



Interview with Nicole Hunt Interview conducted July 13, 2006 By Meghan Hicks Like Nicole Hunt, Meghan Hicks lives, runs, works, and plays in Montana. This is her EliteRunning.com reporting debut Nicole Hunt has an enduring positive attitude, and it was laced throughout her interview. Even here, atop Mount Washington after a grueling hill climb in the 2006 Mount Washington Road Race, Hunt is still all smiles. (Photo by [MickFoto/NERunner](#))

Nicole Hunt, a professional runner, personal trainer, and coach from Montana, was crowned the U.S. Women's Mountain Running Champion June 17 at the Mount Washington Road Race. Hunt's running prowess extends outside of mountain running scene as well; she finished 18th with a 2:40 PR at the 2004 U.S. Olympic Marathon Trials. With an outstanding fourth-place, 2:43:25 finish at the 2005 Twin Cities Marathon, Hunt has already secured a 2008 U.S. Olympic Marathon Trials qualifier. Hunt also sports PRs of 1:16 (half marathon), 33:24 (10,000m), and 15:52 (5,000m).

Hunt and her husband, Ray Hunt, live, run, and play in the small town of Deer Lodge, Montana, which is nestled within some of the state's finest wilderness. EliteRunning.com spoke with Hunt by telephone from her home, where she's currently training for the World Mountain Running Championships to be held September 10th in Bursa, Turkey.

In June, you became the U.S. Women's Mountain Running Champion at Mount Washington. Describe for us your experience at that race, which features a course that gains 4,650 vertical feet over 7.6 miles. What was your strategy going into such a unique race? How did you feel during the climb? Was the outcome as you wished it to be?

Prior to this race, I had no mountain racing experience, so I was not certain what to expect. I imagined the course to be very steep and trained on steep hills but no words can describe the feeling I felt when I first saw the course. I was in awe of the sudden vertical grade change of the course. I discovered that I did not know the definition of steep before this race started but I soon found out. Anna Pichrtova, took the pace out hard. She seemed to be surging at each point where the grade dropped down under 12%. Although, she probably did not surge as I felt she did but instead maintained a steady even pace throughout. My calves and lungs were burning, and I so wanted to rest a little but Anna kept hammering the pace. We were a couple of minutes ahead of my goal pace at two miles so at that point I decided I better back off or I might not make my goal of being one of the top two Americans. My race strategy was to try to stay with Anna as long as I felt good and stay within my goal splits for myself. I was right on goal pace halfway and Anna was within about 100m of me. However, 100m in a mountain race is a long way to make up ground. I felt really strong during the entire race. I loved the finish. You climb about 100m up a 25% grade hill to the finish line. When you reach the top, it is such a fantastic feeling. I was so happy to see the finish tape that I could not stop smiling. I was thrilled with the outcome.

As the U.S. Women's Mountain Running Champion, you will represent the U.S. at the World Mountain Running Championships

in Turkey. How are you preparing for another unique course that gains 865 vertical meters over 8.5 kilometers on a trail? After I finished Mount Washington, I did a section where I worked on my speed, because I had such a long cycle of doing hills before that. Now I'm going to start working on hills again, focusing on the long hill climb. I'm doing a race this weekend in Montana that is a four mile hill climb. It's probably about 10-12% grade. It's going to be very similar to what I'm going to see in Turkey. I'm going to focus on doing two hill workouts a week, and maybe another workout, a track workout or a tempo run.

In Turkey, what do you expect your competition to be like? What are your race goals? I will expect [my competition] to be very difficult. I know that Anna [Pichrtova] is going to be there. I would love to get top 10. I'm going to try to stay with the leaders.

Mountain running races are unique racing opportunities in which you have been highly successful. While you are a versatile runner with talent at many distances and in many types of running environments, how have you come to be a mountain runner? How did you discover and/or develop this interest? Is part of it that you're from Montana, a place known for its mountains? I have trained a lot in the mountains. I think that running up a mountain really builds the stamina you need for a marathon. Last year, I looked at running the Mountain Running Championships. I thought that would be really fun, something new that I've never done. So, I did Mount Washington.

Speaking of Montana, what is it like to train and race in Montana, where mountains and trails are outside your back door? What are some advantages and disadvantages to running in Montana? Spectacular scenery, I can just go out my door, numerous trails and dirt roads. Another advantage is that there's such a large community of runners and we're all friends and we all know each other. Whenever I go to a race, it's like seeing a big family, even though the state is so large. There are so many people, we network, we e-mail, and we had a running camp last year. A disadvantage for me is that I don't feel really safe running on the trails by myself because of mountain lions and bears. The mountain lions scare me most. I've never seen a mountain lion, though. So, I need to run with a friend when I go out in the wilderness.

Many EliteRunning.com readers have little experience with true wilderness and true wildlife. You said that you counter those dangers by running with other people. When you go out on a trail run in Montana, describe for us how else you prepare yourself? I make sure to look on a map and know where I'm going. I tell someone where I'm going. I bring mace with me sometimes. Another obstacle is hunters, and I have to wear orange. I run with a buddy and I make noise. I have encountered bears and, if they see you, they just run away. As long as you back off you're fine. I've seen a grizzly bear while hiking and it did come toward us but it we scared it enough that it left after a few minutes. I guess I prepare myself mentally and go out with a friend.

Can you paint us a picture of a 'perfect' training day that you've had in Montana? Describe for us the run, the scenery, the weather, your training partners. I can think of one that I had last year, outside of Glacier National Park. It was a beautiful day with clear blue skies. The temperature was in the 50s. It was a long run, about 20 miles. We were on a dirt road where you could see the mountains, which had snow on them. The air was really crisp. It was grizzly [bear] country, but there were five of us. At the end of the long run, we soaked in a river. We had watermelon, pastries at a little pastry shop, and they were the best pastries, we were starving! I really recommend that run.

As a professional runner, your training program is complex. What is a typical day of training like for you? In addition to running, does your program have other elements, such as cross training and strength training? Yes, I usually run in the morning. If it's a hard workout, I will do 10 or 13 miles. Then I will usually recover at the house. Later in the day, I'll do something like strength work or I also incorporate something like plyometrics. I occasionally do cross training. We have a Stairmaster, an elliptical trainer, a NordicTrack, and a stationary bike in the basement. So I have a wide variety of [cross training] options.

Do you have a favorite running workout? My favorite workout would be the hard workouts. I would say my favorite hard workout would be a long run with friends and doing a progression-type run, where you start out at a moderate effort and you progress your effort until you're running quite fast at the end. I also love running in the mountains, you know, a 16-mile progression run through the mountains.

What is your typical weekly mileage? When I'm training for a marathon about 80 miles. I'm not training for a marathon right now. I'm not a high mileage runner, maybe 60 miles/wk.

Do you have training partners? I do, but they're men [laughs]. There are several good masters men who live out here. They're about my speed and so they're terrific training partners.

We've heard that you've suffered from plantar fasciitis in the past. Have you had other running-related injuries? How do you work to prevent injuries? How do you recover from them? I have suffered from plantar fasciitis twice. Most recently after the Olympic Trials Marathon [in 2004]. What I do is to take time off, I don't run, and I do cross train, such as a workout in the pool. And I try to do other things like biking and hiking. I try to take care of myself. I also seek medical advice. As far as other injuries, I've been really lucky.

As we've mentioned, you have notable versatility to your running talent. In addition to your mountain running successes, we've also noted your recent performances at the marathon distance. We imagine you are looking ahead towards the 2008 U.S. Olympic Trials in Boston. Is this a longer-term goal for you? How will you prepare for the Trials? Absolutely, I'm going to prepare for the Olympic Trials. I believe that you should do only one marathon a year. I'm actually not doing [a marathon] this year. My goal is to start training for the Trials next fall and not do another marathon until then, so I can put forth my best effort at the Trials. I will count back about six months and start training then.

Do you have any staple elements of your training program tailored for the marathon distance? I believe in quality over quantity. I do a lot of workouts at goal marathon pace at altitude. I think that 10 to 12 miles at goal marathon pace is my staple marathon workout.

To clarify, you live and train at elevation. Do you run a modified marathon goal pace to account for the elevation, or do you run your actual marathon goal pace up there at elevation? I'm running my marathon goal pace at elevation.

What is the hardest part for you in racing a marathon? The hardest part of the race for me is probably from about 10 to 20 miles. That's a lonely, long distance. I think this is because I'm not close to the end, I can't smell the finish line yet. The last 10k, yes, it's tough, but you can prepare your mind and your body for the last 10k through training.

In addition to being a professional runner, you also work as a personal trainer and coach. What is your job like? How many hours do you work? Do you find that your job enhances or detracts from your running career? I think that my job enhances my running career. I love what I do. I started my online business in personal training, I guess, about six years ago. Ever since then it's been rewarding and meaningful. It depends on the day, but I work anywhere from four to seven hours a day. I try to take weekends off. It's really flexible. My husband works 10-hour days, and has Tuesdays off, so it allows me to work when he's gone.

As a professional runner, do you ever find yourself making personal sacrifices for your sport? I think I see professional running as taking care of the little things, like eating healthy and going to bed early, having a set schedule. I don't see these as sacrifices. I enjoy what I do. I make choices every day based on how [that choice] will help me get faster.

Do you, then, look at life as, 'What can I do that will help make me faster,' rather than 'What am I doing that's detracting from the rest of my life?' Yes.

What do you do when you aren't running? What are your outside hobbies and interests? What's your favorite food? When I'm not running, I love to hike. My husband and I go hiking all the time. I love to walk. My favorite food, I really love all foods. But I guess my favorite food is pizza. I love pizza. I love chocolate and caramel. But I try to eat healthy. I drink soy milk. I eat nuts and wild fish. I don't eat any meat from a store, but I do eat wild meat.

Do you have a really funny running story, something that perhaps happened on a training run or in a race? [Laughs] The one thing I can think of now is, when we first moved here, the police would follow me around as I was running because they didn't know what I was doing. Runners are scarce out here, so they would actually follow me around.

Were they just curious or did they suspect you of deviant behavior? I don't know! Afterwards, they realized that I was just a runner and they were really friendly.

So are you now a common sight in your small town? Yes, they all know me as the runner. Now I'm the runner going to Turkey [laughing].

Training and racing hard is often a mind-over-matter affair. What inspires you when a training run or a race feels particularly tough? I try not to have negative thoughts. I put them aside and think of everything I've done to work towards a goal. So, I replace negative thoughts with positive thoughts. I also think about, when you reach your goal, how good it feels. It gives you such a sense of sweet satisfaction. I really try hard to focus on my goals.

We've talked about your short-term goals with respect to mountain running and your longer-term goals with respect to the marathon. Aside from these goals, what do you envision for your running career over the next year, or five years? Another goal of mine is to qualify for the Olympic Trials in the 10,000. I feel like I haven't had the right race to run fast [in the 10,000]. I've encountered some obstacles, be it the weather or something else, even though I'm in the best shape I've ever been in. I would love to run 2:37 or faster in the marathon. I would like to do more mountain running. I really enjoy the team events.

Anything else that you would like to add? When I walked on the University of Montana team in 1992, I hadn't broken 20 minutes for the 5k. With a little guidance, I became faster every year. One of my college coaches said to me, 'Someday you're going to run a 34 minute 10k.' At the time I was running 38 minutes for 10k. My jaw just dropped and I thought, 'No way!' And then my husband said, 'You can run even faster.' I guess I would just like to add that if you believe in yourself and your goals, you never know how fast you can be.