

H E R



S E E of RUNNING



Centrowitz on his home training track in Portland, Oregon. His immediate goals now? Breaking his own personal records.

THE FOLLOWING RUNNERS HAVE FACED DOUBT, ADVERSITY, AND UNIMAGINABLY LONG ODDS. YET THEY ALL FOUND THE GRIT, GRACE, AND HUMILITY TO SUCCEED—AND INSPIRE.

WHEN MATTHEW CENTROWITZ CROSSED THE FINISH LINE

of the men's 1500-meter final at the Rio Olympics, he was in shock. And so was the rest of the world. The 27-year-old from Portland, Oregon, had just won gold—the first for an American in that distance in 108 years.

"I was thinking, *Are you kidding me?*" he says. "It was surreal. A lifelong dream accomplished already? It's hard to put into words."

His gold was part of a historic haul of 32 medals by the U.S. track-and-field team—the most Americans have won during a non-boycotted Games since 1932. It was Centrowitz's second Olympics—he was fourth in the 1500 in 2012—and capped a year in which he won the 1500-meter world indoor championships, the Millrose Games indoor mile, and the 1500 at the U.S. Olympic Trials.

The final in Rio was slow and tactical, with Centrowitz in full control of a high-caliber field that included two past Olympic champions. He won in 3:50.00. By comparison, his best time in the event is 3:30.40. "To make it the race that I wanted and take it by the horns, that's what I really liked about it," he says.

His father, Matt Centrowitz, a two-time Olympian (1976 in the 1500 meters and 1980 in the 5,000 meters) and head cross-country and track coach at American University, was watching from the stands that night. "I was in a little

bit of shock that the race went that slow after the first lap," he says. "It was the first I've ever seen a guy lead from start to finish. He was the best on the given day."

But what accounted for such a breakthrough in 2016? Good health and extreme focus for sure, and maybe a little growing up, too. Centrowitz, who has been training with the Nike Oregon Project under coach Alberto Salazar since 2011, finally committed to his plan.

"Alberto mentioned that he noticed I was doing all the right things—coming to practice early and things like that," says Centrowitz. "In the past, I'd be a few minutes late and maybe skip a couple of massages. But this year, I was focused and locked into this program."

As for his medal—which reportedly has bite marks that don't belong to him—it's been to a friend's wedding and worn by the bride, and over the neck of Steph Curry, star of the NBA's Golden State Warriors, whom Centrowitz says he met on a flight. For now, it's in a safe. "I don't trust myself to put it anywhere else," Centrowitz says.

It's not going to be easy to top 2016, but Centrowitz is targeting another medal at the 2017 world championships in London and hoping to break the 1500-meter American record of 3:29.30, set by Bernard Lagat in 2005.

But first, he has a score to settle. When Centrowitz got *Like father like son* tattooed across his chest, his dad wasn't pleased. So they made a wager: Centrowitz wins a medal and his dad gets inked—with what is unclear, but the elder Centrowitz is considering Rio de Janeiro's iconic Christ the Redeemer statue.

"A bet is a bet and even though I hate it, I'll do what I said," the senior Centrowitz says. "I think Jesus is going to be wearing a gold medal on my tattoo." —ERIN STROUT

The Gold Medalist

MATTHEW CENTROWITZ

PERHAPS

it's not surprising that he's a runner. Not when you consider his birthplace.

"This is Congo," says Makorobondo "Dee" Salukombo, 29. "People run to save their lives."

Since 1996, civil wars have killed nearly 6 million people in the Democratic Republic of the Congo—more than any other conflict since World War II. The central African country is infamous for sexual violence and its estimated 30,000 child soldiers.

Salukombo and his family fled their village of Kirotshe, near the Rwandan border, in 2001, and eventually ended up in Cleveland, Ohio. There, Salukombo ran both in high school and at Denison University, a Division III school for which he was a six-time All-American in cross country and track.

After graduating in 2012, Salukombo started Project Kirotshe, a youth running program with an educational focus based in his former village. With a \$10,000 grant from Davis Projects for Peace and donations from institutions and individuals, he shipped 13,000 textbooks, 55 computers, and athletic equipment to supply the village's new community learning center and running team. Then he returned home for the first time, to launch his vision of turning kids into students and runners.

Through donations, Project Kirotshe pays their school expenses, roughly \$50 for primary school, \$100 for secondary, and \$500 for college—steep fees in a country where the per capita income is \$442. At press time, the organization, now called

"What if we are great runners who are doing greater things than I did?" asks Salukombo. Here is a group photo of his school's athletes in Kinshasa.



The Long-Distance Savior **MAKOROBONDO "DEE" SALUKOMBO**



the Kirotsha Foundation, had provided funds for approximately 64 students in 2016. In a country where militants lure kids with guns and money, education is critical, says Salukombo.

The kids simultaneously participate in running groups and compete in local- and national-level events. "By running together, they're creating a family that most never had" after war left them orphans, says Salukombo. His top runners log about 90 miles a week, and Salukombo spent much of the last year training with them as well as coaching them. In August, he and his best runner, 5,000-meter ace Beatrice Kanuchanga, 19, went to Rio to represent DR Congo in the Olympics. Kanuchanga didn't advance out of her heat, and Salukombo finished 113th in the marathon (in 2:29:54), but it was being there that mattered most, he says. "The Games gave the youth confidence to believe they can get that first Olympic medal for Congo?"

Salukombo is now back in Cleveland, fundraising and coaching his runners remotely. He is determined to help as many kids as he can. "Why not use my strength to try to inspire them?" —NICK WELDON

THE ULTRA-ACTIVIST

STEPHANIE CASE

FOR STEPHANIE CASE, running in Afghanistan usually meant logging laps inside the United Nations compound in Kabul, where she worked as a human rights lawyer. One day, the competitive ultrarunner—with wins at the Vermont 100 Endurance Race and podium finishes internationally—hitched a U.N. helicopter ride to the Koh-e Baba Mountains in the western Hindu Kush for a day of unrestricted running. During that workout, she thought, *I'd love for the Afghan women to experience this sense of freedom.*

When Case floated the idea of a running club for women, other organizations dismissed it as impossible—too dangerous, they said. To her surprise, it was Afghan women who pushed for the idea. "I thought, *If they're interested and brave enough to try this, I should be brave enough to help them,*" she says. So in 2014, Case founded Free to Run. Its goal: to use sports to empower women and girls afflicted by conflict in their countries.

Twelve women from Bamiyan, a town about 80 miles northwest of Kabul, joined her for two days in the mountains; after that inaugural outing,

the group met once or twice a month for alpine hikes, runs, and other activities. In 2015, a Free to Run member became the first female Afghan to complete a 26.2 in her own country, the Marathon of Afghanistan in Bamiyan, and in February 2016, the country's first coed team—trained and supported by Free to Run—finished Racing The Planet, a 155-mile ultra in Sri Lanka.

Today, there are teams in three Afghan provinces who meet for weekly workouts, and Case has expanded her initiative to Hong Kong (that territory's program is targeted to refugees). In November, more than 100 women and girls from Free to Run programs ran either the 10K or the 26.2 at the second annual Marathon of Afghanistan.

Case, 34, now lives in Geneva, Switzerland, but keeps in contact with her teams, coordinates their training, and visits often. She's hoping to expand her refugee and mixed-gender programs. "Changing the perception of women's role in society is a way to achieve peace," she says. "It's not something you put on the to-do list after the re's peace."

—A.C. SHILTON



Case (far left) met some of her runners in Afghanistan. "Sports are a gateway to breakdown barriers," she says. "One the real game, everyone is equal."

IT WAS 2012, and freshman Justin Gallegos was about to run his first cross-country meet. Nervous, he followed his father's advice and lined up in the back. They both knew that when the gun went off and boys started jostling for position, it wouldn't take much to knock Gallegos down.

Gallegos has cerebral palsy (CP), a neurological disorder that affects body movement and muscle coordination, and ranges in severity. Gallegos has a speech impairment and lacks muscle control, which means that while he can walk and run unaided, his feet often drag and cause him to fall.

When he first started running, he fell a lot. But he didn't quit, and at that first cross-country meet, he stayed upright and crushed his goal of running a sub-30-minute three-miler by 35 seconds.

For the next four years, Gallegos rarely missed a day of practice at Hart High School in Santa Clarita, California, and his work ethic rubbed off on his teammates. "The effort

he put into training just gave everyone a sense of, 'I've got nothing to complain about,'" says his head coach, Larry David. "Everyone loved Justin. At meets, everyone would root for him."

And he just kept getting better. As a senior, he set a cross-country, three-mile PR of 23:58 and a mile PR of 7:08 (down from 8:50). In June, he won gold in the 400 meters in the Paralympics-Ambulatory division at the California State Track & Field Championships.

Most impressive of all? Gallegos barely drags his feet and he hardly ever falls anymore. While his doctors can't definitely say that running has improved his CP, they certainly don't want him to stop.

Gallegos, 18, doesn't plan to. Now a freshman at the University of Oregon, he's joined the school's running club and is targeting spring road races.

"I want to show people that you should live your life without limits," he says. "Don't let people who question you get in your way." —A.C.S.

Gallegos on campus at the University of Oregon. He hopes to become a motivational speaker spreading this idea: "No such thing as a disability."

TATYANA

McFadden is a force. A 17-time medalist in the Paralympics and multiple Para world record holder, McFadden, 27, has dominated every wheelchair race distance from 100 meters to 26.2 miles over the last decade. She's known as the "Beast," and her rigorous training includes 100-mile weeks on the road and the track as well as gym workouts that feature stair climbs—while in a handstand. It pays off: In September, she won six medals—four gold, two silver—in Rio, then three weeks later won the Bank of America Chicago Marathon wheelchair division. In November, she claimed her fourth consecutive World Marathon Majors Grand Slam (winning Boston, London, Chicago, and New York in a single year)—an unheard-of feat for any runner.

That's right, *runner*. "I've never seen myself as a person with a disability, and I've always identified as a runner," she says. "Being a runner means putting in hard work and learning from your failures."

Born with spina bifida, a condition where the spinal column fails to close all the way, McFadden was paralyzed from the waist down. She spent her first five years at an orphanage in St. Petersburg, Russia, and taught herself to walk on her hands. When she was 6, her mother, Deborah, adopted her, moved her to Clarksville, Maryland, and enrolled her in an adaptive sports program. "I tried a lot of sports, and I really fell in love with wheelchair racing," she says. "It made me feel so fast and free."



McFadden regularly hits the roads near University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, where she trains. "The competition is always tough, so I have to stay on my game."

The Unbeatable Advocate

TATYANA McFADDEN

At 15, McFadden became the youngest member of the U.S. Paralympics Team and medaled in both the 100 and 200 meters in Athens, Greece. The following year, she tried to join her high school track team; when she was instructed to race separately from the other students, she and her mother filed a lawsuit against the school system—and won. Today, no child in the U.S. can legally be denied the right to participate in interscholastic and intramural athletics.

"It was important for me that others understand it's not okay to exclude people with disabilities and treat them differently," she says.

As an adult, McFadden has continued her advocacy. She's spoken to Congress, schools, and clubs about the power of sport and the need for equal access, treatment, and pay for athletes with disabilities. Last year, she created the Tatyana McFadden Foundation, "to create a world where people with disabilities can achieve their dreams, live healthy lives, and be equal participants in a global society."

On top of all that—and while training for Rio—McFadden released a kid's book last spring, titled *Ya Sama! Moments From My Life*. The Russian phrase means "I can do it." The book includes lessons about community, acceptance, and setting goals.

"I knew I could do anything if I just set my mind to it. I always figure out ways to do things, even if they're a bit different."

—LINDSEY EMERY



HE'S been profiled on ESPN, on NBC News, and in the *Wall Street Journal* in the last year alone. But perhaps the apogee of Mikey Brannigan's career came in September, when he got his first fan letter. It was from a 13-year-old boy in Kentucky. In the letter, the boy said that he was trying to play baseball, despite "difficulties."

"I was moved and motivated to work hard," the boy wrote. "You are the perfect example of determination."

When asked how he felt about the letter, Brannigan, 20, smiles. "Like a professional athlete."

Brannigan was diagnosed with autism at 18 months, was nonverbal until age 5, and has a severe learning disability and a speech impediment. But as a runner, he is unstoppable. The six-time high school All-American has been attracting attention since he ran a 38:36 10K at age 12. In 2014, he became national champion in the 3200 meters after running 8:53.59. In 2015, he set a world record in the T20 (intellectual impairment) category when he ran 3:48.85 in the 1500 at the U.S. Paralympics Track & Field National Championships. And in August, he became the first person with autism to break four minutes in the mile, when he ran 3:57.58 in Raleigh, North Carolina.

While more than 200 colleges courted Brannigan, he couldn't meet the NCAA educational requirements to compete at the college level. Instead, after graduating high school in 2015, he accepted an offer to run and train with the New York Athletic Club, which pays some

After returning from Rio, Brannigan spoke to a group of middle school students. "I gave them a pep talk," he says. His message? "Follow your passion."

The Unstoppable Star

**MIKEY
BRANNIGAN**



of his travel and training expenses (he'll attend community college in January). With Team USA's help, he trained for the Paralympics at the Olympic Training Center in Chula Vista, California. In preparing for the Games, Brannigan studied Matthew Centrowitz's brilliant Olympic gold performance in the 1500 meters just a few weeks earlier (see page 83).

"I saw it, like, a hundred times," Brannigan says. "I was thinking, *Run like Matt did. Run like Matt did.*"

And he did: Competing in the category for intellectually impaired athletes, Brannigan led wire to wire, finishing in 3:51.73.

"I was delighted that he won gold in the Paralympics," Centrowitz—who ran 3:50—wrote in an email. "I'm honored that Mikey looks at me for inspiration, but I'm also inspired by his accomplishments. At 20 he has a great future ahead."

Indeed, after returning from Rio, Brannigan was greeted like a conquering hero during halftime at a football game at Northport High School, on Long Island, New York, his alma mater. "That was very special to me," he says.

After reading the letter from the 13-year-old, Brannigan wrote the boy back. He thanked him and sympathized with his challenges. "I also struggle to overcome difficulties," he wrote. "Keep working hard in school and playing baseball. Go out there and give it your all!"

He finished with a single line: "Look for me in the Tokyo Olympics in 2020!"

—JOHN HANC

"Marc would be so proud of the time and love we've put into these [speech-impaired] kids," says Charney, who races with groups like Team Red, White & Blue.



IT WAS A CRAPPY BENCH in a beautiful spot. It sat beneath a couple of weeping willow trees alongside the Cooper River, and from it, Amanda Charney and her fiancé, U.S. Army Special Forces Staff Sgt. Marc Small, could watch the sun set above the Philadelphia skyline. They'd sit and talk and work out the plan for their life together. After a few minutes, they'd get up and finish their run or their walk.

After Small was killed in Afghanistan, Charney ran all the time, and whenever she ran up to the bench, she'd sit and she'd cry and sometimes she'd think about how she was weeping beneath the weeping willows. It was 2009. She was 29 years old.

Today, the crappy bench on the river has been replaced with a beautiful black iron one, and there's a stone memorial on the ground nearby honoring Small. And Charney, a speech and language pathologist, is implementing the plan she made with a man she will always love.

She is the founder and executive director of Small Steps in Speech, a nonprofit that provides grants to families of kids with communication disorders; the grants cover therapy when insurance falls short. Charney formed the organization just days after Small's death on February 12, asking for donations in lieu of flowers. When she and Small had talked about their plans, Small Steps in Speech—the name was his idea—was going to be her private practice. But after he died, Charney wanted every dollar raised to go to kids with

speech and language disorders like autism or childhood apraxia of speech (when the brain fumbles signals to the mouth) that silence their voices. Since 2009, the organization has raised more than \$1 million, and by far, its biggest fundraiser is the annual On Your Marc 5K. Held every August around Small's birthday near his hometown of Collegeville, Pennsylvania, the event raised more than \$35,000 this year in its eighth consecutive running. Charney runs the event every year and she used to cry when she crossed the finish line. Now, there is more happiness and much gratitude—for the family and friends and hundreds of supporters who run to honor Small and support the cause that bears his name. Thanks in very large part to these runners, the nonverbal kid who used to throw a tantrum and bang his head on the floor because he couldn't say he was hungry can now use visual communication to convey what he needs. The boy who once sat in a self-contained class for kids with severe limitations is now in a general classroom. And some kids have improved so much that they've left speech therapy for good.

"Marc loved kids, and we never got to have them together," says Charney, who is now a marathoner and triathlete and is looking to expand the On Your Marc 5K into more communities. "But when I look at the hundreds of children we've helped, it gives me hope and joy. Maybe these kids, in some way, are our kids."

—CHRISTINE FENNESSY