



Nicole Hunt, a Montana native, lives in Deer Lodge and competes in races all over the United States.

Nicole Hunt moved swiftly and lightly down the country road, the gravel crunching under her Nike running shoes. Running “is my passion,” Hunt, 36, said just prior to an evening workout near Pipestone.

Hunt, of Deer Lodge, makes running look easy. But good luck keeping up with her. She is one of the fastest women distance runners in Montana, and in the country.

This month, she took 10th overall among women, and was the second American woman by six seconds, in the Bloomsday Race 12-kilometer in Spokane, with a time of 41 minutes, 34 seconds.

And when Hunt isn't pounding the pavement, she's coaching other runners. “She's an awesome coach,” said Dani Salois-Shahan, a

Bozeman runner. “I've grown in leaps and bounds with my running and I have to give the credit to her.” Hunt, who sports a distance runner's sinewy frame, has the experience to be a running role-model.

She ran track in junior high and continued running on her own when her family moved to rural Illinois for her high school years, even though her school lacked a track program. “I would be running 3 miles a day and I did have this thought in the back of my mind that I could be faster, I just didn't know how fast,” she said.

At age 21, she caught a glimpse of her potential. She walked onto the track team at the University of Montana where, under a helpful coach, she shaved minutes off her miles.

She later earned a track scholarship and transferred to Montana State University to complete a nursing degree, where she was a standout runner as well.

Hunt remained competitive even after college. Even now, she competes in marathons, half-marathons and other distance races nationwide, and once, in Russia. Sometimes, her swiftness pays off, literally. She took home \$10,000 after placing fourth in the Twin Cities Marathon. “I never see it as a job, but I do make a little money off of it,” she said.

Training for competition alone is full-time work. Hunt logs 70 to 90 miles a week, sometimes running twice a day and doing strength training in between.

When she's not training herself, she's coaching other runners from Montana and elsewhere. Runners contact her on the Internet with their goals and she provides training programs and nutrition tips with help from her husband Ray, a former track coach and Registered Dietitian.

In addition to coaching competitive runners like Salois-Shahan, she also regularly trains a Butte running club. Helping other runners is as satisfying as crossing the finish line herself, Hunt said. “The reward is having athletes meet their goals,” she said. “I know how it is to reach a goal.”

As for her own goals, Hunt said she plans to continue running for as long as her body allows. “I hope to be running when I'm 100,” she said. “Your body can do so much more than you think is possible. You just have to believe and keep dreaming.”