

How I Went From 4-Hour Marathoner to 2-Time Qualifier

“Having a meaningful, even audacious, goal to chase reveals capability we didn’t know we possessed.”

BY [TEAL BURRELL](#) FEB 28, 2020



On a perfect spring morning in April 2008, I stood with my back to the Charles River in Boston cheering wildly for women I didn’t know racing the [Olympic Marathon Trials](#). My personal best for a marathon at the time was just over four hours, but I dreamed of [qualifying for Boston](#). I couldn’t watch the next day’s [Boston Marathon](#) because of work, but figured the Trials would suffice for inspiration.

Turns out, those Trials inspired me—at the age of 22—to chase a life-changing dream.

I first learned [everything about the Olympic Marathon Trials](#) in a *Runner's World* issue that highlighted the Olympic team contenders like [Deena Kastor](#) and [Desiree Davila](#) (now Linden, a long shot back then). But the women behind the professionals, with full-time jobs, families, and myriad other responsibilities, impressed me more. *Runner's World* featured five of them, including a mother of four, an architect who run-commuted everywhere, and a speech pathologist by day who worked at her husband's restaurant by night.

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How could they be so fast with everything else they juggled? My sister and I jogged at their pace for 100 meters before gasping for breath and laughing at ourselves for trying.

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A year later, fresh from qualifying for and racing my first Boston Marathon, the women's stories resurfaced in my mind. If they could squeeze running that fast into their "normal" lives, could I? I'd already taken nearly 50 minutes off my marathon time but needed to slice at least 30 more to qualify for the Trials. I didn't claim talent; I ran in high school but deemed myself too mediocre for the collegiate level. But running marathons brought me back to the sport, and I knew—even if making the Trials proved impossible—the goal would keep me running.

I chiseled away at my PR, sometimes taking off a big chunk, sometimes a small shard, sometimes rolling backward. In 2010, at my sixth marathon, I aimed for a 3:05 on a hot Chicago day. I finished in a devastating 3:20. Despite the result, I trusted my training revealed improvement. Rather than backing off, I went for an even bigger PR the next spring and broke three hours. As Des Linden—who did not make that 2008 Olympic team, but did in 2012 and 2016 and won the 2018 Boston Marathon—says, “Keep showing up.”

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I channeled that new determination elsewhere. In 2014, after nearly five years in a neuroscience doctorate program (run commuting to the lab on weekends, just like the woman in *Runner’s World*), I felt ready to defend and graduate. My thesis committee disagreed. “Come back in a year,” they said. But I knew I just needed to keep showing up, working hard, until the laboratory equivalent of a 45-degree day with a tailwind arrived. Three months later, I asked again. My committee agreed, giving me my Ph.D.

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In my wildest dreams, I hoped to make the 2012 Trials. When I didn’t, instead of cowering to a goal too lofty, I created a blog named “Miles to the Trials,” as if 2016 was certain. In the fall of 2014, after three failed attempts to break 2:50, I still needed to slash 10 minutes off my PR. Before the California International Marathon, I wrote sub-2:43 on a champagne bottle and chilled it for the inevitable celebration.

On race morning, I started with the 2:42-pace pack, while friends following along worried my boldness would backfire. Five years and nine marathons after devising this crazy dream, I qualified for the Olympic Marathon Trials to be held in Los Angeles.

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I used my new confidence for more than champagne bottles. Even before I qualified, I launched a freelance science writing career, realizing that’s what I really wanted to do. After racing the 2016 Trials on a sweltering L.A. day, I announced I’d be back for 2020. I hoped to start a family first, but my 2008 heroes had kids (one had four!) and qualified for multiple Trials (one ran four!), so why couldn’t I?



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This week a few different people have reached out/mentioned to others that they've been inspired by my story(!!!). I knew one of those women felt that way, but had no idea of the others. Oftentimes (especially early on with my blog) I felt like I was writing into a void. The whole point of putting so much of myself online was to inspire people to realize they could do more than they ever imagined... but would anyone read it? It turns out yes, and now some of those readers have OTQs of their own. (So crazy awesome, I can't even tell you.) .

It means SOOO much to me when people tell me they were inspired by my journey. I bet anyone would love to hear the same, but I suspect some of us never tell our heroes what they've meant to us. Do you have anyone you've always looked up to but haven't told them? Tag and share in the comments, below. 🙌 I'll start:

Thanks (and 🥰) to:

🙌 @beckispell and all the other mamas at the 2016 Trials for showing me I could make it back even after having a kid

🙌 all the women at the 2008 Trials for showing me you can make the Trials as a "normal" person (e.g. not a pro) and the @runnersworldmag article (2nd photo) by @sarahlorgebutler about them (including @masterskimbrough, the only one I can find on here)

🙌 @karagoucher for being my idol from the day she ran her first marathon (about the time I ran my first BQ) .

Your turn! Leave a thank you in the comments! 🙌

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In the spring of 2017, I gave birth to my daughter. And then the hormones, the lack of sleep, the crying, and the certainty I was doing absolutely nothing right became crushing. *"I don't have the mom gene,"* I thought. *"I can't do this."*

Starting to run again finally lifted the black cloud. It reminded me that I remained tough and capable. As I chased the 2020 Trials standard, the person who could do hard things reemerged, albeit covered in spit up, with [separated abs](#), and bags under her eyes.

In 2018, I requalified and lowered my PR again. If I hadn't read that article 12 years ago, I may not have realized my potential. The Trials pursuit changed me, revealing a fierce determination I didn't know existed, strengthening shaky self-esteem, and keeping me afloat when challenges threatened to sink me.

Having a meaningful, even audacious, goal to chase—whether it's a finisher medal, Boston qualifier, or Olympic Trials standard—reveals capability we didn't know we possessed. Turns out I can keep up with those women for more than 100 meters. It just took a few years of dreaming big to realize it.
