

## Kim Conley's Road to Rio Success!



photo by Brian Davies, Register-Guard

*By Bob Burns*

EUGENE, Ore. – Four years ago, the look on Kim Conley's face was one of complete incredulity.

Sunday, it was a look of tired relief.

Both were the looks of a United States Olympian.

Conley, a 30-year-old resident of West Sacramento, finished third in the women's 5,000 meters at the U.S. Olympic Track & Field Trials in 15 minutes, 10.62 seconds, nine seconds faster than she ran in 2012 when she qualified for her first Olympic team.

Her gritty finish Sunday was retribution for losing a shoe and having to drop out of the 10,000 meters on July 2. Conley had geared her training toward the longer race and would not have even run the 5,000 at Hayward Field had she made the U.S. team in the 10,000.

"I feel relieved and triumphant," Conley said. "My heart was in the 10,000 this year, and obviously it was a big disappoint to have my shoe come off.

"But I feel like I turned the page really well."

Molly Huddle won in 15:05.01, adding the 5,000-meter title to the one she won eight days earlier in the Trials 10,000. Shelby Houlihan was second in 15:06.62.

In 2012, Conley claimed the third and final Olympic spot in the 5,000 by 0.04 seconds, simultaneously slipping under the Olympic qualifying standard of 15:20 by just .21 seconds.

At the time, her highest finish in the USA Championships was a 10<sup>th</sup> 2011. She never qualified for the NCAA Championships during her four years at UC Davis.

In her second Olympic Trials, Conley's margin over fourth-place finisher Emily Infeld was more than three seconds.

"It wasn't a photo finish this time, but I think I leaned a little at the line, just to be sure," Conley said, laughing while holding a small U.S. flag after the race.

In the Trials 10,000 – the distance at which she won her only U.S. title, in 2014 at Sacramento State – Conley was running with the lead pack when another runner clipped her heel on the 10<sup>th</sup> lap. Conley veered wide into an outside lane, sat down on the track, and struggled to put her shoe back on.

She then continued running but trailed the leaders by about 10 seconds. Conley moved into seventh place with eight laps remaining but decided to drop out with a little more than a mile left in the race, to conserve energy for Thursday's qualifying round in the 5,000.

After winning her 5,000 heat on Thursday in 15:40.04, Conley and her husband/coach Drew Wartenburg plotted their strategy for the final. The first objective was to stay out of trouble, and Conley ran much of Sunday's final in the second lane. She ran fourth or fifth for most of the first 10 laps.

"I was trusting that Molly (Huddle) would keep the race honest, because she's such a strong runner," Conley said. "And I knew there several athletes in the field, like Shelby (Houlihan), who come from a 1,500-meter background, so I didn't want it to be a last-lap sprint. I thought I could run a good last 1,000 meters."

Conley was fourth at the bell, a stride behind Houlihan. Huddle and Houlihan pulled away from her in the final 400 meters, but Conley passed Infeld into third on the backstretch and held the final Olympic spot in the run for home.

"I knew that Molly probably wasn't going to run the 5,000 at the Olympics, but I really wanted to be in the top three and get take a victory lap," Conley said.

Conley's final-day performance capped a strong Olympic Trials for the NorCal Distance Project, the Sacramento-based group coached by Wartenburg. Kate Grace earlier won the 800 meters, almost a year to the day that she moved from Oregon to Sacramento to join Wartenburg's club.

“It confirms for us that we’re doing the right thing,” Wartenburg. “We were convinced that Kim would make the team this summer, but it certainly didn’t follow the script.”

After qualifying for her second Olympic team, Conley found a silver lining to her roundabout road to Rio de Janeiro.

“If I had made the team in the 10,000, we would have left Eugene and gone immediately into altitude training,” Conley said. “This way, I got to stick around for the entire Trials and got to experience it in full.

“I’m very relieved and excited to have made the team, and looking forward to what’s ahead.”

Jordan Hasay, the former Mission Prep (San Luis Obispo) standout, finished 13<sup>th</sup> in the 5,000 final 15:51.68, one spot in front of Redding’s Sara Hall (15:54.99).

While Conley and Wartenburg were having breakfast Monday, the morning after the Trials, they wondered about how things would have been had she not been flat-tired in the 10,000.

“Kim said, ‘I really feel like I would have made that 10,000 team,’” Wartenburg said. “We’ll never know, obviously, but in the end, we’re just thankful that she had a second chance.”



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