

Running a Different Path

By [Mario Fraioli](#), Published Oct. 14, 2010, Updated Mar. 15, 2012 at 5:10 PM UTC

Shalane Flanagan has blazed her own trail toward records, medals and a much-anticipated first marathon next month.

Written by: Matt Fitzgerald

Shalane Flanagan has a simple goal for her first marathon. The 29-year-old Nike athlete's ambition at the ING New York City Marathon on November 7 is nothing more or less than to cross the finish line.



Photo: John Segesta

"If I told most people that my goal was to finish," she explains, "they would say, 'Well, you're an elite runner; of course you should finish.' But I don't look at it that way. I've never run a marathon. I want to finish. That in itself is an accomplishment."

If you think this means the American record holder at 3,000 meters and 10,000 meters is going to jog through the five boroughs, think again. "I know that my competitive side can be ignited very easily," she says, "so I'm just focusing on being able to go the distance, and then my competitiveness will come out on race day."

Flanagan has been letting her competitiveness come out on race day since grade school in Marblehead, Mass., when she used to beat the boys in the annual school fitness test, a one-mile

run. "I liked to beat them, but I also liked the attention I got by beating them," she says with a devilish laugh.

What the mortified boys who finished behind young Flanagan might not have known was that the petite blonde had a certain advantage. She was born in the endurance mecca of Boulder, Colo., as the daughter of two world-class runners: Cheryl Treworgy (née Bridges), who once held the marathon world record, and Steve Flanagan, who represented the United States at the World Cross-Country Championships. More importantly, though, it was not just the gift but also the passion for running that Flanagan inherited from her parents. "I just knew that it was within me," she recalls. "I loved to run, and I knew it was my calling."

In her high school years that combination of talent and passion propelled Flanagan to three Massachusetts state cross-country championship titles, a national scholastic indoor track championship title in the mile (with a time of 4:46), and a victory in the U.S. junior cross-country championship. On the strength of this résumé she could have gone on to run at any of the collegiate women's running powerhouses—Villanova, Colorado, Stanford—but instead she chose the University of North Carolina.

Flanagan remembers the decision clearly. "I had my heart set on Villanova," she says. "They have a great legacy, really good academics—a really good package. And then on a whim I took a visit to North Carolina, and as soon as I got down there I fell in love with it. So then I had this dilemma: Should I go with the obvious choice, which was Villanova, or take a different path and go to a great university and hope I could be a part of creating something new and special?"

Flanagan chose UNC because, she says, "I knew I would be happy at the University of North Carolina even if I was injured and couldn't run. There is more to life than running."

It was the right decision. Flanagan flourished under the comparatively light training load prescribed by UNC coach Michael Whittlesey. She won the 2001 and 2002 NCAA Cross-Country Championships and then forfeited her last year of eligibility to turn pro and try to make the 2004 Olympics—which she succeeded in doing, representing the United States at 5,000 meters in Athens.

Then disaster struck. Flanagan developed a pain in her left foot that became worse and worse as she continued running, and returned quickly even after time off. She sought treatment from more than half a dozen specialists, none of whom was able to even diagnose the problem until Dr. Amol Saxena, a podiatric surgeon in Palo Alto, Calif., discovered an extra bone in her foot and removed it.

This woeful saga took Flanagan away from racing for 17 months, but it wasn't without a silver lining. "It forced me to evaluate whether I was maximizing my potential," she says. "I realized I wasn't putting in the time and effort that I should. I needed someone to show me how to improve."

Flanagan hired a new coach, John Cook, under whose guidance she trained harder than she had ever known she could. In February 2007, healthy, fit, and fueled by renewed motivation, Flanagan returned to competition in style, setting a new American record of 8:33.25 for 3,000 meters indoors.

That was just the beginning. Since then, Flanagan has amassed six national championship titles, set a new American record at 5,000 meters, and as her crowning achievement she won a bronze medal at 10,000 meters in the 2008 Olympics, setting another American record in the process. In

a word, she has been on a roll. Why, then, did she change coaches again last year, moving across the country to Portland, Ore. to train with Nike coach Jerry Schumacher?

"When I was little my dad always told me to dare to be different," Flanagan explains. "Sometimes when you make choices they may not always be popular, but I've always felt that if I follow my gut and my instinct it will take me to great places."

Flanagan continues to trust her gut as she prepares to expand her racing repertoire from the track to the roads. "More than anything I am focused on just enjoying the marathon training," she said at the beginning of a six-week block of high-mileage, high-altitude training in Mammoth Lakes, Calif. "The more passionate I am about the training, the better I race."

When she was last seen at the Rock 'n' Roll Philadelphia Half Marathon in September, Flanagan reported that she was indeed enjoying her marathon buildup, and feeling good about her new coach and training environment. "Jerry and I definitely have a connection," she says. "It's more than just workouts. I knew that kind of connection could carry us further than mile repeat workouts or whatever."

In other words, there's more to running than running.

[Follow Flanagan's Footsteps](#): Want to prepare for a marathon the same way as Shalane? Click [here](#) to for three suggestions on how to emulate her key training elements.