

Ryan Hall

Inspiring With the Gift.

BY TITO MORALES

The men's Olympic Marathon Trials come around only once every four years, and the stakes are always high.

On the morning of November 3, 2007, 130 of the country's best marathoners, including 25-year-old Ryan Hall, clustered in the predawn darkness near Rockefeller Center to vie for the right to represent the United States at the 2008 Olympic Games. While all had spent the better part of their lives training for this moment, only three would make the team.

The atmosphere for these Trials was particularly electric. For the first time in history, the competition was being staged in conjunction with the New York City Marathon, one of the highest-profile races on the planet. The course, which featured five challenging loops through Central Park, had been designed for bigger crowd support and heightened drama. Anything to do with the Big Apple, it seems, always equates to heightened drama.

Aside from Hall, the field included all three returning marathoners from the 2004 Olympic team: Meb Keflezighi, who earned a silver medal in Athens; Alan Culpepper; and Dan Browne. Other headliners included Khalid Khannouchi, a former world record holder who has thrice broken 2:06 in his illustrious career; the Hansons-Brooks team, a 13-member contingent led by Brian Sell; Ryan Shay, the 2003 USATF marathon champion; and Abdi Abdirahman, whose marathon PR of 2:08:56 had earned him the third seed.

But the two runners who seemed to be bringing the most buzz to the proceedings were upstarts Hall and Dathan Ritzenhein, 24—two of “the big three” from the celebrated high school class of 2001. Prior to race day, both had completed just one competitive marathon, yet they were looked upon as bona fide favorites to grab one of the coveted spots.

Earlier, Hall's coach, Terrence Mahon, predicted that anyone who could hold a five-minute-per-mile pace would make the team: “There may be someone who wins the race and runs 2:10, possibly even sub-2:10 if they're really just out there rocking and rolling, but I think the top three will probably be 2:11.”



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▲ Hall en route to capturing the 2008 U.S. Olympic Team Trials-Men's Marathon.

After the gun went off, the group of athletes swept along the darkened streets toward the park. Soon, daylight began to illuminate the overcast skies over Manhattan. This event, and the increased media exposure it generated, was ushering in a new dawn for U.S. distance running.

A COMPETITIVE UPBRINGING

Ryan Hall comes from an athletic family. His grandfather, at 76, is still active in a softball league. His mother, Susan, comes from a dance background. And his father, Mickey, played baseball at Pepperdine University.

Mickey introduced running into the Hall household. After he walked away from the diamond, he turned himself into a marathoner—a pursuit, he says, that took hold while he was chasing a future in the major leagues.

"I ran a lot when I was a pitcher," Mickey says. "I loved that part of it. I did probably two to three times as much as they asked us to do just because I liked it and I figured that it would be good for me."

Mickey, who teaches and coaches the cross-country team at Big Bear High School and has since gone on to compete in triathlons, has always been fascinated by movement.

"My major was kinesiology, the study of the body when you move," he says. "I appreciate watching people move."

More significant, though, is the fact that he has been enthralled with competition.

“We’ve always loved to compete,” says Mickey of his side of the family. “We tend to be fairly aggressive—not in life, but athletically.”

This is what the Hall children—Steve, Casey, Ryan, Craig, and Chad—were exposed to during their formative years. If their mother wasn’t practicing dance somewhere, their father was probably off on a long run or a bike ride.

Ryan distinctly remembers, in fact, watching his father compete at the Western Hemisphere Marathon in Culver City. A seed may have been planted somewhere, but it was certainly buried far from sight.

“I remember being a little bit interested in [the marathon], but it’s hard to get it when you’re a kid and a mile seems so long,” says the soft-spoken Ryan. “I definitely didn’t see myself as a professional marathoner.”

A RUN AROUND THE LAKE

Though the Halls have become synonymous with Big Bear Lake, a resort community roughly 100 miles east of Los Angeles, Ryan was born in Washington. After the family settled in Southern California, Ryan began to sample a wide variety of sports.

“He wasn’t much of a sit-down-and-read type of kid,” says Mickey.

Much like his father, Ryan initially had designs on becoming a professional baseball player.

“That was my big goal,” says Ryan, who started playing at the T-ball level. “I’ve always been a Dodgers guy. We grew up watching baseball because it was always on TV.”

Somehow, though, while focusing on how best to get into a blue uniform at Chavez Ravine, Ryan got sidetracked by running.

“He was always gifted,” recalls Mickey. “I have always had a deep, deep belief that Ryan had a great talent at running. When I would watch him run as a little guy playing baseball, I would watch him glide around the bases.”

A turning point for Ryan came when he was in the eighth grade. His school’s basketball season had just concluded, and Ryan was frustrated at having spent too much time on the bench, due more to size than to ability. One Saturday, as his father was readying himself for a training run around the lake, Ryan approached him and asked if he could tag along.

““This is not how you start running,”” Mickey recalls telling the young teen. ““You don’t just do a 15-miler.””

Ryan, though, was insistent.

“He’s very strong willed and always has been,” says Mickey, who finally acceded to his son’s wishes, but with one important caveat: ““I don’t want you to whine about it if you’re going. You just have to do it.””

Whether to work off frustration because of his lack of playing time on the hardwood, to make an impression on his father, whom he had always admired,

or just to see up close what it was about running that his father was so enamored of, Ryan laced up his basketball shoes and set off with his dad.

One mile became two, two became four, four became eight . . .

“There was no whining or complaining, but at about 12 miles, I could tell he was really starting to get uncomfortable,” says Mickey. “I wanted it to be a good experience for him, so we stopped at an AM/PM Mini Mart to get a drink.”

While they were enjoying their refreshments, Mickey commended his son on the terrific job he was doing.

“I told him he was gifted at this, and he asked, ‘Well, how gifted?’” says Mickey. “And I said, ‘You can be very good at this,’ and he wanted to know *how* good. ‘Ry, I don’t really know how good. You can practice, and we’ll see where it leads.’”

That was all the youngster needed to hear.

“He worked pretty hard that whole next year,” recalls Mickey. “We did not enter him in cross-country in his ninth-grade year because there was no team at the high school.”

Ryan’s official coming-out race was at a time trial near the University of California, Davis. “He went out and ran 4:42,” recalls Mickey. “He got deadly serious about it after that.”

INFLUENCE FROM THE LAND DOWN UNDER

In Big Bear Lake, Hall was exposed to one of the best training environments in the world. Big Bear is at an elevation of about 7,000 feet, with access to even higher elevations just a stone’s throw away. In addition to a network of beautiful running trails, which translates to soft, runner-friendly surfaces, there is also a modern, all-weather track at San Bernardino Valley College, just an hour or so away by car.

Hall’s training, always monitored closely by his father, emphasized mileage, but within reason.

“I remember in my freshman year of high school doing about 40 miles a week, and that seemed like a lot,” Hall recalls. “And then in my sophomore year, I think I got up to 70 or so, and then in my senior year, I got up to 85.”

Hall and his father discovered that as Ryan continued to increase his mileage, he also continued to whittle down his times in both cross-country and track.

“It’s always been a gradual progression,” Hall says, pointing out that by the time he reached his senior year in college, his mileage reached triple digits.

During a teaching stint in Australia in the mid- to late 1970s, Mickey had uncovered the innovative training philosophies of Arthur Lydiard and Percy Cerutti. Cerutti had helped guide Herb Elliot to a gold medal in the 1,500 meters at the 1960 Rome Olympic Games.

Mickey had patterned his own training after Lydiard’s and Cerutti’s theories, and now he was using them to nurture his son’s gift.

“Percy Cerutti used a lot of hill training in the sand dunes,” says Mickey. “We don’t have that kind of thing up here [in Big Bear], but we have altitude, and we have a ski resort where we can do what we call ‘summit repeats.’”

One of Mickey’s bread and butter workouts, not for the faint of heart, consists of his athletes doing repeats on a roughly one-mile course at Snow Summit and then charging up a triple-black-diamond ski slope for another quarter mile. Ryan and the other members of the Big Bear High School cross-country team, including younger brother Chad, now a star at the University of Oregon, strengthened their legs, lungs, and resolve upward of a half-dozen times per session, pausing only to ride the chair lift back down the mountain.

Whatever Mickey was doing was working.

As a high school senior in 2000, Ryan broke the record for the illustrious Mount San Antonio College cross-country course when he crossed the finish line of the three-mile course in 14:28. On the track, he broke the California state record in the mile by running 4:02 with 60.5s on every lap.

Still, though, Mickey believed that his son hadn’t begun to tap his potential. While Ryan was still zeroed in on the mile distance, his father, based on his own experiences, realized that his son’s calling might well be at longer distances.

“As we went on, it was obvious that he could do long stuff,” Mickey says. “His long tempo runs were always the easiest part for him.”

A HIGHER AWARENESS

Besides his father, one of those whom Hall credits with influencing his running is Jim Ryun, the running legend turned Kansas lawmaker. Though Hall is too young to remember Ryun’s exploits on the track, he had an opportunity at the end of his sophomore year in high school to attend a running camp created by Ryun.

“That was a really special thing,” he recalls. “That really changed my life around.”

In addition to the inspiration he gained from the camp, Hall also met and befriended Ryun’s son Drew, who would not only be instrumental in persuading him to enroll at Stanford University but would eventually be the one to introduce Hall to his future wife, fellow high school all-American Sara Bei.

What is perhaps most refreshing about Ryan and Sara is that they don’t view their running as the be-all and end-all of their existence but as a means of making the world a better place.

Hall, in fact, credits Sara with helping him to keep his running in the proper perspective.

“I can be a very focused individual, and sometimes I get too focused,” Hall concedes. “She’s opened up my eyes to the big world and to the fact that there are things that are more important than running.”

Both Halls are devout Christians, and Ryan is quick to praise his wife's spirituality, especially her generosity.

"She has such a big heart for helping those who are in need," he says. "She wants to do missionary work after we're all done, and I hope that we can find a place to do that."

Hall has long been inspired by the movie *Chariots of Fire*, particularly the film's depiction of Eric Liddell, the Scottish running star.

"I just really admire him for his faith and how he wanted to use his running for something that wasn't just for his own glory and his own fame," says Hall.

To the outsider, it may seem incongruous that someone as humble and religious as Hall can be so competitive in the heat of battle. But like Liddell, Hall believes that the ability to run well is a blessing that can and should be used to make a positive impact on the lives of others.

"[Liddell's] running was guts out so that he could praise God in his running," Hall says. "That was his form of worship."

"Ryan is incredibly competitive," says Mickey. "He does not like to lose, and I'm afraid he got that from me."

But more important, Hall also got from his father and his mother lessons about life that resonate far beyond bib numbers, race results, and awards.

"Our emphasis with him has always been to be a great person," says Mickey. "You need to honor other people. You need to treat other people with respect."

"I'm just trying to make sure that I'm doing it for the right reasons," says Hall. "I know that one day running is going to be over, and I know that one day someone is going to break my half-marathon record, and that's going to be OK. It's all temporary. So I try to focus more on what is eternal value."

A BREATH OF FRESH AIR

As track and field, still reeling from the revelations of performance-enhancing drug use by such high-profile stars as Tim Montgomery, Marion Jones, and Justin Gatlin, heads toward Beijing on wobbly legs, it is a breath of fresh air that the first track athlete to earn a spot on Team USA was Hall—someone whose outlook on life is less about "me" and more about "we."

When it comes to the issue of cheating, Hall acknowledges that the climate in which the elite athlete now operates is far different than the one he observed as a youngster, but he cautions against those who resort to making blanket judgments.

"I think that it can be a trap for some people to be thinking that there's no way a person can do this or that and be clean," he says. "It is possible to run really fast times."

"I've talked about this with all of our athletes," says Mahon. "The moment you assume that your competitors are on drugs is the moment you stop improving."

If you limit yourself to thinking that people who run fast are doing it because they're on drugs, then you're shooting yourself in the foot."

For his part, Hall chooses to focus on the positive rather than the negative, and he finds it far more productive to look forward rather than backward. He insists, for example, that the recent drug scandals have given clean athletes "a great opportunity to shine."

Hall doesn't concern himself with who might be doing what. His focus is on becoming the very best runner that he can become, and he is optimistic that the system works—that the drug cheats will ultimately be found out.

Conversely, though, Hall fully understands that from here on, all great athletic achievements will invariably be greeted with suspicion and cynicism—including his own.

"I can see how outsiders can be critical of other athletes when they do really well," says Hall, alluding to his breakthrough year in 2007. "But . . . I think it's time we opened up our minds to what is possible. I think there are a lot of people who are doing it clean. I think there are a lot more people who are doing it clean than who aren't."

A PEEK INTO THE FUTURE

It is right there on the Internet for all to see. It has been posted, as pretty much everything else under the sun seems to have been, on YouTube. The picture isn't all that sharp. In fact, the video is downright blurry. But at least whoever uploaded video of the 2000 Footlocker National Cross-Country Championships was nice enough to hack out all the commercials.

The race was staged at Lake Buena Vista, Florida. In a battle for the ages, high school phenoms Ritzenhein, Alan Webb, and Hall, who had already been dubbed "the big three" heading into the competition, went head-to-head-to-head along the twisting, spectator-lined course on a vibrant, sunlit morning. Coincidentally, Deena Kastor, who would eventually become a training partner and mentor of sorts for Hall, was color commentator.

On the video, Ritzenhein starts to assume control of the race just after the opening mile, with Webb and the rest of the field in frantic pursuit. Soon afterward, it appears as if Ritzenhein and Webb are the only two in the race. In fact, Hall is not heard from until just before the finish line, when he finishes a fast-closing third.

It is almost prophetic that had the race been a bit longer, Hall might have been able to catch Webb. And, had the race been longer still, he might have been able to overcome Ritzenhein, who appears absolutely spent as he breasts the tape.

A lot has happened in the years since the battle of the prep titans. Webb has gone on to become the fastest American miler in two and a half decades, and Ritzenhein, when he is injury free, has shown flashes of brilliance in winning

► Sara Hall, née Bei, and Dathan Ritzenhein, the 2000 Foot Locker national champions.

such notable races as the 2005 Belfast International Cross-Country race. Both earned valuable experience while competing at the 2004 Olympic Games.

And then there's Hall, who spent pretty much the next seven years chasing both of them before finally reaching their level of excellence with his dominating performances of the past 12 months.

"You definitely feel competitive toward that person, and maybe it's a little bit harder to open up because of that," says Hall of his rivalry with Ritzenhein and Webb, "but I definitely feel like we're moving in that direction of becoming good friends. I think we all look back on our class as a very special year for distance running."

Hall had improved so dynamically during his years at Big Bear High School that it appeared as if his collegiate career at Stanford University would be just as seamless. The truth, though, was anything but.

By the end of his sophomore year at Stanford, in fact, Hall was so disillusioned with his running that he was prepared to walk away from the sport.

A STUDY IN MINIMALISM

Hall's running form is a study in minimalism. His legs, slender and long, appear to float, rather than churn, and his head and torso barely tremble, even when he is moving in top gear. What is most striking in Hall's technique, though, is the lack of movement in his arms.

According to Mickey, when Ryan took up the sport in earnest, the trick was to *not* tinker with what came naturally.

"We did look at his biomechanics a lot, and we tried to figure out whether we should keep things the same or change them," he says. "Most of the things from his waist down, we left the same, because he had such a beautiful glide in his stride."



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Things in Ryan's upper body, though, were tweaked. To be sure, Ryan's unique style is as much a product of his father's lifelong fascination with kinesiology as it is a reflection of his son's natural ability.

"He has always had a sort of effortless look," says Mickey. "He used to raise his shoulders in practice, with his hands crossing his body, so we made him do some drills to correct that. We were always working on him keeping his shoulders down and keeping his hands down by his waist."

The goal was to pattern Ryan's form after that of other athletes who had similar body types and who possessed the same basic speed, particularly the incomparable Hicham El Guerrouj.

"If you watch El Guerrouj run, and he's in a 1,500-meter race, his hands will be down and low and relaxed," Mickey explains. "And then, when he starts kicking, they come up and he really starts elevating them."

Still, even after spending hours with his son analyzing videotape of El Guerrouj's form, it took more than a little convincing to get Ryan to believe that allowing his arms to hang so low would be beneficial to his running.

"Dad, I need to elevate my hands. Look at everybody else!" Mickey recalls his son protesting.

But Mickey Hall drove home his point the old-fashioned way, through empirical evidence. During lengthy training runs, Mickey would ride a bicycle next to his son and periodically check Ryan's exertion level with the help of a heart rate monitor.

"As we lowered the arms, even if it was later in the tempo run, his heart rate would go down a little," recalls Mickey. "We would put the low arms in later in the tempo, when your heart rate should be higher because you're more fatigued, and his heart rate would still go down."

Looking at Hall's form today, both graceful and elegant, it becomes evident that it's only a matter of time before more and more young runners who have a similar body composition will try to emulate *his* style, much as he and his father had once set out to emulate El Guerrouj's.

A RESURRECTION IN THE MOUNTAINS

With the likes of Don Sage, Grant Robison, and Ian Dobson, the Stanford Cardinal, at the time of Hall's arrival in Palo Alto, was loaded with talent. Hall, who pretty much had had his way throughout high school, discovered that not only was the competition at the NCAA Division I level much more challenging than he could have imagined, but so too were the demands of the student athlete, including sleep deprivation.

In 2001, as a freshman, Hall earned 76th place at the NCAA Division I Cross-Country Championships and wasn't close to being a point scorer for the Cardinal. A year later, he finished 37th at the championships and still failed to score for his team.

Meanwhile, Ritzenhein and Webb had made a much smoother transition to the next level. The former, while a freshman competing for the University of Colorado, finished fourth in his first NCAA Cross-Country Championships, and the latter, at the University of Michigan, crossed the line in 11th place. His peers, Hall realized, were literally running away from him.

Disenchanted, Hall returned to Big Bear to pick up the pieces of a career in shambles.

“He had a very difficult time balancing his life at Stanford,” recalls Mickey. “He came home his sophomore year and told us that he was quitting: ‘I’m not very fast, I’m not very good, and I’m not going back.’”

His parents begged to differ. They were more than happy to welcome him back for a recuperative respite, but they told their son that one way or another, he was going back to earn his degree. In the interim, though, they encouraged him to forget about the pressures of college for a while and to go out for some enjoyable, low-key runs.

“We all have defining moments in our lives,” says Mickey. “Those nine weeks here of him running out into the forest—I think those were defining moments in Ryan’s life.”

As Hall ventured off by himself on the picturesque mountain roads and trails where he had first uncovered his passion for the sport, he gradually began to realize that he just loved to run, regardless of the outcome. He also became more settled in his faith, deciding that it was OK to place more trust in God.

“He was able to actually let go of always trying to control every outcome of every race,” says Mickey. “I think he was holding on to his athletic career so tight that some of that was stress in his life.”

Sara, Ryan’s girlfriend at the time, noticed a change in Ryan’s attitude as soon as he returned to Northern California. In fact, she was so surprised by the transformation that she remarked to the Halls, “I don’t know what you did to him, but he *is* different.”

▶ Hall leads the Stanford Cardinal to victory at the 2003 NCAA Cross-Country Championships.



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The running community began to notice the change also. Hall catapulted all the way to second place at the 2003 NCAA Cross-Country Championships, and to make the day even sweeter, his team also performed brilliantly.

“I had had a really good breakthrough race,” Hall recalls. “But then to see my teammates come across the line not that far behind me. . . . That was something that was really special.”

Stanford shocked onlookers by destroying the competition with a phenomenal score of 24 points. In contrast, the University of Wisconsin, the runner-up that year, totaled 174 points.

Hall had righted the ship. In 2005, he captured the 5,000-meter crown at the NCAA Division I Outdoor Track and Field Championships, and shortly thereafter, he made the decision to turn professional and relocate to Mammoth with Sara, his new bride.

IN THE COMPANY OF GREATNESS

Team Running USA in Mammoth had produced Olympic medalists Keflezighi and Kastor, so choosing to pursue his running there was not a particularly difficult decision for Hall to make.

“I think it was, for everybody, a fairly easy transition,” says Terrence Mahon, who had taken over Kastor’s coaching reigns upon the retirement of Joe Vigil in late 2004.

Because of Hall’s upbringing in Big Bear, the elevation of Mammoth Lakes at about 8,000 feet would not require extensive acclimation.

“They had two medalists in the last Olympics, so obviously they were doing something right up there,” says Hall. “We fell right into the perfect scenario. Great coaching, amazing team, and what a beautiful place to train.”

Nice scenery aside, though, it is never easy for someone so young—Hall was not yet 23 at the time—to make such a monastic commitment while trying to maximize his gift.

But having Kastor and Keflezighi already at Mammoth, Hall readily admits, helped. Their success in Athens has, in a sense, paved the way for someone like Hall to similarly achieve great things. Suddenly, a trip to the podium is not so daunting. Suddenly, competing at the Olympic Games is not an end to reach but a beginning *from which to reach*.

“I’ve gained a lot from both of their perspectives on running,” says Hall. “They really do a good job of keeping themselves emotionally stable and having a generally positive outlook on where they’re headed and how what they’re doing today, and more of what they do tomorrow, is going to help them get there.”

But even more significant is the fact that it didn’t take long for Hall to place his complete confidence in Mahon once he made the move.

“It’s the responsibility of the athlete to develop the relationship with the coach and to be able to trust him,” Hall says. “That’s not something that instantly clicks, but for me it did come pretty naturally with Terrence. I don’t think there’s a better marathon coach in the country.”

COMING OF AGE IN THE LONE STAR STATE

Hall’s transformation into an elite marathoner has been astonishing. On February 19, 2006, he captured the 12-kilometer USA Cross-Country Championships. It was the longest race of his life. On September 4, 2006, Hall ran the U.S. 20K Championships, as Mahon explains, “mostly on a whim,” and he won there also.

As Hall tackled longer race distances, both he and Mahon, a former elite marathoner, began to realize that the runner possessed a remarkable aptitude for running long.

“It was such an easy transition for him, and he felt so comfortable with it, that from that point on . . . it just became more of a natural fit for us to start going toward the long stuff,” says Mahon.

The revelations and the results kept coming. On January 14, 2007, Hall broke the American record in the Aramco Houston Half-Marathon in Houston, Texas, in his first crack at that distance. And then, just 14 months after his first 12K race, Hall found himself mixing it up in London with some of the greatest marathon runners ever.

“Probably going from the 5K to the half-marathon and 20K was the bigger step for me,” says Hall. “My first 20K was in New Haven, and it was the national championships, and I just remember thinking to myself, *Man, what have I gotten myself into?*”

It was in the Lone Star State that Hall first became a legitimate gold medal threat in Beijing.

“We said we’d go for an experiment and do a cycle of marathon training leading up to the half [in Houston], one, to see how he’d handle it, and two, to see how he could race off of it,” says Mahon. “So we gave him about six to eight weeks of marathon training leading up to the half.”

By the time race day rolled around, both Mahon and Hall knew that Hall might just be prepared to do something special. The American record, 1:00:55, had been set by Mark Curp in 1985, some two decades before—when Hall himself was just 3 years old. While other parts of the world got faster—Kenya’s Moses Tanui was the first to crack the one-hour mark in the distance in 1993, and over two dozen runners have since followed suit—no American had been able to match Curp’s record run.

“We always start out with just trying to run a good race,” says Mahon. “We let times get determined as we get into the end of the training cycle. But once we

got to that last week, I told Ryan the day before the race that I thought he could break the American record if it was a good day.”

“The thought of breaking an hour, honestly, didn’t cross my mind,” admits Hall. “I had set as a goal to break an hour at some point in my career, but I thought it’d be maybe four or five years down the road.”

The day before the race was hot and windy—not conditions conducive to running fast, let alone to breaking records. Fortunately, the weather changed for the better overnight.

“We got out there that morning, and it was overcast and foggy and cooler weather,” says Mahon. “We decided it was all systems go.”

Once the gun went off, Hall found himself in the type of zone all runners fantasize about.

“I went out [at] 4:36 and I was like, ‘Whoa, this is great,’” says Hall. “I feel good, and this is comfortable.”

Mahon could tell pretty much after the opening mile that Hall was on, and on big time.

“His first mile was the slowest mile of the whole race,” Mahon explains. “The second mile, he kicked it up just a hair, and he kind of dropped everybody. When I saw that he was running fast and not pressing the pace, I knew he was fine.”

No one would know how fine, though, until Hall crossed the line in a scintillating 59:43, breaking the former American record by 1:12 and positioning himself as the 13th-fastest half-marathoner in history.

In truth, Hall is convinced that his being so unschooled in the distance helped him run such a landmark race.

► Hall shatters the U.S. record in the half-marathon at the Aramco Houston Half-Marathon in January 2007.



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“Maybe not having visualized running a 4:33 pace was almost a blessing in disguise because I wasn’t scared by it. I wasn’t telling myself, *I have to run 4:33 pace. I’m going to go out in 4:33, and I’m not going to deviate from it for one mile.*”

Suddenly, Hall had not only run himself out of anonymity, but he had also run himself into a new event, marathoning, which rolled out before him like open road.

“It just seems like every time I get out there, it feels more natural than the last time,” Hall says.

AN AMERICAN IN LONDON

For the world’s greatest marathoners, the London Marathon has become the sport’s version of the Academy Awards—the place to see and to be seen. In what has evolved into a rite of spring, every April, the best long-distance runners from every continent descend upon Blackheath to test their mettle against the distance and against one another. The Olympic Games marathon may still possess the aura and the Boston Marathon the tradition, but the London Marathon possesses all the glitter.

In what was surely the most anticipated marathon debut in recent memory, Hall traveled to London in the spring of 2007 to see whether he could translate his phenomenal half-marathon race into an equally stirring 26.2-miler.

The decision to run in London, according to Mahon, was an easy one. First, there was the opportunity to gain valuable experience by competing against the likes of Keflezighi, Haile Gebrselassie, Paul Tergat, Felix Limo, Stefano Baldini, Martin Lel, Hendrick Ramaala, and Marilson Gomes. More important, though, lining up against such a stellar field would allow Hall to blend in and not be the center of attention his first time out.

“We started to look at where he could go and still be anonymous,” said Mahon. “It was a low-pressure thing. It gave him the ability, after running such a great time in Houston, to be a no-name.”

An added inducement was that Kastor had, again, already paved the way for her younger teammate. Kastor had run in London twice, setting the American record there in 2006. She had, in a sense, created a blueprint for Hall and Keflezighi, who would also be running London for the first time, to participate in the race. Hall, for example, stayed at the same apartment that Kastor had in 2006 in the weeks leading up to the race, trained on the same running loops, and ate at the same restaurants. The familiarity, no doubt, helped Hall feel comfortable in the circus atmosphere surrounding the race.

The plan for Hall was to play it safe by going out with the second group, particularly since the lead group had designs on setting a world record.

“We felt very comfortable about his being in that group,” says Mahon, “with the idea that it wouldn’t be so far off the front group and that if he was having a great day after the halfway point, he could then try to bridge the gap.”

“I was fully expecting to go out in the second group and just try to pick off as many guys as I could in the second half of the race,” says Hall.

But on a warmer-than-usual morning, it was clear when the lead group rolled through the opening miles in 5:00 pace that a world record was simply not in the cards, and Hall could see that from his vantage point in the second group.

Initially, Hall ran with Keflezighi, Baldini, and Gomes, a Brazilian star with a 2:08:48 marathon PR. It was heady company for someone whose long-distance resume included all of one half-marathon. Still, Hall treated the experience as if it were simply a long training run with a friend and teammate.

“I felt good running next to Meb,” says Hall. “I felt good and confident because I’d run with him before, and it felt as if we were working together.”

The farther Hall ran, the more comfortable he became. Gradually, he began to bridge the gap, finally catching up to the lead group at around the 14th mile.

“He’s got a very quick learning curve,” says Mahon. “He was a little bit intimidated running with such a stellar field, but he wasn’t so intimidated that he didn’t want to be in the front pack.”

“I’ll never forget when I first caught the lead group,” says Hall. “I remember running next to Gebrselassie, and I was looking around, and I couldn’t believe I was running next to those guys. These are legends. They’re some of the best runners of all time. It was really kind of surreal for me.”



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▲ Hall with fellow U.S. stars Khalid Khannouchi and Meb Keflezighi prior to Hall’s marathon debut in London in 2007.

“It was great to see that he wasn’t bashful and he wasn’t afraid to run next to Tergat or Baldini or Khannouchi or any of those guys,” says Mahon.

Hall quickly got over his initial awe over who was running beside him, and once the rabbits called it a day at 30K, he took the lead, which thrilled the boisterous London spectators to no end.

“I could hear my name coming out of the crowd a lot,” Hall says. “I was getting a lot of cheers because I was the big underdog.”

“For a young kid, he really felt as if he belonged,” says Mahon. “Watching him run that race, I could see that he got more and more excited the more he was in the front of that pack.”

“I wanted to be up in the lead just so I could taste it,” says Hall.

The others in the group were also getting their first taste of Hall, who not only possessed the fitness to join their party but also had the audacity to take one of the prized seats.

In hindsight, though, Hall is convinced that it was his inexperience that ultimately led to his downfall.

“I really wanted to be out of the lead, but no one wanted to take it,” Hall says. “Guys were just sitting on me. I should have been in the pack, relaxing as much as I could and saving it up for those last couple of miles.”

The marathon rookie’s stint at the front of the pack had expended more energy than he realized, and when Limo decided to throw down the gauntlet with about 5K left, Hall was simply too weary to respond.

“It hit me at 23 1/2 miles,” Hall says. “All of a sudden, the top of my legs just got really tight.”

Hall gamely fought on, crossing the finish line in seventh place. His time of 2:08:24 was the fastest debut by an American marathoner, destroying the previous best of 2:09:41, jointly held by Alberto Salazar (1989) and Alan Culpepper (2002).

In the end, though, the London experience was everything that Mahon could have hoped for.

“He’s not going to be timid in a field like that,” Mahon says. “He really wanted to be there. It’s now a matter of getting him fit and then having him learn how to run the right style for the race.”

TRIUMPH AND TRAGEDY AT THE TRIALS

In hindsight, the surprise wasn’t that Hall was able to prevail over one of the deepest fields in U.S. Olympic Marathon Team Trials history but rather the ease with which he was able to do so.

This race had all the makings of a slugfest. The fact that it was being waged in the heart of New York City was a pronouncement as to just how far the sport

of marathoning had rebounded since the dismal 2000 Olympic Games when the U.S. team consisted of just one male and one female athlete. Without question, such a prominent venue was a direct result of Keflezighi's and Kastor's extraordinary success in Athens.

At the outset, Hall lingered in a large pack that covered the first 5K in a comfortable 16:44, a 5:23 pace. With each passing kilometer, though, the lead group began to gently turn the screw, gradually increasing the pace to see who could respond. By 20K, it had lowered its mile splits to 4:53, and only Hall, Keflezighi, Browne, Abdirahman, and Ritzenhein were able to keep pace. It soon became apparent that the winner of the race would likely emerge from this group.

Hall, his bright-blue singlet in stark contrast to the yellow singlets worn by those around him, made his move right before the 17-mile marker, the most challenging section of the course. He would explain later that seeing a large video-monitor image of a tenacious Khannouchi, who was quickly eating away at the lead group's advantage, spurred him into action.

Shortly after putting on a decisive surge, Hall took one glance over his right shoulder to gauge its effects. While he may have been somewhat surprised to see how much daylight he had created, he quickly understood that he was in an excellent position to seal the deal.

"I've learned in racing that when you get a gap, you go with it," Hall says. "If you're feeling good, you don't let people back into it. I was confident that I could hold it for the rest of the race, so I went with it."

To some, such a move would have been tempting fate. After all, in a race of this nature, it is always much easier to share the burden than to go it alone—especially with so much on the line.

But Mahon points out that Hall has always enjoyed running clear of the field.

"He likes running alone," says Mahon. "He grew up in a small town, so he was the best kid on his team by far. He's had to do so much training alone. He's used to being in that situation."

Once Hall recognized that his moment was at hand, he continued to drive forward, dropping a 4:32 17th mile, then backing that up with a 4:49, which essentially left his competitors grappling for second through fifth place.

The move was bold, it was mesmerizing, and most of all, it was inspiring.

"You know you're having a good day when you're relaxed and surprised by the splits," says Hall, whose final time, 2:09:02, bettered the previous Olympic Trials record by well over a minute. "It was one of the most enjoyable races I've ever run, and I felt great the whole time out there. It was a dream come true."

Hall's time was also faster than New York City Marathon winner Martin Lel's time the next day, and that effort, most observers agree, came on a less-taxing course.

In the months since the Trials, Hall's spectacular run has been dissected and redissected. For the record, he covered the second half of the course in a remarkable 1:02.44, a 4:47 pace. He cranked out 4:47 and 4:49 for his 25th and 26th miles, splits produced while he was in the midst of an extended, fist-pumping celebratory jaunt.

But any triumph Hall experienced in New York was quickly tempered by the news of his friend Ryan Shay's death. The two had gone out for one last easy run together the day before the race.

"I didn't find out until about 20 minutes after the race," Hall says quietly. "And then I went from complete joy to complete shock and sadness. It was an incredible swing of emotion for me."

It's disappointing that it often takes misfortune for the sport of marathoning to receive more than a passing interest from the mainstream media. The 2004 men's Olympic marathon, for instance, got more publicity because of the deranged onlooker who seized race leader Vanderlei de Lima than for the brilliant running of de Lima and the other eventual medalists, Baldini and Keflezighi. The 2006 Chicago Marathon received enhanced coverage because Robert Cheruiyot, the champion, slipped and fell hard just as he crossed the line. And the Marathon Trials received a more prominent position on ESPN *SportsCenter* only because of Shay's collapse.

To have anyone die in a race is numbing. To have it be one of your close friends, Hall says, goes against all logic.



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▲ Hall, in honor of the late Ryan Shay, will lead Team USA in Beijing.

“I’ve been trying to figure out, just like everyone else, what good we can take from this,” says Hall. “I know that he will continue to live on in me in terms of how he inspired me to train at such a high level. He was such a hard worker. I think we can all take away things that Ryan has taught us, and we can continue to use them and live better lives.”

Understandably, Hall has been very forthright about his desire to dedicate his race in Beijing to Shay.

LONDON: A RETURN ENGAGEMENT

When it was announced in early January that Hall would be contesting the 2008 London Marathon, the news generated a great deal of chatter on the Internet—some supportive and some not. Hall and Mahon were confident that participating in the April 13th event would afford Hall’s body plenty of time to recuperate before the Olympic Games marathon scheduled for August 24, 2008. Others expressed their doubts.

It’s curious how running aficionados, the vast majority of which have never come close to either coaching or competing at Mahon and Hall’s level, profess to know what the young man should or shouldn’t do with his running career. But in a sport which has been hungry for an American megastar for about three decades, maybe any dialogue should be viewed as good dialogue. Quite simply, interest in Hall and his every decision is a reflection of the continued improved health of U.S. distance running.

When Hall landed at Heathrow Airport prior to this year’s race, much had changed in the 12 months since his marathon debut. Thanks in part to his commanding win at the Olympic Trials, Hall had risen from the role of being an inconspicuous secondary character to becoming a lead player alongside the likes of defending champion Lel and South African stalwart Ramaala. At a pre-race press conference, in fact, no less than Baldini, the 2004 Olympic Games gold medalist, made a point of singing the young American’s praises, even going so far as to anoint Hall the future of the sport.

Neither Hall nor Mahon, though, had flown all the way from California just to be on the receiving end of some flattery. Hall’s mission this time around was simple and straightforward: to go out with the lead pack and experience firsthand what type of racing tactics unfold there.

“We wanted to try to find his upper limits,” says Mahon. “How hard can he go out? If he thinks he has a chance of getting on the podium in Beijing, he’s going to have to deal with many of the guys who are going to be in that race.”

Both Hall and Mahon knew that the pace would be aggressive, and it was. The rabbits charged with pace making duties pulled the group which, aside from Hall, Lel and Ramaala, included Sammy Wanjiru and Abderrahim Goumri, through the first 5K in 14:21, the first 10k in 29:10 and the first half marathon in a jarring

1:02:13 (4:44 per mile pace). The game was most certainly on. And everyone involved, from the race organizers to the sponsors to the fans to the athletes themselves, hoped that the end result would be at least one of the athletes eclipsing Gebressalie's world record of 2:04:26, set at the 2007 Berlin Marathon.

But while the rabbits were hitting their marks, they were doing so somewhat erratically.

"It's the nature of how these guys run," explains Mahon. "A lot Africans don't run in a metronome fashion. There's always a surge, then a relax, a surge, then a relax..."

Not only had Hall's fitness level improved dramatically since the 2007 edition of the race, so had his confidence in his abilities. When the rabbits slowed to a 4:55 15th mile, he actually had the impudence to slide up alongside them and request that the pace be kept steadier. The two pace setters promptly sped up and a short while later, after the group banged out a 4:35 mile, Hall himself, ironically, was dropped.

But Hall refused to give in. He'd come precisely for a hefty dose of this level of competition, and he was fully committed to the assignment. Running alone, he managed to loiter about ten seconds behind the others, waiting for an opportunity to rejoin the group. It took Hall over three miles, but he finally fought his way back up during the 21st mile—just as a storm kicked in that quickly enveloped



▲ Three generations of Halls at the 2008 London Marathon: Mickey (left), Ryan, and Don. Inset: Ryan and Sara Hall celebrate Ryan's huge PR at London.

the runners with cold wind and rain. Despite his tenacity, Hall was again dropped a short while later, this time for good. But the message to Lel, Wanjiru and those who would eventually finish ahead of Hall rang loud and clear: the American will never go away without a fight. If they weren't completely taken aback by Hall's peskiness at the time, they will, upon reflection, realize that it must have taken some impressive running on Hall's part to have chased them down so late in the race.

Ultimately the weather wrecked havoc on the world record attempt, but Lel still won the race in a blistering 2:05:15, Wanjiru crossed the line second in 2:05:25, and Goumri finished third in 2:05:30. Hall earned 6th place in 2:06:17, a whopping 2 minute and 7 second P.R. Never before had so many runners broken 2:07 in the same race.

In the end, Hall and Mahon got exactly what they were after in London—especially more invaluable experience—and now they're hard at work formulating a plan for how best to attack the marathon in Beijing.

"He's already ahead of himself," says Mahon of Hall and his preparations. "He wants to figure out how not to get dropped and how to get that minute back that he lost over those last couple of miles. He's excited to keep pushing it. On some level, he feels happy with his performance, but he's not content with it."

UNLIMITED POTENTIAL

Hall is already the second fastest marathoner in U.S. history, behind Khannouchi. Not only is he faster than Frank Shorter, Bill Rodgers, and Salazar, but the time he recorded at the 2008 London Marathon ranks as the third fastest performance ever by an American.

To be sure, though, Hall completely understands that the Olympic Games marathon, just like the Olympic Trials marathon, has nothing whatsoever to do with time and everything to do with *place*. Case in point: neither Paula Radcliffe nor Paul Tergat, who headed into the 2004 Athens Games having recorded the fastest marathons in history, earned a medal.

"No one even knows what the Olympic record is in the marathon," Hall points out. "No one remembers how fast you run. If I ran 2:07 and finished 12th, I wouldn't be as happy as if I ran 2:14 and medaled. The thing about the Olympics is grabbing a spot on the podium."

Perhaps what is most intriguing about Hall's upcoming marathon is that for all intents and purposes he is still an unknown commodity. While he will again be lining up against the best marathoners in the world, most of whom have been fixtures on the running landscape for several years if not longer, Hall's long distance career is still very much in its infancy. The Olympic marathon will be only his fourth attempt at the distance. Hall has not come close to realizing his full potential in the marathon and those who will be competing against him in China are well aware of that.

Hall has come to relish the cyclical nature of marathon training, and especially how the race itself is an all or nothing proposition.

“It feels like a prize fight or something like that,” he says. “You spend three months training all out for one day—for one big crack at doing something special. I really love that.”

How They Train—The Art of the Taper

When Ryan Hall shows up at a goal race, he is both mentally and physiologically prepared for peak performance, which is, in part, a testament to Terrence Mahon’s tapering methods.

According to Mahon, far too many athletes go overboard with their taper, which causes their body to slip into a “detraining mode.”

Mahon’s training, and consequently his tapering, incorporates three distinct components: volume, intensity, and what he calls “density.”

“Some of the great coaches have taught me that you can’t take two away when we’re coming into the taper phase,” he explains.

Volume and intensity speak for themselves. The former is the amount of mileage, and the latter is the intensity at which the various workouts are performed. Density, on the other hand, refers to the spacing between workouts.

Hall’s marathon training is broken down into two-week cycles. In the midst of Hall’s heaviest cycles, the rest between particularly challenging workouts is minimized, which makes that period denser. As Hall closes in on race day, though, density is reduced by introducing additional recovery days into the cycle.

“That gives us the opportunity to not abandon the volume and not abandon the intensity,” explains Mahon. “We’re not getting into the detraining phase. That’s where, I think, a lot of people run into trouble. They start detraining.”

A drastic reduction in volume, intensity, and density, Mahon says, causes an athlete’s “central nervous system” to go on hiatus. “That’s why you find a lot of people who get sick the last week to 10 days right before a marathon, because they shut it down too much.”

Mahon is quick to add, however, that such a tapering strategy doesn’t apply to all runners. Hall, a workhorse, is most comfortable when he is putting in the hard work. Others may need the extra rest.

“I’ll do different things with different people,” he says. “The biggest thing I look at is the psychological side of what’s going on with a taper, because certain athletes are used to putting in certain amounts of work. ‘Does this athlete need to taper more to feel fast?’ ‘Does that athlete need to work more to feel confident?’”

