

Lauren Shelley Remote Success

Interviewed by Julian Dwyer

Name: Lauren Shelley
 Date of Birth: 2 December 1976
 Place of Birth: Melbourne
 Sponsors: ASICS
 Currently Living: Esperance WA
 Marital Status: Partner Greg
 Occupation: Physiotherapist
 Height: 158 cm
 Weight: 50 kg
 Shoe Size: 7.5
 Hair colour: Blonde
 Most loved pair of runners you have ever had (brand and style): Any ASICS 2000 series – I've worn Asics ever since my first pair of "Tigers" when I was 12!
 Favourite Race: Perth City to Surf
 Personal Bests for your favourite distances:
 Marathon 2:33.42
 Half Marathon 1:14.27
 Top 3 running experiences/performances:
 London Marathon 2005 – for the atmosphere
 World Half Marathon Champs Edmonton 2005 – my first Australian team
 Tokyo International Womens' Marathon 2005 – my "A" qualifier!

Although great for Australian marathoning, selecting the women's 2006 Commonwealth marathon team is going to be very difficult for the selectors. In order to save over dosing on Panadol over the festive season the selectors have decided not to announce the team as planned in December, but to wait until the rest of the team is announced in February. This will allow some of the athletes to attempt to attain A standards in other events and to nominate closer to games what event they wish to run. Lauren is one of seven women who have achieved the Commonwealth Games A marathon standard running a personal best 2:33.42 in the Tokyo International Women's Marathon in November. Lauren comes in fifth in the order, separated by 1 second to Victorian Kate Smyth who ran 2:33.41 in Chicago in October. Although many would be hearing Lauren's name for the first time she is a 15-year veteran of the sport being very much a testament to persistence. I was lucky to catch up with Lauren in Melbourne on a Christmas break.

If you were to graph your improvement from juniors till now, your graph would be a straight-line heading in the right direction. Unlike most athletes how have you managed to keep improving over such a long period?
 I still surprise myself sometimes at where I've got to, especially in the last 2 years. Overall it has been a steady improvement over many years, but all of us have patches where improvements are few and far between. My line definitely plateaued for a number of years – but it was more due to lifestyle factors, a more casual approach and my environment (living and working in remote and hot locations) rather than injury or other setbacks. I didn't race for 6 months in 2000 owing to a lack of nearby races, and even after that sparingly due to travel constraints. So while I never stopped running, there was definitely less of a focus.

My plateau really lasted 3 or 4 years, until I moved to Esperance in 2002. All of my personal bests stood from 1999. I knew I didn't want to stop (like many of us, I am addicted and actually enjoy running!), and I didn't feel I'd fulfilled my potential. In the long run (forgive the pun) I think having a few years where I maintained my mileage at a consistent level without really pushing myself further was beneficial. I also feel like I've had a life outside of running, and I haven't missed out on anything. Luckily long distance runners tend to peak later in life, so time was on my side. I always felt that when I was in the right environment, at the right stage in my life, I would really have a good shot at running and start doing all the little things to ensure I was at my best – nutrition, recovery, strength work etc. I definitely approach my running more seriously now.

Success in running rarely stands alone. We have seen country domination from the Australians, Finns, New Zealanders and more recently African nations. On a micro level elite runners have migrated together to geographical locations that are rich in running culture. Canberra, Melbourne and Ballarat are three that come to mind. You are quite the opposite. You moved from Doncaster, a Melbourne suburb which has produced numerous Olympians to Esperance, Western Australia. Esperance is 398km from

the closest track. Most athletes would have traded their runners for a surfboard, but such a move has seen you springboard from being competitive on a national to an international level. Could you elaborate on why you believe such a move has had such a positive result?

I was running very well living in Melbourne and then rural Victoria through 1998 – 2000 and starting to show further potential. But I was also keen to travel and do something different. So I headed west to work as a locum physiotherapist in Port Hedland (northern WA) for three months. Five and a half years later, here I am, still living in WA with my partner Greg, whom I met in Kalgoorlie and followed to Esperance 3 years ago.

When I moved to Esperance I still wondered if it was possible to get to an elite level from such a remote location (we live about 720km from Perth by road, or 1.5hrs flight). I always felt a time would come when I may have to move back east to fulfil my running ambitions. We are all so quick to label living and training in Esperance as a negative.

On the other hand, you make the most of where you are, and you develop your own routines. I like a challenge – I like being a bit different, and I wanted to prove that you don't have to live in a big city and train with a squad and coach on the sidelines to be able to perform at the top level.

While Esperance lacks an athletics track – the nearest (grass) track is 400km away in Kalgoorlie – it is a fantastic training location. It has a good running climate, a great mix of hills, sand dunes and beaches, flat foreshore bike paths, a relaxing lifestyle and a lack of distractions. I don't waste time sitting in traffic on the way to training and it's quieter socially, so you can really focus on your running.

The local running club, South East Runners, conducts weekly low key cross country and road events, which has been great and I do a lot of tempo sessions (rather than racing) within the club runs. But having to travel to major races has always been the biggest barrier in many respects.

In marathon training I feel regular racing is less important at certain times in your build-up, so my remoteness becomes less of a barrier. But I recognised that this year I would need to travel to race more. Though I've travelled a lot this year I think I've struck a good balance.



Lauren on her way to 32nd place in the World Half Marathon Championships.

What coaches have you had an association with over the years and how have these situations worked?

I've always done a lot of training on my own, even when I was younger running at Doncaster AC under Tom Kelly. You need to be prepared to run alone a lot if you want to run marathons – it makes you physically and mentally stronger. I've been doing my own training programs now for the last five years and getting some advice off Jackie Gallagher for the last two and a half years. We made some significant training changes early on, and they really seemed to pay off.

I still write my own programs and email them to Jackie, and she offers suggestions and comments. We do speak on the phone from time to time and we've caught up in

person a handful of times at races. It's become more of a mentor-type relationship rather than coaching, and it works well for me, given my location and my personality.

Most athletes need their coaches close by in the tough times such as when you are going through a tired phase, to pull you aside and force you to have some R&R. Are you extra skilled in listening to your body or does Jackie get enough feedback that she can see that you are struggling?

Jackie and I mainly communicate by email probably only once or twice a week at most, so I'm in charge of my day-to-day training and any changes that need to be made according to how I'm feeling or responding to various sessions. So obviously I need to be really in touch with my body and how it's responding. I'm

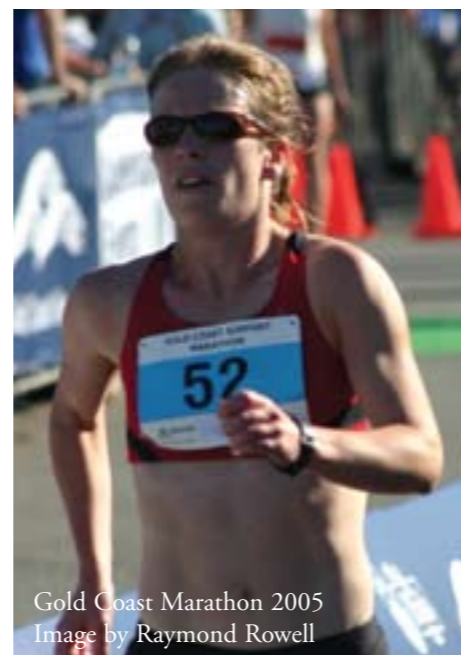
Taking in the surrounds of the West Australian coastline.



fairly sensible; I've never been one to overdo things too much (though I'm not afraid of a bit of hard work!) and I tend to keep on top of things quite well. Greg is great as someone close by who can be more objective and can put things in perspective, push me to get out the door and get fired up for a hard session, or let me know when he thinks I'm looking pretty stuffed and might need a day off. I also have other great support people in Esperance – for a small town it has quite a sporting culture and a history of good local distance runners. In the end I'm the one that's out there for every single kilometre of the week, so I feel I'm in the best position to judge how I'm coping.

Last time we spoke you were heading to the pool to do some water running. What part does water running and other forms of cross training play in your training? I've been water running for a number of years and I try to get in the pool once a week to help recover, turn the legs over and focus on my technique. I went water running in the ocean during my lunch hour last week too; that was great fun, if a touch chilly! I also include gym work at certain stages in my training and have found that very beneficial. I went through a triathlon patch and competed at the world age group triathlon in Portugal in 2004, but running is my true love (and Greg, of course) and I am formally retired from triathlons now – I have been on my bike once in the last 18 months!

The last Olympic marathoner from the West was Sue Grayson (nee Hobson). She moved from Perth to Melbourne during the peak of her career for the extra competition the east coast provided. You have done the opposite. What is your advice for travelling and racing? I know at last years World Half marathon championships in Canada you were one of the only athletes to run close to your personal best in the atrocious conditions. Yet you spent half the week just getting to the race. Could your run us through your travel experience and how you managed to still run so strongly? I used to find the trip from WA to Melbourne as hard as any. It's something I realised that I would have to sort out, because as long as I'm in the west I will always have to travel to races. This year I've been to the UK, Japan, Canada, Sydney, Adelaide and Gold Coast, as well as trips to Perth for weekends. It's been a busy year and one of the hardest parts of the travel is the interruption to your training, that's why I find getting that balance between travelling away and time at home is so important. I find often it's not the trip away that's the problem, but more often the trip home on tired legs and with a generally increased level of fatigue, and trying to get on with training while you are recovering from a trip and a race. I've done some horrid journeys in the past – numerous car trips to Perth and return in one weekend, sometimes alone, (7hrs each way); driving home from Perth in the



Gold Coast Marathon 2005
Image by Raymond Rowell

afternoon after running the Rottneest marathon; flying to the UK with gastro ... My mammoth trip to Edmonton for the World Half Marathon was the biggest trip I've done – I flew from Esperance to Perth on Sunday afternoon, then took the red-eye to Sydney where I caught up with Brett Cartwright and we flew the rest of the way to Edmonton, via Honolulu and Vancouver. I think I spent around 36hrs total travelling. I actually pulled up really well and had no problems adjusting when I arrived. If I can run well off that, I can manage anything! So after surviving a couple of trips like these, Esperance to Melbourne is a piece of cake! I've found the key is to be prepared – I take my supply of gastrolyte and Imodium (I've learnt from my mistakes!), tubigrip, fruit/nuts and healthy snacks for the plane, and the Skins get a lot of wear! I think about my meal times and sleep times in advance; I eat well over the days leading into and out of travel; I ensure I'm well-rested when I step onto the plane. So I feel like I've got the travel thing pretty well nussed out now.

Is there sufficient competition in the West to help an athlete of your calibre to continue to push and improve? It's been frustrating at times racing in WA – I've flown to Perth especially for a race, expecting the top girls would be running, and ended up winning by several minutes. There just isn't the depth that there is over east in Melbourne and other places, so it's hard to get everyone running well in the one race. There are actually some really talented



You could find worse places to train!

female runners in WA, such as Tina Major, Jayme Wellington, Lauren Jones, Natalie Goffroy, Gina Grayson, Lauren Gardiner and Pippa Hendon. The Perth marathon is held on the same day as Gold Cast marathon, but if the top 2 WA girls in the Perth marathon had competed on the Gold Coast in 2005, WA would have won the state teams title. So there is definitely potential there - the girls are running some great times, and it's just a matter of stepping up to that next level. The WA marathon club does a fantastic job of organising distance races and promoting distance running, and is very supportive. There are some great events – Perth and Rottneest marathons and the Bridges Fun Run in particular are fantastic. The Perth City to Surf is getting bigger every year, with 25,101 finishers in 2005, and now offering prize money to winners, so hopefully this will help to attract additional elite athletes from other states in future years.

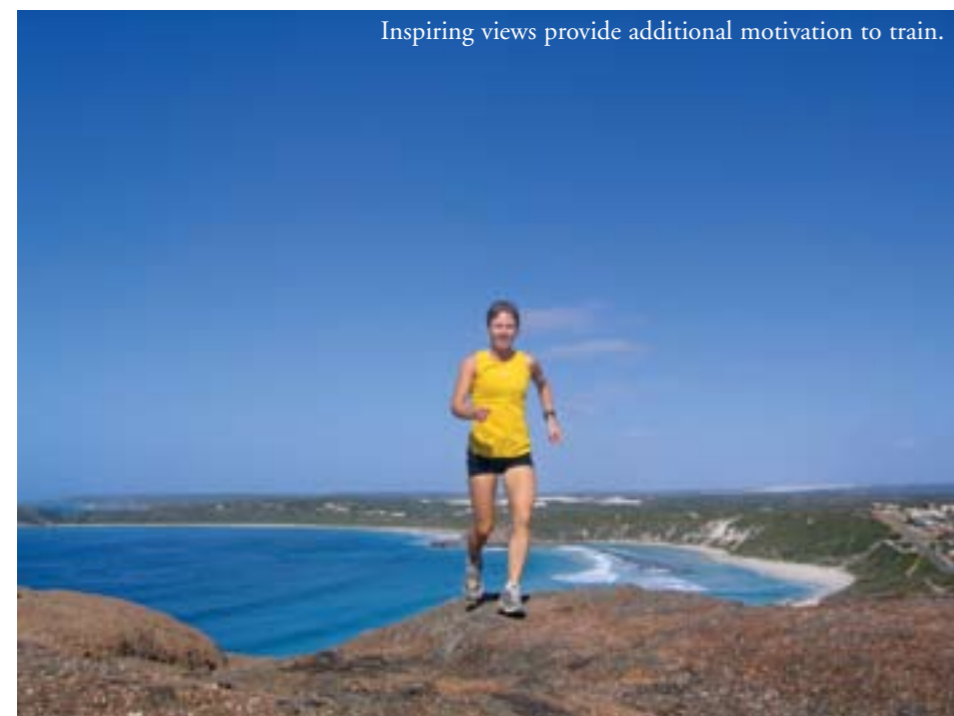
Unlike many other elite athletes you hold down close to a full time job (32 hours per week) as a physiotherapist. As a physiotherapist and elite athlete what advice would you give to runners about staying in one piece? I work in a public hospital; we see a broad range of patients, from sports injuries to women's health to taking seniors' exercise groups. I believe that it doesn't matter what level you're at – age 75 and starting an exercise program to help your arthritis, or an elite marathon runner – you need to be

able to listen to your body and respond, be flexible with your training and exercise regime, and be patient to get the results you want. And you need to help yourself by doing what you can to minimise the risk of injury. I feel I have a good balance between the approach of an over-motivated athlete and the perhaps slightly conservative approach to injury management and training of a physiotherapist. In the end we are treading a fine line. We're all prepared to do the hard work to get to where we want to, but it's about more than hard work, it's about being smart with your training too, and knowing when to work hard, and when to back off. While I've been relatively injury-free, I used to get a lot of muscle soreness that seemed to limit me in the late stages of a marathon. By focussing on prevention, I've become more efficient and able to handle the training loads. I don't get much soreness at all now during or after training and pull up from marathons very well. Mind you this is harder than it sounds, and it's something I've had to be very patient with over a number of years. I've done core stability work, home strength exercises and gym programs, technique work, weekly massages, water running plus of course plenty of stretching. I do the hot-cold showers regularly, ice and heat packs and ice baths when needed, dip the legs in the ocean after runs, eat well post-training (and at other times), and get more sleep than I used to. It's all simple stuff; it doesn't take long and you can easily fit it into everyday

life, but it's important when you're trying to get the most out of yourself that you are recovering adequately.

The delay in announcing the marathon team has caused a dilemma for the Commonwealth Games marathoners. Do you continue to train as if you are in the marathon team, or do you alter your training to try to qualify for the 10,000m. This could be at the detriment of your marathon performance in March should you make the team? I know some of the qualified athletes are heading over to New Zealand to run a 10,000m to try to run a qualifier and to prove current fitness to selectors. What is going to be your approach? The half marathon and marathon are my strongest events and I've generally always been a cross country and road runner rather than a track runner. It's also a lot easier to train for distance and road races in Esperance. If I were to try and get a qualifying time for 10,000m I'd need to spend a lot of time over east in the next 6 weeks working on speed and racing regularly. Realistically this will be difficult and would obviously compromise my marathon preparation. The marathon is my preferred event; it is my dream to run the marathon, not the 10,000m. I have a realistic chance of being selected, so I'll be training with that in mind and with the marathon as my objective. The 10,000m at the Nationals has always been part of my training schedule for the marathon and I'll be looking to run a PB as part of this preparation.

I believe you are not going to be the hardest person to find in the Esperance phone book next year; you are going to be on the front cover of the Central and Eastern WA phonebook. Does the community get behind your performances and support your career and athletics in general? Everyone in Esperance has been extremely supportive - I have people I don't know come up to me in the street asking me if I've made the Commonwealth Games team, and patients asking for weekly race updates and offering their massage services to me! Esperance is a great community and the people are generally active and lifestyle-oriented themselves, so it's a nice, relaxed atmosphere to train, work and live in.



Inspiring views provide additional motivation to train.