



Photo courtesy of Kevin R. Morris (KevinMorris.com)

Lauren Wallace: USATF Pacific Athlete to Track

By Bob Burns

Nature and nurture tried their darndest to make Lauren Wallace a distance runner. Growing up in Ukiah, she accompanied her parents and dogs on hikes through the wide-open countryside and long runs around Lake Mendocino.

“My mom and dad were distance runners,” Wallace said. “My mom made me run two miles each morning.”

But when she had her choice of running events at Ukiah High School, Wallace chose to be a sprinter. She proved to be the speediest girl in town, and she still viewed herself as a sprinter when she transferred from UC Riverside to UC Davis in 2009.

It wasn't until her coaches suggested trying races with more than one turn than Wallace took the path she's on today.

“I guess I fought it for as long as I could,” she said.

Fast-forward to March 1, 2015, when Wallace trailed the leaders with one lap remaining in the women's 1,000-meter final at the USATF Indoor Championships outside Boston. Wallace set the early pace but was passed on the third of four 200-meter laps by Charlene Lipsey and Stephanie Brown. Wallace wasn't as confident as you'd think an ex-sprinter would be in that position.

"In high school, I was known for a lethal kick, but I hadn't shown it as a professional," Wallace said. "As a professional, everyone has a lethal kick."

But Wallace had noticed in other indoor races that the leaders had a habit of drifting toward the middle lanes as they came off the final turn. After being passed, Wallace held fast to her position on the inside, and, sure enough, Lipsey provided an opening by drifting wide entering the homestretch.

Wallace sprinted to victory on the inside in 2 minutes, 40.42 seconds, two-tenths ahead of Treniere Moser and Brown. Lipsey finished fourth.

(View the video of her race here:

http://www.usatf.tv/gprofile.php?mgroup_id=45365&do=videos&video_id=136042-Women-039-s-1000m-Final-USATF-Indoor-Track-and-Field-Championships-2015)

"I guess my old kick finally came back," Wallace said.

Since finding her niche as an 800-meter runner at UC Davis sophomore, Wallace displayed steady progress, cutting her time to 2:02.91 as a senior. Her eighth-place finish at the 2013 NCAA Championships earned her All-America honors and a professional contract with Oiselle, the women's running apparel company.

Wallace trimmed her personal best to 2:02.16 in the heats of the 2014 USA Outdoor Championships in Sacramento before bowing out in the semifinals. Even after winning a couple of summer races in Europe, Wallace appeared to be a few years away from seriously competing for a national title.

But just two months into the pre-Olympic year, in a race even longer than her preferred 800, the ex-Ukiah sprinter was a national champion. A couple of weeks later, relaxing at a coffee shop following a morning run along the American River bike trail, Wallace sounded almost as surprised by her breakthrough as she looked when she crossed the finish line in Massachusetts.

"I experienced so many emotions at once," Wallace said. "It's crazy. You know you're capable of doing something like this, but to do it, and to do it by coming from behind ... it was amazing.

"It was a big step. A necessary step."

Wallace, 25, lives in Sacramento and trains under Drew Wartenburg, her former coach at UC Davis who now heads the NorCal Distance Project. While she had already made the switch to the middle distances when Wartenburg began coaching her at Davis, there's no doubt in Wallace's mind as to who is the architect of her success.

"While a lot of things have to go right to run at Lauren's level, nothing about her recent performances surprises me," said Wartenburg, who also coaches Olympian Kim Conley.

Wallace's goals this season include making the final at the USA Outdoor Championships and meeting the IAAF's world "A" standard of 2:01.00. She spent much of April training at high altitude in Flagstaff, Ariz., and plans to return to the track on May 2 with a 1,500 at the Payton Jordan Invitational. Her first outdoor 800 will come May 14 in the HOKA ONE ONE Middle Distance Classic at Occidental.

"I want to use this year as a building year. I need more experience. I know I'm not up there yet with Ajee Wilson," Wallace said, referring to the reigning U.S. outdoor champion. "I know I can run a lot faster than 2:02. I just need to do it in a race."

She's come a long way from Ukiah, where her best times in the sprints (12.9 in the 100, 25.9 in the 200 and 59.0 in the 400) pale next to her middle-distance evolution. But the small-town upbringing shaped her in other ways – the hikes with her father, Scott Wallace; the runs with her mother, Lisa Cortina; the countless hours spent riding her horse through the Mendocino County fields.

"I'm a granola, Northern California-type girl, Wallace said. "I love hiking, nature, the outdoors," Wallace said. "People hate hiking with me. I like going from Point A to Point B in a certain time. It was instilled in me at an early age."

Wallace majored in international relations and French at UC Davis. She talks about earning a graduate degree in environmental studies or possibly going to law school. But she also talks about remaining competitive on the track through 2020.

"I absolutely love pushing my body to heights I never thought possible," she said. "I can't imagine my life without running."