

Collier Lawrence

Reno's Olympic Steeplechase "A" Standard Qualifier



By Bob Burns

There were plenty of times when Collier Lawrence wondered whether she was spinning her wheels.

Given the promise she showed at Reno High School, where she won Lawrence "underperformed," to use her word, at Washington State. The years immediately following her collegiate career were riddled with injuries. At 24, with a bulging disk in her back, she thought she might have to walk away from the sport.

"There were periods last year when I couldn't even get my leg over a hurdle," Lawrence said.

For a steeplechaser, that's a problem. But there's something to be said for persistence, and Lawrence is suddenly reaping the rewards in this Olympic year. A year after not being able to run faster than 10:53 in the 3,000-meter steeplechase, the University of Nevada volunteer assistant coach clocked a stunning 10:01.19 at the Stanford Invitational on April 6.

That was 24 seconds faster than her four-year-old previous best and bettered the provisional "B" qualifying standard for this summer's U.S. Olympic Track and Field Trials.

Three weeks later, returning to Stanford for the Payton Jordan Invitational, Lawrence dropped another big chunk of time, removing the provisional designation with a Trials "A" standard clocking of 9:53.79.

In three weeks, Lawrence chopped 35 seconds off her personal best and earned a free ticket to the Olympic Trials, which will be held June 21 – July 1 in Eugene, Ore. Qualifying heats in the women's steeplechase are June 25, and Lawrence will be one of the elite runners on the starting line.

"It doesn't feel real yet," Lawrence said. "It's more, 'OK, what's the next thing I have to do? What do I need to do to be one of those people who maybe has a chance with three laps left.'"

It's that single-mindedness that steered Lawrence through the frustrating years following her graduation from Washington State in 2008, according to her coach, Nevada assistant Kirk Elias.

"Collier is extraordinarily disciplined and is very focused," Elias said. "She's healthy for the first time in more than two years. One can't run if one is hurt."

At Reno High School, Lawrence won several state championships in track and cross country. While she had a decent collegiate career, scoring points in the Pacific-10 Championships and qualifying for three NCAA regional meets, she failed to meet her own expectations.

"I did some good things, but mostly I never showed the potential I should have shown," Lawrence said. "I never put in the work I should have done. In the whole scheme, I'd have to say I underperformed."

After staying at Washington State for a year after her eligibility ran out to serve as a volunteer assistant coach, Lawrence moved back to Reno, where she had enjoyed her greatest success as a runner.

In 2003, she won the intermediate girls title at the National Junior Olympic Cross County Championships. As a high school junior, she won a 1600/3200m double at the Nevada state track meet.

But home cooking didn't restore her health. While younger sister Mel was earning multiple All-America honors at the University of Washington, Collier wasn't able to put in the consistent training she needed to get back on track.

"There were times when I thought that maybe I'd reached as far as I could go," Collier said. "But then I'd have that one workout where I'd say, 'No way. I can do better.' At my core, I always knew I had something more."

She didn't run at all for two months last summer. Her lower back always felt tight, a problem that affected her hamstrings as well. Elias told her to be patient and changed her lifting program slightly. By the turn of the year, she was able to run 85 miles a week.

"I knew that she could run faster than she had," Elias said. "I had no idea how much faster, though I suspected quite a bit."

Distance races at Stanford are sometimes seen as glorified time trials, with perfect weather conditions, pacesetters and runners racing the clock more than each other.

That's what made her second Stanford breakthrough so satisfying. Running in the second of three steeplechase sections on April 29, Lawrence found herself running not just freely but actually racing.

She finished second in the 15-woman field, trailing only Angela Maria Figueroa Palacios of Colombia (9:52.35). Lawrence's second-place clocking of 9:53.79 put her among the fastest dozen U.S. women of the season through the end of May.

"It was nice to get a good time and also feel like I was racing," Lawrence said. "I love to race, but it's scary. You go to this dark, scary place."

Lawrence assists Elias with Nevada's distance runners on a voluntary basis. Her parents moved to Oregon when the last of three children went off to school, but Collier is living in the home she grew up in. She works part-time at a running store as well as at a Reno restaurant, giving her the flexibility to pursue her running dreams.

Unfortunately, while Collier is running injury-free for the first time in years, her sister is recovering from a stress fracture and was granted a sixth year of eligibility at Washington, which she hopes to use in 2013.

The big sister can commiserate. Even with her injury history, Collier has no plans to give up the grueling steeplechase.

"I like the challenge of the steeplechase," Collier said. "If you're having a bad race, you can't fake it, because you've got all those hurdles you've got to clear."