

The World's Most Determined (and Dominant) Marathoner

The most dominant force in marathoning right now isn't a wiry Kenyan or Ethiopian. She hasn't yet set a marathon world record, nor does she have a major shoe sponsor. As a matter of fact, her personal website lists two sponsors: Liberty Mutual Insurance and BP Oil. She not only specializes in the marathon but is also a world-class cross-country skier.

The most dominant force in the marathon is only 25 years old and hails from the town of Clarksville, Maryland (pop. 56,239), some 30 minutes west of Baltimore. She is younger than her American marathon counterparts, Shalane Flanagan and Kara Goucher, and has excelled in sprinting events like the 100 meters and 400 meters, too.

She spends her time at rehabilitation hospitals, is always smiling for selfies, and has met some of the biggest names in sports and pop culture. Glance at her Twitter account and you'll see pictures with hurdler Lolo Jones, former football star and motivational speaker Eric LeGrand, and marathon world record holder Dennis Kimetto. On Instagram, she has selfies with Prince Harry, LeB-



ron James, Michael Sam, and Richard Sherman. She has been nominated for an ESPY Award (Best Female Athlete With a Disability) and is a four-time Olympian.

Still trying to guess who this top marathon star is? Here are two more hints: she has won the World Marathon Majors grand slam for two straight years, and she goes by the nickname "Beast."

The world's best marathoner is Tatyana McFadden, the most consistent and successful push-rim wheelchair athlete in recent years.

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I've always wondered what it's like to sit inches off the ground, propelling oneself on a titanium three-wheeled contraption at breakneck speeds. If you've been to any major road race or marathon and seen the professional wheelchair athletes go by, you know what I'm talking about.

In a flash, McFadden and her fellow competitors fly by, a blur of color streaking down the road with finesse and speed. Averaging around 3:45-minute-per-mile pace (sometimes

faster, sometimes slower, depending on the course), she reaches the finish long before the top runners.

Three days before the 2014 TCS New York City Marathon, McFadden completed an easy seven-mile training run (yes, she uses the term “run”) and then changed into a nice purple shirt and dress pants. Making her way into the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center, McFadden took her place alongside New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio and the de facto mayor of running, Meb Keflezighi. Together they would officially kick off marathon week at a press conference where they were presented with their bib numbers.

Being up on stage is nothing new to McFadden. In the past decade, she has risen within the ranks of wheelchair racing, taking her spot among the top wheelers to have ever covered 26.2 miles. One is hard pressed to find the last time she didn’t finish on the podium—it has been at least two years.

“I really want to be able to push the sport,” she says, speaking in a soft, sincere, and determined tone. When mentioned in the same sentence as legends like Ernst Van Dyk, Jean Driscoll, and Kurt Fearnley, she smiles brightly and gives a genuine, “Thank you; that means a very lot to be mentioned with them.”

At the Javits Center, McFadden nibbles on a sandwich and sips some water, looking out over the Hudson River. While throngs of media tend to Meb and the mayor, McFadden sits in peace at her table, smiling and laughing with those around her. Her relaxed persona extends to anyone who comes

within her reach. Not an ounce of anxiety or tension is audible in her voice, despite the fact that the five-borough marathon is less than 72 hours away.

When I approach McFadden, I ask about the upcoming race, her strategy, and if the impending winds and harsh conditions will play a dramatic factor on the streets of New York. To many it’s a foregone conclusion that McFadden will win, just a matter by how much.

Modestly, like any great sportsman, she acknowledges her competitors, saying that it is an honor to be racing among



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▲ Despite crashing close to the finish, Tatyana McFadden completed her second consecutive World Marathon Majors wheelchair grand slam at last year’s TCS New York City Marathon, her eighth marathon victory in a row.

the world's best on the world's biggest stage and that it will be a tough contest no matter what. Her class and dignity remind me of another marathon icon, American record holder Deena Kastor.

"Everyone's going to be there, so it's going to be a really, really tough race," she says. "This is one of the toughest marathons. It's very, very unique . . . Challenging, fun, and the support from the city is unbelievable."

In the end, McFadden does win. After race organizers shortened the wheelchair race to 23.2 miles due to reported 60-mile-per-hour winds registered on the Verrazano Narrows Bridge, McFadden jumped out in front and maintained her place at the head of the field.

Not even a mishap in the final mile could keep McFadden from winning the title with ease. Before entering Central Park, McFadden took a wrong line in making a sharp turn, causing her wheelchair to tip. She fell out of the chair and hit a bike that was riding alongside her.

"It was quite embarrassing, but I owned it at that moment, and I got back in and took one look behind me to make sure the girls didn't catch me, and I just continued with my way up that last hill right before the finish," she said.

McFadden powered up West Drive and broke the tape in Central Park with a time of 1:42:16. Her closest competitor, Manuela Schar of Switzerland, was a minute and nine seconds back.

"I cannot believe that I have won eight marathons in a row," McFadden would say, adding how special it is to

win in New York for the third time since 2010. The victory solidified her second consecutive World Marathon Majors grand slam, made up of (for wheelchair athletes) the Virgin Money London Marathon, Boston Marathon, Bank of America Chicago Marathon, and TCS New York City Marathon. No other athlete—able bodied or in a wheelchair, male or female—has ever accomplished the feat.

Her race and determination drew the attention of Australian Kurt Fearnley, who took the men's title after a Tour de France-style sprint to the finish against five other wheelers. A pioneer in the sport, Fearnley's words speak for the entire Paralympic and marathon community.

While McFadden was describing her fall, Fearnley spoke up and wanted to say a few words about the women's champion.

"Can I add to that and just say that's an absolute testament to the athlete that Tatyana is. There is not a more dominant athlete in any sport at the moment than what Tat is doing to women's wheelchair marathons. It's incredible," he said.

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Fearnley's words answer in part a question I had posed to Tatyana in the days leading up to the New York City Marathon.

"What does it take to be the best and most dominant in the world?" I asked.

Momentarily silent, McFadden took her time to formulate her answer. She giggled her usual giggle and then smiled again. (If you ever speak with



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▲ Tatyana McFadden has had great success in London, winning the London Marathon twice and taking home two golds and a bronze medal from the 2012 Paralympics.

Tatyana, you'll notice she doesn't stop smiling, nor does it take much to gain a kind giggle.)

"It's a full-time job," she said, in between laughs, before going into greater detail.

Just like any of the top marathon runners in the world, to be the best push-rim wheelchair athlete requires hours and hours of training. Little varies between the training of an elite runner and that of a wheelchair athlete.

"Training is really, really tough. I train twice a day, over 100 miles a week," she said in a nonchalant way, as if 100 miles was a mere warm-up. She has been reported to hit 200 miles on especially tough weeks.

In the morning, McFadden said that typical training includes a track session that can be a tempo, endurance,

or speed-based workout. Similar to runners, this can take the form of intervals.

In the afternoon, McFadden and her training partners will do hill-climbing work or a long recovery push. Twice a week they lift, building their upper-body strength.

"All the different training aspects that we do, we put in specifically for each race. Getting ready for New York City, we really just focused on climbing. We did stadium ramps in Illinois," she said. "We went to the football stadium and climbed all of the stadium ramps. We did that a few times in one week, and that kind of stuff gets us ready for New York."

For, say, the Boston Marathon, which mixes a variety of up- and downhill stretches, McFadden will incorporate lots of downhill work, too.



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▲ At the 2014 Boston Marathon, Tatyana McFadden celebrated her 25th birthday in style by retaining her title in a time of 1:35:06.

“It’s very typical. I was talking to Meb [Keflezighi], and we have similar training runs. Today we both ran at Central Park and both put in about seven miles. It’s very typical how we build, build, build, and then taper,” she said.

While runners work on their legs, making sure they are finely tuned and ready to fire on race day, McFadden focuses on her upper body and back. After all, she will spend the better part of an hour and 40 minutes pumping her muscular arms.

“Just putting in that time and focus, really just being a full-time athlete and

being able to transition and refocus. Each race is so different, and I have a goal for each different race because they’re very strategic in their own way,” she said.

Fearnley added his insight on the dais after her New York victory: “Having spent time with Tatyana training, she is an absolute warrior. She works hard and is just dedicated. It’s good.”

McFadden’s response to Fearnley’s praise was priceless.

“I like keeping up with the boys in training,” she said.

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After watching Tatyana McFadden roll to victory and celebrate with her family and close friends, it's hard to fathom that McFadden was once an orphan living in Russia less than 20 years ago.

Born with spina bifida in 1989, McFadden was paralyzed from the waist down. Without a wheelchair and living in an orphanage, McFadden walked on her hands, trying to keep up with those around her. From there, a star was born.

McFadden's inspiring story of how she got to the United States has been widely chronicled by numerous news outlets, from ESPN to *Sports Illustrated* and *USA Today*: In 1994, Deborah McFadden was the Commissioner of Disabilities for the U. S. Department of Health. That year she took a routine business trip to an orphanage in Leningrad, where she met Tatyana and quickly fell in love with the young girl.

Ms. McFadden soon adopted Tatyana, and upon their arrival in Maryland she was introduced to numerous sports. A devotion to wheelchair racing developed rapidly, leading to immense success on the track and on the roads.

A decade after her move to America, McFadden competed at the 2004 Paralympic Games in Athens. The youngest member of Team USA, she earned a pair of medals, silver in the 100 meters and bronze in the 200 meters. Fast-forward to the present day, and she has added nine more Paralympic medals to her collection, totaling three gold, five silver, and three bronze. That's more medals than Usain Bolt and Mo Farah combined.

Most recently, McFadden took home a silver in cross-country skiing from the 2014 Winter Games in Sochi, Russia. During that Paralympic trip, she was able to reunite with her birth mother for the first time.

"This year has been an absolutely incredible year. There's no words to describe it. I did the Winter Paralympics in Sochi, and I got to go back to my place where I was born and have my birth family [and] my adoptive family there. Winning the silver medal was just the cherry on top," she said.

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For all of her success, McFadden's motivation doesn't come from gold

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medals or grand slams. Rather, it lies within her wheels and heart. She speaks passionately about making sure others who may be wheelchair bound have the same opportunities she had as a girl. She wants those with disabilities to believe they can achieve greatness, participate in athletics, and live a long, enjoyable, and prosperous life just like any able-bodied person.

In high school, McFadden helped pass the Maryland Fitness and Athletics Equity for Students with Disabilities Act, requiring schools to give students with disabilities the opportunity to compete in interscholastic athletics. In 2013, she helped pass a similar law that assures all students with disabilities nationwide have a chance to be involved with school sports.

In New York City, Tatyana McFadden posed for picture after picture with Fearnley, Wilson Kipsang, and Mary Keitany. The latter two were the men's and women's open champions of the marathon, timing 2:10:59 and 2:25:07, respectively. With every picture and photo-op and interview, McFadden hopes to gain a greater awareness for Paralympic sports here in America, particularly push-rim wheelchair racing.

In our interview, McFadden spent less than a minute speaking of her accolades and accomplishments. She would much rather talk about the future and what could be for wheelchair athletics.

"I really want to be able to push the sport, where elite wheelchair athletes are the same as everybody else. I want society to see that. I was talking to Meb and he was saying that we're both the

same. We're both elite runners, we have that passion for running, and we really do. We go through struggles in life, but we've pursued on and we both know what it takes to be champions and how hard work pays off," she said, speaking again with a mixture of excitement and passion. "To be able to spread the word of running, to get others involved. It's not about always winning marathons, but in other ways we're winning in pushing Paralympic sports and pushing the marathon, and it's just unbelievable how exposure has changed."

It is here that she recognizes the other wheelchair athletes among her, the Van Dyks and Fearnleys and Driscolls of the world, who paved the way for her.

"To be among the others who have helped push the sport and paved wheelchair athletics is amazing, and I love that. I love being a role model to many others," she says. "I think that pushes me to do so well. I've already done something unbelievable that no runner has ever done before—to freakishly win seven major marathons in a row [eight after New York City]. That is just unbelievable, and sometimes I think, *Wow, did I just allow my body to do that?* It takes a lot of hard work and preparation."

Away from the roads, McFadden gets to see the impact of her inspiring story play out in real time. After graduating from the University of Illinois in December 2013, McFadden began to work at Spaulding Rehabilitation Hospital in Boston, the same hospital where numerous Boston Marathon bombing victims were treated.

As a child-life specialist, McFadden works with critically ill children in hospital settings. Interning at Spaulding's Pediatric Center, she spent time assisting children who had gone through significant tragedies.

"I'm there to not only help them cope through the hospital experience, but for the time after, and say, 'Hey, life still continues after something tragic has happened in our life,'" she said. "Being able to share my story and have that relationship and say that absolutely life is not over, you can still go back to school, get involved with sports, go to college, travel the world! It's really rewarding."

A number of children have already expressed interest in racing wheelchairs a la McFadden.

"They thought wheelchair racing was the best thing in the world and that they really wanted to get out there and try it!" recalled McFadden. "That was rewarding."

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With the wind in her hair and pavement flying beneath her frame, McFadden feels an invigorating shot of adrenaline.

"It's thrilling, let me tell you. It's thrilling because you're sitting in a tiny titanium chair that is sort of meant to go down 30, 35 miles per hour—the guys usually hit higher—but it is so fast, and you have to be tucked in an aerodynamic position because if you sit up or hit a bump wrong, you're like done."

When she talks about the sensation of flying down a racecourse, McFadden uses such vivid detail that you can envision the exact setting: crowds roaring

on your left and right, the air blowing by with every stroke, the endless road ahead.

This April, McFadden will take her place on the starting line in London and Boston once again, setting off on her quest to claim an unprecedented third grand slam in a row. While her main priority is the 2016 Paralympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, McFadden is still passionate about keeping the marathon winning streak alive. There is no telling how long she will dominate the 26.2-mile circuit.

"I know how to tweak, how to prepare my body, and how to tweak my nutrition and change my preparation. The sport is evolving, and even the runners are getting faster and faster each year. Part of that whole change, I love it, and it's what keeps me going. It will keep me going for a long, long time," she said.

In 2015, we could see men race the marathon in under 2:02:00, or we could be witness to another triumphant victory like Keflezighi's in Boston last year. All eyes will be on the runners at the front of the pack—the Kipsangs and Keitanys, wiry Kenyans, Ethiopians, and a handful of Americans who will battle for the title.

But keep in mind that there is someone far, far ahead of the elite runners. She is clipping off mile after mile in the 3:45 range and rewriting the history books with every pump of her defined arms.

The most dominant and most inspiring marathoner in the world right now is American Tatyana McFadden.