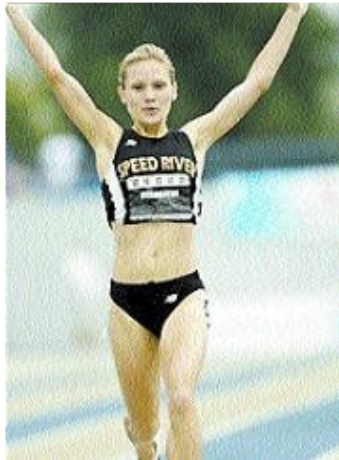


Olympic Push for Speed Star

By Ned Bekavac

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SUBMITTED PHOTO

Hilary Stellingwerff of the Speed River Track & Field Club has her sights set on the Olympics.

She sure has come a long way since that first race, when she was but a wee one in grade school.

"I think I was in about Grade 2 or 3, it was a school cross-country race in Sarnia and I was one of the youngest kids. I was so nervous before the race I was nearly sick," says Hilary Stellingwerff, recalling her first taste of running competition.

"When the gun went off, I went out at the front of the group, fell down, got trampled, got back up and finished the race near the back. But I loved the challenge and was determined to improve so I kept at it."

Improve? Indeed.

Today, the 26-year-old, who runs for Guelph's Speed River Track & Field Club, is the defending national 1,500m champion, and she has her sites set on qualifying for the Olympics this summer.

Stellingwerff, currently living in Lausanne, Switzerland, is one of eight Canadians who competed at the world indoor track championships this past weekend in Spain as she qualified for the 1,500m event.

While she was disappointed with her result - she failed to qualify for the final - Stellingwerff seems to have let it bounce off her.

"It wasn't a good competition for me. I've been training hard and things have been going well, but it was just not my day," she said.

She says she's taking a down week and then getting back into training and getting ready for the huge summer ahead. We caught up with Stellingwerff for a chat.

Q: You have ambitions of making the 2008 Olympics. The pressure of something so grand surely has to weigh on you every day. What's that like?

HS: Gee, when you put it that way, it does sound pretty stressful!

I honestly haven't gotten too worked up about it because I have a lot of trust and faith in the plan we (my coach Dave Scott-Thomas in Guelph and my secondary coach, Trent, my husband) have set out, which includes being ready to get the qualifying mark in May/June, going to national champs in July to defend my 1,500m title, and training hard to get ready to make the final in Beijing at the end of August.

Otherwise, I'm just carrying on as normal with the knowledge that there is a big summer ahead.

Q: How often are you in Guelph and, training and running aside, what are three must-do things for you when you're here?

HS: I am usually in Guelph for a good part of November, December and January and then again in the summer before the national championships.

Three must-dos, running aside: 1) Catch up with former colleagues and friends at the University of Guelph. I used to work in research communications at the U of G so I always stop in to say hi, and I can always count on catching up with some teammates in Dave's (Scott-Thomas) office or at practice, as well as some old roommates. It's usually busy.

2) Hit up downtown Guelph for great food: Carden Street Cafe, Bookshelf, Eggcetera or Angel's. (You can't get a good breakfast in Switzerland.)

3) Try to catch some live music downtown when timing works.

Q: When it comes to training and diet, runners are among the most disciplined athletes in the world. When was the last time you "let loose," so to speak, and what did ya do?

HS: I suppose we can be pretty regimented, but I just try to be balanced. I usually throw all healthy eating out the window once the summer season is complete and eat chocolate and ice cream whenever I feel like it.

Q: You're currently in Switzerland. What are three things you miss about Canada? And three things you don't?

HS: Three things I miss: 1) The people. Obviously family and friends, but also Canadian people in general. When you leave, you realize how friendly and down-to-earth Canadians are.

2) The camaraderie of my teammates at Guelph and other Canadian athletes - although I'm lucky to see a lot of them when they come to Europe to race in the summer

3) Familiarity - culture, food, language, etc.

Three things I don't miss:

1) The really, really cold winters. You would think Switzerland would be comparable, but the two years we've been here, most winter days are above zero.

2) The abundance of chain restaurants and stores.

3) Travelling so far to races.

Q: You were born in Sarnia and belong to Guelph's Speed River Club. If the Sting and the Storm were to meet in the OHL playoffs, who would you cheer for?

HS: I would have to go with the Sting considering I've never been to a Storm game. But I used to go to the Sting games in high school to cheer for friends.

Q: As a gift, the Speed River club gives you a mini mp3 player which holds just five songs. Which five do you first put on it?

HS: In no particular order: Nora Jones, Sunrise; Tragically Hip, Fireworks; U2, Sunday Bloody Sunday; Coldplay, Fix You; The Mugs, Here Tomorrow.

Q: Does running, um, pay the bills?

HS: Yes, running can pay the bills, but it's not like the big professional sports with the huge contracts. I have a salary contract with New Balance and funding through the national team with the Canadian government and if I run fast, I can win prize money in races, but I also have to fund my training camps and travel off these funds so it can add up.

But, my husband has a good job so between us both we are surviving fine. However, at the high level in my event, if you're, say, top 10 in the world, you can make maybe \$100,000 in a really good year, and if you're top three you can pretty easily make five times that because you can ask for high appearances fees.

But this is really at the highest level and a pretty select few.

In general, many professional runners are JUST paying the bills because the sponsorship support is not the same as some more popular sports - it's more for the love than the money.

Other than running, for some balance I do a few other things. I help coach cross-country and track at an international school in Lausanne - they are high school age.

And I do some freelance writing, I'll be writing an article about training and nutrition for Canadian Running Magazine in June. I majored in communications and journalism in university so it's nice to keep that active.

Q: Where do you see yourself running-wise and life-wise in, say, five years?

HS: There is a lot more I want to achieve in track so I see myself running competitively in the 1,500m at least until the 2012 Olympics in London, England. But I'll always be an active runner and have goals to run longer distances after the track.

Life-wise, in a couple years I'd like to do a masters degree in sports management - there is a really good program here in Lausanne with the IOC. And eventually we want to have kids, but there's time!

HILARY'S FAVES . . .

- **Band or musician:** U2, Coldplay, The Mugs, Nora Jones. Can't just pick one!
- **Actor:** Morgan Freeman
- **Actress:** Julia Roberts
- **TV show:** Prison Break
- **Movie:** Pretty Woman

- **Board or card game:** Euchre
- **City:** New York City
- **Drink:** Chocolate Milk
- **Food:** Pasta and Seafood
- **Pro sports team:** Canadian track and field team. This is the sport I pay most attention to! But I still cheer for: Leafs (out of childhood loyalty - but it's tough to keep up living in Europe because they don't show much hockey), Manchester United.