



CHELSEA WORKING OUT IN THE SHADOW OF MARIN COUNTY'S MT. TAMALPIAS *photo courtesy of GU Energy*

Chelsea Reilly Sodaro on the Road to Rio

By Bob Burns

Chelsea Reilly Sodaro's first memory of the sport that became her livelihood goes back to when she was five or six years old. She would ride her bicycle with her dad as he ran on the paths of the UC Davis Arboretum.

It's easy to imagine the carefree joy the young girl felt, pedaling away alongside Putah Creek with Peter Reilly, a high school history teacher who ran in several Boston Marathons. Even at that early age, she remembers being impressed by the hard work her father put into accomplishing his goals.

"I really admired the way my dad stuck with it," Chelsea said. "It made a deep impression on me."

The apple didn't fall far from the arboretum. Two decades removed from those bucolic bike rides, Sodaro's career is a testament to sticking with it. A succession of injuries during her first three years at UC Berkeley kept her from showing the promise she demonstrated as a Davis High School standout. Finally healthy as a college senior, Reilly enjoyed a modest breakthrough in 2012, earning All-America honors in cross country, indoor track and outdoor track.

But it wasn't until 2013, training regularly under the direction of former Cal coach Magdalena Lewy Boulet, that Sodaro emerged as one of the top female distance runners in the country. She blossomed on her first European circuit, claiming personal bests of 15 minutes, 10.14 seconds (5,000 meters), 8:47.34 (3,000) and

4:08.77 (1,500). She finished the season ranked fifth in the U.S. in the 5,000 and had a shoe deal with Saucony.

“In my first year out of college, I expected a personal best every time I touched the line,” said Sodaro, known by her maiden name of Reilly before marrying former Cal steeplechaser Steve Sodaro at her parents’ home in late 2015. “It almost felt easy.”

The feeling didn’t last. After running 8:52.23 for 3,000 meters in June 2014, injuries again derailed her progress. Sodaro finished a distant 13th in the 5,000 at the USA Outdoor Championships in Sacramento. A major back injury limited her to just three races in 2015.

“I had a great first year out of college, but it doesn’t really mean much if you can’t back it up,” Sodaro said. “The last two years were tough. It’s challenging when you see yourself up there with the best people but you can’t do what your mind wants to do.”

Compounding matters was her training situation. Lewy Boulet, a member of the U.S. Olympic marathon team in 2008, had taken a full-time job as an executive with GU Energy Labs, a Berkeley-based maker of sports nutritional products. Lewy Boulet no longer had the time to continue coaching Sodaro.

Feeling she needed a stable training environment, Sodaro joined Furman Elite, a group of professional runners based out of Greenville, S.C. Furman Elite’s coach is Robert Gary, a two-time Olympian in the steeplechase. Sodaro left the familiar environs of Northern California in August. Steve Sodaro, a filmmaker, quit his job to join his wife in South Carolina.

“I think we have everything we need to be successful,” Chelsea Sodaro said. “It’s brought the love of the sport back to me. I feel like I did in high school and college, going to practice, being around a team. I have a tendency to get carried away in training, trying to kill every workout. Coach Gary is good about keeping the long view.”

While Sodaro and Lewy Boulet are wistful about the separation, they see the cross-country move as the right step in the 26-year-old runner’s development.

“I miss it every single day, but Chelsea deserves a situation where she can reach her full potential,” Lewy Boulet said. “She’s in great in great hands with Furman Elite.

“Besides, I believe that one day we’ll be reunited. I really do.”

Sodaro is equally grateful.

“Magda gave me my career,” Sodaro said. “She transformed me from a mediocre collegiate athlete to a 15:10 5k runner. She basically offered me all of her

knowledge. Although our paths have moved in different directions, I'll always be thankful for the opportunities she gave me."

Lewy Boulet calls Sodaro one of the most driven runners she's ever seen.

"Most runners, had they gone through the things Chelsea went through in college, they would have walked away from the sport," Lewy Boulet said. "But Chelsea could always see the light at the end of the tunnel. She wants it so bad.

Gary says he's retaining many aspects of the training program Sodaro followed under Lewy Boulet's direction.

"Chelsea's times speak for themselves, obviously," Gary said. "I feel I am very good at keeping people healthy. An athlete who's as motivated as Chelsea doesn't want to be told she can't do everything she wants. My primary job is to make sure that some adaptation occurs before we start adding new stress."

Following a month of high-altitude training in Flagstaff, Ariz., Sodaro entered the Pacific 10,000 Pursuit, an early December track race at Sacramento State's Hornet Stadium. Sodaro's first-ever 10,000 on the track resulted in a strong second-place finish behind Kim Conley, the 2014 national champion. Sodaro's time of 32:05.84 was well under the Olympic qualifying standard of 32:15.

Sodaro's next objective is to get the Olympic qualifying standard of 15:20 in the 5,000 meters, perhaps as soon as Saturday's Millrose Games in New York. She was disappointed with her finish (second) and time (9:04.46) in the 3,000 meters at last weekend's Music City Challenge indoor meet in Nashville, Tenn.

"I was hoping to run much faster and get the win," Sodaro said. "Things didn't quite go to plan, but I'll take my lumps and move on. I think this will only help me for the Millrose 5k and the rest of the season."

Gary and Sodaro believe the rest of her season could include the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Gary predicts a "very special year."

"This season is about qualifying for the Olympics," Sodaro said. "The Olympics only come around once every four years. I'd be remiss if I didn't give it everything."

Going back to the beginning, Sodaro was asked if she ever felt like getting off her bike and running with Dad.

"Oh, no," she responded. "It wasn't until I was 10 or 11 that I'd go along for his runs. I'd complain the whole out, then run as fast as I could going home."