

A Brief Chat With Alissa McKaig

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By Peter Gambaccini

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Alissa McKaig of North Carolina-based ZAP Fitness, who was a member of the U.S. bronze medal women's team at the



2011 ^[1]World Cross Country Championships, will do the Freihofer's Run for Women 5K in Albany, New York on June 4 and will be part of the U.S. squad in the marathon at the World Championships in Daegu, South Korea later this summer. "Life is too short and too unpredictable. I didn't want to turn down a World team," explains McKaig. "What if it never happens again? I might as well take the chance to represent my country."

McKaig was sixth at the 2011 USA Cross Country Championships in San Diego, which qualified her for World Cross Country in Spain, where she placed 28th. She has run personal bests of 15:28 for 5000 meters and 32:14 for 10,000 on the track this spring. McKaig was the fifth American female and 20th overall at the 2010 ING New York City Marathon in 2:37:29. She had been third in the USA Women's 10 Mile in Minnesota in 55:18. McKaig attended Michigan State, where she was tenth in NCAA Cross Country, and then Indiana Tech, where she was an NAIA Cross Country champion and an NAIA 5000 and 10,000-meter titlist on the track. McKaig was a high school valedictorian and a state 1600-meter champion in Fort Wayne, Indiana. She is coached at ZAP by Pete Rea. "It's funny. To actually have a little bit of success feels weird when you struggled for so long," observes McKaig. "But it's nice. Everything's kind of coming together."

Since the ING New York City Marathon. You've obviously gone up to another level, beginning with the success you had in cross country. What happened in those months between the marathon and USA Cross Country? Is it just a

case that at some point the effect of the work is going to kick in and it did, or were you actually doing something better over the winter?

Alissa McKaig: I don't think anything changed over the winter. We took a little break after New York. I was running (a bit), but we did our first workout at the beginning of December. But it wasn't anything that really changed, I don't think. It was a matter of my not having been hurt for a long time, knock on wood. I think it was that coming together with being comfortable here (at ZAP) and comfortable with Pete and also just figuring out racing a little bit. It was just a matter of continuing what we'd done up to New York, and I think I'd gotten a lot stronger from the marathon training, and I think that paid off.

Did you stay in North Carolina for the whole winter?

AM: No. Here in the mountains, it gets kind of bad. I got to go home (to Indiana) for three weeks at Christmas, and then we go to Tallahassee, Florida for five weeks. And then we go to Greenville, South Carolina (Furman University) for five weeks.

One's always hoping for the best, but when you went to USA Cross Country in San Diego, did you really think you'd win a trip to the World Championships?

AM: I think we knew that if I put together a really good race, that was a strong possibility. But obviously, there are a lot of really good people there; it's the U.S. Championships. Obviously, you can't control what other people do, but we knew that if I put together the race that I thought I could, there was a good chance. Not a really good chance; we thought I'd have to run really well to do it, and I did. It was a really fun race and a great day.

Were you in pretty much the position you finished in for most of the race? You weren't hanging back in 15th place, were you?

AM: No. I wasn't going to race for sixth (six would qualify for the Worlds). We were going to race for a higher spot. It wasn't a matter of "let's just hang on." Our plan was to be aggressive, and if it works, it works. And if it doesn't, whatever. We just wanted to put me out there.

On the awards podium at USA Cross Country, there were women with a lot of credentials, including some who were on the American bronze medal team at Worlds in 2010. Other than Lisa Koll, who'd been the big college phenom last year, you were the new kid on the block. How did it feel, standing up there with everyone?

AM: It was really awesome. It's funny that you say that, that "new kid on the block" idea. It was weird because it didn't really feel real. When I was in San Diego, I felt "oh yeah, I get to go to Spain now." I don't know, it didn't make sense. And then I was actually in Spain. One day I was sitting at dinner and I looked around and I thought "oh my goodness, why am I here? Do they know?" I almost wanted to go to tell someone "did you mean for me to be here?" It was just this weird feeling of "I don't know that I'm the one you wanted to be here." Pete and I talked about it, he was like "you cannot think that way, you earned the right to be here and you're going to race like it." But it was just this moment that I was awestruck by these people. They've done so much. And they were all so great. I'd never been to Europe. All of them were amazing and reached out and helped me to feel comfortable. They were fabulous and I'm so grateful to be on that team.

And you were joining a team that had won a bronze at World Cross Country a year before and had hopes of doing at least that well and maybe getting a silver. Was that talked about much between you and the other American women, and was it an additional source of pressure for you?

AM: It wasn't an additional source of pressure. We definitely talked about it. It was really cool, to get to be part of a cross country team again, because you don't really get to do that after college. From the first night we got there, it was even mentioned. We were "game on" from the beginning. Everybody knew that that was our intention. It wasn't "oh, let's maybe medal," it was "no, we're going to medal, and we're going to reach for silver. That's not out of the realm of possibility." It wasn't pressure, it was exciting. The whole thing was just exciting.

And in Spain, you had rhythm interruptions with the logs you had to leap over. Was that unusual for you?

AM: Oh, my goodness, I'd never jumped over anything before in my life. I wasn't worried about it. I don't know how it worked out, but I never jumped over them at all before the race. I just never got over there to jump over them, so I was standing on the (starting) line thinking "well, this could be interesting." And there were nine of them (logs) on each loop. It was a lot, but it was kind of fun. Especially in that situation where you were racing so hard, it kind of gave you something else to think about. It broke up each loop. It was like "I'm just going to focus on getting over these, and then I'll think about what's next." I liked it. I wish we did that here.

So then you got to wear the bronze medal around your neck.

AM: Yeah. It was crazy. It was an amazing moment, to stand up there at the awards ceremony. It was kind of surreal.

You came back and you've had a couple of good track results already this spring, 15:28 for 5000 and 32:14 for 10,000. Are those substantial personal bests for you?

AM: Yeah. I ran 15:47 indoors the week after cross country in San Diego. I just stayed on the West Coast and went up to the University of Washington and ran an indoor 5k. The 15:28 was definitely a big PR, but the 32:14 was a 94-second track PR. I ran 33:44 in a roadrace earlier this year, but as the far as the track goes, that was a 94 second PR, which is pretty

crazy.

When you run a 94-second PR, you obviously committed to a much faster pace than ever before. If you ran 32:14, I have to assume you were at least confident you'd run something like 32:30, right?

AM: Yeah, and actually, the goal going in was 32:00 to 32:20ish, in there. But we also wanted to see how the race went out. I kind of wanted to break 32:00. The plan was to go out with that intention, which was a lot faster than I ever went out for a 10k before. But it didn't feel bad, it felt comfortable. It was good. I enjoyed it. And I ended up going out a faster than maybe I would have. Otherwise, I would have been in No Man's Land. I was kind of able to be with a group. It worked out. I didn't negative split, but I held on and felt fine at the end.

Something's obviously been going well for you. Maybe it's just month after month of consistent training. It's kind of amazing to have improvements like these.

AM: Obviously, 94 seconds, that's a lot. But for a couple of years, my PRs haven't reflect how I've worked out, so for me, it's not a surprise. I've just expected it, like this is going to happen. I didn't expect this swift of a jump. I thought I'd go 32:45, and then, you know. But I've also just known that I should have run faster than I have for the last couple of years. But it's like you said, I think it's just consistency. I've put in the time and I didn't give up. I think that's the biggest thing. I wasn't seeing the results I wanted, but I was also just willing to keep plugging away, just keep getting out there and going at it. I also think last year I'd getting really frustrated as far as racing goes. I shifted my mindset a little bit and I think that helped a lot. I'd wanted every race to be "this is it," and if you're telling yourself that, you're probably not going to do it. It's just too much. I stopped thinking that way, and I think that helped a lot, too.

The Freihofer's Run is next for you. Other than marathons, is it the most important roadrace for you so far?

AM: Well, the ten-miler was a U.S. Championship. We're focused on Freihofer's, but a little bit it's that we're gearing up for the 5000 at U.S. nationals. So in some ways, yes, it's big in my head. But in my head it's also "let's get used to running the 5k." I don't know. It's a big deal, for sure, but it's not like the biggest, I guess.

Was there any deliberation about choosing the 5k over the 10k at USATFs?

AM: There definitely was. I love both of them. I've always liked the 5k more, but after the 10k at Stanford (her 32:14), I was like "I want to run another 10k, it'll be really fun." But we're going to get into training for the World (Championships) marathon right after. It's kind of just what you can recover from easiest. Not that the 10k would set me back a bunch, but it does take a lot out of you. It was a tossup for me anyway.

It'll probably be a quick 5000 at USATFs. What are you hoping for there?

AM: I'm hoping it's a fast race, to get in and get after it. I'd love to run under 15:20 but I don't know. We'll see. I think I can, and I think I was a little bit conservative when I ran 15:28. More than time, I just want to compete and get in there and mix it up with really good women.

You're from the Midwest. Turning pro, what made you pick ZAP in North Carolina?

AM: It was timing, and a good fit for me. I really like the location there, with mountains and even moderate elevation. I liked the idea of getting a lot more strength from running hills here. I took a visit and really liked it, and the timing was such that they needed a decision so I just decided to go ahead and do it. It's amazing. I really love it.

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