

Moving Past Foot Woes, Clearing Path to Games

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Shalane Flanagan ran the 5,000 meters in the 2004 Olympics in Athens and the 2005 world championships in Helsinki. But her left foot hurt so badly in 2005 she could hardly train, and after Helsinki she decided not to run again until she found what was wrong. She went from doctor to doctor, looking for an answer.



Itsuo Inouye/Associated Press

Shalane Flanagan set a U.S. indoor record for 3,000 meters after a foot operation.

Doctor No. 1 said the foot was fractured and there was no quick cure.

Doctor No. 2 said there was an avulsion fracture, in which a bone fragment tears away. No immediate solution.

Doctor No. 3 said there was a calcium deposit. No quick panacea.

There were Doctors 4, 5 and 6 — maybe more, she said — but no relief.

Finally, in April 2006, a breakthrough occurred. Dr. Amol Saxena, a podiatric surgeon in Palo Alto, Calif., said that Flanagan's tendon appeared to be tearing, and he was about to operate. Minutes before, he took a standing X-ray and found the answer.

She had an extra bone in the foot.

He operated, removed the bone, repaired a torn tendon under the big toe and implanted a screw to hold everything together. After three months of rehabilitation, including hours in the swimming pool, Flanagan was running again on the roads.

In February 2007, in her first race in 17 months, she set an American record of 8 minutes 33.25 seconds for 3,000 meters indoors. In April, she set an American record of 14:44.80 for 5,000 meters outdoors. She has won United States championships in outdoor track, indoor track and cross-country. If she makes this year's Olympic team, she could be a medal contender in Beijing.

Her next race is 8 kilometers Saturday in Central Park against top runners from the United States, Canada and Russia. The accompanying United States men's 8-kilometer championship will feature the Olympian [Alan Webb](#). Dathan Ritzenhein, who made this year's Olympic team in the marathon, withdrew Wednesday from the race because of an injured left foot.

"I thought I had a bad foot, and that's the name of the game in running," Flanagan said Wednesday. "I wasn't discouraged, just disappointed. I felt helpless. But it helped me grow up, so it was a blessing in disguise."

Flanagan is 26, 5 feet 5 inches and 105 pounds. She is from Marblehead, Mass., where she was a high school swimmer until she took up running. She has succeeded, she said, "because I have a lot of good genetics and a good work ethic."

In 1971, her mother, Cheryl Bridges Treworgy, set an unofficial world marathon record for women of 2 hours 49 minutes 40 seconds. Her father, Steve, an 800-meter runner at Connecticut, became a 2:18 marathoner.

Flanagan graduated from North Carolina in 2004 with a degree in history. "I haven't used it yet," she said, laughing, "but I watch History Channel a lot."

In 2005, she married Steve Edwards, a former 800-meter runner at North Carolina. They live in Pittsboro, N.C.

She returned Tuesday from San Luis Potosi, Mexico, where she had trained for two and a half months with German Silva, winner of the [New York City Marathon](#) in 1994 and 1995. Flanagan, who is coached by John Cook, the former coach at George Mason, and two other women wanted altitude training.

"But the others didn't want the cold of the California or Colorado mountains, where so many other runners train," she said. "So we went to this place, four hours north of Mexico City, and trained at 6,500-foot altitude. I got a great foundation for a year, and I got confidence."

She interrupted the adventure to run in the United States cross-country championships Feb. 18 in San Diego. She won by 70 seconds, the widest recorded margin statisticians have uncovered.

Soon, the ranks of America's great female distance runners — [Mary Decker Slaney](#), Joan Benoit Samuelson, Lynn Jennings, Francie Larrieu and Doris Brown Heritage — may acquire a new name.

"Everyone thinks Shalane is a great Irish name," Flanagan said. "Actually, it's the name of a science-fiction heroine in a book my dad read."