


**FORTY YEARS AGO,
A CALIFORNIA TEENAGER RAN A RACE
THAT SHOCKED THE WORLD.**

IT SEEMED IMPORTANT AT THE TIME.



IT'S EVEN MORE IMPORTANT NOW.



NOW AND THEN
Debbie Heald today, and at her
historic 1972 race (opposite).

Meteor

BY **STEVE FRIEDMAN**

PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL SUGRUE



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they are sitting together at a round oak table in a sun-soaked living room on a mountain ridge in Ukiah, California, surrounded by fir trees and hiking trails. It's late spring, and they are an hour from the Pacific Ocean, 45 minutes from Mendocino National Forest, and nearly 500 miles from the place where they first changed each other's lives. Forty years ago, when she was just 16 and sometimes running 10 or 12 miles a day, he helped her accomplish something no female high school runner had ever done before, and none has done since.

He's 73 now, retired. She's 57, living on psychiatric disability. It's a perfect Northern California day, clear and not too hot. The sliding glass doors to the wooden deck are open, and outside, birds twitter and occasionally car tires softly kiss the twisting pavement outside his front door. Inside, the old friends watch a footrace on his laptop computer.

The audio is odd. The clicking of film. The stentorian voice of the legendary sports broadcaster Jack Whitaker, his voice filled with urgency even during the introductions. And there is a strange pounding, like people smacking bats together, or a boxing timekeeper pounding his hammer before a round's end. It's the runners' feet pounding the indoor wooden track. Four runners, 11 laps, one mile.

The second lap has just ended. In front, a powerfully built woman with a red U.S.S.R. jersey. In second, another Soviet. Third place, a long-limbed, graceful American with blonde hair. They're all smooth, seasoned, all in their late 20s. Fourth out of four: the one who doesn't fit, who never quite fit. Slender, pigtailed. Blue and yellow fuzzy balls on her socks. Ratty running shoes held together with duct tape. Sixteen years old.

"What are you thinking?" Roy Mason asks his friend, whom he's known since she was 9, since before she wore pigtails.

Debbie Heald now wears her hair short and slicked back, like a truck driver or a rock star.

"That I'm in last," she says.

She laughs. He smiles. They know what happens next.

DEBBIE HEALD GREW UP in La Mirada, in Southern California, a scented suburb of rolling hills, hissing sprinklers, and soft, Hobbit curves. One of the parks has a Frisbee golf course. The town hosts an annual father-daughter dance. Debbie's brother Dana played football, baseball, and basketball. Her other brother, Michael, was more into literature and the arts. Her mother, Ernestine, cooked and kept house. Her father, Richard, was an auditor for an insurance company.

Richard came home from his office at Transamerica Occidental Life Insurance in downtown Los Angeles on summer evenings and tossed his jacket aside and told Debbie to grab her glove, they were going to play catch. He played Wiffle ball with her and her brothers and took her to ride in bumper cars. After dark, he would let her sit next to him while he relaxed in his



Opener Still: MITCH MANDEL (frame); Top Left: KENT PELL; Bottom Right: MICHAEL SUGRU



The advice Roy gave Debbie, the hard-headed little warrior, was simple: RUN AS FAST AS YOU CAN AS FAR AS YOU CAN.

HISTORY LESSON
Heald, above left, looks through scrapbooks kept by her coach, Roy Mason, that trace her early running successes.



easy chair and listened to the Los Angeles Rams and the Dodgers and UCLA football. He and Ernestine played tennis on Sunday afternoons at Gardenhill Park, and afterward Richard would lob balls to Debbie and let her hit them. When she smacked one over the fence, he laughed. She remembers that, because he didn't laugh a lot. On August 19, 1963, the day before Debbie's 8th birthday, Ernestine awoke and found her husband in the garage, in the family car, with the motor running, dead. Debbie worried people would forget her birthday, and she wouldn't get cake and ice cream. She remembers feeling she was selfish and bad for thinking that. She still feels that way.

A year later, when Debbie was about to enter fourth grade, Ernestine drove to the offices of the La Mirada School District. She told the administrator she wanted Debbie to be taught by a man that year, that her daughter needed a father figure.

Roy Mason Swett (he dropped his last name in 1985; he didn't like how people always misspelled it) was 25 years old and teaching fourth grade at the time. He knew that kids loved competing, and he wanted to make sure everyone—the small, the slow, the shy, the stubborn—could find a way. He held reading races, and he stapled a racetrack to a bulletin board in his classroom, and taped cars to it. Each car had a name on it, and for each book report a student turned in, her car moved forward.

He gave spelling tests every Wednesday and Friday. For every word a student missed on the Wednesday test, she had to write the word 10 times. One of Roy's students missed six out of 10 words the first Wednesday of the 1964 school year, but failed to turn in her 60 words. Then she missed five words the next week, and failed to turn in those words. He talked to her, but she missed seven the next week. Still, no makeup words. What was wrong with her? There were rules here. When she fell more than 1,000 words behind, he had another talk with her and told her that this was serious, that she really had to buckle down and turn in the words—but she just stared at him. Was she nodding? Or glaring? The following Monday she said good-

bye to her mother, left the house, but didn't show up at school. She had circled the block, then crept into the neighbor's garage. She stayed there the entire day. She did the same thing the next day, and the next. That's Roy's first memory of the girl who would change his life. "A hard-headed kid," he says. A child with will to spare.

Hard-headed but still just a kid. One day on the playground a German shepherd from the neighborhood was loose, and when Debbie ran to the water fountain, the dog bit Debbie on

the butt. She cried and bolted toward home, half a mile away. Roy, who was also the playground supervisor, jumped in his car to catch her, to bring her back to school, to treat and console her, but the car was no match for Debbie. She beat Roy's car to the front door of her house, where her mother thanked Roy for trying to help her daughter.

All the kids seemed to like Mr. Swett, but after Debbie learned that he was sticking around—that no matter how stubborn, hard-headed, or disobedient, and no matter how bad she behaved, he wasn't going anywhere—Debbie loved him. Roy made up games and laughed a lot. She started turning in her spelling words (she didn't improve that much in spelling, but she tried). He marveled at her energy, her determination. She could throw the softball as far as any girl on the playground, she excelled on the basketball court, and, most of all, she could outrun most girls her age.

There was a makeshift track at Hutchinson Elementary school, a 300-yard oblong. Roy would often offer suggestions to the kids on the playground or on the track. His advice to Debbie, the hard-headed, fatherless little warrior, was simple: Run as fast as you can and as far as you can.

Debbie looked at her coach and teacher and surrogate father. "Okay, Mr. Swett," she said, and took off.

Outside, on the top of Fircrest Drive in Ukiah, where Roy has lived since 1986, the spring sunlight slants through the canopy of leaves.

All's quiet. But at his living room table, on his laptop, there's whirring film and pounding feet and it's late winter 1972, St. Patrick's Day, and Debbie Heald is still in last place. In the black-and-white clip, the two Soviets are ahead, pushing the pace on the tight indoor track of the Richmond Coliseum. Two minutes in, the race is nearly half over.

CALIFORNIA IN THE MID 1960s GREW female runners like the coal country of Pennsylvania grew quarterbacks. Francie Larrieu, three years older than Debbie, was star of the San Jose Cindergals. Larrieu would go on to set 35 American records. Garden Grove's Mary Decker, or "Little Mary Decker," three years younger than Debbie, would set numerous world records and in 1983 be named *Sports Illustrated's* Sportsperson of the Year.

Most school districts didn't sponsor girls track teams at the time, so in 1965 Roy started an AAU team. Other squads showed up to meets in satin warmups and shorts. The Hutchinson Track Club (which later became the La Mirada Meteors) sported T-shirts with ironed-on letters and stars. Quickly, the rag-tag bunch coached by the elementary school teacher turned into a remarkable group of runners, by any standard. One Meteor, a little girl named Renee Quigley, would win the 9-and-under national cross-country championships in 1970 and then run a 5:17 mile

When Debbie worried, she ran. And when she ran, she didn't need to worry. SHE WOULD RUN UNTIL SHE WOULD WIN.



FATHER FIGURE

After Heald lost her dad to suicide just before turning 8, she formed a friendship with Mason (above and right) that has lasted nearly 50 years.

the next year. Cathy Mintie ran a 4:56 mile when she was 13, winning the state championships by 20 seconds. Debbie Heald set an American record for 10- and 11-year-olds with a 5:33.9 mile in 1966. The next year, she set the 12-year-old mark, with a 5:07.6. After getting that record, a reporter asked her if she wanted to run in the Olympics one day. "I don't know," she said, "but I hope so."

All of Roy's girls had strong wills, but no one had will like Debbie. She was hard-headed. Playing football with the neighborhood boys, she ran to the ball, and if the ball was flying toward a parked car, Debbie caught it, and bounced off the car, and held on. If she was playing basketball and a girl elbowed her, she elbowed back, harder. When Mr. Swett suggested his girls get in some extra miles on their own, they often ran seven miles, then back. Debbie would always make sure to touch a fence at the turnaround, and when teammate and friend Suzanne DeCuir laughed and asked if that was really necessary, Debbie gave her a look and Suzanne DeCuir didn't say anything again.

Others sprinted faster, finished stronger, ran more gracefully. No one worked harder than Debbie Heald.

By the time she was 12, she was often running as much as 10 miles a day, and most mornings she would jog the quarter mile to Reeny Westcott's house, then they would run five miles together. Later, when she was in high school, Debbie would jog to Suzanne DeCuir's house for a run. Suzanne remembers standing on a hill near her house on foggy days, and watching her friend rise out of the mist, steady, strong, determined. Suzanne thought Debbie looked like she could pull a truck.



Before races her brother Dana, a year older, watched Debbie warm up, “clenched from pain.” Debbie’s mother remembers her daughter running through parties, and movies, and dinners. “Running always came first,” says Ernestine, now 80. “She couldn’t do enough. Her body would not handle the workouts and it broke my heart.” Debbie suffered multiple stress fractures and even rib injuries. Between 1969 and 1978, she had 13 surgeries. She had chronic tendinitis. But she kept running.

It wasn’t simply to please her coach, who wanted Debbie to succeed but also wanted her to remain healthy. It wasn’t because anyone was telling her she had to.

Ernestine remarried in November 1964, and the Heald kids—especially Debbie—didn’t like their stepfather. He drank, and when he stumbled home after dark, bellowing, Debbie knew he had drunk a lot. He had a scar on his cheek, and on those nights it would turn a deep crimson. On those nights Ernestine would gather her children together and tell them to pack up their clothes and toothbrushes because they were going to a hotel that night to get away from Ernestine’s husband, but once they had gathered everything, and Ernestine had a long, muffled talk with him, they never did go. And Debbie kept running.

Debbie and Roy saw each other almost every day. All of the Meteors seemed to love their coach—in addition to devising individual workouts for each girl, he printed up newsletters that broke down how one runner won a 100-yard dash, how another set a personal best in the 880. But no one loved him like Debbie. She babysat for his four kids. And when the Meteors

traveled out of town to meets, Roy would often hear a knock on his motel door at 11 or midnight. It would be Debbie.

She would say she couldn’t sleep, that she was worried. He would tell her everyone worried, it was okay, but he thought that no one worried quite like his hardest-working runner. He wasn’t sure why.

Whatever it was, running helped. When Debbie worried, she ran. And when she ran, she didn’t need to worry. She didn’t need to think or feel. She would run until she was exhausted, and she would win. Focus on running, and winning, that was the secret. Ernestine divorced in 1969, when Debbie was 14, so she didn’t need to run away from home every day.

But she still kept running.

When she was a high school freshman, in 1969, she broke the five-minute barrier for the mile. She won in 4:55.9, beating 21-year-old Linda McCain, who had been racing internationally for several years. In 1971, just after turning 16, Debbie beat Francie Larrieu by 33 seconds to win the California girls cross-country championships. Then, a few months later, on February 25, 1972, came one of the biggest races of her life, on one of the biggest stages in the world. She traveled to New York City to compete in the mile at the National AAU Indoor Championships at Madison Square Garden. Doris Brown, who in 1966 had become the first woman to run a sub-five-minute mile indoors, was entered, and so was Mary Decker. The top two finishers would earn a spot in the U.S.–U.S.S.R. dual meet scheduled for the next month in Richmond, Virginia; it would be a showdown between track’s superpowers right in the middle of the Cold War. At the Garden that day, Doris Brown won the race, easily, but Debbie ran a 4:47.5, good enough for second place.

In March, Debbie flew to Richmond for her first international competition. She would face Doris Brown again and the two best women milers from the Soviet Union. The race was scheduled for St. Patrick’s Day, and would be shown on tape, nationally, the next day on CBS. If Debbie did well, she’d boost her chances of making the U.S. Olympic team that summer.

Debbie was confident and hard-headed. But she was still a teenager. She’d be gone from home for nearly a week. She didn’t want to go without Roy.

“Which would you rather do?” her coach asked her. “Be with me, or go to the Olympics?” She didn’t answer. But she remembers what she thought.

“I remember thinking, *Why can’t I have Roy for a father?*”

Debbie and Roy watch and listen, as if the race on the laptop is taking place at that moment. The grainy video shows time-keepers and meet officials on the infield of the Richmond Coliseum. The TV announcer is shouting over the cheering crowd. The 9,000 people filling the Coliseum seem to get louder each time the runners pass through a turn. In a section of seats just a body-length or so up from the track, the Soviet fans in the arena are watching their nation’s two best milers leading at the halfway point. The fans have their arms raised, sensing a sweep of first and second.



PICTURE PERFECT
Heald won AAU and state titles as a teen, but her victory in the 1972 U.S.-U.S.S.R. meet remains her finest highlight.

IN THE DINING AREA in Richmond where the American and Soviet athletes ate, the shot-putters feasted on lobster and steak for dinner and looked like mountains. The sprinters had rippling thighs. Debbie's roommate, a hurdler, stayed up until 3 a.m., reading Archie Comics and keeping Debbie from falling asleep. All of that was disconcerting. Worse: the teenager's competition. Tamara Pangelova had set a world indoor record in the 1500 meters the week before in the European championships. Lyudmila Bragina would go on to win the Olympic gold in the 1500 meters later that summer. The other American, Doris Brown, was invariably referred to as The Great Doris Brown. At one point in her career, she held every women's national record from 440 yards to one mile. She was slender, elegant, majestic. Back home, in La Mirada, in Debbie's bedroom, sat a photo of Doris Brown. Brown was 29, Pangelova, 28, and Bragina, 28.

Debbie called her mother, crying. She called Roy, crying. Three days before the race, she asked a representative from Adidas if he might be able to spare a new pair of running shoes, because hers were falling apart. "Nah," he said, "you're not that good." She called Roy and her mother again, crying. Then she wrapped duct tape around her shoes.

The race took place on Friday. Earlier in the week she had trouble sleeping and she ran the race in her head. She knew she would have to run at least a 4:30 to beat the Soviets and The Great Doris Brown. She had run a 4:47 once before, and she was hoping that with the Soviets and Brown pushing her, maybe she could get to 4:45, or even 4:44. She ran the race in her mind that night, "at least 500 times," and she never broke 4:44.

In the morning, when she had finished her cottage cheese and scrambled eggs—her usual prerace breakfast—she called Roy. He asked how she was feeling.

Fine, she said. Then she laughed. She would finish last, she told him, but she would run hard, and maybe she'd get a fast time. Maybe she'd even set a personal best.

Her coach didn't doubt her prediction of last place—he knew she was out of her class—but he was a coach, and he couldn't help himself. He liked strategy. He asked Debbie if she knew what The Great Doris Brown's plans were for the first three-fourths of a mile.

"Hold on," Debbie said, laughing. "I'll ask her."

She turned to Doris Brown, who happened to be walking by, and asked her. (Brown said 3:25. She was probably as shocked as Roy at Debbie's question.)

That night, in the Richmond Coliseum, Debbie wore her lucky socks, low cut with blue and yellow fuzzy balls in back. She looked out of place at the start of the race, compact, pigtailed, nervous, next to the long, lean Doris Brown and the unsmiling, powerful Soviets.

She started in last, and seemed surprised. After 50 feet, though, she sprinted. "A surprising spurt," the TV broadcaster said. "Pretty spunky." She led for a lap before the natural order reasserted itself. First Bragina passed her, then Pangelova, and then Brown.

Debbie had never been a great finisher. "She had never been a kicker," Roy says. "That wasn't her M.O." But she was racing against the greatest kickers in the world. "Nine times out of 10, she loses this race," Roy says.

Last place, overmatched, alone. About to do something no high school girl runner would ever do again.

"Debbie had never been a kicker," Roy says. "That wasn't her M.O. NINE TIMES OUT OF TEN SHE LOSES THAT RACE."

"And now? And now what are you thinking?" Roy asks Debbie.

With just five laps to go, Bragina has fallen to last place, and the pigtailed kid is in third. If she were a strong finisher, it wouldn't be a bad place to be. But she was not a strong finisher, neither author of nor believer in miraculous endings. Still hard-headed, still running as hard as she could, but

the high school cross-country champion was out of her league, and she knew it. The slapping—quickened now—sounds like funeral drums, tribal, desultory, a dirge for a young, earnest, doomed miler.

Since the mile that changed their lives, Roy has been divorced twice, retired, bought two houses in Ukiah (where he moved in 1978), and last flew in an airplane in 1998. "No, not because I'm afraid of flying. I just don't have much call to go anywhere."

Debbie has moved more times than she can remember, and lived in places she'd prefer not to think about. For the past eight years she has lived in Whittier, California, only four miles as the yellow-chevroned parakeet flies from the hushed gentility of La Mirada, where she grew up. She and her partner for the past 19 years, Cecilia, share an apartment in a complex where rusted bikes huddle at the racks dotting the grounds, and men in soiled T-shirts push old grocery (continued on page 115)

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carts, sometimes empty, sometimes not. There is a small, oblong swimming pool boxed in by the apartment buildings, but neither Debbie nor Cecilia swims there because both suspect the apartment kids pee in it. She goes to bed at 4:30 or 5 o'clock in the afternoon and wakes up around 5 a.m. She and Cecilia spend a few hours on buses most days, traveling to doctors' offices, social workers' offices, pharmacies.

"What are you thinking?" Roy repeats.

"That I'm in third," she says, and, as before, they laugh.

DEBBIE NEVER MADE IT to the 1972 Olympics; she didn't even make it to the U.S. Olympic Trials. Injuries—tendinitis, stress fractures—seemed always to plague her. She spent the rest of her high school days hurt, but still running. Roy had left the Meteors, but he invited Debbie to work out with his boys team at Bellflower High School, where he was now teaching and coaching. When her injuries weren't too severe, she and Roy would run together, eight to 12 miles at a time. Until they hit the last mile, they'd talk—"what's in the paper, what's on the radio, that sort of thing," Debbie says—but the last mile, it was quiet. They were waiting to see who would start kicking first.

Debbie was offered a track scholarship to UCLA, but she didn't want to leave home, so she enrolled at Cal State Fullerton in 1973, and lived with her mother and her new stepfather, Bob Lucker. She called him "Pop." When she was 19, she and Roy decided that his private workouts weren't enough, that she needed to run with other national-class women. She joined the San Fernando Valley Track Club and continued to overtrain, continued to hurt herself. For the first time since she was 9, Roy was no longer coaching her, and the two began to drift apart. But she kept running.

At 23, college degree in hand, she moved north, to Berkeley. There, she worked in a running store, ran for Nike, still dreamed of running in the Olympics, and if she could stay healthy (she managed to win several races during the 1978 indoor season) she had a shot. She still worried about things she didn't talk about. She worried a lot, and now she sometimes drank to blunt the pain. But she had her life in front of her—she would run, and then she would teach and coach, just like Mr. Swett.

In Berkeley, she suffered an injury on the fourth toe of her left foot, and needed to

have surgery. She had to stop running for awhile. She had stopped running before, and she had worried and fretted, but things had been okay. She was resilient. But this time she wasn't.

Her brother Dana noticed that Debbie, hard-headed, a life force, a clown, turned severe. Before his wedding in 1979, at his rehearsal dinner, she hardly said a word. Dana thought maybe it was the drama of his wedding that had Debbie cowed. Either that or the stress of being an athlete. Maybe something wasn't going well at the track. Or maybe it was injuries.

Those explanations might have made a certain kind of sense. What was happening to Debbie didn't.

At night, in her bedroom, when she tried to sleep but couldn't, she was hallucinating. She thought a man who had been close to the family was in the room, menacing her. She could see him. She watched his dark, threatening face loom close. And she could hear him. "If you say anything about what happened," he said. "I'll kill you and your whole family."

She called her mother and told her she was scared.

"And now," Roy asks Debbie, "what are you thinking?"

She's moved up to second place, a lap and a quarter to go, but biding her time in fourth is the indomitable Soviet, Bragina. Leading the race is the other indomitable Soviet, Pangelova. Just a step behind her is Doris Brown. The magnificent Doris Brown. It's a brave move to move up to second, but Debbie is not a kicker, not a finisher. Brave, maybe the only thing she could do. But certainly not a winning strategy.

"What are you thinking, Debbie?"

"That I'm beating Doris Brown!"

IN A PSYCHIATRIC HOSPITAL in Oakland, Debbie told her mother that the man who appeared in the hallucinations had, in real life, molested her. She claimed that he had assaulted her at home when Ernestine wasn't around, from the time she was 11 years old until she was 14—the years she turned herself into a runner who never quit, who could endure anything.

Ernestine brought Debbie home to La Mirada. She was 23 years old, still injured, and now taking Mellaril for what doctors diagnosed as schizophrenia. The medicine affected her coordination. Even when her physical injuries healed, she felt sluggish, like she was going to tip over. She still

couldn't run, and she hated that. She took on odd jobs; she worked at a Midas muffler shop, for \$3.25 an hour. She saw different shrinks, took different meds. She couldn't sleep, so she went for walks at 2 a.m., but she couldn't run because she felt so uncoordinated. The cops and the trash collectors honked and waved to her and she waved back. She attended a group-therapy program called Straight Talk. Things got better, but things got worse, too. Then, when she didn't come home one night, Pop had to drive all over the neighborhood until he found her lying in a gutter.

The voices continued. Doctors tried different pills. Some made her drool, others made her sleep. She got electroshock, and more pills. She knew one thing could save her. She had to run. She entered a 10-K and ran it in 41 minutes, unbearably slow for her. "They're interviewing the first-place person, and I'm thinking they should be interviewing me."

Then she couldn't run at all. What did that make her? "Everything about my life had centered around running," she says. "Running was my identity, and I didn't think of myself as enough of a person to exist without running."

On a Saturday morning in January 1980, at 24 years old, Debbie swallowed 100 pills of Mellaril, called a friend in the Bay Area, and passed out. Her friend called Debbie's mother. Ernestine called a neighbor who was a police officer. Someone—no one remembers who—called Debbie's friend and running mate Suzanne DeCuir.

Suzanne called Roy.

"Here comes Debbie Heald. Look at that! She's moving up. Sixteen years old! Debbie Heald, what a tremendous push! Debbie Heald....!"

Debbie will go for a walk later. Roy will sit on the deck, look out on the waves of trees, knock back a Henry Weinhard's beer or two. He'll probably spend a few minutes thinking about his great, greatly damaged runner.

At this moment, though, there is only an excited TV announcer, a whirring, black-and-white event from the distant past. Only thudding, and yelling. Only the finish.

THE CHATTERBOX WAS SILENT. The hard-headed kid was as passive as a newborn. On the day Debbie attempted suicide, and was admitted to a Whittier hospital, Roy drove the nine hours from Ukiah. He hadn't seen Debbie, or talked to her, in years, since she last ran for him and since he had moved north. When he arrived at the psych ward,

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he saw other patients shuffling, vacant-eyed, in the hall. He had to pass through three locked doors to get to her ward. She didn't say much other than, "Hi, Roy." Roy didn't say much, either.

Over the next few weeks he continued to visit her, even after she had been transferred to another facility. On his fourth visit, he was allowed to take her out. They went to Marie Callender's for dinner and dessert. He asked what kind of pie she wanted. She told him to order first. Whatever he ordered, she ordered. Every time they went to Marie Callender's, or anywhere else, she ordered what he ordered. He encouraged her to pick something for herself, but she wouldn't do it. She couldn't.

The first time they went out, they finished their meal in 40 minutes.

"Okay, bye, Roy. I gotta go back now," Debbie said.

"We have an hour, Debbie. Why don't we stay here awhile?"

"I gotta go back! I gotta go back!"

For the better part of the next two decades, she was in and out of institutions, on and off drugs, seeing different shrinks. Through those years Roy made the drive every few months to see her. She was living in one care facility or another. Whenever Roy visited, Debbie would wait till he ordered, then ask for whatever he was having.

Debbie gained weight, heard voices, lost jobs, worried. She started receiving psychiatric disability payments. She couldn't run, but went for an hour walk every day. Meanwhile, Roy, who at one point had a running streak of 2,727 consecutive days, kept up the heavy mileage until his body started to resist it. Then he switched to bicycling, and cycled around Ukiah, where he had his hammock below his back porch. Debbie stayed in Southern California and had her daily walks.

Every year, on St. Patrick's Day, he would call her. And a few weeks later, Debbie would receive a ticket in the mail. It was a round-trip ticket from Long Beach (the nearest airport to her) to Oakland. Roy would pick her up in Oakland, and they'd drive to the Oakland Coliseum to watch the Athletics play. If they weren't in town, they would drive into San Francisco and catch a Giants game. Then they'd head to Ukiah.

Roy would read or go to the gym, while Debbie took her hour walk. They would talk about sports and drink coffee. They would read, or sometimes sit on Roy's back porch, and listen to a ballgame on the radio.

When she got home, she'd see new doc-

tors, try new meds. She still heard voices, but tried to ignore them. She got better, then worse, then better.

Through it all, a few constants—the phone call on St. Patrick's Day, the trip to Ukiah in the spring. And a mystery with no answer.

Thirty years ago it was an article of faith among mental health professionals that schizophrenia was caused by cold, distant mothers. As the biochemical paradigm of disease took hold, though, bad brain chemistry—not bad parenting—became the culprit and medication the cure, for schizophrenia as well as most other mental illnesses. Still, recent studies show that someone with a predisposition toward mental illness who is raised in a stable loving home is less likely to manifest symptoms of that illness, including schizophrenia, than the same person subjected to parental suicide and other traumatic experiences.

Maybe someone with more robust brain synapses and a less sensitive nature would have responded to a suicidal father and a heavy-drinking stepfather by gritting her teeth and getting on with life. But maybe someone with more robust synapses would not have possessed an inhuman ability to withstand pain, to channel fear into tendon-stretching, bone-breaking training. Exactly what caused Debbie's schizophrenia—doctors' opinions notwithstanding—is as inexplicable as what caused her to keep running even when failure seemed certain. It's as much of a mystery as what happened that spring day 40 years ago, when Debbie Heald did something no high school girl had ever done before, or has ever done again.

On this visit to Ukiah, Debbie has been reading *Unbroken* (about a miler who suffers unimaginable hardships, yet prevails in the end) and Roy is reading *Wherever I Wind Up: My Quest for Truth, Authenticity, and the Perfect Knuckleball*. Every day Debbie calls her mom. She tells her about Roy's dogs and his cat. She talks about Roy.

Roy is not an overly sentimental man. No, he doesn't know how or if Debbie changed him. No, he's not sure he is any different than he ever was.

They're staring at Roy's computer. Debbie is grinning. She's watching the race with such avidity that she doesn't see her coach's eyes welling.

Less than a lap left, 90 yards. Pangelova still has a commanding lead. Doris Brown is surely about to surge. And little Debbie Heald, the compact, stout-hearted, pigtailed

16-year-old star of the La Mirada Meteors is out of it. She had done her best and that was enough. She was just a girl with a little talent and a lot of woe—a hunger for exercise so great it hurt, a father dead by suicide, a pedophile who preyed on her, a coach who loved her.

Nine times out of 10, she loses the race. That St. Patrick's Day, though, something happened. She wasn't a strong finisher, but something happened. Something that even today, 40 years later, is awesome and ineffably beautiful to see, even on grainy, jumpy videotape with a soundtrack of a thudding funeral march. The girl with no kick kicks harder than she ever had kicked before, kicks away from Doris Brown, kicks past the great Russian Pangelova, who looks like she is standing still. She kicks through the tape in a world-record time of 4:38.5, eight and a half seconds faster than she had ever run the distance before, a new high school girl's indoor mile mark, a record that has never been broken, the oldest girl's high school track record in the United States.

It's a record that prompts Roy to pick up his telephone every St. Patrick's Day. When Debbie answers, her coach says, "You've still got it!"

Two days after returning from her latest trip to Ukiah, Debbie sits in the passenger seat of a rental car in Southern California, tracing widening circles around the place where she was loved and ruined. Past the trimmed lawns and sculpted trees of the La Mirada neighborhood where she grew up, past the park where she ran as a kid. There's the house of the boy who once asked her to a dance. And there's the school where she first met Roy. "That was his room," she says, pointing at it.

She wishes she were less wobbly. She wishes she would never hear the voices that she's heard since the schizophrenia took hold of her, would never have to take another pill. If only she could go for a brisk jog once a day, or even once every other day, to enter 10-Ks on a whim, to have a little spending money.

She had planned to be a physical education teacher and a coach and an Olympian, and now here she is, on psychiatric disability, driving away from the tidy lawns and soft grass of her childhood home toward the rusted shopping carts of her apartment complex. She is trying to explain how her ideas of victory, and happiness, have changed.

Before she was hospitalized, she says, "I wasn't Debbie Heald the person. I was Debbie Heald the (continued on page 124)

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runner. My self worth was my running. When I wasn't running, or if I was running badly, then I was a bad person."

Every morning, while Cecilia, her partner and roommate, sleeps in, Debbie walks for an hour or so—four or five miles—and if the walk goes well, she knows it's probably going to be a good day. She thinks about what she's going to do. She takes a minute to "appreciate the fact that I can walk, that I'm not locked up in a loony bin."

She watches track meets occasionally on television and she says she can tell—long before the announcers know—when runners in 1500-meter races are about to make their move. Though she's not proud of it, sometimes she wishes for runners to stumble and fall, especially if they're running the mile. In January, February, and March, at the height of the high school indoor track season, she'll get regular updates from Roy on how close kids have come to her record. He tries to prepare her for the day when the record is finally broken. "I know how important it is to her," Roy says.

For breakfast, she and Cecilia like going to Polly's Pies, where for \$4.99 you can get eggs and potatoes. On the rare days that it's closed, they go to The Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf, where a large coffee is \$2.95, which outrages them. They spend some of their time at the mall, visiting Sears, Kohl's, Target. They take their photos to CVS. Most of the merchants know them by name and say hello. It's unlikely that any of them know they're greeting a former track star.

Debbie spends a good part of her time writing letters, a lot of letters—three a week to Roy, three a week to her mother, one every month or so to Suzanne DeCuir—and on Sundays she clips coupons from the *Los Angeles Times*. Afterward, armed with the coupons, she says, "I have my weekly competition with the grocery store."

The tour of the area continues. There's the mall. There are the tennis courts where her father lobbed her balls to smack over the fence. There is Polly's Pies.

Then, the last stop before she heads home: the La Mirada community gymnasium, a sparkling structure where Debbie's hard-to-believe past meets her unlikely present. Past the front desk, where a young man wearing sweat pants and a crisp white polo shirt smiles a Southern California smile, is a wide, glittering hallway and on the far wall are mounted four photos, each of them accompanied by a plaque.

The La Mirada Wall of Fame. First is Jennie Finch, a graduate of La Mirada High School and an Olympic softball pitcher, a supremely talented athlete and one of female softball's first hard-marketed bombshells. Next is Dave Holmquist, the men's head basketball coach at California's Biola University, the youngest basketball coach ever to reach 500 and 600 victories at the collegiate level. Third is Ila Borders, the first woman ever to pitch in the minor leagues. Finch is famous, Borders slightly less so. Fewer people know of Holmquist, but locally, he is an athletic icon.

The last photo on the wall is different. The only black-and-white shot. The only teenager. The shooting star, just before plummeting.

There she is, slender, pigtailed, spent, more like a sock-hop princess than world record holder. The photo was taken on St. Patrick's Day 1972, and hidden behind the frame are the artifacts from another era: an indoor wooden running track; unsmiling men in tuxedos; three muscled women in their 20s, also unsmiling, in shorts and tank tops, the three greatest women milers in the world at the time. Inside the frame, a simple, pure, misleading picture. One teenager, sheer emotion: Crossing the finish line at the conclusion of one of the most unlikely miles ever run, grimacing. Or is it a grin?

"I'm not sure," Debbie says.

To the three great runners Debbie defeated, the indoor mile in Richmond was a blip, as inconsequential in the context of their careers as it was curious in its result. Tamara Pangelova went on to make the Soviet Olympic team in 1972. Lyudmila Bragina was awarded the Soviet Union's Order of the Red Banner of Labor in 1972. Doris Brown Heritage was inducted into the USA Track & Field Hall of Fame in 1990.

To the young winner, though, the race meant everything. A world record (if only for a year). A high school record that is still hers. A measure of fame. Validation. A reason to be by the phone every St. Paddy's Day to take a call from her teacher, her coach, her friend.

On the way out, Debbie stops to chat with the man at the front desk. She tells him she worked for the city decades earlier, a time after she had risen further than she could have imagined, and after she had fallen to a place that terrified everyone who knew her. She asks how the bosses treat him.

Does the young man know he's talking to a record holder, a champion? Does he realize he is in the presence of a La Mirada Hall of Famer, and that her photo is on the wall stretching to his left?




He smiles, but it's slightly suspicious.

The teenager from the picture has gained a lot of weight. She is wearing athletic shorts and a purple T-shirt with yellow letters that says "Zombies love brains—even small ones like yours." There is the slicked-back hair. She is a fraction chattier than most people, maybe a millimeter more bright-eyed.

"Really?" the employee asks. He is trying to be friendly.

"Oh, yeah," she says, as if she's telling the funniest, saddest joke in the world. She remembers how she felt in the photo after that St. Patrick's Day race, the result she thought might define her future. She remembers how she felt after all her races. She remembers everything else, too.

"I was awesome." 

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STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION OF *Runner's World* REQUIRED BY ACT OF OCTOBER 23, 1962: SECTION 4369, TITLE 39, UNITED STATES CODE, FILED, October 1, 2012. *Runner's World* is published 12 times a year at 400 South 10th Street, Emmaus, PA, 18098, publication and general business offices.

1. The names and addresses of the publisher, editor, and managing editor are: Publisher: Christopher Lambiase, 733 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017; Editor: David Willey, 400 South 10th Street, Emmaus, PA 18098; Managing Editor: John Atwood, 400 South 10th Street, Emmaus, PA 18098.

2. The owner is: Rodale, Inc., 400 South 10th Street, Emmaus, PA, 18098. The stockholders thereof being, Maria Rodale.

3. The known bond holders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities: None. First column refers to Average no. of copies each issue during preceding 12 mos. Second column refers to SEPT 2012, single issue nearest to filing date.

A. TOTAL NO. COPIES (Net Press Run)	886,282	874,026
B. PAID CIRCULATION		
1. Mailed Paid Subscriptions	612,786	594,992
3. Sales through dealers and carriers, street vendors, counter sales, and other paid	90,193	90,853
C. TOTAL PAID CIRCULATION (Sum of B1 and B3)	702,979	685,845
D. E. FREE OR NOMINAL RATE DISTRIBUTION	9,453	8,283
F. TOTAL DISTRIBUTION (Sum of C and E)	712,433	694,128
G. COPIES NOT DISTRIBUTED		
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H. TOTAL (Sum of F and G)	886,282	874,026
I. PERCENT PAID	98.67%	98.81%

Publication of the Statement of Ownership is required. Will be printed in the December issue of this publication.
Ray Jobst, VP Finance 9/28/2012