



Nicole Hunt Interview

by Duncan Larkin, 2 October 2006.

Nicole Hunt running the 2005 USA 8K Championships at Randall's Island in New York City, where she placed 13th with a time of 27:34. Photo by: Alison Wade, New York Road Runners

On October 9, Nicole Hunt, 36, will race in the largest all-women's 10K in the U.S., the Tufts Health Plan 10K for Women. In September, Hunt placed ninth at the World Mountain Trophy in Bursa, Turkey, and led the U.S. women's team to a gold medal; this was the first U.S. gold in the race's 22-year history.

A resident of Deer Lodge, Montana, Hunt is a versatile runner who runs everything from mountain races and the marathon to track 10Ks. She placed 18th at the 2004 U.S. Olympic Trials, setting a PR of 2:40:39. In June, she won the U.S. Women's Mountain Running Championship at Mount Washington, New Hampshire.

It's possible that you are the only Montana resident registered in the Tufts 10K. It's a fact that you are the highest-ranked mountain runner in the world racing circuit. Why are you competing in a flat 10K in the Northeast? I'm excited to race the best women in the US. I know there's going to be great competition there, and that's what I'm after. I'm going to go out and try and run the best possible race on that day.

I read in a recent interview that you are looking to qualify for the Olympic Trials in the 10,000 meters, and that you were looking for the right race in order to do this. Is Tufts the right road race to get you ready for the right track race? Yes. I look at every race as a learning experience. So I am always looking at what I can do to make myself a better runner for my goal race and my next goal race will be to try and hit the 10,000-meter standard.

Where are you thinking about trying to run the Olympic standard? That's undecided yet. However, it will be in the spring—maybe Stanford or the Mount SAC Relays. I guess it depends on where the competition is going to be, and if I can fit it into my schedule.

From winning the U.S. mountain running title, to placing ninth in the world at the Mountain Running Trophy race, to qualifying for the 2004 marathon trials, to now racing a 10K, you are clearly an incredibly versatile runner. Do you think that running this wide of a range of distances and events limits your ability to focus in on and run better in one race? Are you running all these events and distances because you love the sport so much, or is it something else? I think it's a combination of everything. I love trying new things. The variety keeps me interested in running, and I also believe that the mountain running has helped me with my road racing.

How so? I believe running up mountains has helped me with my stamina and strength. It should feel more comfortable when I'm ready to run my goal race with that type of training.

In last year's Tufts, the top three times were 33:00, something that hadn't happened in a few years. Your 10K road PR is 32:48, which could put you within striking distance of placing. In light of this, how are you going to go out during the race? Are you going to go out aggressive? I'd like to go out aggressive. I'd like to see where I'm at. I haven't been on the track for a couple months, and I'm just easing back into more speed-type training right now after the mountain running. I would like to come out of the race feeling like I ran my very best and I tried my hardest. Ultimately, a PR would be nice, but I just want to say to myself, "No regrets!" after the race.

Let's move on to the World Mountain Running Trophy in Bursa, Turkey. You wanted to place top 10 in the world, and you did, placing ninth. Tell us about that racing experience. Before the championships, I had never run a mountain running race on trails before. All I had raced before was Mount Washington, which was more or less like a road race up a hill. I had trained on the trails, but I had no racing experience, so when I got to Turkey and I was on the starting line with all these other elite mountain runners, I was feeling intimidated, but I also felt confident in my training. I felt that I had done all I could do to run my very best race. The race itself started on a downhill on a narrow, gravel road that had some sharp rocks on it, and everyone was sprinting down this 100-meter steep trail, and that was chaotic for me—I was nervous about the start and didn't want to get trampled. There was a lot of elbowing going on. I was in the top 20 in that first 100 meters. I tried to work my way up, and it was difficult, because I had to go off to the side where there were boulders to work my way up. It was a different kind of rhythm; it wasn't like a road race. You had to pass and swerve and jump over rocks. I thought it was going to be 10 to 12 percent grades the entire race, but it turned out to be much steeper than that, because there were a few downhills in the race. I wasn't quite prepared for that in my training. It was an extremely painful race for me—my calves and hamstrings were on fire. I felt like I was going to drop out at some point, but I tried to squash those negative thoughts and just push on through the pain. I lost two positions through the race, and I thought it was because I needed to do more very steep hill training. The women in front of me were outstanding—real hill runners. It was tough—I hit my head on a branch. You had to watch where you were running. In the second half of the course, there were giant rocks that we had to climb over. It was all in the forest. I was very happy to finish. To place top ten was my goal. I thought in the second half of the race that everyone was going to pass me because I was in so much pain. In the last 200 meters, you had to sprint to the finish on an asphalt road, and that tailored to my strengths and so I caught some people.

This was quite a finish coming from someone with only one mountain race under her belt. Do you think you'll be able to take what you learned here and place better next year? That is my hope, to learn from this experience. I know what I need to work on. I would love to place higher if that's possible. I'm going to try mountain running again in the future, and if I make the team again, I'd love to place higher. I feel that I can work on my weaknesses that might help me do that.

Based on your reaction to the race, it sounds like the course was a bit of a surprise to you. Were you able to do a walk-though beforehand? Yes, we were allowed to. On the first day I walked the course with Paul Low, Simon Gutierrez, and Anna Pirchtova. The course wasn't marked. We walked part of it, and I was able to run on it, so I was able to get on the course, but racing a course is entirely different than jogging or walking. I wasn't prepared for that feeling of pain.

Were you acclimated going into this race? Were you rested and over the jetlag? Was your diet okay leading into it? I arrived in Turkey eight days before the race and was in Istanbul for five or six days, and then I found a way to get to Bursa, which was another five-hour journey. It was an interesting journey. But I was rested and was acclimated. I am at altitude here [in Montana]. The race finished at 5,000 feet, and so altitude was not something that hindered my performance. The food was delicious. We had these wonderful meals. I was just in awe of how good it was. We had beans and rice and kebabs. I just love that kind of food. We had fresh vegetables—even some things I've never tasted before.

So it was a cultural experience too, not just a racing experience? Yes. I learned that the Turkish people are very friendly people. I was a little hesitant because of what's going on in the area. I was completely surprised that they were such happy and friendly people. Even as an American, they went out of their way to help me.

I read in a previous interview that the hardest workouts you've ever done were progression runs. Is that still true? I don't remember saying that. I think I said they were my favorite ones? The hardest workouts would be something similar. Running up a hill is painful for me. So running 8 miles up a steep hill would be one of the most painful workouts.

If running up a hill is so painful for you, then why did you get into mountain running? I incorporated hill training for my Twin Cities Marathon build-up last year, and that went really well. I had my husband helping me, timing me each mile up the hill. So I thought I liked it, even though it was painful, because I felt really strong afterwards. The workouts were going really well, and then I did some research on the Internet. I thought that would be one thing I'd love to try, and I found out that the qualifier was Mount Washington, and that piqued my interest right away, and so I set the trip up and the rest is history, I guess.

How would you describe the pain experienced in mountain running? It's unrelenting. The pain is a little different than when you run flat. It's a constant strain in the legs. It's similar to doing weights and never being able to stop—like doing squats repeatedly. If you let your guard down, you'll be passed. One of my mountain running teammates, Paul Low, told me, "Don't ever let up." That's what I kept thinking throughout the race. I told myself to fight through that feeling and make sure no one passes me.

You mentioned weights. Do you lift? I do. So you are probably doing high reps with low weight? I was doing high reps with low weight before I ran Mount Washington, and then I decided I wanted to try something different. I went into heavy weights and low reps for about four or five weeks before the Mountain Running Championships, and then I went back to high reps/low weights to transition back, and then I did add plyometrics to give me more power when it counted.

Back to the 10K race coming up, are you now doing track sessions with mile repeats, 1K repeats or 800-meter repeats? We don't have a track here now. There's construction on it. I'm doing off-road training—fartleks, tempo runs, and cruise intervals.

Are you wearing a heartrate monitor for any of this training? I used to wear a heartrate monitor, but I'm very attuned to my body now. I just now run by effort.

You mentioned you are doing off-road training. Are you wearing a GPS to measure pace and mileage, or is it just a gut feeling? It's just gut feeling. I am rarely on a track. That does sometimes bother me, because I don't have a feel for where I'm at, but it can be good because it sometimes takes the pressure off. But I do have a treadmill at home, so I can get on that to know my pace and effort.

Is your husband coaching you? He is advising me right now and coached me up until 2005. I went to a running camp—Owen Anderson's running camp. I learned a lot there and incorporated a lot of different coaches' philosophies about training. My husband was an outstanding coach and I learned so much from him, but we both felt it was better if I ran my own workouts and he looked at them and advised me. It gave me a little more freedom and flexibility. I'm the type of person that is very obsessive about my workouts, and I felt like I needed to get that workout done on that day. But with running my own workouts, I've found that I'm less obsessive. It's worked out really well.

In 2002, you went to the Team USA Camp and got advice from Deena Kastor. Tell us about it. The camp was 12 weeks, and I saw Deena every day and could ask her questions any time I wanted. She was very helpful.

What did you ask her? I observed her weight routine and have incorporated that into my training. I observed her plyometric drills and also incorporated that into my training. I observed her work out and have tried to emulate her outlook and drive. Coach [Joe]Vigil was so helpful. I learned a lot from him. He gave us a coaches' training philosophy class as well as a science class.

You already have the "B" standard for the marathon trials and are trying to qualify for the 10,000-meter Olympic Trials. Assuming you qualify for both events, where are you going to focus your efforts? I would focus on the first race, which would be the marathon and then I would transition my training to the 10,000 meters.

You were a walk-on at the University of Montana in 1992. Since that time, you dropped your PRs by 5 minutes each in the 5K and the 10K. Your first marathon in 1991 was 3:45, and since then you have dropped your PR down over an hour. You decided rather spontaneously to get into mountain running, then won the U.S. title, and placed ninth in the world a few months later. These are all amazing examples of demonstrated results. What advice do you have for runners looking to make improvements?

You have to believe in yourself. You need to have a desire. The main thing is the faith—that you can do something that you don't think is possible. It might come true.