons.

Porter said she didn't show up to work out for track season until April. And as any runner will attest, being fit is not the same as being in running shape.

"She didn't run a full year for me until her senior year," said Porter, who's led the Eagles program for the last 14 years.

Even running part-time, she had remarkable success. Her sophomore year she won the 5A state championship in cross-country by less than a second. She lost that same race by less than a second as a junior, which Porter said fueled her summer workouts heading into her senior season.

She ran a great race and crossed the finish line second. Her effort had also helped the Eagles to a third-place finish as a team, something that had meant as much to her as an individual title as she credited her teammates for pushing her and making her better.



Utah's Shalaya Kipp, right, and Emma Coburn celebrate advancing to the Olympics after finishing the women's 3,000 meter steeplechase at the U.S. Olympic Track and Field Trials Friday, June 29, 2012, in Eugene, Ore. (Marcio Jose Sanchez, AP)



Skyline's Shalaya Kipp takes a strong lead over the rest of the pack during the Region 2 cross-country championships in Salt Lake City, Utah on Friday, Oct. 6, 2006. (Sarah Aulse, Deseret Morning News)

But before the team could revel in the accomplishment, Porter was informed by officials that Kipp had been disqualified for rolling her shorts at the waistband. State rules require uniforms be worn as the manufacturers intended, and it was Porter who had to tell her.

It was a heartbreaking blow that might have devastated other runners. But Kipp established very early that she isn't an ordinary runner.

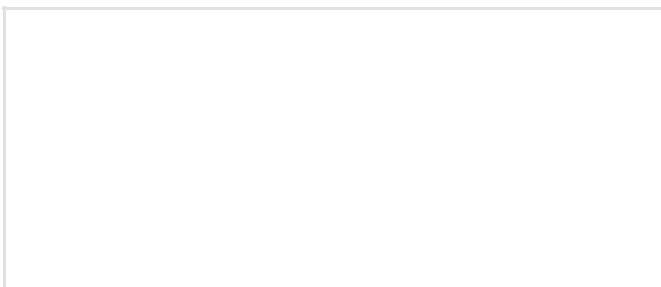
Her father once told reporters his daughter's secret to success.

"She said, 'All you have to do is hurt more than the other runners,'" said Ron Kipp.

Porter said Kipp's mental toughness is unmatched in his two decades of coaching college and high school runners. Even before the dust had settled, Kipp was trying not to let the disappointment defeat her.

"She was most upset about the displacement of the team," he said, noting that the disqualification meant the Eagles finished fifth. "That was her whole concern. She felt like she let the team down."

Kipp used any frustration as fuel. She trained harder for the regional meet that would determine which of the country's best high school runners would compete at the Nike national meet. And while she trained, she made



a decision that her future was in running shoes — not ski boots.

“I remember it like it was yesterday,” said Porter, adding that she told him at the beginning of December 2008 that she was giving up competitive skiing. “That was one of the most painful things for her to do, when she kind of realized skiing wasn’t going to take her as far as running would.”

Her winter work paid off as she won 5A state titles in both the 1,600- and 3,200-meter events in her senior track season. She was being recruited to run in college by Oregon and Colorado. Once Oregon signed the country’s top prep runner in 2009, the Ducks simply stopped taking Kipp’s calls.



Bridget Franek, right, and Shalaya Kipp make the water jump in the women’s 3,000-meter steeplechase final at the U.S. Olympic Track and Field Trials on Friday, June 29, 2012, in Eugene, Ore. Franek finished second and Kipp finished third. (Charlie Riedel, AP)



Shalaya Kipp has enjoyed considerable success since she ran for Skyline High in the mid 2000s. (Courtesy of University of Colorado)

“It was terrible,” Porter said of the recruiting experience. “But, luckily Colorado worked out pretty good.”

Yes, it did.

In fact, if she hadn’t committed to the Buffaloes, she might not have achieved her childhood dream of representing the U.S. in the Olympics.

Because of her athleticism, Colorado coaches asked her to try the 3,000-meter steeplechase. Despite being a “terrible hurdler,” she showed promise in her very first try, even if only her coaches recognized it.

“I know the first time she did it, it wasn’t a pretty thing,” said Porter laughing. “But she’s so freaking strong. I’ve never had a girl that was so strong. She could dead lift almost 300 pounds.”

Porter said when Kipp told him what coaches were doing with her, it made perfect sense.

“The first time they had her do it in a race, you could see there was something pretty amazing there,” said Porter, who ran a little steeplechase himself.

It is not a race for every runner. Participants must scale barriers and slosh through water obstacles as they run 3.2 kilometers. It’s a gritty, grueling event that requires more than just the ability to

cover ground quickly.

“I would say the No. 1 thing you need is mental toughness,” said Porter. “You can talk about all of the physical attributes a person would need to have, but toughness upstairs is probably the most crucial thing.” Toughness upstairs just happens to be what Kipp does best.



Shalaya Kipp has enjoyed considerable success since she ran for Skyline High in the mid 2000s. (Larry Lawson, Larry C. Lawson)



Utahn Shalaya Kipp, right, and Emma Coburn celebrate advancing to the Olympics after finishing the women's 3,000 meter steeplechase at the U.S. Olympic Track and Field Trials Friday, June 29, 2012, in Eugene, Ore. (Marcio Jose Sanchez, AP)

“You couldn’t meet or talk to a nicer person, until you have to race her,”

he said, pride evident in his voice. “And then you had better just get out of the way.” She was the teammate who made birthday cakes for everyone else on the squad. But she showed no mercy when it came to training.

Her toughness showed most when she shocked everyone but those who know her best and qualified for the 2012 Olympic Games in London. Her star is still rising as she recently qualified for the U.S. team that will compete at

IAAF World Championships in Moscow Aug. 10-18.

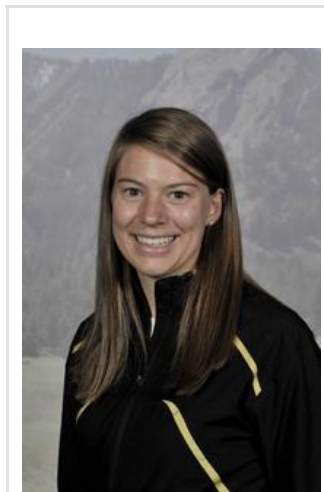
Porter is like a proud parent when he talks about Kipp, and who can blame him? He spent six years as an assistant at the U. and saw a lot of talented runners chase their dreams.

“I saw a lot of kids who were state champions, and then who came into college and were average at best,” he said. “To foresee that this was going to happen, it’s pretty difficult. At the same time ... she’s always been out there to prove everybody wrong.”

He has no doubt Kipp has room to improve in her final season at Colorado, a school that now boasts two consecutive NCAA steeplechase champions.

When Kipp called Porter to tell him, she also asked the coach about his recent race. They talk training, exchanging workouts and tips. For a high school coach the rewards have always been in seeing teens succeed, and maybe knowing, even if no one else does, that you played a small part in that success.

For Porter, he’s satisfied knowing that every time Kipp crosses a finish line, everyone who suffered through those sweltering summer workouts with her can share a little piece of her joy.



Shalaya Kipp has enjoyed considerable success since she ran for Skyline High in the mid 2000s. (Courtesy of University of Colorado)

“It’s amazing, shocking,” Porter said of her most recent accomplishment of making the world’s team. “This is neat. But at the same time, you see little things along the way, and yeah, I think this kid showed what her potential was all along.”



Twitter: [adonsports](#)

Email: adonaldson@deseretnews.com

Copyright 2013, Deseret News Publishing Company

Shalaya Kipp has enjoyed considerable success since she ran for Skyline High in the mid 2000s.
(Larry Lawson, Larry C. Lawson)