

## On the Road to Rio: Alia Gray (5,000m, 10,000m, Marathon)

By Bob Burns

Alia Gray's college coach believed in her strongly enough to predict that she'd one day finish in the top 10 in the U.S. Olympic Trials women's marathon.

Gray, who at the time was debating whether to commit to a post-collegiate running career, wasn't sure about Chico State coach Gary Towne's prognostication. She was sure about one thing, however.

"I've never felt as though I was done with the sport," Gray said. "When I finish a race, I think, wow, that was awesome. Then I say, 'What's next?'"

It's safe to say, on several levels, that the 27-year-old Santa Rosa native had never experienced a race quite like last month's Olympic Trials marathon. Four years after graduating from Chico State, Gray justified Towne's confidence – and her decision to continue on – by running the race of her life in Los Angeles. In a field of 198 starters, Gray battled the heat and a fractured fibula in her right leg to wind up right where Towne said she would.

She finished 10<sup>th</sup> in 2 hours, 35 minutes and 47 seconds, a full four minutes faster than her previous best.

"For the most part, I was proud of how I did," Gray said by telephone from Boulder, Colo., where she has lived and trained the past two years. "I know I'm not the most talented runner. I wasn't a high-school phenom. But I know I can be really tough. My goal was to keep fighting the whole way."



**Alia Gray finishes 10<sup>th</sup> at the 2016 U.S. Olympic Marathon Trials in a breakthrough performance.** Photo courtesy of PhotoRun.com and LetRun.com

Gray suffered the fracture in November but was able to keep training on an anti-gravity treadmill. She ran personal bests in the 10,000 meters (32:29.06) and half-marathon (1:12:48) in the two months leading up to the Olympic Trials marathon.

“I got lucky with the injury since it was high up in my leg,” Gray said. “Still, the training cycle was draining mentally. It’s hard to prepare for the biggest race of your life while injured.”

The temperature in Los Angeles was 66 degrees for the 10:22 a.m. start of the women’s race, and it would climb to 73 by the finish, making it the hottest U.S. Trials marathon ever. Gray ran cautiously for the first 10 miles, about 40 seconds behind the leaders.

“At 15 miles, I could see people struggling ahead of me,” Gray said. “It wasn’t easy, but you have to remind yourself that everybody else is hurting, too. I felt strong and started passing some people.”

She worked her way up to nine place at one point but she was passed in the final two miles by the fast-finishing Katja Goldring, who crossed the line 26 seconds in front of Gray.

“The last three miles, it’s pretty much a case of putting one foot in front of the other,” Gray said.

Towne attended the Trials race and was able to congratulate Gray afterward. He predicts that she’ll eventually run as fast as his own personal best of 2:29 in the marathon.

“She’s right on target,” Towne said. “Alia isn’t necessarily driven to prove people wrong, but she has a great internal drive to explore just how far she can go in the sport.”

For much of her teenaged years in Santa Rosa, Gray was a talented but injury-plagued midfielder on the soccer pitch. She began running to recover from one of her knee surgeries. As a senior at Maria Carillo High School, after missing her junior track season with a stress fracture, Gray was the third runner on the cross country team. Her best prep time on the track as a senior was 11:03 for 3,200 meters.

Gray wanted to run in college but wondered whether she was good enough. A one-hour telephone conversation with Towne led her to consider and ultimately choose Chico State.

“I felt like I wouldn’t get lost in his program,” Gray said.

Gray won conference championships in the 5,000 meters and cross country while at Chico State, earning All-America honors in both sports and setting a school record in the 10,000 (34:31.09).

Interestingly, given the role altitude would play in her subsequent progress, Gray struggled in her final race for the Wildcats. At the 2012 NCAA Division II Track Championships at the 7,543-foot elevation of Alamosa, Colo., Gray placed eighth.

“She finished as an All-American, but her chances of winning or placing as high as we might have hoped were dashed by the altitude,” Towne said.

Gray did some traveling in Europe following graduation and then took a public relations job in San Francisco. Towne helped her formulate a training program and coached her from afar for one year. In 2013, Gray moved to Boulder, where the altitude (5,400 feet) and running-friendly community proved to be a great fit.

Soon after relocating, Gray asked the United States Olympic Committee to help her get in touch with former Adams State coach Joe Vigil. The 86-year-old coaching legend now lives in Arizona, but Gray heard that he still coached a handful of developmental athletes, so she reached out to see if he’d work with her.

“In meeting and visiting with her on several occasions, I was able to detect the passion I like to see in runners,” said Vigil, an assistant U.S. Olympic coach in 1988. “She has the level of commitment and hunger necessary to continue to improve. We have a good dialogue about all running matters, which makes for a good team.”

Gray says she makes sure to have a notebook at hand whenever she talks on the phone with Vigil.

“Running is his way of imparting life lessons,” she said. “For a man in his 80s, taking on a developmental athlete such as myself, shows how much he loves the sport.”

Even with her marathon breakthrough, Gray wants to continue running the 5,000 and 10,000 on the track. She lowered her 5,000 best to 15:35.6 last spring and finished 12<sup>th</sup> at the USA Championships in Eugene, where Vigil was honored as a “Legend Coach” by USA Track & Field.

In December, she lowered her 10,000 best to 32:29.06 in the Pacific Pursuit 10k at Sacramento State. She needs to bring her times down a bit to earn automatic entry into the U.S. Olympic Trials in July. The qualifying times are 15:25.0 and 32:25.0.

“When I look at world-class marathoners, their closing 10,000 is faster than my personal best,” Gray said. “I need to keep developing my track speed.”

With Vigil in Arizona, Gray’s day-to-day coach in Boulder is Richard Hansen, a chiropractor who is also her romantic partner. Alia, who assisted with the redesign

of the Pacific Association's website in late 2014, works between 30 and 40 hours a week as a freelance copywriter. She and Hansen are also closely involved with the Roots Running Project in Boulder.

"The dream of becoming a professional runner is becoming real," Gray said. "I've been really lucky in that the people I've worked with are excited about my career and have always been so supportive. I don't know how much better I can get, but it's going to be fun finding out."