

FEARLESS

Middle-distance star Shalane Flanagan will be tough to beat in Eugene.

By Matthew Dale

Runners cannot play scared. They've got to be willing to hit on 16 when the dealer's showing a face card. Pull out a 3-wood and go for the lake-fronted green. Dig into oxygen debt and go with the leader, even if they might crash and burn.

"You've got to be willing to take yourself into harm's way," says Toni Reavis, running historian and host of Elite Racing Television.

And as it is often said in the sports world, "You've got to dare to be great."

Shalane Flanagan has dared. And she has crashed, most famously at an NCAA cross country championship as a sophomore at the University of North Carolina, when she wound up walking up a hill.

But she has learned and grown and matured; and after recovering from a 2006 foot surgery that threatened her career, she has developed into an Olympic-medal contender at 5,000 meters.

Flanagan, who grew up outside Boston, celebrated her coming out party last January at the 2007 Reebok Boston Indoor Games. She had not raced in more than a year, after having a bone removed from her left foot. She was born with an extra bone in the foot, which caused a tendon to tear when she ran.

"[When I looked at my foot after surgery and saw it so mangled-looking], I thought, 'How am I even going to walk, let alone run on this foot?'" she recalls in an interview with the *Denver Post*. "I thought maybe I'd never be able to run indoor or cross country again, just because of the torque and the beating it gets. I feel really, really lucky that it went as well as it did."

Her comeback race on the track couldn't have gone much better. Racing near her hometown, Flanagan shadowed Ethiopia's Meseret Defar in the 3,000 meters, pulling even with the 5,000-meter Olympic gold medalist with about 500 meters to go. While Defar pulled away for the victory, Flanagan made a statement. Her time, 8 minutes, 33.25 seconds, shattered Regina Jacobs' U.S. record by nearly 6 seconds. Defar won by less than 3 seconds.

"I think that race put the belief in her that she could run with anybody," says Reavis.

If there was any doubt, it was removed come spring when Flanagan set the American record outdoors in the 5,000 meter, running 14:44.80 at the Mt. SAC Relays, held last April at Mt. San Antonio College in Walnut, Calif.

The results have caused a predictable by-product.

"I'm a lot more confident in myself and everything I'm doing," the 5-foot-5, 113-pound Nike athlete admits.

Flanagan, 26, is blessed with running genes. Her mother, Cheryl Treworgy, held the world record in the marathon for nearly two years in the early '70s (2:49:40). Flanagan's father, Steve, lived in Boulder, Colo., in the mid-70s when that college town planted its roots as a running mecca. Steve Flanagan clocked the 10K in 29:06.

"The funny thing is, I never really knew [about my parents' success] maybe until a couple of



"You've got to dare to be great."

years ago. My parents downplayed most of their accomplishments until I started running, and then they would kind of sneak in and say, 'Oh, by the way, I used to kind of run, and I was kind of good,'" says Flanagan, whose own resume includes three NCAA titles at the University of North Carolina (two in cross country) and four open national championships (three in cross country). She also earned a spot on the 2004 U.S. Olympic team in the 5,000 meters and headed to the Summer Games in Athens.

At the 2004 Olympic Trials, she demonstrated her assertiveness. Frustrated with the casual pace, Flanagan jumped to the lead and held it until the final 200 meters when she was passed by veterans Shayne Culpepper and Marla Runyan.

"I felt like I had to take it over, run my own race and take control of my destiny," Flanagan said at the time. "I just went with my gut instinct when I got out there. It's gotten me this far."

Flanagan, then 23, placed 11th in her semifinal heat at Athens and failed to advance to the finals. Expectations will be greater this summer at the 2008 U.S. Olympic Team Track & Field Trials in Eugene, Ore., where she'll again try to qualify in the 5,000.

"I think she has to be considered a medal contender," says Reavis.

Flanagan plans to race at longer distances leading up to the Trials. To maximize her potential, she trained at altitude for the first time this winter, working out in San Luis Potosi, Mexico.

Of the training, she says, "It seems to agree with me."

Guess so, based on her performance in February at the USA Cross Country Championships at Mission Bay in San Diego. Flanagan dominated the 8K, winning by 70 seconds, in 25:26.

"Everyone in America realizes she's definitely got the tools," says Reavis. "She's gritty, she's tough. She's got a good head."

Flanagan has one other thing going for her. Fearlessness.

Adds Reavis, "She's not afraid of putting herself out on the limb." ♦