

00:00:03

Speaker 1: Thank you New York. Today we're reminded of the power of community and the power of coming together. Athletes on your mark.

00:00:15

Speaker 2: The first woman to finish for the second straight year here in the New York City Marathon is Miki Gorman, a smiling Miki Gorman. And why not, 2: 29: 30 the time for (inaudible) .

00:00:27

Speaker 3: Look at the emotion of Shalane Flanagan as she comes to the line.

00:00:31

Becs Gentry: Pointing to his chest, pointing to the USA, he so proudly wears across his chest. A great day for Meb Keflezighi.

00:00:44

Rob Simmelkjaer: Hey everybody, and welcome to another edition of Set the Pace presented by Peloton, the official podcast of New York Road Runners. I'm your host and CEO of New York Road Runners, Rob Simmelkjaer. With me as co-host the marvelous Becs Gentry. Becs, how are you? Good to see you.

00:01:01

Becs Gentry: Hi, I am very good, Rob. Happy Father's Day.

00:01:04

Rob Simmelkjaer: Aw, thank you. It was a great, great Father's Day weekend. It was lovely. I spent tons of time with my girls, I appreciate that. It was lovely. We had a good time. We all went out Saturday together to the amazing Citizens Queens 10K out at Flushing Meadows Park. And Becs, I know you had the weekend off from-

00:01:26

Becs Gentry: I did.

00:01:26

Rob Simmelkjaer: ... teaching and from running, but it was a beautiful day. Not the coolest day to run, but it's June, you can't expect cool. It was a hot run, but a great turnout and there was a festival and so many people. Citizens did an amazing job just making it a special experience for everyone. I ran the 10K. My daughter Julia ran the stage three kids race that was a one miler-

00:01:54

Becs Gentry: Congratz Julia.

00:01:54

Rob Simmelkjaer: ... she ran in under seven minutes, so that was great for her.

00:01:56

Becs Gentry: Wow.

00:01:57

Rob Simmelkjaer: But the star of the day was my little one Annika, who never runs really says she hates it. She ran the stage two, which was a half mile run, kind of a fun run untimed. And she leaves the starting line flying. And Julia and I are like, "Oh, that's not good, she's going to tire out." And she turns around and comes back, and she ran it like under four minutes. It was unbelievable.

00:02:18

Becs Gentry: Oh my goodness.

00:02:19

Rob Simmelkjaer: Under three, what am I saying? Under three minutes for-

00:02:21

Becs Gentry: Annika.

00:02:21

Rob Simmelkjaer: ... a half mile. It was crazy. So we were so happy for her. She was fired up, and then that led into a great Father's Day. So it was a lot, a lot of fun.

00:02:30

Becs Gentry: That sounds like you have two future running stars on your hands with those times.

00:02:34

Rob Simmelkjaer: Yeah, we'll see. Jules runs-

00:02:36

Becs Gentry: We'll see.

00:02:36

Rob Simmelkjaer: ... cross country in high school, so she's into it. Annika, maybe that'll get her excited about it. Because she had never expressed any interest in running. But the smile when she crossed the finish line was priceless.

00:02:48

Becs Gentry: That's what we like to see.

00:02:50

Rob Simmelkjaer: Yeah, those kids races are so special.

00:02:53

Becs Gentry: They are.

00:02:53

Rob Simmelkjaer: Our team led by Herman Martinez does such a great job with our youth events. And for those out there listening, I really encourage you if you're a runner, look at the schedule of our youth series. We have so many youth races, a lot of them are alongside the adult races. We have one or two that are solo. And it's just great to get your kids out there, put a bib on them and just give them the feeling of running a race. We start as young as two years old with these races, so it's just a great experience for the kids.

00:03:25

Becs Gentry: I can't wait for Tallulah to do her first New York Road Runners Youth Race. It's going to be good.

00:03:30

Rob Simmelkjaer: You got to make it happen.

00:03:30

Becs Gentry: Oh, so soon, so soon. Few more months. But this weekend was so good.

00:03:35

Rob Simmelkjaer: Oh yeah. Becs, we put out a funny video actually on Father's Day, New York Road Runners with a bunch of dads talking about being a runner dad, and things they do with their kids. And one of them was a guy named John Phillips on our team who literally says, "Of course, I'm a runner dad, so of course I signed my kid up for a race the day she turned two years old." And it shows her-

00:03:58

Becs Gentry: Brilliant.

00:03:58

Rob Simmelkjaer: ... picking his kid up and running with her to the finish line. So I expect that to be you Becs.

00:04:03

Becs Gentry: More than likely it will be. October 22nd, let's

go. But now listen, I hear that there were record number of finishes at the Citizens Queens 10K this weekend, is that right?

00:04:15

Rob Simmelkjaer: It was crazy Becs, 12,094 finishers, a record-

00:04:20

Becs Gentry: Oh, my goodness.

00:04:20

Rob Simmelkjaer: ... record crowd. Incredible day. Congrats to the winners that day by the way. Yenew Alamirew Getahun was the men's winner at 30 minutes and 45 seconds.

00:04:31

Becs Gentry: Oh my gosh.

00:04:32

Rob Simmelkjaer: That's a blazing time for 10K. Can you believe that time?

00:04:35

Becs Gentry: So fast.

00:04:37

Rob Simmelkjaer: Just bananas. And on the women's side it was Roberta Groner, New York Road Runners member. She's been a guest on Set the Pace, she comes up with the win, 34 minutes and one second.

00:04:47

Becs Gentry: Beautiful.

00:04:47

Rob Simmelkjaer: She's just an absolute wonder.

00:04:49

Becs Gentry: She is. She is. Oh my goodness. And congrats to the non-binary winner with Jacob Caswell in 36: 32. All these times, absolutely everyone's times, not just the winners were phenomenal.

00:05:04

Rob Simmelkjaer: Amazing.

00:05:04

Becs Gentry: Congratulations to you all.

00:05:06

Rob Simmelkjaer: Yeah, it was amazing. And I went out and ran a pretty good race myself. I set a PR in the 10K, which was great. I have to say I have to thank my pacer, and my chief of staff by the way, Iber Gonzalez Vidals, who works for us at Road Runners, and he's also an incredible runner. He works for us at Road Runners and he's an incredible runner. And a couple of weeks ago I said, "I think I could maybe run a good time in Queens. It's flat." I had aspirations of running even faster than I ended up running. And Iber who's way faster than me, agreed to pace me. And so we set a plan, and we go out and start running the pace that we plan to run. At two miles index I was like, "I cannot keep this pace up, there's no way we're going to run that time."

00:05:53

Becs Gentry: Oh no.

00:05:53

Rob Simmelkjaer: It was just hot enough that I felt like I was really dying from about two miles on. But we hung on there and ran in just over 42 minutes and it was a great race for me, so I had a really good time.

00:06:05

Becs Gentry: Amazing. Congratulations. These PRs, they keep coming, they keep on flowing.

00:06:10

Rob Simmelkjaer: I don't think there's many left Becs, I think I've tapped out. I'm going to take a little time off from racing hard now, and then we'll see what the fall brings, but it should be a lot of fun. And Becs, there's so much going on at Road Runners in the month of June.

00:06:23

Becs Gentry: There is.

00:06:23

Rob Simmelkjaer: We've got such a-

00:06:24

Becs Gentry: Oh my gosh.

00:06:24

Rob Simmelkjaer: ... busy month.

00:06:24

Becs Gentry: So many races.

00:06:26

Rob Simmelkjaer: So many races. It's like one after the other. This coming Sunday we'll be back in Central Park for one of the most inspiring races of the year, the Achilles Hope and Possibility for Miler presented by TD Bank. That's always such an inspiring run, Becs, as we see all of the great work that Achilles does with athletes with disabilities, and it's just so inspiring to see them all out there racing in that event. So it's a really a special one.

00:06:53

Becs Gentry: Oh my gosh, I can't wait. I'll be sending you all lots of love from the other side of the pond.

00:06:58

Rob Simmelkjaer: Absolutely. As you head back to the UK for a visit home, I know you'll enjoy yourself over there. So we'll miss you, but I know you'll have a great time. And then we've got a great show today, Becs, such an honor to speak with Nikki Hiltz. For anybody who follows track and field, Nikki really has become such a trailblazer in that world. A professional middle distance runner, really specializing in that 1,500 meters, 800 meters as well. Nikki, a powerful advocate for the LGBTQ community as well. Nikki identifies as non-binary and they've been breaking barriers and setting records on and off the track, and they'll be here to share their story with us. A great conversation with Nikki Hiltz coming up in just a little bit. And then for our member moment this week. Meb will be here with New York Road Runners' Runner of the Year in the non-binary category, ages 45 to 49, Rob Roberts.

Rob just started running marathons in 2021, but now has many to his name and we can't wait for you to hear his story too. And then for today's Meb Minute, we're going to get some tips on one of the most important summertime running topics, especially in a week as hot as this one has been, especially on the East Coast, hydration. Got to stay hydrated.

00:08:14

Becs Gentry: Oh my goodness, what a show. What a show. I'm very excited for everyone to hear the conversation we had with Nikki because it's such an exciting time for them. And Meb Minute is going to be invaluable team, take everything he says and try it.

00:08:32

Rob Simmelkjaer: Absolutely. So looking forward to a good show.

00:08:36

Becs Gentry: Get ready to go the extra mile with walking and running content fit for all levels available on the Peloton app. Tap in and track your workouts all in one place with the Just Walk or Just Run features to easily get moving towards your goals. No equipment needed. Find the Peloton app in the Apple, Android and Google app stores. Peloton, the official digital fitness partner for New York Road Runners.

00:09:01

Rob Simmelkjaer: Nikki Hiltz is a champion middle distance runner specializing in the 800 meter and the 1,500 meter events. They live and train in Flagstaff, Arizona under the guidance of Coach Mike Smith. In 2023, Nikki won the national championship in the 1500 meters, and recently ran a phenomenal 359 in the 1500 at the Prefontaine Classic. As an openly non-binary athlete Nikki advocates for the LGBTQ+ community, and emphasizes the importance of mental health and sports. And Nikki is headed next week to the Olympic trials in Eugene, Oregon. They use their platform to humanize trans and non-binary people and inspire so many people by sharing their story. Nikki, so awesome to have you on Set the Pace, really, it's an honor. We are such fans of you at New York Road Runners and everything you're doing. So welcome to the show. Thanks for joining us.

00:09:53

Nikki Hiltz: Thank you. Thank you so much for having me. I love a good podcast. So, so excited for this conversation.

00:10:00

Rob Simmelkjaer: Who doesn't love a good podcast? I'm sure you are asked to do more than your share of podcasts, Nikki, given your incredible success and your story. So wait, let's start at the start here. How is it going getting ready for Eugene? How are you feeling? What do you feel like your chances are to make yourself an Olympic team?

00:10:20

Nikki Hiltz: Yeah, it's crazy. We're two weeks out. I think yesterday was exactly two weeks from round one, and so it's crazy it's finally here. There's a lot of feelings, I think a lot of excitement, definitely a lot of nervousness. But I just can't believe it's finally here. This is what we've been working towards for the last three years it feels like.

So I think I feel pretty good though. I'm in the best shape of my life, and that's always a great place to be in going into a big important race. I feel confident. I love championship racing because there's no rabbits, there's no pace lights, it's literally just let's go out and try to beat everyone that's next to me. And so I love that. And I think

I'm just excited to race and to execute a really good 1, 500 and hopefully that lands me for second or third.

00:11:19

Becs Gentry: I think you're going to do it because judging by your insane performance at the Prefontaine classic, my jaw was on the floor. As a long distance runner. I was like, "That makes me feel physically sick." Unreal fast. How was it coming off the back of that and going into this insanely important training plan? How was that the high and then, okay, I've got to refocus my brain.

00:11:47

Nikki Hiltz: Totally. It was kind of scary because it was my first 15 of the season. I've kind of approached this season differently than I have maybe past outdoor seasons. I really haven't raced that much. I did a couple of eights in early May, which I think got me ready for when we went out fast at Pre. And I think the Olympic trials is going to go out fast too, so just practicing that. But it's weird, I think I've really leaned into training the past six months whereas before I would rely on racing into shape more. And I think that's just shown how I've maybe grown as an athlete or grown in my confidence, and I don't need to race a ton to know that I'm a good racer. I have that confidence in myself. After the meet, it was obviously just such a fun weekend.

TrackTown did such a good job of putting that meat on, and just such a cool atmosphere. And then coming back to Quiet Flagstaff was definitely a change. But I think I've just been leaning into training, and just really knowing the training is what is going to make you do... It's what's going to make you fit so that you can do all the right moves you want to do in the race if that makes sense.

00:13:14

Rob Simmelkjaer: Nikki 1, 500 meters and 800 even faster, but it goes by so quickly, it just happens so fast. We talk of course on this show a lot about marathons and half-marathons. But I'm sure you go into these races with a plan, everybody's got a plan. As Mike Tyson used to say, everybody's got a plan until they get hit in the face. You walk in with a plan, and then how do you try to make your plan actually happen over a race that is so short and unexpected things happen, unexpected pace, unexpected people doing unexpected things. How do you execute a plan while at the same time being ready for the unexpected in a race where things can happen so quickly?

00:14:03



Nikki Hiltz: I think you just said it, you have to be ready for everything and anything. And I think the only thing predictable about the 1,500 is that it's going to be unpredictable. But I think that's why I love this event. It keeps me on my toes and obviously I have a plan to some extent, a rough outline I would say. But it's really just about getting in there and trusting your instincts. And I'm such a nerd. I watch so many 15,000s, I really study this event.

I know what to do when certain things happen and if I don't and if something new happens in a race, it's almost like I get excited of like, "Oh, this is something new I'm learning." And so yeah, I think you have to run races to your strength and my strength is my finishing kick. It's pretty simple. It's complicated and hard and very difficult thing to do, but it's simple. I just sit and kick, that's at the end of the day my strategy. And sometimes I'm sitting and the pace is fast pace and sometimes it's slow and then it becomes about positioning. So I don't know, I think it's just a fun chess match for me out there. And that's why I love championship racing, it's like who can figure it out and who can be at the right place at the right time.

00:15:19

Becs Gentry: I love that it's like a chess match. So there's four minutes let's say of the 1,500 and you are not just absolutely crushing it, but you're having this game of chess in your brain, that's inspiring. So talking of learning new things, you've been working with Coach Mike Smith. And you've always been an incredible athlete, but recently you have been breaking your own records. You've been going for it, you've been just leveling up every single time. So is there something that you, or he, or together you've been doing differently in your training?

00:15:57

Nikki Hiltz: I think just when I first moved here in March of 2022, so it's been two full years, it was really just the focus on let's get stronger. I've always had a really good finishing kick. But I just wasn't quite strong enough to be there to be able to use it. So that was the main goal was it was focus on the third lap, that's the hardest lap of the 1,500. And so I think I've really, really built out my threshold, aerobic threshold, we do this thing called double threshold. I'm sure the whole running world is sick of hearing about it. It's you work out in the morning and then you come back in the afternoon. It's nothing crazy fast, it's threshold pace, it's just the volume. It gets you over weeks and weeks, months and months, years and years

just gets you stronger.

And so that I think has been the really big focus. And my training partners are 5K, 10K athletes, so that obviously helps in that arena too, but also not completely abandoning my speed. Every Friday I do 800 workouts specifically. I'm doing 60 pace or under on Friday, so it's really hitting two ends of the spectrum. On Tuesdays I'm running 80 pace and on Fridays I'm running 60 pace. And then when I get in the race, it's somewhere in between.

00:17:24

Rob Simmelkjaer: It almost sounds like your speed is the thing that you know is there that you can count on. It seems like you've always had that. And in sports we all have that. We all have a thing if we're good and we excel at a sport, one part of that thing that we know we can go to. So it sounds like for me maybe in tennis, maybe it's my backhand that's reliable, or whatever it may be. For you the kick seems like the thing you know is there. So is that why you're training with these 5K and 10 K runners to build up the part that you aren't always as sure of, the second and the third lap before you can get to that kick?

00:18:03

Nikki Hiltz: Exactly, you said it perfectly. And I think, I don't know, I think really good athletes can look at themselves in the mirror and be like, "Okay, what am I bad at? What do I need help with?" And I think that's I think what I did coming off the last Olympic trials. Not to say I'm bad at something, but it's like, "Where's room for improvement?" And so I just dove headfirst into at the start of 2022 to really figure that out. And altitude was something I had dabbled in. I had done training camps and stuff and Flagstaff and things like that, but I was like I think this is going to be good for me in the long haul. And it's just really cool to see it paying off.

00:18:47

Becs Gentry: That is, because you're originally from California.

00:18:51

Nikki Hiltz: Yes. Santa Cruz, California.

00:18:52

Becs Gentry: Santa Cruz, That's it. So going up into the mountains in Flagstaff, you're surrounded by the running mecca almost. Just everyone is out there living and training and inspiring one another. And I guess one of my questions I'm dying to know, which is totally probably off script here. But being that you are in Flagstaff and surrounded by people

over many different disciplines who are training out there with hopes of making the team for the Olympics, how do you keep yourself grounded but also motivated?

00:19:32

Nikki Hiltz: No, that's a really good question. I feel like it's so applicable just right now. I was saying we're two weeks out from this thing that everyone wants so badly. And so I think it is really important to surround yourself with people who are just good energy, and are approaching it in a way that maybe you approach it. It's a really delicate thing because everyone, we all want it and we are all working so hard for it, but it's like you also have to protect your space. And I've surrounded myself with really awesome people. My partner Emma, she just found out today that she's officially accepted into the trials.

00:20:17

Becs Gentry: Yeah, congrats Emma.

00:20:17

Nikki Hiltz: It's so exciting. And so being around her, obviously, every day is awesome. Maddie Borman has become a really good friend, she's training up here and she's in the steeplechase as well. And I think just finding people, Rachel Smith and Mike are like they just have such a good head on their shoulders. And know that yes we're going to Eugene to try to make an Olympic team. But at the end of the day we're going to Eugene to just try to execute a really good race. And that's what we practice and what we do, and that's something I'm confident, I'm really good at. It's just finding yourself people that believe in you, and then also have the same mindset of let's just be really process focused instead of outcome oriented. And so that's been really helpful for me.

00:21:07

Rob Simmelkjaer: It makes so much sense to think that way because your process and your performance, that's the part you can control. You can't control what other people do, and ultimately whether you make the team or not is in part based on what other people do, but you can't control that. So it must make it a lot easier to manage the next couple of weeks thinking that way.

And I'm impressed with you that you're even sitting here doing a podcast two weeks out from this thing. I can tell you must be mentally very strong that you're able to have a conversation like this and talk about it. Does it relax you to talk about it and have these conversations, or does it make you feel any different, or is it just kind of part of

what you have to do as a pro athlete?

00:21:54

Nikki Hiltz: Yeah, it's part of it. We talk about the trials almost every day. It's in my mind, it's in the back of my mind, why not talk about it? I think just pretending it doesn't exist or trying to not talk about it would almost fester inside of you more.

00:22:10

Rob Simmelkjaer: What trials, what are you talking about? Is that a thing?

00:22:11

Nikki Hiltz: But I think also I've been in this sport long enough. In 2021, I felt so much pressure and stress to make the team, and there was I felt like all this stuff riding on it. And then the worst thing happened, I didn't make the team and I was fine. My life went on, and I have a beautiful life. And then I moved to Flagstaff the next year and then my life got even better. And then I've had championships where I did make... last year I won the whole thing. So I've had the experience of having both outcomes of doing it and not doing it. And it actually, no matter what the outcome is, it doesn't change your life at all. And I think that going into this, it's almost like not making the Olympic team in 2021 was a blessing in disguise. Because now I'm like that can happen again, and it's going to be fine if the outcome isn't what I want.

00:23:11

Becs Gentry: Wow, I love that. And it sounds like you have such a supportive team around you from obviously Emma, but also friends and training partners and coaches, it's lucky and it's so inspiring. And honestly from seeing what you do as an athlete, and the love that you give back, and the inspiration that you give back to the LGBTQ+ community is just, it's wonderful. It's really something that athletes right now are getting more and more voice to be able to stand up and use these platforms in the way that they want to. It's not closed off and it's not, I don't know, policed maybe. And so is that helping you, knowing how many people out there are looking to you with just thanks and inspiration?

00:24:08

Nikki Hiltz: Totally, it's always lovely to have support. I feel like people say in the LGBTQ community, "We're with you." Those words just, I don't know, means so much to me because this is such a solo sport. It's not a team sport,

you can have obviously coaches, training partners, partners, things like that. But at the end of the day it's just you on the track making it happen or not. And so I think, "We're with you, we're cheering you on." It does make it feel like I have a purpose or community with me when I'm out there. And I think that's just so powerful.

00:24:57

Rob Simmelkjaer: Nikki, what's interesting to me when I look at your trajectory is you came out as transgender and non-binary in 2021. I believe it was after that trials where you didn't make the team, is that correct?

00:25:13

Nikki Hiltz: It was actually before it was March-

00:25:16

Rob Simmelkjaer: Is that before?

00:25:16

Nikki Hiltz: Yeah. So it was-

00:25:16

Rob Simmelkjaer: So soon before.

00:25:16

Nikki Hiltz: ... three months before.

00:25:17

Rob Simmelkjaer: Soon before. But then since then you have just skyrocketed in terms of your results. I'm sure there's a lot of factors, your training and your coaching and just where you're at as an athlete, but has that been part of it? Your ability to be out there as your true self, running as who you are and having everybody know it. Do you think that's part of what is driving the success that you are having on the track the last couple of years?

00:25:51

Nikki Hiltz: Yeah, definitely. I think I was holding this thing inside. I think when you have serene emotions, or energy, or stress about something. Kind of like I was saying if you just hold it in, it's going to weigh you down or just... I don't know, so I do really feel like when I came out about my gender identity and it was a weight lifted. But I think it kind of took a while for maybe the running world to catch up and start normalizing using they, them pronouns, and it is an adjustment period.

It's almost like the better the running world gets at it, the better, the more I feel seen safe and supported, and

then of course I can be better at my craft. I think it definitely is all connected. I remember in 2016 I came out initially about my sexuality and then boom, 2017 was my best year I ever had in college. So it was paralleling that, but now with my gender identity and so it's definitely not a coincidence. Just very grateful for all the people who have made space for me.

00:27:10

Rob Simmelkjaer: I just think Nikki, and you talk about mental health a lot in your travels as an athlete. We talk about it a lot at New York Road Runners, and here on this podcast. And I just think it's such an interesting case study in what makes someone be able to perform at their best, whether it's in athletics or any other walk of life, your job, your relationships, whatever it is.

When you have this stuff that's weighing you down, it's just hard. And we think we can compartmentalize and say, "Okay, well, I'm going to take that thing and put that in a drawer, and not look at that because I'm focused on running this race." But you can only do that so much and at some point those things that are nagging you will affect your performance or your training. But when those things are resolved and you feel like you're unified as a person, that's how you can really get the best out of yourself.

00:28:11

Nikki Hiltz: Totally, 100%.

00:28:14

Rob Simmelkjaer: It's just fascinating. What do you say to other athletes who maybe are going through it or before where you were maybe in your journey, maybe the 2020 version of a Nikki Hiltz. Do you give advice to people, whether it's specific individuals or just in general? What do you say to them?

00:28:36

Nikki Hiltz: I think for me the biggest struggle was not feeling that I belonged, because I think I didn't see... I'm the first. I didn't see someone like me or have representation of someone using they, them pronouns and what that even looks like. And so I'm like, "Okay, I guess that doesn't belong in track and field or sports." I think that was really hard to get over. So I would say you do belong. Anyone who competes in this sport belongs in this sport. It's not reserved for just one gender or one race or one body type. That's the beautiful part about track and field, it's like a hundred different sports within one sport. And so I do think that just you belong wherever you decide to be,

that's the case. I think that there are people in this sport and world that are willing to make space for you, and see you, and try to understand you even if they don't have the same identity.

It's obviously scary, and it's such a leap of faith to come out about something, but that's where the biggest growth happens. And, I don't know, I'm a big Brene Brown fan, courage and vulnerability are one and the same. And so, I don't know. Just you belong and don't let anyone tell you otherwise.

00:30:14

Becs Gentry: And that's such a good mental health piece of advice as well, no matter what is going on of just you belong, find your true self and you belong where you are. And that's just such a wonderful message for anyone out there as a mom. I'm definitely, that's something that I constantly am making sure I'm reminding my... She's only 20 months, so got a while. But you have to take it in to your life.

00:30:41

Rob Simmelkjaer: You belong in bed, right?

00:30:41

Becs Gentry: You belong in bed.

00:30:41

Rob Simmelkjaer: It's bedtime.

00:30:41

Becs Gentry: That's what is said quite often, " Mom really wants to go for a run, please can you go to bed." But Nikki, I loved your post on Instagram about just how open you were about saying it's no coincidence that it's Pride month, and you were just like, " I want to be an Olympian at the end of this month." And how thankful you were to the community of giving you the love and the support and seeing you. And I just think has that really given you a good boost just being like, it's going to happen, it's June, this is, "I'm literally flying my flag as high as I possibly can right now to make this Olympic dream come true." It must be magical in your mind.

00:31:27

Nikki Hiltz: Emma and I joke whenever you race during Pride Month, it's impossible to lose. June 30th is the final day of the trials, it's the final day of Pride Month. It's the 1,500 final. I think it would be no better way to close out the month than running a really good 1,500. It is very

exciting. That's the beautiful part is like we said, no matter what the outcome is I know that I'm a part of this community and I'm so proud to be a part of it. And there's so much love and support no matter what happens in those four minutes.

00:32:13

Becs Gentry: Can I just ask as well as somebody who's gone through a quick rise to notoriety, let's say, and somebody who tries, tries, not your standard, also didn't make the Olympic team and haven't tried again though. But when it comes to that recognition level and you're a leader, you're such a leader, but knowing that you have that role. But also at the same time having to actually really go to that internal Nikki and have that conversation with yourself about your training, how do you balance that mental health side?

00:32:54

Nikki Hiltz: I think that's a great question. I have a sports psych who I meet with weekly, and I think that has really helped me to compartmentalize the two. I think in the past I've tried to be this spokesperson for the queer community, and I do still identify as that and claim that as an advocate. But I think more, not stressing and focusing more on that, but just like, "Okay, the better I do at my sport, the bigger I'm going to get."

And just focus on that and then the rest is going to come kind of a thing. I don't know, does that make sense? So I think separating the two of actually the trials is just about performance. It's just about showing up, being seen, doing my job. And then outside of that just having the identity I have, that's enough. I don't need to go and be on the senate floor campaigning for these anti-trans laws or things like that. I think I can just actually focus on what I'm good at. And then also obviously if I get an interview and there's a question about it, totally happy to answer it. But I think the more and more I can hone in on just racing and doing my best there, then that's going to actually help the community as well.

00:34:26

Becs Gentry: Fully agree.

00:34:26

Rob Simmelkjaer: It makes sense because we can only do so much, right? You can't be everything. You can't be an elite Olympic level athlete, and an activist, and a politician, and a partner and all that. We can't do every single thing, so it all makes sense to me. But you are so eloquent in talking about these issues and you're kind enough to do a little



internal chat with our New York Roadrunner staff a couple of weeks ago. And got great questions and inspired people so much here in talking about it. And we talked a little bit on that call about the non-binary division, and of course we've really pioneered that here at New York Road Runners.

And it's a journey. Sometimes we get some things right, sometimes we don't, but we're working on making it better every day. And I remember asking you during that conference, you're competing obviously in Eugene with women, you're in the female division, and is that where you felt you should be at this point? Do you think there should be a non-binary Olympics division and medals and all that at some point? And you gave a really interesting answer you can share here.

00:35:46

Nikki Hiltz: In track and field at the professional level, it's very binary, there's the woman's category in the men's category. For me right now I feel totally okay in the women's category. But I think something that really helps me is just inclusive language. So I remember at Pre when they were announcing us on the start line, the in standing announcer was like, "Here are the athletes competing in the women's 1,500," and then announce the field. Instead of here are the 1,500 woman, it's just little tweaks that can go a long way in making sure I feel safe and seen and accepted. I think obviously also the normalization of pronouns has been huge. The announcers, broadcasters, my competitors, training partners, everyone just casually using they, them pronouns also obviously helps me feel accepted. And so I think those, even though I'm competing, yes, in the woman's category, I don't 100% identify as a woman.

Those little simple inclusive language can really, really, really change how I'm feeling. And then on top of that, your second part of your question of would I want a non-binary category? It's like I don't know if right now that makes sense because it's just me. It would be like what the men run, then the woman run and then I run alone, that's not what I want. But I also don't have all the answers. I'm just one non-binary person trying to figure out... I'm the first in the US in this sport.

I'm trying to just figure out what makes sense for me. But like I said, I think the more we can use inclusive language, the better. And I think you guys as New York Road Runners are in the same boat of you're like, "Well, we're the first that major marathon to have a non-binary category. We're just trying to figure it out. Maybe we're going to make mistakes sometimes, or we don't speak for all major marathons." You know what I mean? It's kind of the same thing of we're just trying to navigate it as best we

can. But I do think what you're doing is awesome. And I think you have a whole team trying to make space for people who five years ago had no space. Does that answer your question? I feel like I kind of rambled.

00:38:12

Rob Simmelkjaer: No, it was perfect and we appreciate it. It is not an easy thing to figure out, but you're blazing a trail. And some of the controversy you hear about, we all know some of that's driven by different agendas, it's just there's a lot of politics in all of that. We all know that. But another thing I know you said in that conversation, which I really appreciated, was how do you react to someone who messes up, because it's hard. I'm a lot older than you and I've been using only male and female pronouns from my entire life. And I'm now learning to make this adjustment to use they, them pronouns and getting a lot better at it, but still sometimes will mess up. And so how do you react to that when you know someone's trying, but they still trying to find their way to the right way to speak in these spaces?

00:39:14

Nikki Hiltz: People are going to mess up, and I totally understand that. I think even when I was first coming out, I would misgender myself. It's hard to adjust it, especially when you're only used to using she, her, he, him. But I think it's really important if you're someone that does mess up and you catch it, be like, "Oh, sorry, I mean they." If you accidentally said she and then quickly move on. I think that's best practiced. I can tell when someone's doing it intentionally and purposely to, I don't know, harm me or I don't know how to explain. Like on Twitter I know when you're like, "Okay, you're using she because you're like them is stupid," or whatever.

00:40:04

Becs Gentry: They're trying to prove a point.

00:40:05

Nikki Hiltz: Yes, exactly. I can tell the difference between that versus, I don't know, some boomer who has never heard a they, them pronoun in their life accidentally be like, "Oh, Nikki, she's so good." It's harmless.

00:40:21

Becs Gentry: Oh my gosh, I have a relationship question. I know a lot of our listeners will be so interested to know how you and Emma are like... How is home life with you both now? It must be quite high intensity and just how do

you manage the home relationship? And obviously, I don't want to deep dive, but unless you want to I'm a listener. I'm a good listener.

00:40:54

Nikki Hiltz: I think that's funny that you said intense, because Emma and I are both very intense people. We are very fun and funny and outgoing and all those things, but we're intense and so definitely we have a lot of conversations about just so many things all the time. I don't know, but I think I'm filming a documentary, and we're in the middle of it and it's going to hopefully follow my path to the Olympic Games. And they were just here this weekend filming and they were like, "Okay, our whole goal this weekend is just to be flies on the wall and just see how you and Emma interact," it's all those things. There's joy, there's laughter, there's fun, funny, and then there's also intense moments of being queer is hard, and both navigating having really big goals in a couple of weeks is also hard. I don't really know how to explain it, but hopefully you'll see some of that in the documentary.

00:41:58

Becs Gentry: I'll wait.

00:41:59

Nikki Hiltz: Stay tuned. But no, Emma obviously I love her and I spend all my time with her. It's like she's taught me a lot when it comes to how I think about things. And she's also honestly helped me a lot in terms of when we were talking about earlier, thinking about being outcome oriented versus just process focused. And that's something she really preaches. And so we try to check each other on that of like, "Oh, you're thinking too much about the outcome right now, let's just focus on doing." I don't know, that's a good question, but you'll have to see.

00:42:41

Becs Gentry: I hope that the end of the documentary or at some part there's both of you learning French.

00:42:47

Nikki Hiltz: Seriously.

00:42:50

Rob Simmelkjaer: She withdrew, Emma did from the marathon trials, but is going to Eugene in what event?

00:42:57

Nikki Hiltz: Steeplechase.

00:42:58

Rob Simmelkjaer: Exactly. Exciting. Great news. And I'm sure it's going to be an exciting time for you, and your household, and your families and everybody. And we are all rooting for you. Of course, we're rooting for all the Americans. We want everybody to have a great meet and we'll be rooting for everybody of course in Paris. But we are rooting for you, Nikki, at New York Roadrunners because you've been such a great, great leader, and a great role model in this sport. So we hope you have all the best, everything goes well for you in Eugene. Thank you so much for being who you are for joining us. We really appreciate it and hope to see you in Paris.

00:43:38

Nikki Hiltz: Yay. Thank you guys so much. This was so fun

00:43:53

Rob Simmelkjaer: Time now for today's member moment, and people run for a lot of reasons. Some people run for their physical health, some people love the community that running brings them, and some people run for their mental health. And then some people do it to more authentically express who they really are. Today's member moment is with Rob Roberts. This year's NYRR Runner of the Year in the non-binary category, age 45 to 49. Rob's award was well-earned with five runs so far this year, and we are honored to have him on the show with Meb.

00:44:25

Meb: Thanks Rob. Rob, welcome to the podcast.

00:44:28

Rob Roberts: Thank you.

00:44:29

Meb: Rob. What does it mean for you to represent non-binary runners in such an inspiring way?

00:44:35

Rob Roberts: So it's an interesting question. Floored, surprised, honored, all come to mind. When I opened that box and I saw the award, I really was at a loss for words. It was an incredible feeling. And I think what really comes to mind is that I hope that I am inspiring others. I hope that I'm helping others, and I hope I'm doing a good job. I don't necessarily look at myself as an inspiration to people, but if I can help one person out or help a few people out, I think that's important.

And talking with other non-binary runners in the New York area and outside of New York, I have gotten a little bit of feedback about what a positive thing it is. And I've mentioned this to New York Road Runners before, when I ran my first marathon in New York I didn't know that it was an option. And I appreciate that New York Road Runners has let me choose that, and lets us as a group identify how we feel best as the mixture of all different things. And I know that that's not true in all parts of this country and all parts of this world.

And I think the one thing that I hope that I do most is give somebody who's in that situation an opportunity to look and go, "Hey, this is somebody who represents us," and maybe appreciate that, feel not so alone. And know that there's a person and people, and an organization, and a group that have got their back whether they can say it out loud or not.

00:46:20

Meb: Absolutely. You're inspiring many people. Let's go back a little bit to you started running in 2020, what inspired you to start running again?

00:46:30

Rob Roberts: Great question. So I had a I'll call it a minor surgery, but important to me on March 13th of 2020, which here in New York was exactly two days before the hospitals shut down because of COVID. And running helped me with that recovery and helped me fill a void. I travel for work, I'm in consulting, I'm on the road every week. And all of a sudden I went from that to never leaving my house.

At the same time, the world was falling apart around me and sanity and sleep were difficult to come by. And I had a choice that I could make. I could sit on my phone at 3:00 in the morning and doom scroll, and let anxiety and bad news consume me, or I could get out and do something positive. And following that surgery, it was a unique experience even for the doctor who said, "I can't approve you to go out and run. I can't approve you to lift weights until I see you. So I don't really know what I could do, but go out and walk."

So I did. And I started walking, and I started walking further, and I started walking faster. And then I met with the doctor virtually and we talked about it. One of my goals was to do a half-marathon, whether it was speed walking or jogging or whatever it was. And I hit that goal in an unofficial way in the summer of 2020, and my doctor was great about it, he went, "I didn't mean that you'd never run a half-marathon, I was just trying to prepare you for life."

But he really inspired me by saying, "Hey, look, this is something that you may not do." I was able to turn that into something that I could do. And getting out and running gave me an outlet for my energy, it let me burn off anxiety. And it also probably more importantly, and part of the reason we're here is it helped me find supportive community of runners and friends who got me to do the crazy things that I do now, like running.

And I'll tell you it was the summer of 2021 when I got a phone call that said, "Hey, do you want one of our clubs?" Let me say this my local running club, North Merrick Runners, their motto is run as you are. And I think in many ways I've challenged them on that, and they've stepped up and they've been a wonderful supporting group in every way, shape and form. But they gave me an opportunity to run the marathon in 2021, and it's something that I never would've done had I not made that change or that decision early on that I want to do something positive with my time. I want to better myself, and maybe even get some other people around me to run as well.

00:49:24

Meb: That's a great story. How was that journey though from having the surgery and to do your first TCS New York City Marathon in 2021? What was that feeling coming across the finish line?

00:49:37

Rob Roberts: I'm actually tearing up now thinking about it. Crossing that finish line was unreal. Having my parents and my partner in the seats cheering me on at the finish line was incredible. Having strangers around me, high-fiving each other, giving each other hugs. All the way down to somebody putting a medal around my neck, that was unreal. Meb you've been there, you've gotten that in the Olympics. I assume that's what that feeling is like. One analogy that I use a lot at work is that there are hard times in life. And for me, I always think about the Queensboro Bridge. And every New York City Marathon, that Queensboro Bridge has been a hard time in life. You're alone, it's quiet, there's footsteps, you start doubting yourself. And then you come out onto First Avenue, and man, people are cheering for you. It feels like the entire city is pulling together, and they're all pulling for you and those people around you. And again, the entire marathon is like that. But between Central Park and First Avenue, I don't know that I ever feel that way more.

00:50:52

Meb: Rob, I can relate. There's always a struggle in life, but there's always a light at the end of the tunnel. As

you described the Queensboro Bridge, quiet, loneliness and whatnot, doubts. But then you hit first avenue, the crowd carries you through. So as life as marathon challenges, things happen. But I heard you have exciting news that you have a new addition to your family that's another even greater cause and purpose. Can you tell us a little bit about that to our audience please?

00:51:22

Rob Roberts: I do, and I appreciate you asking that. Yes. So we have an 18-month old who is with us. And about 11 days ago we had a new baby join us who has already run 500 miles inside of his mother. And he's well versed in running whether he wants to be or not, as is his brother.

00:51:49

Meb: Great. That's great. Great. Congratulations.

00:51:53

Rob Roberts: Thank you.

00:51:54

Meb: Well, Rob, keep inspiring people. Everybody have different stories to tell as 50,000 people do the TCS New York City Marathon, or many of the New Yorker Road Runners races. And we just glad that you were inspiring to many non-binary categories. So congratulations on a job well done.

00:52:12

Rob Roberts: Thank you. And again, I really look at the New York road running community and New York Road Runners, and I want to say thanks for having my back. Thanks for having everyone's back, and enabling myself and others to be okay with who they are. It really has made a huge difference in my life mentally, which has impacted other things as well. And not just for myself, but more so for the community and communities at large. Thank you all.

00:52:43

Meb: Thanks, Rob.

00:52:44

Rob Simmelkjaer: Now it's time for today's Med Minutes.

00:52:47

Meb: Thanks, Rob. Hydration is crucial and hydration is something that you do every single day. Some people think it's just when you run or when you work out, but it's something that you need to do on a day-to-day base, sometimes even hourly. Hydration is good indicator about your

performance. If you feel thirsty by that time you'll have to increase your performance by about 25%, which is a huge, huge deal.

So hydration is something that you need to do every day. On the race day you need to do before, during, and after. You have to stick with it and to stick to something that works for you. It's not just plain water is not always simple. It's something that you don't want to wash out the nutrition that you've been consuming. So you need to be able to have electrolytes once a day or orange juice, or something that will give you sugar to be able to just keep you going.

I think it's important to hydrate way out before race, and then during the race you stick to something that you've been training for. If you're fortunate enough, even if you have to carry it for a little bit, or if you're meeting some family members during the run or during the race. So it is important to be able to just monitor your hydration. And rule of thumb, I think Lance Armstrong started this, it's kind of nasty, but at the same time it's a good indicator.

You just don't want it all washed out, you want it to have a little color to your urine. So that's a good way that I have used it because if it's too yellow, then you definitely dehydrated. So you want to be able to just be able to drink as much as he can, but you don't want to overdo that as well just with water.

00:54:29

Rob Simmelkjaer: And that does it for a really special episode of Set The Pace. I want to thank our guest Nikki Hiltz. We're all going to be watching out for Nikki in Eugene. Also want to thank our New York Road Runners member of the week, Rob Roberts. Want to wish everybody out there a very happy Pride Month. Remember, if you like this episode, please go ahead, subscribe, rate, leave a comment for the show on whatever platform you're listening to. This will help other people find it as well. We'll see you next time. Enjoy the miles.