

July 23: Shannon Rowbury Reports from Teddington

In an exclusive interview with Bob Burns



Shannon Rowbury's final preparations for the Olympics are taking place in the London suburb of Teddington, where the San Francisco runner feels more at home than she did four years ago in China. She's staying in a private residence and is finding plenty of open space to run, including Bushy Park, one of London's largest.

"The difference is night and day," Rowbury said via Skype from Great Britain. "It's nice to be able to talk to people here. Beijing was a great experience, but everything was so foreign."

Rowbury finished seventh in the 1,500 meters at the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, China, a strong showing in her first season as an international competitor. She returns to the London Olympics in a much different place – as a seasoned professional who has shown she has the talent and moxie to compete with the world's best.

"I'm really grateful to have this experience under my belt," Rowbury said. "I've been to two world championships, but the Olympic Games is a whole different ballgame. I'm glad I've been through it once before."

Olympic track and field competition begins on Aug. 3. First-round heats in the women's 1,500 are Aug. 6, followed by semifinals on Aug. 8 and the final on Aug. 10. With her race coming near the end of the Games, Rowbury plans to avoid the distractions of the Olympic Village and remain in Teddington until it's time to race.

"I'm really pleased with the program I'm following," she said. "I'm feeling healthy and excited to compete."

Four years ago, the lead-up to the Olympics was a blur for Rowbury, an NCAA indoor mile champion at Duke who had to cut her senior season short due to a hip injury. After returning to the Bay Area and joining up with renowned middle-distance coach John Cook, Rowbury lowered her 1,500 best by 11 seconds in 2008, all the way down to 4:00.33.

“Making the team (in 2008) was as far as my dreams went,” she said. “I was like, ‘Woo-hoo, I did it!’ I was torn when I got to the Olympics, because part of me wanted to do all the exciting things that go with it but I knew I couldn’t if I wanted to be at my best in the races.

“This time I have five years of professional running under my belt. I know what to expect, and I’ve been able to plan accordingly.”

In 2009, Rowbury won a bronze medal at the World Championships in Berlin, proving that her breakthrough season of the year before wasn’t a fluke. She had another outstanding season in 2010, ranking seventh in the world in the 1,500 and lowering her 3,000-meter best to 8:31.38, second all-time among U.S. women.

Injuries to both Achilles’ tendons made the 2011 season a struggle. Though she did manage to qualify for the World Championships, she failed to make the final in South Korea. U.S. teammate Jenny Simpson wound up winning the gold medal at worlds, and another American, Morgan Uceny, finished the season ranked first in the world.

“It was so frustrating, watching Jenny win the gold medal and Morgan running so well,” Rowbury said. “I was thinking, I can do that.”

Those three, along with Anna Pierce, figured to be the leading contenders for the three U.S. Olympic berths entering the 2012 season. Rowbury showed good early-season form, clocking 4:05.92 in mid-May.

In the pressure cooker of the U.S. Olympic Trials in Eugene, Rowbury finished second behind Uceny, who won in 4:04.59. Rowbury (4:05.11) nipped Simpson (4:105.17) for second place. Pierce finished a distant fifth.

“The only disappointment for me was that I didn’t win,” Rowbury said. “It’s tough when you go into a race knowing you have to be in the top three, because at the end of the day, it’s just qualifying. The only difference is, there’s five weeks between that race and the Olympics. It was a great dress rehearsal for London.”

Since arriving in Europe, Rowbury finished seventh in the 1,500 at the London Grand Prix and placed fourth in the 3,000 meters in Monaco. Her 8:39.33 in the 3,000 is the fastest time by an American this season.

While there have been several extremely fast races in Europe this summer – five women broke four minutes in the 1,500 in a Paris race – Rowbury is confident that her strength will serve her well through three rounds of the Olympics. Additionally, the world leader in the women’s 1,500, Mariem Alaoui Selsouli of Morocco, recently failed a drug test and will likely receive a lifetime ban.

“I love the fact that there are rounds at the Olympics,” Rowbury said. “I think it separates the athletes. I think I’m prepared to run a fast time, but if it’s a tactical race, I’m prepared for a sit-and-kick finish.”

In between racing on the European circuit and training at high-altitude camps in Mexico and Utah, Rowbury spends about six months a year at her San Francisco home. While other top middle-distance runners gravitate toward running towns such as Boulder, Colo., and Eugene, Ore., Rowbury is more comfortable living in the Bay Area.

“I think of San Francisco as a great place for a runner to live and train,” said Rowbury, who runs the trails of Golden Gate Park and does much of her track work at St. Ignatius High School. While she’s sponsored by Nike, she’s quick to stress her affiliation the Bay Area Track Club.

“I have a really great support system at home,” Rowbury said.

At 27, Rowbury should be hitting her stride as a world-class runner. She certainly has high expectations for herself in her next meet, just up the road from Teddington.

“Coming home with a medal would be a success for me,” she said. “And on the right day, I think I’m capable of standing on top of the podium.”