

My Most Unforgettable Marathon

(And what I learned from it.)

BY AMBER GREEN

DULUTH, MINNESOTA, June 20, 2015—As I sit here on a plane, flying over the Midwest, heading back to my home in Saint George, Utah, a smile spreads across my face. I did it. Pause . . . wait, no; that’s not right. *We* did it!

Fifteen years ago, at the age of 20, I decided to run my first marathon. I was a freshman at my local junior college with interests in student government and my boyfriend, Matt. I wasn’t much interested in running. I had always tried to stay fit, but I had never in my life run over three miles. The marathon seemed the perfect challenge, and I was inspired by my mom (also not a runner), who had trained and completed the Saint George Marathon years earlier when I was just

12 years old. I will never forget seeing my mother in her colorful running shorts, running the race with her sister Terri, who had to drop out due to a knee injury. My mom later told me how she forged on to the finish line alone. When the race got hard, she pressed on by taking one segment of the road at a time. She would tell herself, *OK, just run to that next road sign; that’s all you have to do.* She would arrive at the sign and then pick a new point in the road ahead as her next goal. She inspired me. If she could complete a marathon, not being a real “runner” by definition, then I certainly wanted to try it, too.

I found a great training friend then—15 years ago—to log “uncharted” miles with as we followed a beginner’s plan to marathon training. We trained an



Courtesy of Amber Green

▲ The coveted Grandma’s Marathon finisher medal.

average of four days a week, mostly between three and seven miles each session, with a long run on Saturdays. Then it was time for my first marathon. Crossing that first finish line in Utah in 2000 with a time of 4:23:37 left me with happy yet tired legs and with a certain satisfaction of reaching my desired goal. Done. Check. OK, now what? As many runners understand, the menacing soreness in the legs eventually subsides, and in its place grows a desire that teases, “Let’s do that again,” as if we had just stepped off a fast and thrilling roller coaster and were not yet ready for solid ground quite yet.

The love of running was planted in me, but it had not yet sprouted, so I gave it a year before my next race. Upon my engagement to my now-husband, Matt, we decided to run the San Diego Marathon together before we left on our honeymoon cruise. And you better believe we did it!

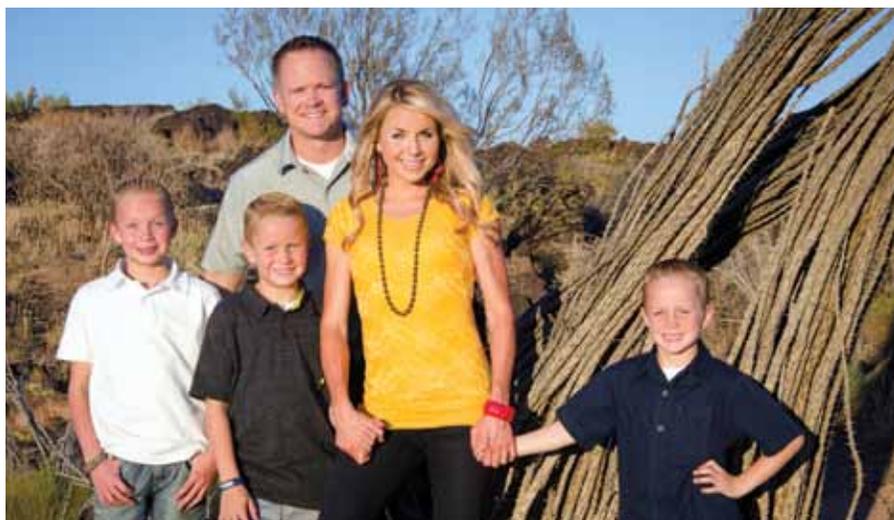
Sparing the details sandwiched in between then and now, we’ll fast forward to 2015. Matt and I now have three children, all boys, ages 6, 9, and 11. My love of running has not only sprouted, but it has grown, been pruned, watered, and fed, right along with the growing and budding of our family.

In the garden of miles

I believe that what you love to do, what you love to think about and spend your time on, grows, perfects, and blossoms. I *love* marathons! Like many thousands of other runners, I love the thrill, the challenge, the training, and the completion of the marathon.

Over the past 15 years I have completed 29 marathons. My running resume has grown long since my first Saint George Marathon in 2000. I have now completed 12 Saint George Marathons with victories in 2012 and 2014. I’ve crossed the finish line first in other marathons as well: Park City, Tri-State, Utah Valley. I have run the Boston Marathon five times, in three of which I had the privilege of starting with the elite women, including the inspirational Shalane Flanagan! I have won the Grand Slam (running four marathons in Utah in one year with the overall fastest times) twice. I have won the Silver Shoe Award as the first local female runner in Saint George four times. Consistent training, weekly speed work, tempo, long runs, and the love of being in the running world have certainly paid off.

As I ran each race, my marathon finishing time began to drop. It wasn’t long before I developed a new goal, the idea, that maybe—just maybe—I could run fast enough to qualify for the Olympic Trials. It was just an idea at first, a sparkle, a thought. It hovered over me, grew inside of me, and begged for me to follow it. And I chased it. At first only half-heartedly and then wholeheartedly, I set my mind and intentions on achieving what I once would have deemed unattainable: to run in the Olympic Trials Marathon. Though my marathon time had dropped



Courtesy of Amber Green

▲ The author combined a busy family life—with husband, Matt, and sons, Daxton, Konrad, and Jace—with intense training to achieve her goal of qualifying for the Olympic Marathon Trials.

down to a PR of 2:40:03 (Saint George 2013), that was on an aided course, meaning it wasn't certified to qualify for the Olympic Trials.

I trained. Oh, how I trained! Juggling being a wife and mother of three and logging 100-plus miles a week was not easy. I know many women who handle careers and motherhood beautifully, and I admire their dedication and organization. While my home was my workplace as a homemaker, my second job became running. I would get up early and run before my family woke up. Then I would get my kids up and ready and off to school and go for a second training session, consisting of some sort of cross-training, typically yoga, swimming, or weight training. After lunch, housework or grocery shopping, I would usually do a second run before the boys got out of school. Once school was out, I tried to be “all mom” and focus on them and their needs, with the occasional night run. I enjoyed the intense training and loved the feel of plopping into bed at night exhausted and sleeping deeply until the next morning to do it all over again.

I tweaked my nutrition too. I focused more on a whole-food, plant-based diet. I found an improvement in my recovery and stamina as I tried to fuel my body adequately for the training load I was inflicting upon it. Recovery immediately after runs was a priority, consisting of a green smoothie with my favorite protein, Sunwarrior, a fabulous plant-based powder. The healthy eating helped me feel light and fresh on my runs, and even though I wasn't perfect, I maintained a food intake that was as clean as possible.

Next to physical training, I incorporated mental training, too. I would visualize and affirm what I wanted. I wrote down my goals and looked at them often.

Oh, so close

My first “real” attempt at running a sub-2:43 marathon on a certified course was at Boston in 2014. Grateful to run on such a historic and beloved course, I loved every minute of that Boston Marathon until the very last minute, when I crossed the line in 2:43:27. I was 27 seconds too late for the Olympic Trials qualifying time. Twenty-seven seconds! The next three attempts were close as well: Grandma’s Marathon 2014 = 2:45:59; California International Marathon 2014 = 2:43:42; and Boston Marathon 2015 = 2:48:07. I was seconds or minutes away from qualifying each time.

I felt that I had failed. My confidence dropped. I wondered if I really had it in me to keep training at this level. Could I pull it off? Had I come close enough to throw in the towel and be content? Why would the hunger to succeed not go away? Why was it so persistent, consistent, and persuading?

Of course I had to try again.

In June 2015, I toed the line again—at age 34. I planted myself at the start line



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of the Grandma’s Marathon in Minnesota. We were standing in the pouring rain with more than 6,000 other runners in Two Harbors, Minnesota, right along Lake Superior. The course took us along the lake for 18 miles, tracking a straight and gentle route along the water and a tree-lined street. Then the marathon course continued through a residential area, finally ending in Canal Park in Duluth.

I remember it like it was yesterday. The other elite runners surrounded me, waiting, as I was, for the gun to go off. The nerves, the tension, the excitement! I asked myself: would this be it? Would this marathon be the one that satisfied my hunger, that taste for victory? I

◀ Looking strong during the early miles at Grandma’s Marathon.

was going for something I had never accomplished before. I was aiming to cross the finish line under 2 hours and 43 minutes to qualify to run in the 2016 Olympic Trials Marathon. Could this finally be the one?

The gun went off, and so did we. Crossing the start line is sometimes harder than stepping over the finish line. As I settled into running, even at a quickened, adrenaline-soaked pace, I remembered, “Oh yeah, I know how to do this!”

My fears dissipated after six miles. The first six miles of any marathon are not an indication of how the rest will play out. It usually takes me that long to get warmed up and start to feel strong. The rain subsided into intermittent sprinkling, the clouds broke and let the sun in at times, and we had a view of Lake Superior through the trees that lined the point-to-point course to the aerial lift bridge in Duluth. The course was green and luscious.

Race goal: 2:42:59.

A bouquet of support from family and friends

I was lucky enough to have my husband, Matt, my dad, and my stepmother at the race to cheer me on. I saw them at mile nine and gave them a quick glance, then forged on ahead, giving every ounce of focus and energy to the finish line. Knowing they would greet me again there, I wanted to make them proud. They had sacrificed much to be there with me, not only on that marathon but many previous ones. They aren't the only ones who encouraged me along this journey. My friends and family from home have all given love, support, and prayers in my behalf.

One of my race mantras was: “I may or may not win (aka reach my goal time), but I will run like a champion.” This helped me keep my head high and press on, focusing less on the outcome and more on each step along the way. I wrote on my hand with marker before the race the words, “Courage, Calm, Strong.” Every mile I chanted in my head “6:05,” as that was the pace I wanted to keep. I came in the halfway point at 1:20:21 . . . just need to double that with a *little* wiggle room. A few other girls and I worked together on and off, meaning we ran with each other and kept each other company without even saying one word. I had to stay focused each mile and work, but my body cooperated and welcomed the challenge. I thanked God through the entire run for the opportunity to race.

I neared mile 18 and took into consideration how I was feeling. Every mile took focus to hit a consistent pace. My watch said I was at a 6:07 average pace, perfect, but still eight miles to go. My legs were fatiguing but still responding. I knew there was Lemon Drop Hill at mile 22. I aimed to take it at a consistent pace and had also determined to save some strength to push the last three miles of the race, where my pace historically slowed. The hill isn't huge, but at this point in the marathon the incline mentally magnifies significantly. Calling upon my mom's methods, I

► Qualifying for the Olympic Trials Marathon with time to spare during the 2015 Grandma's Marathon.

began to take the race a minute at a time, counting to 60 and then starting over. One, two, three, four . . . 60. One, two, three, four . . . 60. I crested the hill and kept on; I wanted this. Mile 24 = 6:02 pace, mile 25 = 6:07 pace, and in the last mile I smiled and pressed on with a 5:54 pace along the cobblestone road in Duluth, turning the corners leading to the finish line, with one more glance and wave to my three-person fan club on the sideline. Crossing that finish line I saw the clock:

Finish time: 2:41:19

Average pace: 6:10

Olympic Trials qualifying time: *Yes*



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And what I learned from it

What did I learn from this marathon? Never give up. Never ever give up. If you have a goal or passion, keep at it. There will be a day when you can check off that box of completion, as long as you get up just one more time when you fall. It doesn't take perfection, but it does take persistence, a good attitude, and support from others.

Is this my most memorable marathon? Well, yes, in fact it is. But I think the next one, the one where I get the opportunity to run in Los Angeles on February 13, 2016, amid 100 or so other female runners from the United States in the Olympic Trials Marathon, *just* might top this one! Stay tuned. 