

Biathlete ready for world stage

BY PAT HANSEN
for *The Montana Standard*

DEER LODGE — Nicole Hunt of Deer Lodge, with her husband-coach Ray and other members of the U.S. world biathlon teams, left recently to compete in the World Summer Biathlon Championships in Khanty-Mansiyusk, Siberia, ending Sunday.

At the world trials in Salt Lake City in July, Nicole was the top finisher among the five women selected for the team. Her teammates are Kristina Sabasteanski of Maine, Ann Sorenson of Indiana, Jill Troutner of Minnesota and 15-year-old Sara Studebaker of Idaho.

The men's team, which includes three Montanans, is headed by Marc Sheppard of West Yellowstone, the program director. The team is comprised of Scott Creel of Bozeman, Logan Hammer of Clancy, Danny Fink of Virginia, Lawton Redman of Vermont and Sheppard.

The biathlon combines cross country running and rifle shooting. It begins with a 1-kilometer run (.62137 mile), then shooting from a prone position at a three-inch target 50 meters away — as fast and as accurate as possible.

For every missed shot the athlete must run a 100-meter penalty loop. The next leg of the race is a two-kilometer run, then firing five shots at a target from a standing position. The last leg is another 1- or 2-kilometer run and five shots from a kneeling position.

The competition is held over three days. The final day is a relay with a team comprised of the top four athletes.

Nicole's edge is her speed. "When I miss a shot, I can run the penalty lap in 20 seconds and catch the others in the field," she said.

When it comes to shooting — breathing, stance and trigger pull are critical compo-



NICOLE HUNT, a Deer Lodge biathlete, poses with her Russian-made bolt action .22 rifle.

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nents for accuracy.

"Our coaches feel we all have a chance for a medal because we are all strong," Nicole said.

While growing up in Missoula, Kalispell and Illinois, Nicole, who always loved running, was an average runner in high school, running a 12:30.2 two-mile. When she enrolled at the University of Montana she walked onto the team, and began to blossom under the tutelage of coach Stu Melby.

When she transferred to Montana State University to complete her degree in nursing, she was a member of the Bobcat team as well. While in college she ran the 5K in 18 minutes and the 10K in 37 minutes.

SHE HAS BEEN running competitively for the past eight years. In addition to being a registered nurse, Nicole is a certified personal trainer. Her husband, Ray, a former coach at UM, has been her coach since 1995.

Nicole's year-long training schedule has helped her increase her speed each year. For the past two years she has been running, and winning, at

the elite level in many national and international races against world and Olympic runners.

From workout to workout she focuses on the next race, always setting short-term and long-term goals.

Last year she failed to meet her goal of qualifying for the nationals. The day of the race she was suffering from an upper respiratory infection and missed qualifying by six seconds.

"I had put all my marbles into one basket," she admitted. "I had to regroup, to think, 'Do I have it in me to refocus, to set the goal again, to be vulnerable and put everything into it?' For two months I didn't run. Ray is not only my coach, but my mentor, and he encouraged me to try again assuring me that I have the ability to run a 32-minute 10K and a 15-minute 5K."

Setting new goals and working hard, Nicole began running and working out again. This year she finished 11th in the Bloomsday 5K race in Spokane, the first American woman to cross the line against stiff competition from Kenyan, Russian and

Japanese runners.

In the Deseret News Race in Salt Lake City she finished third in the 10K. And in Seattle's St. Patrick's Day Dash, a 3K race, she and a Russian woman finished side-by-side, but coming to the finish chute Nicole was elbowed and finished second. She won the 5K at the Sweet Pea Festival in Bozeman last month.

Nicole's primary goal this year was to make the Olympic trials time standard in the 5K and 10K.

Running is very competitive in the U.S., and Nicole was edged out by seconds. She ran her personal-best times at the trials, but the last U.S. team member ran the 5K in 16:05 and she finished in 16:13. In the 10K the other runner finished in 33:20 and Nicole in 33:45.

Although deeply disappointed, she wasn't as devastated as last year. The pretty 5-3 blonde is 30 years old and knows that women peak in their mid-30s. She already is setting her sights on the 2004 Olympics.

"IT'S AMAZING how the body gets stronger and faster each year," she said. "This year I could see I was getting faster and faster, and that was a stimulus to train harder. Winning cash prizes is partly a motivator too," she admitted.

Her successes have also won her the endorsement of Brooks Shoe Co., which is her sponsor.

The running season begins in October or November and will be ending soon. Typically, she takes August off, but this year is different.

When Ray was asked by the national biathletes in Montana to be their trainer, he accepted, and then encouraged Nicole to try the biathlon. She purchased a rifle, began practicing, and found she enjoyed it.

Modest about her accom-

plishments as a runner and shooter (she can put three shots on top of each other), Nicole said, "I dabbled in a few biathlons before going to Salt Lake City. I got lucky because my running carried me. I ran fast, but the others are awesome shooters."

Nicole's training schedule involves three-a-day workouts on the track with long and short speed sprints, weight lifting, core work for abdomen and back muscles, plyometrics (high knee lifts and bounding) to develop leg muscles for power, cross training in swimming and cycling, stretching and shooting.

Before she was introduced to the biathlon, Nicole had never shot a rifle. Her .22 rifle is a Russian-made bolt action that weighs 12 pounds and is extremely accurate. Eating properly is a big part of her training program as well. Ray is a registered dietician (he works at Montana State Prison) and supervises her dietary program too.

Nicole and Ray left last week with planned visits in Prague and Moscow.

Khanty-Mansiysk, Siberia, is at the same latitude as Fairbanks, Alaska. The weather is predicted to be moderate, and the sea level altitude should be a great advantage to Nicole, who has been training at our high altitude.

Nicole is excited about this new adventure.

"I want people to understand the sport, and consider competing in it. ... You never know what a person's potential is until you try."