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Nnenna Lynch: What was really key for me was taking the pressure off. And so I thought, okay, what's the minimum I could do to stay fit? And it was to run two days a week. I figured worst comes to worst, I can run on Saturday and Sunday. And then I discovered the beautiful thing of when you set a goal and you achieve it, that virtuous cycle of it feels good, you want to do more. As opposed to setting a goal that's really always feels so far out of reach. And so that for me was the big insight.

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Speaker 2: Thank you New York. Today we're reminded of the power of community and the power of coming together. Athletes, on your mark.

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Speaker 3: 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 good advice.

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Speaker 4: Look at the emotion of Shalane Flanagan as she comes to the line, pointing to his chest, pointing to the USA. He so proudly wears across his chest. A great day for Meb Depletsky.

00:01:13

Rob Simmelkjaer: Hey everybody, and welcome to Set the Pace, the official podcast of New York Roadrunners, presented by Peloton. I'm your host, Rob Simmelkjaer, the CEO of NYRR. And with me week in and week out from Peloton, Becs Gentry. Good to see you, Becs. How's it going today?

00:01:30

Becs Gentry: Hello. Good. How are you?

00:01:32

Rob Simmelkjaer: I'm good. I'm really, really good.

00:01:34

Becs Gentry: I'm just going to sound so weird. I re-watched your run route many times because I was like, "Did you get lost?" I loved it. I was like, I feel like I can see his brain being like, "Okay, we'll go this way. We're going to add some more miles if we go this way then we're going to go back here. Then around here." It was a phenomenal 22.

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Rob Simmelkjaer: What Becs is referring to is my 22-mile run on Saturday up here in Westport, Connecticut. This was my longest run preparing for Tokyo.

00:02:06

Becs Gentry: So good.

00:02:07

Rob Simmelkjaer: And I went out that morning. I kind of had a mindset of, all right, I had to go to the Millrose games that afternoon, so I had a window I had to run in. I knew Snow was coming the next day, so I had to do it that day. And I just said, "I'm going to go to do 20 and if it feels good, I'm going to go two more." And I ran, you're right, I just ran all over the place up here. I ran from Westport to Norwalk around the beach, back the other way. I did find a few nooks and crannies, Saugatuck Island, some beautiful areas along the shoreline here to run in Connecticut. And I just felt good.

I kept feeling so good, Becs, this is way better than any training that I ever had for Berlin. So I added on those two more, and I feel great. I really do. I'm so excited and I just couldn't be more excited to go to Tokyo. First trip ever to Japan and it's going to be great. But yes, Becs, I had you in my ear in part I was listening to some of our podcasts, but in part because I was thinking of you as I got toward the end of that run. So it was a great day.

00:03:06

Becs Gentry: Well, congratulations. It looked very fun and very rewarding to then have it done. You've ticked the box and now you're ready.

00:03:16

Rob Simmelkjaer: Yeah, I'm ready and—

00:03:16

Becs Gentry: He's ready.

00:03:16

Rob Simmelkjaer: ... by the way, today's show is so much fun because not only are we talking about Tokyo. But I'm going to be joined by not only my running mate in Tokyo, but also the chair of the New York Roadrunners board of directors and my boss, Nnenna Lynch, who's going to come join us. Talk about her incredible career as a runner, post running. And talk about us getting excited to run Tokyo together as the CEO and chair of Roadrunner. So it's going to be a lot of fun.

00:03:45

Becs Gentry: She is incredible. She's a force.

00:03:45

Rob Simmelkjaer: Yeah.

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Becs Gentry: You also did spend the Millrose Games with her as well.

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Rob Simmelkjaer: I sure did. I sure did.

00:03:53

Becs Gentry: What a weekend?

00:03:53

Rob Simmelkjaer: Becs, we were so lucky. Nnenna and I got a front-row seat to just incredible history at the Millrose Games. This was of course up at the Armory, and she and I got to hold the finish line tape for a-

00:04:09

Becs Gentry: So cool.

00:04:09

Rob Simmelkjaer: ... new world record in the indoor mile. Yared Nuguse, unbelievable performance.

00:04:16

Becs Gentry: What a legend.

00:04:17

Rob Simmelkjaer: A time of what's a legend? 3:46: 63, his third Water maker mile championship in a row. And boy, Becs, what a thrill it was! The crowd was just going nuts to see this very popular American runner come through and break that record. It was quite a moment at the Millrose Games.

00:04:37

Becs Gentry: I am sure it was, it was wonderful to watch from afar. I wish I could have been there but had personal commitments that evening. But I mean Yared Nuguse, we had Hops Kessler in second place as well. Our friend of the podcast, Josh Kerr, had to drop out due to illness, we understand. But just there were multiple, multiple records just taken down from people we know to rising New York Roadrunners as well, which was just great to see.

00:05:13

Rob Simmelkjaer: That's right. In addition to the men's mile, I think the other really exciting moment on the men's side was an incredible duel in the 3000 meters, which we ended up seeing Grant Fisher come through with the wind there. That was a really dramatic race. Mano a mano right to the end, so a record there. And then on the women's side, your country woman, Georgia Bell.

00:05:37

Becs Gentry: I know Georgia Bell came through with a PB.

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Rob Simmelkjaer: That's right in the mile.

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Becs Gentry: 4:23.

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Rob Simmelkjaer: 4:23: 35. She was followed by Heather McLean from the United States. And in third a friend of the podcast, Nikki Hiltz, a personal best- finishing third. So that was a special performance as well. And then Becs, we also had a great moment earlier in the day, our Rising New York Roadrunners Invitational 800 meters. And these are kids part of the New York Roadrunners Rising Program and it was on the youth girls side, a young lady named Evelyn Sharafo from MS 245M, the computer school, with a time of 2:36: 39. And on the boy side it was Will Berger from MS442K, Carroll Garden School 2: 13:88. A meet record. So phenomenal day at the Millrose games. And boy indoor track and field just had a real vibe going this week in New York City.

00:06:40

Becs Gentry: Thank goodness for it being indoor because Sunday was a no- go. It was no one wants to slip, let's just say. When you're so close to the likes of Tokyo, you might be so close to the United Airlines NYC half, London, Boston. I just say don't do it. Okay.

00:07:00

Rob Simmelkjaer: Thank you. Becs, thank you for saying that. I want to thank you because it's always a hard decision for us to cancel a race at New York Roadrunners.

00:07:09

Becs Gentry: So tough.

00:07:10

Rob Simmelkjaer: People are looking forward to it. People are

structuring their weekends around it. I heard from a friend Sunday who was like, "I didn't even go out Saturday night. I was getting ready for this race." And then they find out we canceled it. But you're 100% right, I try always to think from the mindset of the runner, right? And what would a runner want? Do they want to go out slippery, slidey conditions? And to your point, risk may be getting injured before a big race that they're training for? Do they want to have the hassle of getting to the race?

Not everybody is coming from a short distance. Lots of people are coming from around the tri-state area. And here in Connecticut on Sunday morning, it was not travel conditions. You are not going to get in a car and go to New York City first thing in the morning on Sunday morning. So we made the tough decision to cancel that race. Good news for all the runners though. They all got their nine plus one credit if they're going for the nine plus one program for next year's marathon. So generally people felt good.

And I want to thank our great sponsors, the Flag Art Foundation. They created an incredible T-shirt for that event. And I think everybody's got an opportunity to go and pick that up at the Run Center. So check out your email-

00:08:27

Becs Gentry: Fantastic.

00:08:27

Rob Simmelkjaer: ... for a way to pick up that race shirt if you were registered for the race, because it's a beautiful piece of art on the shirt. We want to make sure everybody gets a chance to wear that shirt with pride.

00:08:37

Becs Gentry: There we go.

00:08:38

Rob Simmelkjaer: As I mentioned earlier today, we've got my Tokyo Marathon running buddy, who also happens to be my boss as chair of New York Roadrunner's Board of Directors Nnenna Lynch. She's our featured guest. And we'll talk about what it's like to train for a marathon when you're in your 50s, as of us happen to be. Both from the pro perspective and the amateur perspective. Nnenna being the pro in that equation, former pro. And I'm sure Becs is going to have some great Tokyo tips for both of us, right Becs? I look forward to hearing those.

00:09:07

Becs Gentry: Absolutely. Stay tuned for that.

00:09:09

Rob Simmelkjaer: And then speaking of running Buddies, on today's member moment, two of New York Roadrunner's most celebrated running buddies, Jacob Caswell and Jay Solly from Frontrunners New York City will join Meb. Followed by today's Meb minute, which is all about, you guessed it, the benefit of having a running buddy. Kind of a Valentine's Day theme there, which is super cute. Valentine's Day coming-

00:09:31

Becs Gentry: That's very cute.

00:09:31

Rob Simmelkjaer: ... up tomorrow as we drop this on Thursday, February 3rd. By the way, Becs, happy Valentine's Day.

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Becs Gentry: Oh, thank you. Happy Valentine's Day my commentary, buddy.

00:09:41

Rob Simmelkjaer: That's right. Absolutely. I'll be looking for the chocolates after the show. All right.

00:09:44

Becs Gentry: All right. Okay, I'll send them over. Do your 24 miles. No I'm kidding. We're not going that high.

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Rob Simmelkjaer: Today's guest was born and raised in New York City and began her relationship with New York Roadrunners at the age of 10, participating in her first race in Central Park in 1981. Nnenna Lynch's talent led her to Villanova University where she became a seven-time All-American and secured five NCAA titles in track and field. Then in 1993, she was honored as NCAA Woman of the Year and went on to become Villanova's first road scholar, earning a master of letters from Oxford University. As a pro, Nnenna was a five-time U.S. national team member and a world university games

gold medalist in the 5, 000 meters.

Transitioning from athletics, Nnenna served as a senior policy advisor on economic development to former New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg. And here's a fun fact about Nnenna, which not many people know, she's also been a model. Nnenna has been seen in Vogue, shot by Annie Leibovitz for Gap, and in People's Magazine's 50 most beautiful people issue. Nnenna is currently the founder of Xylem Projects, which is a real estate development firm dedicated to sustainable and affordable housing.

In 2023, she made history as the first woman and first African-American to be appointed chair of the board of directors of New York Roadrunners. She is my boss. She is also my Tokyo Marathon running buddy and was my fellow tape holder at the Millrose games this past weekend. Nnenna Lynch, welcome to the podcast.

00:11:59

Nnenna Lynch: Hey, good to see you guys.

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Rob Simmelkjaer: Absolutely. So before we talk about anything else, Nnenna, we have to just talk about Saturday and what-

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Nnenna Lynch: Oh my God.

00:12:08

Rob Simmelkjaer: ... a thrill that was for you and I-

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Becs Gentry: Oh my gosh.

00:12:08

Rob Simmelkjaer: Becs, I don't know if you saw us holding the tape.

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Becs Gentry: Oh I did. I was so envious to miss it, but it was my good friend's birthday, so I had to make a decision. I normally do put running and sport first, but-

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Rob Simmelkjaer: It was incredible for us to-

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Becs Gentry: What an experience?

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Rob Simmelkjaer: ... be holding either ends of the tape-

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Becs Gentry: New records.

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Rob Simmelkjaer: ... for a world record. Yared Nuguse in the one mile Nnenna-

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Becs Gentry: My favorite.

00:12:29

Rob Simmelkjaer: ... that was really quite a thrill, wasn't it?

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Nnenna Lynch: Oh my God, totally a peak experience. Millrose Games, so I ran in the Millrose games growing up back when they were in Madison Square Garden. So there's a long, long history personally for me there. But I mean overall, the whole meet, I mean, that wasn't the only world record, right? You had world records, national records, personal records. I mean, it was just such a phenomenal meet. And one of the things I love about it is how it marries.

We had our rising New York roadrunners in the race earlier in the day. And so you have these world's best with few middle school kids out there doing their thing. And so the range of running life that you see exhibited in Millrose Games is one of the things I love.

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Becs Gentry: Nnenna, I would love to ask you a question about your experience with running with the sport, with community. How did you feel at the weekend holding the tape and seeing these records being broken by names that were relatively unknown in the households around this country? The normal households, until last summer. And now it's like Super Bowl, what? We were all about the Millrose games this weekend?

00:13:50

Nnenna Lynch: Yeah, it's so phenomenal. And the Armory, which hosts the Millrose games was packed. And Rita and Jonathan who lead the Armory did such a phenomenal job and race director Rae Flynn. But it's really thrilling to see the interest in running. And for me it's also, I was there and I've been in the sport for 40 years. And so it's also these events, it happens at the New York City Marathon as well. It's almost like a little bit of a reunion, right? I was bumping into people I hadn't seen since 1988.

And so it's really, for me, the combination of just the phenomenal talent that's on display. Obviously Yared Nuguse sort of takes the cake on that. But then also you had a

really phenomenal high school mile event. Actually, my alma mater, a young girl from my alma mater Hunter High school won the high school mile, so that was really exciting to see. And then again, the rising New York Roadrunners, it's so phenomenal to see our programs really come to the spotlight there at the Millrose Games. So yeah, just really, really phenomenal to see how the sport is thriving.

00:15:05

Rob Simmelkjaer: It was a thrill for everyone at New York Roadrunners to be there. We have a great partnership with the Armory, as you mentioned, and it was really a great day. Okay Nnenna you mentioned those 40 years of running. Let's talk about them one by one by one, starting with year number one. No, just kidding. But no, let's go back to the beginning of your running journey, Nnenna. Running in a New York Roadrunners race at 10 years old in Central Park, 1981. What led you to that moment? How did you first find this sport?

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Nnenna Lynch: Yeah, so it started with sort of normal schoolyard races, and I could beat all the boys in my grade and a big... And we loved playing manhunt after school, which is a form of tag, so a lot of running. So I seem to be good at it and I really loved it. It felt good. Organized running came a little bit later, and so my sister joined track team along with a friend. And I eventually wanted to join too, but was rejected. Because I was the annoying younger sister. My sister was like, "No, this is my thing. Get out of here, skedaddle. You do your own thing." And you know what? My parents agreed, and it was really well intentioned. My sister had been a star on Sesame Street and I was really, really shy, and so they thought it'd be good for me to carve my own path and find my own thing. So they actually said, "No, no, no, you can't run. You have to find something else." And so I did. I tried ballet and then I tried tennis, but I just I wanted to run. So I eventually insisted.

And then the coach that my sister had been working with was actually a guy named Barry Geisler who had been president of New York Roadrunners in 1971, 1972. And was the founder of the early youth and community programs dating back to the mid to late 1960s, this amazing connection. So he was obviously very familiar with New York Roadrunners and most of the time we did youth age group, what was known as age group races. But occasionally if there wasn't a race that weekend, he would enter us in a New York Roadrunners race.

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Becs Gentry: Wow, okay. So talking of races of past and all of this experience of being involved in many a race, rumor has it, you're heading to the other side of the world in a few weeks to run the Tokyo Marathon. But a little extra cherry on the top here is that you are going to be Rob's running buddy for 26.2 miles, which is awfully exciting.

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Rob Simmelkjaer: Rob's going to try to make that happen.

00:18:03

Nnenna Lynch: Actually, I have something to talk. I was listening to your recent podcast honoring Fred LeBeau with Mary, and Ted and I noticed something that I have a bone to pick with you. There was a lot of hedging going on. Rob was like, "I'm probably going to run a spring marathon. I might." And I was like, "Uh-uh buddy, we need to hear it here."

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Rob Simmelkjaer: It's out now.

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Nnenna Lynch: Okay.

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Rob Simmelkjaer: I came clean last week-

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Becs Gentry: He did.

00:18:33

Rob Simmelkjaer: ... and said, "I'm definitely doing it." No, but you're totally right. I'm a notorious sandbagger when it comes to my running and I hedge about whether I'm doing it and then, oh my God, I'm going to be so slow, it's like... And Nnenna you can probably relate to this as a runner one time in a professional runner, like the whole managing of expectations, right? Because your expectations can really be your greatest enemy when it comes to running and life, right?

And it's a question for you, how do you manage your expectations as a runner today, given all the incredible success that you had as a runner in your youth? A lot of tennis players don't want to play tennis in their 40s and beyond because they remember how good they were in their teens and 20s. How do you manage that?

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Nnenna Lynch: Yeah. Well, let me tell you, it was a journey. It really was, right? Because as a competitive athlete, so from age 10 to basically age 30, for 20 years of my life, I was a very serious competitive athlete. It was all about peak performance and pushing yourself. And then when I retired, I really struggled to find my way, and it took several years. And so for a long time I thought I have to keep pushing. And what I realized is that didn't really sit well with me. I was then back in New York trying to start a career at the time.

My very first job actually after retiring was at Goldman Sachs. I was an analyst there working insane hours. And I signed up for the marathon in I guess it was 2002. And I was really trying to push myself and I realized that it just doesn't work. And so eventually I gave myself the grace and shifted my mindset to this really is just about being active. And I was so excited by this insight by the way, and it did take several years that I ended up writing a New York Times op-ed about it, which is set the bar low.

So for that time in my life when I was early in my career, working really hard, and a young family, what was really key for me was taking the pressure off. And so for me at that time, it was I thought, okay, what's the minimum I could do to stay fit? And it was to run two days a week. I figured worst comes to worst, the crazy weekdays, with a crazy schedule I can run on Saturday and Sunday. And then I discovered the beautiful thing of when you set a goal and you achieve it, that virtuous cycle of it feels good, you want to do more. As opposed to setting a goal that's really always feels so far out of reach. And so that for me was the big insight.

And today I'm back to running, I would say five days a week. But it's really all about feeling good. It's about hygiene. I think of it as, it's like brushing my teeth. It's like this mental hygiene, it helps me feel good, helps me process feelings. So it's just a wholly different perspective, but it took me a while to get there.

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Becs Gentry: Do you still feel like you set the bar low even though you run five days a week? Do you still try to manage your expectations on the lower side for yourself?

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Nnenna Lynch: I do. Well, actually, I don't have expectations anymore. Again, I was a competitive runner for 20 years. I really went after it. And my identity, my sense of worth was really tied up in how I did. And now I have a rich and full life and whatever time I run doesn't really matter. And so, I really focus now on what it feels like and feeling

good. And I'll enter a race where I'll sometimes push myself a little bit, but I tend not to go all flat out. I'm not trying to set any personal records. I'm only not trying to set any age group records. There was a time of life when I did that. But yeah, so it's really about, I would say now I have very little expectations.

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Becs Gentry: I love that just for the happiness and the pure just enjoyment of being out there with the community, getting it done. That's beautiful.

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Rob Simmelkjaer: I want to talk about the college days a little bit, Nnenna, and-

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Becs Gentry: Yeah. They sound wildly good.

00:23:01

Rob Simmelkjaer: ... your incredible running. We're at the Millrose games watching a lot of great college athletes obviously come through all Americans. And five NCAA titles, seven time all, All-American is really incredible. I mean, you don't see that resume walking around very much. Is there anything that stands out when you look back? Is there a race or a championship or a moment that you kind of think of as the highlight of your college career?

00:23:32

Nnenna Lynch: Yeah, there is. And I should say, so there were four team titles and one individual title in the 3000 meters. But it was definitely, even though I had that individual title, it was the team titles for sure that were most meaningful to me. And in particular, the fourth NCAA title. Up to that point, we had been undefeated our entire cross country for my first three years. My collegiate career, we were undefeated. And going into my fourth year, we were going for the fourth title, but there was no, by no means a short. We graduated some seniors, we had some freshmen who were untested.

And actually that fall, I ended up having my first injury in up to that point in my career. So I spent most of the fall actually training in the pool. And every time I would run, my legs felt wobbly. And so there was a lot, and I was one of the leading seniors. And so going into the NCAAAs my senior year, there was a lot riding on it and a lot of uncertainty, but we pulled through. So I ended up finishing third. So we got a podium finish and we won our fourth title.

And if you see the photos of me in those final stages, the strain on my face and in my neck, I mean I get bit my all. And so it was really, really gratifying to finish my collegiate career as a cross country runner and with our team undefeated with that fourth title. Which by the way it's like, I don't know of many sports or any other sports where... I mean four consecutive titles, it's pretty amazing.

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Becs Gentry: Wow, that is unreal. And a very random question, do you still speak to or run with any of your teammates from then?

00:25:27

Nnenna Lynch: Yeah, so my teammates are from their now in all different areas. Actually one of Jack Fleming, who is the race director of Boston, so his wife, Kathy Fleming was one of my teammates. So, I love going to Boston because I guess I could see Kathy and catch up with her-

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Becs Gentry: So nice.

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Nnenna Lynch: But yeah, I don't have any teammates from my era that live in New York City, so I don't see them often. But yeah, we're in touch.

00:25:53

Becs Gentry: I love that. I love the fact that it's still so true to you, seeing how happy you were when you set your alma mater from the weekend took first place. So just knowing that the connection has stayed with you, I think is really important for people of all ages who are starting out in running, to know that you can have this joy and you can find people who are similar to you in some ways and so different to you in other ways, but you can bond over your love for movement and it can transcend decades of running so-

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Nnenna Lynch: Yeah, for sure. No, being on the team, I mean and it was such a deep team too. It was like I joined a team that actually that very first year we won our team title. The winner of the overall race was my teammate Vicki Huber, who... So this was the fall of 1989, the year before 1988. So she was a junior in college, placed, I believe it was fifth in the Seoul Olympics. And she was my teammate. Say Sonya Sullivan, who went on to get a silver medal in the Olympics, an Irish runner was my teammate. So it was really an

amazing set of talent.

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Rob Simmelkjaer: And Nnenna, your success on the track and then also in the classroom led you to the opportunity to be a Rhodes Scholar. Which for those who don't know, is something that really recognizes college students who do it all, who are exceptional athletes and exceptional students. And you had a chance to go to Oxford and go have that chariots of fire kind of English experience. Becs I'm sure you can relate to this.

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Becs Gentry: Yeah.

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Rob Simmelkjaer: What was that like going over there? I know you had some opportunities to even encounter people like Roger Bannister, the legendary names in the sport of running in those days.

00:27:56

Nnenna Lynch: Yeah. So I actually never met Roger Bannister, but of course his history looms large. He broke the four-minute mile at the Oxford Track. So yeah, living in England though was, from a running standpoint, I would say it was really such a pleasure. Because the British and the Europeans in general just had such a deep respect and love for the sport and a rich history. And my favorite discipline was cross country. And so you had a really lengthy deep season there. And I ended up winning the, actually I won the English Cross Country Championships in 1996 with, so there's a... And they have a longer season. So just from a standpoint of running, it was really, really phenomenal.

And then from being the standpoint of being a Rhodes Scholar, it was also this really this inflection point. When I went to Oxford, I was not sure I would continue running. I had had as a middle distance runner in college, you're running all three seasons, right? And so by the time I graduated, I actually graduated injured, and I was also tired and ready to just be a full-time student. But within weeks, I would say of getting to Oxford, I missed it and I wanted to get back to it. But it's a wholly different setting, right?

So in US in college, you have a phenomenal infrastructure of coaches and physical therapists and so on. At Oxford, the track was really pretty much a club without a coach. It was a loose collection of runners. So it was also this inflection point for me where I really, it was a very clear choice, right? There was nobody telling, there was no scholarship on the line. It was a very concerted and effort and to continue

running. So it was a big inflection point for me and my maturity as an athlete.

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Rob Simmelkjaer: Becs, I just like to think about what it was like when Nnenna went over there from New York and wins the cross-country championship in your homeland, Becs. I'm sure they were all very nice and polite.

00:30:16

Becs Gentry: I'm sure, I'm sure. Very nice. And understanding that it is, Nnenna, you described it really well, it is exactly just like having a club. We do not have the... Well maybe we do now, I haven't lived in the country for nearly seven years. But we didn't have the deep, deep passion that runs through schools in the US for sport and academia. It is more or less one or the other for I would say 99% of universities in the UK. And then they can still have a phenomenal team of ex-sport, but it's more on the club level than this incredible college basketball. And all of the stuff that we have here in the US and the UK, it's just, just study. Just please get the books done and then focus on sports, if you've got time or brain power. So that was a great description. But yes, I'm sure they were all humble and lovely.

00:31:20

Rob Simmelkjaer: Oh, I'm sure they were. I'm sure they were. So Nnenna on the heels of your time at Villanova, then you decided to go and keep going, right? You weren't sure you wanted to keep running, you kept running and went into the pro game. What was that like for you?

00:31:33

Nnenna Lynch: Well, I was really fortunate enough by my second year at Oxford, I had gotten hooked up with a coach named Bruce Tullah. Who himself had been European champ, maybe 1958, back in the 1950s. And it was coaching Britain's top distance runner, Richard Nerukar, who ended up placing fifth in the '96 Olympic marathon. So I ended up with this squad that was just really supportive and serious. I learned what it means to really dedicate yourself. We would go also in altitude training camps to Mexico and Kenya. And so it was a great introduction to what it means to be a professional athlete through this group. And it was really sort of a phenomenal time of life.

00:32:34

Rob Simmelkjaer: When you decided to go and continue with your running, what were you hoping to get out of running for

your career from that point forward? And how was it? I mean, it's not an easy thing to go out and actually try to run for a living.

00:32:50

Nnenna Lynch: No, no. Well, I think most runners who run post collegiately or run professionally, I was Olympic hopeful. When I was a junior in college I went to Olympic trials in two events. And then in '96 I went in one event. And so there was always this hope and dream of being an Olympian, which I never achieved. But I did, as you said in the intro, was able to represent the US in five different national teams, three world cross teams. And then the world University games and a Goodwill games.

And so it's interesting, at the time, I would say I was incredibly always frustrated with what I was able to achieve. And it's only with a lot of hindsight and being able to look back and appreciate what I did achieve. But when you're an athlete, it's like you're... I don't know, climbing a mountain and you're looking at that peak, and all you can see is that thing... You can't see everything you've climbed behind you. That's not what you're focused on. You're looking ahead and you're thinking about the next thing, and what more you can achieve. Which is you're able to push yourself a lot that way. But I definitely did not have a great deep appreciation for what I was able to achieve.

But yeah, at my best, I think I was ranked top 30 in the world. But yeah, I would say every year I would have something that kept my hope going. Whether it was winning the US trials for the World Cross Country Championships, or winning the England National Championships. Or running a world leading time at the end of 1990, I ran a world leading time in the five miles. So there were always these... I had plenty of bright spots along the way, but no, huge, huge breakthrough to the ultimate goal of being an Olympian. And then I retired in 2000.

00:35:04

Becs Gentry: Wow. It's taking a minute for all of these incredible achievements to settle into my brain as you're saying them, and it's just unbelievable. But you're continuing to do, and a few things you said there has brought me to today, to the more recent times for you as a mom. You have two children?

00:35:32

Nnenna Lynch: I do.

00:35:32

Becs Gentry: Yeah. Okay. You're CEO of a company—

00:35:32

Nnenna Lynch: Teenagers.

00:35:33

Becs Gentry: Two teenagers, even more incredible. You're an active runner and you wear a lot of hats in your day-to-day life. And that's inspiring in itself. But as you said, when you're constantly striving for the peak of the mountain, you don't get to take in the beautiful views on the way up. And that is so true. And right now one of the roles that you have is very pertinent to the times right now.

You're the first woman and African-American to chair the NYRR board. And I think it's just such a great time for us to discuss that is the... The peak is so huge, and what are we looking at right now as you are in this role of getting to a peak that's ever probably growing, moving? What are you seeing? What are you envisioning for inclusivity and diversity within the running community?

00:36:41

Nnenna Lynch: Well, what amazing thing about the sport is I think, and it has a DNA, it's a democratic sport. And really the barrier to entry is really low. We are a non-profit and serving the city. And so our goal on the board and completely aligned with Rob and the leadership team is to continually make sure we're serving all New Yorkers. It's really as simple as that. And getting to every neighborhood, etc. We do focus on, we do have limited resources and focus on under-resourced neighborhoods. But we're really focused on ensuring that our programs and our races and events and everything are really open and accessible to the beautiful range of people that make up our great city.

00:37:44

Rob Simmelkjaer: Nnenna, one of your goals as chair, one of my goals as CEO is to make sure that people know what you just said, right? That we're a non-profit, that we have this mission. It's very easy, I think for people to see New York Roadrunners... Of course, they see the marathon and they see us take over the city and give New York City the best day of the year every year. And what a huge event that is, the scale of that event. And I think a lot of folks just say, "All right, well that's New York Roadrunners." A lot of people think maybe that's not even done as a non-profit think maybe it's some people think it's for-profit or just don't know.

And your history with the board, you really started out in that community impact side of things. You chaired the community impact committee of our board. So you've always

been focused on the impact that Roadrunners makes as an organization, and it really ties back to you, right, and that ten-year-old who ran a race. What has it meant for you to watch this organization evolve and grow? We obviously have some amazing youth programs. You also were on the board as the organization weathered a pandemic and now is kind of coming back from that. So you've seen a lot in your time on the board. How do you reflect on that and think about the way the organization has evolved?

00:39:06

Nnenna Lynch: Yeah, I mean, I'm super proud of the work that the organization has done. We have continually grown. I mean, I've been focused on growing our reach and deepening our impact, I think is the best way to say it, and have just seen phenomenal growth. And I touched on my coach growing up who was the creator of the earliest youth and community programs. And by the way, I didn't know that when I joined the board. Like I just became aware of his history and some of the details of his history more recently. So it feels like this on a personal level, a great full circle moment.

And also on a personal level, the role running has played in my life has been so central and impactful. And I haven't talked about it much, but I had a difficult home life growing up. And running was this thing that really helped me develop a positive identity, a sense of confidence, a team, and a family and the coach and all that. And so I was really drawn to the board and the community impact work, which we used to call youth in community services. Really, because I want every kid in New York to have the opportunity to run and think of themselves as a runner, and feel like like this is the sport as a tussleton, because it should be, and it's in fact.

00:40:54

Rob Simmelkjaer: Yeah, and Becs, I mean now we've got over 100,000 kids in New York City alone that are part of the rising New York Roadrunners program. And so that's the impact, right? Out of that 100,000 kids, I'm going to guess that there'll be more than a few division one college runners that will come out of that group.

00:41:15

Becs Gentry: Absolutely.

00:41:16

Rob Simmelkjaer: And who knows, maybe there'll be a Rhodes Scholar and maybe even a Vogue model, who knows?

00:41:23

Nnenna Lynch: But you know what? One of the things I love about our approach though is it's really, it's not about the winners. I mean, one of the things that I love doing is being a race buddy for our Run for the Future program. Which is these are young women girls who really don't think of themselves as athletes, and the idea of running a 5K is a real achievement. And to see the look of pride on their faces or to see some of the novice wheelchair racers, when they've... Because it's hard to figure out, develop upper body strength and figure out how to maneuver a wheelchair. To see these kids who don't think of themselves as athletes and probably are not going to be Olympian or NCAA champion. But to see them develop the sense of confidence in their ability to take on a challenge and develop this amazing habit of practice of running, that's the gift that really excites me, is that it's so impactful or so powerful. And if every kid could have access to that knowledge, that feeling, that confidence, the world would be a better place.

00:42:54

Becs Gentry: It truly would. It truly would. I love seeing the whole families sort of coming to the events where we have the children's run, the Rising Run. We have the adults running and there's just everyone in the family is wearing a bib, and they're all going to go off to their various races. And then at the end of the day, just the happiness that... The mile is like the one that sticks out in my mind for that is just seeing the parents go and run it, and then the kids just... Oh, by the time it's all finished, you just know that they're going to have the best day. And they've all inspired each other without really purposefully knowing that they're doing it. It's wonderful, so inspiring.

00:43:37

Nnenna Lynch: Yeah, that's one of the great things about our open runs too, which we have in community parks throughout the city, is it's low-key and the whole family can come out. And yeah, everybody from grandma to the little one, and it's low pressure, it's relaxed, but gives families opportunity to get outside and exercise together.

00:44:01

Becs Gentry: Yeah. Which we need more of. We always need more of. Do you exercise with your teenagers? Do they run with you?

00:44:09

Nnenna Lynch: They have rejected running?

00:44:11

Becs Gentry: No.

00:44:12

Nnenna Lynch: Completely. Now they're both athletes, but they prefer team sports.

00:44:22

Becs Gentry: Okay, that's okay.

00:44:22

Nnenna Lynch: Yeah. So I mean, both of them could be really good runners. My strategy with them was to just hang back and not... And give them exposure. Like I took my daughter to our New York Roadrunners Jamborees that we host a couple times a year. These running festivals where kids get to try different events, and super fun. So definitely they both had exposure. But as far as really guiding them to a sport, my strategy was to hang back and it looks like it backfired, so. No-

00:44:57

Rob Simmelkjaer: They find their own path.

00:44:58

Nnenna Lynch: ... I'm actually really happy. That's the thing is they need to find their own path and have a passion for it. And they do, so that's great.

00:45:04

Rob Simmelkjaer: All right, Nnenna, I made a joke about it before, but I really do have to ask this question, and we've never spoken about this before. What was it like to have Annie Leibovitz taking your photos? Can you just take us through that day and how that happened and what that was like?

00:45:22

Nnenna Lynch: Yeah, I think I was way too naive to be nervous. So I think I fully realized what an icon she was. So I think the way it happened is, so back in the 1980s, back in the day, Newspapers, there were more newspapers first of all, and they covered high school sports, right? And so I was a prominent athlete through my teenage years, through my high school. My sister was too, and she was a little older, so by this point she had graduated. She was running at University of Texas. But there was a period there where the Lynch sisters were a thing. Because we were both top runners nationally ranked top runners. And so I presume it was because of that media. We live in

New York City, big media market, I presume it's because that media exposure, that we were on somebody's radar. And yeah, got a call one day and Gap had just started their... I think it's called Individuals of Style campaign where they were looking for people who were not celebrities, and not models. They were looking for, so quote- unquote real people. And so yeah, I got the call and we're like, "Okay." Went to her studio. I think it was on Valet street, it was.

And looking back, I think one of the things I really appreciate is she was just a incredibly confident self-possessed woman who was a master and fully inhabited that, right? And she had this whole studio of people running around and assisting her. It's interesting because I feel like my memory at least is that the photo shoot just didn't take all that long. And so it's hard to really appreciate the artistry in the moment. But yeah, I just remember her poise and command and her confidence.

00:47:39

Rob Simmelkjaer: Do you going back and looking at those photos? Or do you put them somewhere and never look at them?

00:47:46

Nnenna Lynch: Yeah. So again, this is one of these things, it's like, what was I thinking? So what ended up happening actually is at the time these campaigns were on bus stops and billboards. They were pretty prominent, except I was away at college running my butt off. And so I don't think I ever actually saw one of these, and I never made a point of getting one of those posters. I have a rag tag sort of torn at the edges, copy of an ad that was in a magazine. So it was like I was not thinking about history and archiving all this stuff.

So at some point several years later, my sister and I went back and we got Annie to sign one of the photographs. So I do have those. But yeah, it's definitely one of those things where you didn't appreciate at the time, but looking back, I'm like, holy moly, that was pretty cool.

00:48:53

Becs Gentry: I've just found it online. I just had to look because I was like, "I've got to see this. I've got to see what you're talking about, right?"

00:48:59

Rob Simmelkjaer: Let's put it in the show notes.

00:48:59

Becs Gentry: I mean, I have an older sister, but I mean there's so much love, you are just... Oh my gosh, the

smiles and the happiness on your faces is wow. It just resonates coming straight through the screen right now. So yes. Wow, that's unreal. I'd definitely have that framed. What an incredible achievement?

And I mean, it just keeps rolling I think as well. I think from reading about you, Nnenna, from having met you and knowing about you, and just sometimes when, not that it matters, not that the times matter, but the variety of accolades that you have achieved throughout your life, you keep going. You ran the 2022 RBC, Brooklyn, half in 1:27:39, by the way. Again, not that time matters, but I think as a female, you are inspiring women to wear these multiple hats and to keep going after it. If that's what's making you happy to keep pushing the boundaries that have been put in place by societal norm of history.

So I want to know female wise, having run for this long, what advice would you give to somebody in their 20s perhaps just getting into loving, running on the longevity of the sport?

00:50:36

Nnenna Lynch: Yeah. I would say, let's see, to listen to your body, take care of your body. I think runners in particular, and I've been guilty of this at different points. Where you take such pride in your toughness, right, like that's part of the point is to push through. But figuring out when that's a bad idea. Whether it's that injury or whatever it is, right? And so taking care of your body, whether it's physical therapy, massage, sometimes rest, right? It's as simple as that, is giving yourself enough rest. And so that's really what I would focus on is listening to your body and taking care of your body.

After my kids, when I came back from running, I ended up with a whole series of injuries, and it turned out it was, I had diastasis. Which is where your core, your abdominal muscles are separated and they don't fuse. And that lack of core stability was leading to all these injuries, right? And so I really focus on the big picture. I do run five days a week but I also do yoga and calisthenics and plenty of core work and swimming when I can. And so yeah, really try and keep a really balanced perspective on it all.

And try and be gentle with myself. And I would say for those who are really trying to get after it, that to think about how the sport can adapt with you as you grow and age and different phases of life, right?

00:52:33

Becs Gentry: Yeah, absolutely.

00:52:35

Rob Simmelkjaer: All right, Nnenna, talk about Tokyo for a second.

00:52:37

Nnenna Lynch: Yes, please.

00:52:39

Becs Gentry: Here we go. Rob's getting the nitty gritty now.

00:52:43

Nnenna Lynch: (inaudible) running, okay yes.

00:52:43

Rob Simmelkjaer: Before we came on, Nnenna was rightly so giving me a hard time because we actually hatched this plan to run Tokyo together last December. It was really-

00:52:53

Becs Gentry: Wow.

00:52:53

Rob Simmelkjaer: ... right around the Ted Corbett 15K race that we decided that we were going to do this. We ran pretty much that whole race together. Had a pretty good day actually, the two of us. And at the finish line, we looked at each other and we were like, "Okay, what do you think? Should we do Tokyo?" And we agreed right then and there.

And then in classic style, I didn't say anything about it. I was hedging about it. Am I really going to do this? Really because I've had a history at least recently, I got hurt a couple of years ago and I didn't want to put it out there and then have to pull out so publicly. But it's on now because we've been doing our runs and-

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Becs Gentry: It's on.

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Rob Simmelkjaer: ... Nnenna knows the morning of the Millrose games, I ran 22 miles up here in Connecticut and felt great, so we're doing this. And so now, Nnenna, the question is how are we going to do this? I think we agree, we were going to kind of take it easy, but I'm looking at your results and you're running really well. You ran the Fred LeBeau half marathon in a time of 1:40:47, the Joe K, 10K in 43 minutes. I do this to guess, I recite their times to them sometimes. But you're running great, so how do you feel going into Tokyo?

00:54:08

Nnenna Lynch: I feel pretty good. I mean, but the marathon is a whole thing... So let's be clear, take a step back. I've run two marathons, one in 2002, and then the second one in 2023. And you could look at the time and be like, "Oh, this was pretty good." But the truth is it was ugly and painful. And so yes, so I'm really excited to do this and with no pressure or little pressure and to do it really with you. And it really is an experience, and because I think it's really... There's nothing like running a race to really get a sense of, I'm so curious to see, like okay, how does Tokyo do it, right? What do they do differently?

So I'm really looking at it through that standpoint. And I figure if I'm going to go, it'd be great to run and I'm so excited to run with you. But unlike you I haven't done my 20... So I was supposed to do my 20 miler on Sunday, except a couple things happened. One, it snowed. And two, I wasn't feeling that well, so it got punted. I'm supposed to do it tomorrow. Well, it's supposed to snow again tomorrow, so-

00:55:24

Becs Gentry: I know.

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Nnenna Lynch: You're feeling all confident like, oh, I did my 22-miler, okay. And I'm sitting here like, I haven't done my 20-miler.

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Becs Gentry: You'll be five.

00:55:36

Rob Simmelkjaer: You'll get it in.

00:55:36

Nnenna Lynch: So anyway, yeah, I'm excited to. Oh, and then it's been such a revelation to work with our phenomenal coach, Roberto, right? Roberto Mandje.

00:55:47

Rob Simmelkjaer: Roberto Mandje. Yes.

00:55:49

Nnenna Lynch: Yeah. And he is so talented and helpful, and so I'm really learning about, I think something I had never figured out previously is the fueling. And so figuring all that, so I'm excited as to bring it all together. Again, yeah, no pressure situation. So Becs I understand you have run Tokyo, you ran. So tell us what are your top three tips?

00:56:13

Becs Gentry: As soon as you land, find the Pocari Sweat, which is the drink that they have on the course as well as water. So I would at least try it as soon as you land, because it's everywhere, and you might accidentally grab it instead of water. Because a lot of people have said it either upsets their stomach violently or they're fine with it. I was fine with it. My partner on the other hand, totally upset his stomach. So get it. You can actually buy it on Amazon, I think over here. But get it when you land. It'll be everywhere. It's in every seven 11.

Do not be afraid of the rules and regulations. Sorry, Tokyo Marathon Foundation, but your booklet that you send out is petrifying to people. I think we could work on the wording.

00:57:04

Rob Simmelkjaer: A lot of rules.

00:57:04

Becs Gentry: A lot of rules. And of course we need rules and we need people to follow certain ways for it to be a great experience for everybody. But the amount of people whose faces have turned to me and being like, "Am I going to get disqualified if I drop my Morton wrapper on the floor or if I accidentally..." No, you're not. Well, I hope that you would not if you absolutely accidentally littered. The receptacles that they have for trash are huge. The booklet makes it seem like you have to stop, walk off the course, find a bin and put it in yourself. That's not true. They had these giant cardboard receptacles at the end of every fluid or aid station.

So turn it into a game, I turned it into... My friend who I was running with, we turned it into a game. We were like four for four, just trying to slam dunk it in every time. And then I never say this, I hate running with music when I'm racing because I love to feel the crowd, the energy. If I train with headphones and I have one in for safety as well, I would have some music lined up or a good conversation.

And the final thing is the last, it's multiple out and backs this route. Which is common knowledge is there. The final out and back to me was probably the most demoralizing six miles I've ever run in my life, because it was such a long out and back. And then you're seeing people literally coming into the final turn. It would be having to do Central Park South three times and be like, I just want to go there. So make sure that you know that you're going to go into one last six mile slog of undulating hills are going to feel like Kilimanjaro whilst you're watching people coming into the finish being like, "I want to be you. I really

want to be you right now."

But the finish line is, the finishing shoot is very short as well. So it's quite like, oh, we're here. Oh my gosh, turn the corner there. It's uneven surface too. So yeah, I feel like Tokyo of all the majors is the most soul searching, most people will do over the 26.2 so-

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Rob Simmelkjaer: Soul- searching like-

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Nnenna Lynch: Interesting.

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Rob Simmelkjaer: ... why did I do this, kind of soul searching?

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Becs Gentry: If you're like me. I was running to my medal. That's all I wanted was that six- star medal. I wanted to see Judy at the finish line, get my six- star medal from her. And then I was like, okay, now let me come and see this beautiful country and this incredible city.

00:59:48

Nnenna Lynch: Yeah. Oh, those are great tips. Thank you.

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Becs Gentry: Of course.

00:59:51

Rob Simmelkjaer: Nnenna doesn't know this, but I've been preparing a three- and- a- half- hour stand- up comedy routine to try to keep her entertained during this race so that we don't have any mental challenges. So I'm working on it. It's a work in progress.

01:00:06

Becs Gentry: Yeah. Somebody actually said this to me yesterday and my partner, he was running the race as well. We were both there in Tokyo last year. And he said he was... Because it was so many out- and- backs, he was really excited to see me. And he was like, " Oh, we're going to see each other four times. It's going to be so fun." And he said, he drained so much energy from mentally trying to see me coming the other direction. We never saw each other. So he was like, " That's part and parcel why I ran slower. I was so mentally exhausted from trying to find you." So there's another tip. Don't try and find people because even though you're doing out- and- backs, it's a huge race.

01:00:43

Nnenna Lynch: Got it. And there will be quite a contingent from your Roadrunners there, so that's-

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Becs Gentry: There's so many new-

01:00:49

Nnenna Lynch: ... a good tip as well. Yeah.

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Becs Gentry: So many Americans. So many New Yorkers doing-

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Nnenna Lynch: See you at the finish line.

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Becs Gentry: Yes.

01:00:54

Rob Simmelkjaer: Absolutely. We're so excited-

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Becs Gentry: And a beautiful finish line.

01:00:56

Rob Simmelkjaer: Nnenna, this is so fun having you on.

01:00:59

Becs Gentry: Yeah, thank you.

01:00:59

Rob Simmelkjaer: I guess I'll close with a question for you just about the organization and where you hope we go from here. You and I talk on a weekly basis about the big picture of New York Roadrunners. Running is so popular right now. We're in a place that's great on so many levels. People started running during the pandemic, and so many have kept up with it, and that's great. Of course, it also means we have a lot of demand for our races, and people are really excited to run and run with us, and we love that. And sometimes it's also a challenge for us to try to keep up with all of that passion for the sport of running. And you and I talk about that as well. But as an organization and especially with your focus on the mission and the impact, where do you hope we go in the next five years?

01:01:53

Nnenna Lynch: Yeah. I mean, it really goes back to broadening and deepening our impact. As you said, we sell out our

races, etc., but I think I always go back to the youth and community side of the picture and thinking about, okay, what more can we do? And I'm so excited by what you and your leadership team are working on. And I think New York City in so many ways, we hear often, right, that the marathon is the best in the world, and it's the most popular. It's definitely it's the biggest. We know that, right?

But yeah, but there's this love of that. And I want to take that excitement and really spread it. And to think about New York City as the best city in the world for runners and running and cultivating running talent. Just creating this ecosystem of starting with elementary school and we have our new middle school program and continuing through high school. I mean, one of the things I love about the team is that we're constantly thinking about how can we do things better? How can we connect the dots more, create more connective tissue? And that's where our middle school program that's going to serve 10,000 kids in the 100 different schools it's going to come from.

But a statistic that really haunts me is that high school, there are only 20% of high schools have a track team. I'm like, "How is that possible?" So there's always so much more to do and I'm super excited by... And I hope we get to talk about this at a future date. The plans we're hatching to really lean into the philanthropic side of this. Because as we said, our races are limited, so our revenue, that means our revenue is limited, but there's so much more we can do. There's so much more we need to do. And philanthropy is really going to be the thing that is able to help us broaden and deepen our impact. And so more to come on that, but I'm really excited about the ambitious plans that we have in the works.

01:04:08

Rob Simmelkjaer: Yeah, 100%. That's why when you listen to this Set the Pace podcast, we have an ad that talks about our impact and actually tells people how to donate. Because that is really how, those donations, the giving to the organization really empowers us to go out and make the kind of impact that you've talked about today on Set the pace. And that we're looking to broaden and deepen in the years to come. So appreciate your mentioning that and appreciate having you on our little podcast. It's been great to have you on.

01:04:40

Nnenna Lynch: It was super fun. Thank you so much.

01:04:55

Rob Simmelkjaer: New York Roadrunners is a nonprofit

organization with a vision to build healthier lives and stronger communities through the transformative power of running. The support of members and donors like you helps us achieve our mission to transform the health and wellbeing of our communities, through inclusive and accessible running experiences, empowering all to achieve their potential. Learn more and contribute at [NYRR.org/donate](https://nyrr.org/donate).

Jacob Caswell and Jay Solly are defining what it means to be an LGBTQ running power couple, both on and off the race course. Caswell a top non-binary marathoner, has claimed victories in major races like the New York City and Chicago marathons. Earning accolades such as New York Roadrunner's, Fred LeBeau, runner of the Year. Solly, a six-time marathoner, and the race director of the Frontrunners New York LGBT Pride Run is a tireless advocate for LGBTQ+ inclusion in road running. Working with global organizations to ensure all athletes can compete authentically. Together, their stories highlight the intersection of athletic excellence and social advocacy and of course joy.

01:06:08

Meb Keflezighi: Thanks Rob. Jacob and Jay, welcome to the Set the PACE podcast. How's it going today?

01:06:14

Jay: It's great. Thank you so much for having us.

01:06:17

Jacob: Yes, thank you so much.

01:06:18

Meb Keflezighi: My pleasure. Welcome to the podcast. You two met through the Frontrunners. For our audience members who may not know, can you tell us about the Frontrunners and what it meant as the community and the Frontrunners like?

01:06:31

Jay: Maybe I can start. Jay can just quickly say I mean, Frontrunners is the largest LGBTQ running club in the world. And in the New York chapter that we have here, we have over 1200 members, and so there's this really large, vibrant community of LGBTQ runners that we see pretty much week in and week out in New York. And we all get together and run together. And it's a community building space. People find relationships, people find best friendships, and Jake and I had actually met there before, long before we even started dating. Jake, I know you came to Frontrunners too before I even did.

01:07:11

Jacob: Yeah. I think Frontrunners really gave a place for a lot of people coming out of the pandemic to really find that community. I think we saw a lot of people either returning to New York or coming to New York for the first time post pandemic. And I think that Frontrunners has really given a lot of queer people opportunity to build community in a large city here like in New York.

01:07:37

Meb Keflezighi: How did you each discover the sport of running to begin with?

01:07:41

Jacob: Yeah, I started running in high school and I think I had a really important network of people. Like that's where my community was in high school. Like really key important coaches and teammates that really I think emboldened my love of running. Running is what brought me to New York. I ran collegiately here at Columbia University and I've been at New York ever since. So I guess running has just been always a part of my life and is what brought me to New York. What about you, Jay?

01:08:18

Jay: I'm the opposite, right? I didn't run in high school or collegiately and I was kind of a passion runner. And then when I joined Frontrunners, I mean there's just such a racing community and then also being able to do it with this queer club made me want to do it more. And I got into marathoning and I got a coach and who also happens to be a Frontrunner, so we kind of have opposite journeys there.

01:08:41

Meb Keflezighi: Running is often seen as both personal and community-driven sport. How have your identities and advocacy shaped the way you approach running in the running community?

01:08:51

Jay: Yeah, I mean I think certainly for me, and this is also a shout-out to New York Roadrunners for having the non-binary category and making it really easy for folks who identify, not only in our club but in many clubs to race as non-binary. I mean, it's been a real tangible way that I get to express my identity, right? I finish a race and I see the X gender marker next to my name, and that's such a tangible way for me to express myself and to run authentically.

And so every time I'm running it's something I'm thinking about whether I'm racing or when I'm just out for a run. Getting to do it as part of the club and then getting to

do it authentically and racing. It's all just kind of melded into this really passion-driven experience for me. Jake, I know you've got a much longer history with racing than I do.

01:09:47

Jacob: Yeah. I think it's just that racing and collegiately, it was always kind of like in this category that I knew it really wasn't meant for me, but there really was no other option. So when there was this option available, and as you were saying Jay, just having that X next to your name just makes it running, just so much more freeing. I mean, I had previous teammates collegiately, who are now also running in the non-binary category and are doing really well. Sophia, I think can really, in their case, and I think even in my case as well, you could really see the blossoming of the runner going from one of those gender categories to the non-binary category.

01:10:41

Meb Keflezighi: Jacob, the non-binary, you've been setting records and what does the future look like for the non-binary representation and community in the running? For you to be a collegiate high school athlete, but now to be able to be part of the New Yorker Roadrunners non-binary, how does that change for the future or do you see progress?

01:11:01

Jacob: Yeah. I think we're really starting to see the non-binary category renaissance. I think more and more people are opting to express their gender identity and the non-binary category. I think once you start seeing more and more people join, you feel more and more comfortable and safe to join as well. So I think we're really seeing from the New York City Marathon to other major marathons. And year in year out, more and more people opting into the non-binary category. Do you have any thoughts, Jay?

01:11:40

Jay: I mean, yeah, I'll echo what you said. And there's so much happening right now for queer athletes to be able to run authentically as themselves, not just in New York, but everywhere, you're seeing more and more races offering the non-binary category. You're seeing more and more attention being given to non-binary athletes who are excelling. But also know LGBTQ athletes in general deserve a space in running, and so that blossoming is really exciting to see.

01:12:10

Meb Keflezighi: Excellent. Jay, as a race director for the FRNY

LGBT Pride Run and advocacy for inclusion, what steps do you think road races and marathons still need to take to be more welcome to non-binary and LGBTQ+ athletes?

01:12:26

Jay: Yeah, I mean, it's a great question. Let me first just start by saying that the LGBT Pride Run now entering its 43rd year is a real expression of that queer joy that we have for New York City, right? It started with just 400 people racing in 1982, and now it's over 8,000 finishers pretty much every year. And it is also one of the races in the New York Roadrunner system that has the largest number of non-binary participants, because it is just that free and safe and welcoming space. Like all of other New York Roadrunners races and many other races are.

I think there's a few things that races can do that are what we might call low-hanging fruits, right? And it's just helping bring visibility to the non-binary category. Not even just to say to legitimize it, but to really be out and proud and say, "That this is something that we're offering for our participants to be able to run authentically. And we are providing a safe space for not just LGBTQ athletes, but everyone to be here and be prideful in the way that they run."

That's how they represent themselves on the website, in social media, in language. Making sure that there's inclusive language and not just necessarily very specific gendered language. All those things are really easy, right? They're pretty simple steps, but they go a long way to helping show people that it's a supportive environment.

01:13:57

Meb Keflezighi: Great. Running is something that is very inclusive that we feel, and you are both on the road a lot and racist all the time. Talk to us about the changes that you are seeing in terms of the LGBTQ running community.

01:14:11

Jay: Yeah, I mean, maybe I'll start. Jake, I think when I first moved to New York and joined Frontrunners, there weren't really that many out athletes even running in the New York Roadrunner system, right? There were a few folks, and Jake, you were out there and obviously impressed and inspired me. But now we're seeing more and more athletes, whether they be from Frontrunners or from elsewhere, right?

If you look at the 2024 Olympic team trials, Frontrunners was represented there with Scotty Nelson, who I know you have also interviewed on this podcast as one of only a few out gay runners at the Olympic team trials for Team USA. And I think as we're starting to see, as we have role models

like that and role models like Jake and Sophia and other people, the more we have of that, the more people feel empowered to not hide a part of their identity when they run. Whether it's professionally at the elite level or whether it's at the community level.

01:15:18

Meb Keflezighi: Pretty awesome. Well, both of you are doing great work and keep inspiring and changing people's lives, so thanks for being on the podcast. Wish you all the best.

01:15:26

Jay: Thanks, Meb.

01:15:26

Jacob: Thank you so much.

01:15:26

Meb Keflezighi: Thank you both for joining us and for being members of New York Roadrunners. Now it's time for today's Meb Bennett.

01:15:35

Meb Bennet: Thanks, Rob. Running buddies train you for a marathon or half marathon can be tough, but it is a lot easier when you have running Buddy by your side. Valentine's Day is a great reminder that running partners are like the perfect training match. They keep you motivated, hold you accountable, and make the miles more enjoyable. Whether it's a friend, spouse, or teammate, having someone to share the highs and the lows of training helps build a stronger bond and make the process more fun.

So this Valentine's Day, give the gift of training partner and go crash those miles together. It is a win-win for your fitness and for your relationship. As I was training, I had a lot of great partners that I trained with, but also I had someone on the bike. So those conversations, those highs and lows of life and marathon training are dialogue that makes the miles go by so fast. Especially under tough conditions, it is important to be able to be with somebody that keeps you accountable and make it a lot more fun. Sometimes you say, "I can't believe we already ran eight miles or nine miles," so keep that friendship going.

01:16:43

Rob Simmelkjaer: All right, what an episode this was today. Thank you to all of our guests, New York Roadrunners board chair, Nnenna Lynch, Jacob Caswell and Jay Solly as well. If you like this episode, make sure you go ahead, subscribe, rate, leave us a comment or a question, wherever you listen.

We'll answer your question and you'll also help others find a podcast as well. Thanks for hanging out with us this week. If you're training or whatever you're doing, enjoy the miles.