

Photo by Becky Miller.



The Education of a Professional Runner

A few words with USA Road Mile National Champion Heather Kampf

BY LAANNA CARRASCO, MA

of racing, Kampf values the team aspect of her sport – in interviews after her Big Ten Championships fall, she says she was motivated to get up and win the race because she needed to earn points toward the team championship.

In this interview, Kampf shares what it's like to be a professional runner as she chases her goal of making the 2016 Olympic team.

BFS: *Who is your coach and what team do you run with, now that you are out of college?*

HK: My coach is Dennis Barker. He was kind of a self-made runner, turned coach, and is a great motivator for me. He serves as the coach for Augsburg College in Minneapolis, as well as coaching all the athletes on Team USA Minnesota, which I belong to.

We have one of the best and most supportive running communities in the Twin Cities, largely thanks to the involvement of one of our sponsors, Twin Cities In Motion, which gives us opportunities to volunteer with and get to know our fans.

BFS: *What's your favorite race?*

HK: I have come to love the road mile. I think I naturally enjoy races I am successful in, and last year was a very good year for road miles – I won the USA Road Mile Championships in the

spring, and then in the fall won the Ryan Shay Mile in Charlevoix, Michigan, the Liberty Mile in Pittsburgh, and then the Minnesota Mile in Duluth. I also ran a new personal best time of 4:27.8 in the event at my last road race of the year – the Fifth Avenue Mile in New York City.

For some reason or another, I just feel like I “get” the road mile, and believe anything is possible in that environment for me. It's given me a lot of confidence that I hope to carry onto the track this year.

I love the atmosphere of road racing, and how competitors are generally friendlier on the roads than when we are confined to the track. Often, these races go straight down one street, with people cheering for you every step of the way. You can see the finish line from a long way out, which is both a blessing and a curse.

BFS: *Tell us about your training program. What are your favorite exercises?*

HK: Because I am a professional runner, my coach wants running to be the main thing at all times. In the off-season, I lift heavier, and then we do more dynamic lifts and lighter lifts as I move into the more competitive portion of my season.

My two favorite lifts are pull-ups and power cleans. I like pull-ups because

“All things are possible.”

—Heather Kampf

Heather Kampf, the current USA Road Mile Champion, is perhaps best known for falling during a heat of the 600 meters at the Big Ten Championships in 2008 and coming back to win the race. A video of this race has gone viral on YouTube with over 1 million hits. “It was one of those amazing experiences that just reaffirmed my belief that all things are possible,” said Kampf when I caught up with her for this interview.

Kampf is a remarkable athlete not just for her running accomplishments, which include winning the NCAA Indoor Championships in the 800 meters as a freshman in 2006, two third-place finishes in the 800 meters at the USA Indoor Championships (2010, 2011), and being named a nine-time All American at the University of Minnesota. Despite the seemingly individual nature



Photo by Becky Miller.

I think that you need to be able to do pull-ups in order to call yourself an athlete. I was a gymnast in high school, so I have had lots of practice with this upper body exercise. I love to see how many I can do; getting up over 10 is always exciting to me.

I love the power cleans because I feel tough doing them. It is a complicated lift that requires good form, something that my college lifting coach worked with me so much on. I like feeling competent at things, and it's cool to see how much weight I can throw around.

BFS: *Have you noticed that lifting has improved your running?*

HK: Most definitely. I never really lifted in high school, and then started the fall of my freshman year of college. In that year, I went from a personal best in the 800 meters of 2:10 to 2:02 in a year, and I think that is largely thanks to strength development in the weightroom. It has helped keep me relatively healthy throughout my running career as well. I have rarely had any serious injuries, and I know it takes a strong body to stay healthy through all the training I do.

BFS: *What advice would you give to young female runners who are interested in running in college?*

HK: Do it! There are many different levels of running in college, be it Division I, II or III, or even just a college running club, so you can find a place where you fit in, and continue running!

Not only is it so healthy for you to continue exercising after high school, you'll make great lifelong friends almost immediately if you belong to a running team or club. If you are at the level where you are being recruited to run, make sure you mesh well with the team and coaches. Teams can be very successful, but if you don't feel happy with the people you are working with every day, you probably won't be as successful there.

Also, be sure to consider your education. Make sure you choose a school



Kampf competing in the 2012 Olympic Trials, where she made the finals of the 800 meters.

that has the major you are interested in, and be sure you make the most of your education, as you are ultimately there for a degree first, and athletic experiences second.

Don't be afraid of not having enough time; you'll always be busy, and running is something worth your time. Don't worry about not being good enough, because you never know what your potential is until you explore it!

BFS: *Can you describe a time in which your mental toughness helped you push through a challenging race and finish?*

HK: I think mental preparation helps create mental toughness. If you have a plan you want to execute, and you have mentally prepared for that plan not going exactly as you'd like, you are able to make adjustments on the fly, and make the most out of every competitive opportunity. I also think you need

to mentally prepare for when things get hard, because ultimately, in every race, you have to make a decision to push through the pain and trust that you will make it in the end.

One example that comes to mind is probably what I am most "famous" for as a runner. In the 2008 Big Ten Indoor Championships, I got tripped from behind with 200 meters to go in a fast heat of the 600-meter dash.

I was already practicing a lot of mental tools leading up to that race, as it was my fourth of five races I was running that weekend in the Championships, and the races are very close together time-wise. Before the race, I told myself that all things are possible, and that my body is like a machine that was created to do this.

When I got tripped, I honestly didn't even realize how bad the fall was, because I was already focusing on what I could control: making up ground. I got up quickly, and told myself to stay calm and chase them down. When I caught one girl, I congratulated myself, but quickly set my sights on the next target, gaining positive momentum from the crowd and announcers along the way. I went on to catch the entire field, passing the last girl right at the finish line.

BFS: *Do you have a hero you admire?*

HK: In elementary school, we had a woman come in acting out the life of Wilma Rudolph. I was very inspired by her story of overcoming polio and becoming an Olympian.

I am also really inspired by the "average runners" of the world, who are dedicated, working hard and still competing, even though they aren't winning races or earning money for it. I think it is so awesome and commendable that people do things because they truly enjoy them, and are doing something that is healthy for them too. I'd like to think that I will continue loving running long after my professional career is over too. **BFS**

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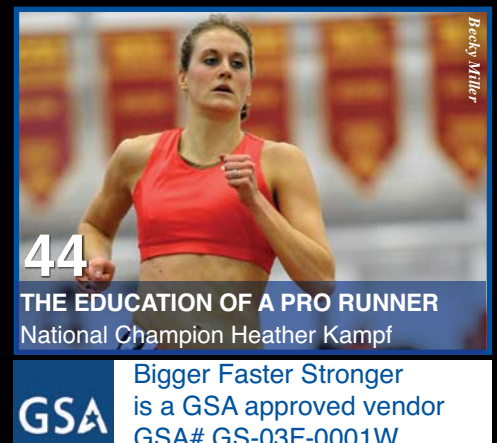
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