

## **I'm a Fan**

It's not difficult to be a sports fan in Boston these days. In one 36-hour stretch, the hometown Bruins forced a game seven against the heavily-favored Canadiens; the Celtics commenced their playoff run with an auspicious romping of the Hawks; the Red Sox sewed up their third late-inning comeback in four games to win eight of their last nine and take a commanding lead in the AL East (and the Yankees aren't even in second); the BC Men's Hockey Team is still on their NCAA Victory Tour and drawing bigger crowds than John McCain on his Bio Tour; Matty "Ice" Ryan is virtually assured to be a first round draft selection; and the city hosted not one, but two, world-class marathons on consecutive days: the US Women's Olympic Marathon Trials and the 112<sup>th</sup> Boston Marathon.

Add to that the cross-pollination of all of these sporting constituents –Bill Belichick and Teddy Bruschi were on-hand to encourage runners of today's Boston Marathon (I didn't even mention the Patriots dynasty in the above digest); David Ortiz and Kevin Youkilis lent their voices to the Garden's crazed audience last night; and Lance Armstrong, in town to run the marathon, threw out the first pitch at Fenway at Friday night's game –and you have one savvy, sporting crowd. I mean, c'mon, name another city in which six college-age men would brave a brisk April morning half-naked so they could paint in large red letters on their chests J-O-A-N-I-E, a tribute to the most iconic figure in all of US women's distance running (and beyond, I would argue). And if you don't know of whom I'm writing, I suggest you put aside this missive immediately and take a moment to brush up on your sporting history. You can start by Googling "arthroscopic knee surgery," "1984 Olympic Trials winner," "gold medalist" and "2:21 marathon".

Clearly, I'm a fan in a fan's kind of town. And it is within *that* context that I offer you the following statement: I have just reorganized my list of my top-10 favorite sporting moments to include at the pinnacle an event I witnessed Sunday morning here in Boston at the US Olympic Marathon Trials.

Unlike other sports and their convoluted Olympic selection processes, track and field has always stood by their do-or-die trials format. For all USATF-sanctioned events from the 20k racewalk to the javelin, and the 100m to the marathon, you must show up on a specified date, toe the line against your competitors and finish in the top three in order to punch your ticket to the Olympics. This coolly objective framework pries from sport the hand of politics, and also assigns "the Trials," as they are known, a Herculean reputation.

Most elite athletic performances are, by definition, challenging; but add to that the white-hot glare of Olympic selection pressure, especially in a sport like Track and Field that enjoys only a quadrennial moment in the sun of widespread public attention, and you have a recipe for drama, intrigue and strategic maneuvering surpassed only by General Hospital's twice-risen-from-the-dead, ex-sister-in-law's suspected affairs with her first husband's jailed brother.

This year's US Women's Olympic Marathon Trials were no different. Stacked with talent – including the formidable US Record holder and defending Olympic bronze medalist: Deena Drossin –the field boasted at least a dozen women who had a legitimate shot at making the team, and another dozen who, given the stark "anything-can-happen" truth of the marathon, stood an outside chance of making a Rudy-type run. But if you've ever watched a marathon –or better yet, run one –you know that 26.2 miles is a long way and a distance over which the cream almost always rises to the top.

The event's criterium-style course, engineered by consummate race directing professional Dave MacGillivray, promised a visual feast for spectators as the 153 competitors orbited a compact section of Cambridge and Boston, affording savvy fans who had taken the time to do some simple course reconnaissance an abundant 15 or 20 looks at the evolution of the race.

Now I could go on to give you the 30,000-ft. view of the race –to tell you, for instance, that the safe pre-race money had to be on Drossin as no other woman in the field had a personal best within nearly 10 minutes of her American Record 2:19:36, or that all were surprised when dark horse Magdalena Lewy Boulet built a nearly two-minute lead over the first fourteen miles –but in endurance contests, where the most overt skill is stoicism (witness Lance's Teflon Tour de France masks), and competitors are trained to give away nothing –not a glance over the shoulder signaling anxiety, nor an unnecessarily ragged exhalation of breath –the fan's pleasure is in the details.

A careful observer might note that the woman in third place just ran the penultimate loop 18 seconds slower than the loop before and that, combined with the fact that her left arm is now swinging a bit erratically, might mean she's dangerously fatigued and thus vulnerable; or that the women running together in sixth and seventh attended rival conference schools and are thus more likely to test each other with grueling surges in attempts to break the other's will.

You see, it's the interstices between the obvious competitive markers wherein lies the endurance spectator's reward. There, and in the history: of the sport, of the event and of the participants. To know something about running, to have a sense of the brutality of the marathon (US Olympic marathoner and accomplished author Kenny Moore has written, "The marathon, if run properly, inflicts serious damage"), or to know personally one of the day's competitors is to introduce the visceral and the emotional into an otherwise compelling but arm's length experience. So it may come as no surprise to hear that I had all three, and they no doubt, added to my enjoyment of this quadrennial's US Olympic Marathon Trials.

My day's reference point was Zoila Gomez, a 28-year old Alamosa, CO denizen and the seventh fastest qualifier entered in the race. Zoila was the lens through which I was viewing the day's activity; as she went, so went I. And she went well.

At the 13-mile halfway point, she was tucked safely into the lead pack (Lewy Boulet was way off the front), and shortly thereafter when Drossin began to give chase and the happy little pack shattered, Zoila steeled herself and began her solitary march to the finish, engaged in the grim game of counting places to see if she could earn herself a spot on the US Olympic Team.

At 23 miles she was in sixth place; and by 24 miles she'd moved up into fifth. When she passed me at the "mile to go" sign (the 25.2 mile mark of the race), she was about 150 meters behind fourth place and the video I was trying to shoot is perhaps the purest evidence of my unbridled enthusiasm: it shows the fourth place woman soldiering by and then begins to pan calmly down the road, prepared to soak up the full freight of the distance of the gap to Zoila, whose tiny form jumps into focus much more quickly than the photographer expects. A bell goes off: she's gaining on fourth! At this point all pretense of adept camerawork is shelved in a frenzy of unintelligible but increasingly amplified cheering; the camera struggles desperately to keep Zoila in the viewfinder but it's clear the photographer is crazed; various ears and shoes of fellow spectators bounce in and out of the screen –up, down, left, right –until, exhausted, the camera falls to the ground, staring unblinkingly up into the blue sky, all the while recording the unmistakable audio of "Go, Zoila! Go! You can get her! Push, Zoila! Vamanos! Zoila, you're going to catch her!"

And then: darkness.

And in that darkness, during the interregnum between the spent camera shutting off after the overload of recording Zoila's hunt for fourth place and the much-coveted "Olympic alternate" spot and the moment it switches back on to tape Zoila's post-race interview, in those last five and a half minutes of the race, the last mile of 26.2 hard miles, Zoila does indeed pass the woman ahead of her and secure herself the alternate spot, meaning that if any of the three women ahead of her get sick or injured or choose not to compete or to compete in a different event at the Olympics, then Zoila will represent the US at the Games in Beijing this August.

What the camera does *not* show, what it *could* not show even if it's bearer had been able to navigate the thick crowds to get in a position to film the finish, is just how fierce a battle Zoila fought to take fourth. And I'm not writing about the fact that she had to struggle mightily just to get within striking distance of the fourth place woman down the finishing straight. Or that then, after over 26 miles of running at a pace most other bipeds could muster for only a lap of a track, she had to dig down to find yet another gear, had to face the fact that she might fall short –that she might just fall, she said later, and have to crawl to the finish; or that from *that* place with 100, then 50, then 25 meters left in the race and Zoila still in fifth, she somehow responded to the crowd's urging and pushed a bit harder to pass her competitor with just 10 meters remaining to eke out a one second margin of victory.

No, I'm talking about the twelve years before the moment Zoila crossed the finish line of the US Olympic Trials, cementing her place in US distance running history. You see, when Zoila passed me at one mile to go and I dropped my camera in my excitement, the audio captures three distinct voices: mine (unfortunately); her coach's; and her sister's. And while the words we're yelling are completely different, and even the languages are different, the message is the unified: not "Zoila, you're almost there," but "Zoila, you *are* there."

The coach is Damon Martin, who guided Zoila through what was inarguably the best Division II running career ever posted by a scholar-athlete (six NCAA titles, 11 All-American certificates and both the 2004 DII Athlete *and* Scholar-Athlete of the Year Awards) and continues to coach her still. And the sister is Alicia Zapata, the youngest of Zoila's 15 siblings (Zoila is the penultimate in the birth order), who lives with Zoila, their sister, brother-in-law and two nephews in Colorado. Together, as representatives of sport, family and community, we three are metaphorically emblematic of Zoila's life to-date.

Zoila immigrated to the States from Mexico when she was sixteen. Only then did she begin to learn English and, amazingly, only then did she begin to run. She became a US citizen in 2005 (20 years to the day after her father was killed in Mexico) and first represented this country in international competition at the Track and Field World Championships in Japan this past fall. That Zoila found her way from a small Mexican town first to a US Junior College, then to a four-year college, then to professional running is astounding; that she did so all the while maintaining her equanimity, her sincerity, her perspective and her generosity is mind-boggling.

In addition to her unshakeable commitment to her sport, Zoila maintains the closest of relationships with her family, often traveling back to Mexico to see her mother and siblings and to give talks at the local schools. She also spends the balance of her training hours involved in targeted community work, either teaching English as a Second Language to unschooled Alamosans or working with youth in after-school programs at the local Boys and Girls Club.

So when *that* woman –the anchor of a family, the pride of a school, the boon to a community – passed by us at 25.2 miles of a grueling physical test, on the threshold of securing an Olympic berth, I thought, “Of course.” And I also thought, “Thank God.”

*Of course* Zoila is right in the thick of it, battling it out. And *of course* she’s going to win. She’s already won. And *thank God* for sport to remind us, to hit us –participants and spectators alike – over the head with life’s most obvious lessons. *Thank God* we watch, we observe, we absorb and we cheer. It means we’re human and that we’re engaged, that we, regardless of the degree of difficulty of the private roads ahead and astern, are committed to the race and its graceful, occasionally painful, but rewarding completion.

**by Amory Rowe**

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