



Nicole Hunt, of Deer Lodge, placed second in last month's Mt. Washington Hill Climb in New Hampshire, securing her a spot on the U.S. Mountain Running Team. The team will compete in Turkey on Sept. 10 in the World Mountain Running Championships.

Photo by MICHAEL GALLACHER/Missoulian

Nicole Hunt is fast and she knows it.

The many thousands of people she beats in everything from marathons to mountain runs know it, too. It seems obvious that a potential Olympian who's also a member of the U.S. Mountain Running team would know she's got some wheels. But it wasn't always that way for 36-year-old Nicole, who lives in Deer Lodge but spent her early childhood in Missoula.

Sure, there were hints early on, like when she led her soccer team in goals as a kid because she could get to the ball before anyone else. And she always loved running, from the time she was 9 years old and her parents would drive behind her as she ran up mountain roads. But even up through high school in Illinois, Nicole didn't have a

coach to help her see how fast she could really be. "I really didn't know I could run fast," she said.

That all changed when she came to the University of Montana to run cross-country and track. It was there that she finally got some coaching, and that she met her husband Ray Hunt. Ray was at UM on a running scholarship and stayed on as an assistant coach for track and cross-country after he graduated. He later had coaching stints at Montana State University, for the U.S. summer biathlon team and, at least in a consultant role, for his wife. "It really wasn't as much coaching her as giving suggestions," he said. Still, Ray could see the difference coaching made for Nicole while she was at UM immediately, he said. "When I first met her was in '92, and at that time she'd never broken 20 minutes for a 5K," he said. "That's a pretty decent goal - breaking 20 minutes for a woman's pretty darn fast. She broke 20 and 19 minutes in the same day. Then soon after she broke 18 and I thought, 'How much more can she have in the tank?' Then she broke 17 and 16."

After Nicole got her degree in nursing, she and Ray moved to Bozeman so he could go to graduate school. Nicole began work as a nurse to pay the bills, but she couldn't shake the desire to see if she could become even faster. She began training for and competing in races nation-wide, but it wasn't easy while holding down a full-time job. So once Ray graduated and got a job as a dietician at the Montana State Prison in Deer Lodge, he encouraged her to focus on running. "I told her, 'You never know how fast you can get if you just stick to it,'" he said. So Nicole quit nursing and began a new career - professional running. She designed an intense training regimen for herself that includes weight training, plyometrics and a whole lot of running. Ray helped guide her somewhat in the beginning, but at a certain point realized it was time to step aside. "Somewhere along the line she absorbed so much information and so much feel for the sport that I think she surpassed me," he said. "One day I had to tell her, 'I think I'm holding you back. You either need to find a new coach or coach yourself.'"

Nicole chose the latter and the result has been realizing her full-speed potential. It's also turned into a lucrative endeavor, as she travels all over the world to run in races that give money to top finishers, which she regularly is. Last year, she won \$10,000 for placing fourth in the U.S. Marathon Championships.

She also started a coaching business of her own online, through which she sets goals for others and provides them with a complete training regimen. "She's a force of nature and I can't keep up with her physically," Ray said. "She can train six hours a day and she still wants to go for a hike when I get home from work. And any free minute she's got she's diving into the books or looking on the internet for more information for coaching." That dedication is paying off in non-monetary ways, as well. Nicole's finish in the U.S. Marathon Championships qualified her for the U.S. Olympic Trials in that sport for the 2008 Summer Olympics. Next year, she'll attempt to qualify in the 10-kilometer race, as well. But Nicole's big goal for the year was to make the U.S. Mountain Running team, and at the Mount Washington Hill Climb in New Hampshire last month she did just that. The race served as the U.S. Mountain Running Championship, so the top American male and female finishers secured a spot on the national team. It was a grueling 7.6 mile race on a road with nearly 5,000 feet of climb and an average grade of almost 12 percent. The last stretch of about 100 meters is so steep that cars aren't allowed to drive on it, Nicole said. She was within 75 meters of winner Anna Pichrtova from the Czech Republic for the entire race, she said, but never managed to pass her. Nicole finished second with a time of 1:12:30, but as the first American female finisher she clinched her spot on the national team. "I was so happy," she said of her finish. "I felt like all that work was worth it, all of that climbing up mountains. It was really kind of relieving." But Nicole isn't going to relax and enjoy her victory. She's competing in a 15-kilometer road race in Ithaca, N.Y., this weekend and she's got to keep her mountain training up for the World Mountain Running Championships on Sept. 10 in Bursa, Turkey, where she'll be one of four women representing the U.S. "I'm extremely excited," she said. "I'm going to embrace the opportunity, and my goal would be to place in the top five. I don't know if I should say that, but that's what I want to do."

Either way, competing in a world championship race on a Turkish mountain is a far cry from being followed up the mountains of Montana by her parents' car. She may not have known how fast she could become then, but she's making sure the world knows it now. "I know there's so much potential in everybody," she said. "I just needed a little guidance."