

Paula Schnurr: Strength & Determination

Finding success in a sport is a great thing. Finding the inner strength and determination within oneself to reach success is an even greater thing. Both quests were achieved by Paula Schnurr, a local athlete. Schnurr, born in 1964, is an extraordinary athlete with many athletic accomplishments to her name. Her career is a testimony of perseverance over physical talent. Though blessed with great physical gifts, Paula Schnurr pushed herself to be the best she could be, if not more. Determination, along with setting goals and making the right decisions made Paula's running career one to admire.

Following is a list of Paula's athletic accomplishments:

- 28 OWIAA indoor/outdoor championship medals
- 18 of those were gold
- 2 OWIAA records
- 1987 OWIAA silver medal in cross country
- CIAU All-Canadian 5 times
- 2 CIAU indoor records in 1988
- top athlete at CIAU track and field championships in 1988
- Mac's Female Athlete of the year 4 times
- 1994 Commonwealth games silver medal
- 2 performances at the Olympics (1992 & '96)

Methadology:

To research Paula Schnurr, I used several sources. A simple internet search linked her name to standings in many races, and gave general info about her running career. Examining the Toronto Star did not turn up many results, besides the mentioning of Paula's name in final rankings of a race. A search in the Hamilton Spectator for articles, however, turned up 269 results,. Several articles, mostly dealing with the 1992 Olympics, had her name featured in the title. A database search also showed 2 featured articles in the Athletic Magazine. The most popular source however, came from the athlete herself through means of an interview.

Findings:

Paula's background:

Paula was born in Kirkland Lake, Ontario, on January 16th, 1964. Her family, having seven children, was quite large. The family moved to Burlington when Paula was yet a child. All children got signed up at the Burlington Legion track and field club, where Paula started running at the tender age of seven. Running for the club was a very positive experience as the coaches were great, there was lots of fun, new friends were made, and the girl excelled tremendously in the sport. After she got older, Paula started running for the Hamilton Olympic Club. Since there was so much potential and goals to

achieve, Paula was determined to stick with it. At this time, a long term goal of reaching the Olympics had already been set. Membership of this club was the main reason why she decided to attend MacMaster, a local university in Hamilton. Though competing in many intercollegiate races and achieving some local athletic recognition, Paula kept striving for the ultimate goal of qualification for the Olympics. The decision to change coaches in 1991 was a great move which helped reach her potential. Before this, Paula's talent had been recognized but an injury often prevented her from making it to big international events. Peter Grinbergs, the new coach, helped realize her goals and trained her well. Not even a year later, all of Paula's hard work and determination paid off when she qualified for the 1992 Olympics.

What made Paula successful:

Paula Schnurr was obviously blessed with natural talent. Her 5'2" and 114 lbs body was a great advantage along with her muscular strength and endurance. Many believe that she mostly wins on spirit since she does not possess as much natural talent as some of her opponents. Paula agrees: "I don't think I do either. Physically, I have the strength, though. And I think I compete well." (Success in stride)

Although there is no way to measure natural talent accurately, there is a very good possibility that Paula indeed relied more on her mind for strength and determination to win races than on her body's characteristics. Grinbergs describes her as tough and an incredibly hard-worker, as would most people that have worked with her.

Another important mind characteristic was to keep believing in herself which was not always easy. “It is necessary to believe that you are just as good as your competitors when you go out to race in order to beat them.” (P 11)

Struggles:

The biggest difficulty in her career, according to Schnurr herself, was dealing with injuries. “I used to try to work too hard all the time.” (Athl, p 11) It was hard for her to decrease her work load when an injury was experienced, or soon to come. However, Paula learned how to back off from her training when she felt an injury coming on. It was also important to remain positive, change training, and get physiotherapy.(A p 11) Grinbergs helped prevent this difficulty by doing more volume and less intense training. The biggest disappointment related to injury was the partial tearing of her Achilles tendon three weeks before her race in the Olympics of ‘96. Though she still finished the race, her performance was very poor due to the injury.

1992 Olympics:

Participation in this event, held in Barcelona, was by far the highlight of Paula’s career. She described it as a real thrill, which is putting it lightly considering this is what she had worked towards all these years. Schnurr performed very well and ran a personal best of 4:04.8. and qualified for the semi-finals. She was 3/100th of a second away from making the 1500 meter finals. Overall, the event was a big success and positive experience which Paula planned to repeat.

Despite Paula's international success, the Toronto Star did not mention her name once. All searches for Paula Schnurr in 1992 did not turn up a single result. This was disappointing and interesting at the same time, seeing as a fairly local athlete's participation in a widely known international event gets ignored.

1996 Olympics:

Paula again accomplished her goal of qualification for the Olympics in 1996 which were held in Atlanta. This time, however, did not turn out to be near as successful as her previous endeavor. Just three weeks before the race, Schnurr injured herself once again by partially tearing her Achilles. The injury was not a minor one, and participation in the race was unexpected until minutes before go-time. Though Paula could not run or train to the extent that was necessary, she did what she could to stay in shape by running in the pool and biking. According to Paula she did not think she could run right up till the warm up. She decided to participate anyways, partially because her family was in the audience and she had put so much time and effort into getting where she was. Her performance, as expected, was very poor.

This year, the Hamilton Spec had less coverage on Paula's race, which is understandable because of the injury. The Toronto Start yet again had no mention of Paula whatsoever.

Running for Pure Pleasure:

Two major things that differentiate Paula Schnurr from many other runners at her level is that she does not run for the money and managed to balance her teaching occupation throughout most of her running success.

Winning money in races was nice admits Paula, but it was always more of a means of paying her way to the big time. Participating in the Olympics is not a cheap event; training, injuries, travel, and time are just some of the costs that come with it. Winning money in races is almost a necessity to be able to afford all this.

Though one might think achieving success to the extend which Paula Schnurr did is everything you need in life, Paula very much stayed down to earth. She started teaching and coaching in 1990, and kept her job throughout her running career. After winning silver at the Commonwealth Games of '94, Paula ended the season simply because she had to get back to her kids at school. "Hopefully the kids will give me a break. (Pg 16 A, nov 96) Paula did take a leave of absence from her teaching job at St. John's Separate School in Burlington so that she could focus on running in 1995/96. Much time and effort was spent on training and racing which in turn helped prepare her financially for the upcoming Olympics.

The end of the track:

The injury-caused disappointment of the Atlanta Olympics had a big impact on her career, but Schnurr did not want to end her career this way. She tried getting back on her feet and started training again. Unfortunately, in her own words she was not motivated,

and if you're not motivated it's very tough to excel. Paula did not compete again after 1996.

Life at the other end of the track:

Though Paula's career had ended, she kept her passion for the sport and the people involved in it. She continued her teaching career in an elementary school and coached several sports, including track and cross country. She is also involved in reading program, where she makes an appearance regularly to inspire the kids.

Paula, along with her husband Peter Self, is also an assistant coach for track and cross country at her old university, MacMaster. She loves giving back and working with young motivated athletes to help reach their potential. She is also very good at it, as her name was mentioned as a helpful recognition by Wyman, a talented middle distance runner, after winning a race due to Paula's advice.

