

DUNCAN HAMILTON

HURDLES TOWARD THE TOP

BY PAUL BURNS

“I’ve been running against competitors who have since gone on to the Olympics...”

Good steeplechase runners have outstanding endurance, of course. It’s not like racing 3,000 meters for just eight minutes is for anyone other than the elite. But if it was just about running, chances are Duncan Hamilton wouldn’t be getting such star treatment.

Hamilton has been featured in numerous publications throughout Montana, and now he’s in this fine magazine. The gifted Montana State runner also has deals with Kendall Ford of Bozeman that allows him the use of a lovely new blue pick-up truck, and there’s a deal with Tailwind, a nutritional supplement company, that helps him recover quickly from the rigors of training to be a world-class athlete.

Hamilton is no slouch at running 3,000 meters, having done it on the national stage for the Bobcats. But add a



handful of barriers, or hurdles if you will, and a water pit to the 3,000 meters, and suddenly Hamilton becomes one of the best in the world at the 3,000-meter steeplechase, with the ultimate aim to be the best.

“He has some really big goals that he wants to accomplish,” MSU head coach Lyle Weese says. Like Eugene this past July for the USA Track and Field Championships and Budapest back in August for the world championships. And, ultimately, Paris in 2024 for the Olympics. “I definitely want to see the world stage as much as I can,” the soft-spoken Hamilton says.

So what is it about five barriers and a shallow water pit that puts Hamilton among the world’s elite? Few American

runners have grown up in an environment like Bozeman. Since he was first able to walk, Hamilton, his older sister Molly and his parents Jill and Ryan, spent as much time as possible outdoors. Hamilton learned to rock-hop at an early age, along with mastering uphill pursuits and downhill slalom runs at Bridger Bowl. It’s not like his family was training for the steeplechase, but all those activities helped him strengthen his leg and butt muscles, and gave him the balance to overcome measly 36-inch hurdles scattered throughout the race course.

“I really enjoy that part of my life, getting outside,” Hamilton says, even though his life after MSU will be consumed more and more by training and racing, and

training some more so he can race some more. “That’s been a tough pill to swallow,” Hamilton says of how his running career is taking away from his time in the mountains. “I’m going to have to put that part of my life on hold. I can always come back to that. I’ve made my peace with that.”

While other runners around the world were running on tracks or streets, Hamilton and his family were tackling the hills and mountains that surround the Gallatin Valley. And they weren’t doing that solely on their feet: the family, led by parents Jill and Ryan, were off exploring Montana on high-caliber mountain bikes, all the while building up the muscles that today allows Hamilton to flow over those barriers as he did so smoothly back in June, finishing




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second in the steeplechase event at the NCAA Outdoor Championships in Austin.

In the heat and humidity of Texas, Hamilton's high expectations of an NCAA national championship came crashing down on the last lap when BYU's Kenneth Rooks passed him by. Yet, it by no means dampens what Hamilton has done and has

meant for MSU, and it gives him extra motivation for the professional circuit he has since embarked on. "What separates him is [that] his approach to running and racing is really healthy," Weese says. "He's focused on the great effort of it, as opposed to the possibility of any disappointment."

This past May, Hamilton alerted the world that he was going to

be a steeplechase force to be reckoned with. In Sacramento at the NCAA Western Regional Outdoor Finals, a precursor to the national meet in Texas, Hamilton blistered the course in eight minutes, 16.23 seconds, while finishing nine seconds ahead of Rooks. It set an MSU and Big Sky Conference record, and for two days represented the best time in the world this year. However, two days later, at a meet in Morocco, eight professional runners eclipsed that time. And in June in Paris, the same day as the NCAA Finals, an Ethiopian established a new world record of 7:52.11. The attention for Hamilton was fun while it lasted, but the results from other parts of the globe have moved the spotlight off Hamilton and allowed him to focus strictly on Austin, and now, on his future.

As great as he has been in his time with the Blue and Gold — four-time All-America, twice runner-up at the nationals, numerous Big Sky titles — he is now flying solo. His eyes are on new colors: the red, white, and blue he hopes to don, whether in Budapest in 2023 or Paris in 2024. "I would love to wear the USA jersey for years to come," he says.

Like other college athletes, it's not unheard of for exceptional distance runners to exit a college program early to take advantage of professional money. That was something Hamilton didn't consider. "I was never interested in leaving. I love the coach and the team here." And each year he got better. "It's hard to think about leaving when I'm PR-ing every season and things are going great." Plus, completing his degree in mechanical engineering was of utmost importance.

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Hamilton still trains in the Bozeman area, where he knows every trail in town and the surrounding hills. “I’ve run those streets thousands of times,” he says. “It hasn’t got old for me.” His schedule now takes him to other training sites with other professional runners. He’ll be introduced to new techniques and new nutritional diets that will help with recovery after grueling workouts. A typical week for Hamilton in the fall will be 100-mile weeks, tapering down to 80-90 miles during the season. Then there’s the weight room, where he power lifts with the goal of clearing hurdles more easily. While in Bozeman, Hamilton enjoys ramen bowls with hardboiled eggs, tofu and enoki mushrooms. It remains to be seen how much, if any, of that changes.

If he can stay healthy, Hamilton doesn’t know why he can’t spend the rest of his twenties competing. Throughout his time as an athlete, he’s been pretty much injury-free. “Not ‘pretty much;’ I’ve been able to run consistently all five years,” he says. With the hurdles and water pit, steeplechasers can be prone to injury, mainly from awkward falls caused by misjudging a hurdle. Hamilton attributes his healthy status to Coach Weese’s training; “He’s very smart about it, smart about how we recover. He’s not throwing people into something they can’t handle.”

Despite taking up running early in life, it took Hamilton years before reaching his potential as a competitor. Sure, running was fun, and he enjoyed the camaraderie, but considering where he is now in his career, it’s a little surprising to look back at his high school years and see just one individual state championship—the Class AA 1600 meters as a senior in 2018.

That was the race that finally drew some interest from college coaches, and Weese was happy to bring him on to the team.

It’s not unusual for runners to become bored or even burned out, especially those who find success early. “I developed slower,” Hamilton admits. “Just taking that extra time to develop as an athlete was helpful.” Which is why, to this day, he still loves to run the Bozeman trails, and probably will long after his competitive days are finished. “I didn’t realize (racing) could be a major part of my life until college,” Hamilton says. “At every level, I got good enough where I knew I wanted to see the next level. In high school I got near the top so much that I knew I wanted to run in college. That’s true in college; I got to the top of the NCAA so that I want to see the professional running career.”

While at Bozeman High, Hamilton was part of the streak of 12 consecutive State AA cross country championships won by the Hawks. With no indoor track in Montana for high schoolers, running is a two-season sport, but in college Hamilton competed for three seasons: in the fall it’s cross country; in winter it’s the indoor circuit; then comes the outdoor season. There’s not much time to rest or recover, but Hamilton has gone seamlessly from one season to another. And nothing says success quite like Hamilton’s final lap at MSU.

In the fall of 2022, pushed by Hamilton, the Bobcats as a team advanced to the cross country nationals for the first time in 20 years. Then came the indoor season, where he ran the 3,000 meters (no hurdles, thank you very much) at the NCAA Finals. And his MSU career finally came to an end in Austin with another great race.

“What an incredible year for our program,” Weese says. “We were fortunate to have outstanding senior leadership for the entire year. We are certainly going to miss them, but they’ve given so much to the program and have built a foundation where we can keep having significant groups going to national championships.”

Hamilton came mere seconds away from standing at the top of the NCAA podium in June. Had he accomplished that, he would have joined former Bobcats Shannon Butler, who won titles in the men’s 10,000 meters (1990) and 5,000 meters (1991), and women’s pole vaulter Ellie Rudy, who claimed indoor titles in 2007 and 2008. As it is, Hamilton’s name is etched on the list of school records. He owns the best times in the indoor mile, 3,000, and 5,000 and the outdoor 1,500, 5,000 and steeplechase.

Now he’s taking his game to the next level. “I’ve been running against competitors who have since gone on to the Olympics, which made me realize that I could do more,” he says. The opportunity to do more has now arrived for Duncan Hamilton.





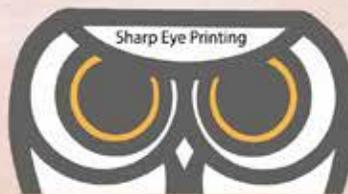
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