



## The Best of Music City Distance Carnival: 2003-2019



### Track #10: Sara Vaughn - 2017 Women's 1500m

by Dave Milner

**I**t is fitting that, on Mother's Day, I get to tell the story of supermom Sara Vaughn's 1500m win at MCDC in 2017. Vaughn, an unsponsored 31-year-old, five feet and one inch, mother of three (at the time) from Boulder, CO won the women's 1500m for the second straight year, clocking a PB, a Meet Record, and World Championships qualifying time of 4:06.64.

Sara Ensrud was born in the small (pop. 8,500) western Nebraska town of Gering, about 10 miles from the Wyoming state line. She dreamed of being an Olympian since the age of 6, but for about 8 years, it was in gymnastics, a sport she pursued until the local gym went out of business. Sara's mom told her to go meet up with the cross-country team about a week before she started her freshman year. Mom, as they say, knows best.

Sara attended Gering High School, was all-state in cross country all four years, won multiple state titles, and had clocked a 4:58 1600 by the time she graduated in 2004. Solid, but not setting the prep track world ablaze.

After a somewhat disappointing freshman year at University of Virginia, she transferred to Colorado to be closer to home. She would now be coached by Jay Johnson. She soon began dating a teammate, a long-legged local lad hailing from Aurora, CO, Brent Vaughn. They welcomed a daughter, Ciara, into the world in September 2006, the start of Sara's junior year, and she and Brent tied the knot the following summer.

Despite the challenges presented by parenthood, Sara and Brent both did their best collegiate running *after* Ciara's birth in 2006—and they both graduated on schedule. Brent twice placed 3<sup>rd</sup> in the 5000 at the NCAA Outdoor Championships.

Sara graduated from Colorado with degrees in Psychology and Spanish in 2009, having clocked a 1500m PB of 4:19.70, and, perhaps more impressively, placed 31<sup>st</sup> at the NCAA Cross-Country Championships. On the surface, very respectable, but nothing to suggest the kind of performances that would come in the following decade, and only really impressive when you factor in that Ciara was not yet three years old at the time of Sara's graduation.

A year after graduating, Sara secured a small 1-year contract with Adidas, but it was not renewed the following year when she was pregnant with their second daughter, Caila, who was born in June 2010.

Johnson continued to coach Sara until 2011, when Brent, who still holds CU's 5,000-meter record (13:18.46), went pro. The Vaughns moved to Portland, OR with Brent running for the Nike-powered Bowerman Track Club and coached by Jerry Schumacher. Sara was coached by Chris Cook, a Nike running shoe developer and BTC youth coach, but tagged along with Jerry's crew whenever her schedule allowed.

Sara was improving steadily, and she placed 3<sup>rd</sup> in the 1500m at the 2012 U.S Indoor Championships, making her first U.S.A team. She competed in the World Indoor Championships in Istanbul, Turkey, but did not advance out of the heats.

That summer she lowered her 1500m PB to 4:08.34 at the USATF Distance Classic at Occidental College, and made the final at the Olympic Trials, placing 13<sup>th</sup>.

With neither Vaughn qualifying for the 2012 Olympic Games in London, and two children to support, the reality of their finances came into clearer focus. They moved back to Boulder, both continued to run at a high level, but Brent began working in construction as a contractor, while Sara got her real estate license, figuring the flexible schedule might work well with her training and the two professions would dovetail together well.

Sara teamed up with Jay Johnson again and was coached by him until becoming pregnant with Cassidy in 2015. She then went from being a Nike athlete, to unsponsored (you know Nike and pregnancies!), to running for Brooks, as she also experimented with the steeplechase. She was 3<sup>rd</sup> at the 2014 U.S Indoor Championship, this time at 3000m, and clocked a promising 9:41.55 steeple a few months later. She was an ever-present at National Championship meets on the track. But outdoors, a 12<sup>th</sup> place finish in the steeple in 2014 and just missing making the 800 final in 2009 remained her best outings. With the talent pool in women's middle distance running gathering depth at a staggering pace, those Olympic dreams seemed, well, distant, and pursuing them was not cheap.

In August 2015, the Vaughns had their third daughter, Cassidy. One might have expected Cassidy's arrival to impede Sara's progress. But instead in 2016, she seemed to turn a corner and gather steam. It seemed like with each birth, she came back even stronger, as if motherhood was a superpower. After taking a stab at self-coaching post-partum, in February, she teamed up with Lee Troop and Boulder Track Club

In her sixth competitive outing of the year, she came to Tennessee to run the 1500m at MCDC, outkicking pre-race favorite Cory McGee for the win and clocking 4:11.39, just ten months after giving birth to her third daughter, Cassidy.

Five weeks after that race, she stunned just about everyone outside her immediate circle with her performances at the Olympic Trials in Eugene. Despite only placing 5<sup>th</sup> in her first round preliminary heat, she placed 4<sup>th</sup> in the semis to advance, and then placed a very impressive 7<sup>th</sup> in the final.

Sara had run well with Troop guiding her, but in January of 2017, she opted to for a change. She left Boulder Track Club because she "found the expectations of her were too much - checking in with a coach every day, having to be team meetings and events, in addition to practice, and then being reprimanded when she couldn't make it all happen. it was too much." I had a very full schedule already, and needed a bit more flexibility and autonomy.

Sara talked things over with Brent, and with her need for more flexibility and autonomy with her full schedule, they decided he would take over coaching reins. "Brent's coaching was kind of a Mark Wetmore-Jerry Schumacher mash-up," Sara says. "The volume and intervals were a lot more

intense than I had been doing with Lee. The training is hard, and there's no negotiating my way out of a workout if I'm not feeling it. I felt like I'd been doing more or less the same workouts for 15 years, not counting pregnancies. But Brent's training was more 5K-focused." A stronger, more patient, and more confident Vaughn would emerge.

Sara has always raced sparingly compared to the folks against whom she competes. That's a function of being a busy, working mom. MCDC would be just her third outdoor race of the year, after Drake Relays and the USATF Distance Classic at Oxy, where she had run her fastest 1500 in 5 years, clocking 4:08.61.



"I like to try and qualify for Nationals with as few races as possible," she freely admits. In contrast to the previous year, when she has stayed with a host family, this time Sara stayed in a hotel by the airport. "I flew in the evening before the meet and got a nice hotel. I got 11 or 12 hours sleep, which was *aah-mazing*," she recalls, and "I was a lot more focused, I remember, as I did a lunchtime shakeout run in the neighborhood near my hotel."

2017 had, by far, the best atmosphere and the deepest fields at the meet to date. The crowds were large and they along with the music, and my mic, were loud!

Jenny Simpson (who had won the 1500m bronze in Rio the previous summer) was racing in a loaded 800, and local high schooler Brodey Hasty had a legitimate shot at scaring 4 minutes in the high school mile. It was also an emotionally charged night because Gabe Grunewald was in the race. Gabe was undergoing chemotherapy at the time, but still trying to qualify for the U.S Championships, and her story had gained a lot of traction on more prominent sports media platforms, like ESPN.

"Usually I would warm up with Gabe or Lauren, but I was hyper-focused that night," Sara recalls, "because I *really* wanted that standard. I was a little more standoffish than usual, and I ended up warming up by myself, which is odd for me."

The field was strong, and although I didn't expect her to be vying for the win, emceeing, I had decided to introduce Gabe last. After all, she had the fastest PB in the field. I kind of struggled to keep my composure as I finally got to her name and provided just a little context for those in the crowd who weren't familiar with her journey. I had a massive lump in my throat, my eyes got glassy, and I had "Fuck Cancer" written down my arm, although I think it might have been obscured by my glittery gold jacket! But I got the words out, indicated to the D.J to silence the music, and a tense silence followed.

At exactly 9:05pm, the crack of the starter's pistol shattered that silence and 14 women tore away down the back stretch of Vanderbilt's brand new silver and gold Mondo track, installed just three weeks earlier, the paint on the lanes barely dry.

The race was to be paced at 65.5-66.0 through the first 400, and 2:11-2:12 through 800, with the intent to get someone under the world Championships qualifying standard of 4:07.50. Laura Roesler, who had won the 800 in 2:00.54 ninety minutes earlier, was assigned pacing duties. She towed the field through 400 in 65.5 seconds, right on schedule, with Shannon Osika and Emi Trost, the NCAA Division II champion, hot on her heels, and Vaughn in 4<sup>th</sup>.

"The race was being paced at the world standard, and we were out at a good pace," Sara remembers. "I didn't check the clock at 400, but knew it was fast. I looked at the clock at 800, and we

were a little bit slow, which is kind of typical for women's races, even the ones with pacers, for some reason. I checked my split again at 1000, and was like 'Aah, no standard today, no big deal. I'll just race for the win.' And I remember right after having that thought, Shannon picked it up."

The second lap was, indeed, slower – around 68.5 – and it was Osika that took the race by the scruff of the neck when Roesler peeled off at 850 meters. Osika's injection of pace saw several runners fall away from the pack, as she led a breakaway group of five with Trost, Stephanie Garcia, Vaughn and Rebecca Addison.

With 400m remaining (67.1 lap - split: 3:04.8), Osika still led, with Vaughn and Garcia in her slipstream as the bell rang. Down the back stretch and into the last turn these three pulled away from the rest of the field. "And then with 200 to go," Sara says, "I was just thinking 'wait, wait, wait and outkick her down the home stretch'"

With 150 meters remaining, the lead trio were kicking for home: Osika leading, Vaughn off her right shoulder, and Garcia tucked on the rail. You could have thrown a table cloth over all three, and I'm sure I said as much, since that's one of my "go to" on-the-mic metaphors.

Entering the home stretch, Vaughn swung wide off the turn and powered past Osika, as did Garcia, thirty meters later. But Vaughn had the biggest gear at the end, and won by a half-second, arms aloft, with excitement and relief written across her face as she saw the clock.

Vaughn had ripped a 61.72 last lap to cross the line in 4:06.64, slicing almost two full seconds off her previous PB of 4:08.34 set in 2012, and ducking under the World Championships standard of 4:07.50. Garcia also got under it with a 4:07.26 clocking.

"I was stoked. I hadn't PR'd in the 1500 for five years. To run 4:06 and get the standard was very exciting for me. [Shannon] picking it up and us just naturally racing each other was enough to get it done."



Vaughn says that race in Nashville and a champagne-fueled dialog with Grunewald a few hours later really had a huge impact. "That night really set the course for the rest of the year. I knew I had more in me, so it was a huge confidence boost for the U.S Champs"

"It was just a really special race, especially with Gabe being in there. I did a good job of holding it together. Before the race I did fine. After the race, as soon as I was done celebrating, I turned around to watch her finish. It was weird. I mean, I hardly ever beat the woman, so it was strange to win a race, turn around and see her still finishing. We

cooled down together, and she, Justin and I had dinner together at her host family's house.”

“Later in the evening, Gabe, Justin and I were sitting in the hot tub, having had a fair bit of champagne, and Gabe said to me ‘You’re gonna make the team this year. I can just tell by the way you raced today.’ And [making the team] was something that Brent and I had been discussing all year, but I rarely had *other people* say that to me. I’d always kind of been an also-raced, never top 3 or a favorite. So to have a competitor, and someone whose opinion I really trust, say that, it led to me completely switching my mindset.”

Results: 1. Sara Vaughn 4:06.64 (MR); 2. Stephanie Garcia 4:07.26; 3. Shannon Osika 4:08.16; 4. Dana Mecke 4:11.92; 5. Emi Trost 4:12.66; 6. Rebecca Addison 4:13.44; 7. Lauren Paquette 4:16.67; 8. Stephanie Brown 4:20.15; 9. Dana Giordano 4:20.47; 10. Grace Walther 4:27.36; 11. Martina Rodriguez (ESP) 4:27.42; 12. Gabe Grunewald 4:28.88; 13. Rebekah Sass (CAN) 4:52.56



#### After MCDC:

The U.S Championships were held in Sacramento, CA three weeks after MCDC. Sara, with buoyed confidence, was cool as the other side of the pillow in her prelim, advancing with ease to the 1500m final, having placing 2<sup>nd</sup> in the second of three heats.

In the final, on the penultimate day of the meet, Sara delivered equal doses of both patience and tactical savvy. In a race that had a brisk first lap followed by a sluggish second circuit, she remained out of trouble towards the back of the pack, but never more than a second off the lead, as the pace was gradually wound up by Jenny Simpson, who had assumed command.



But as the bell rang out, a 61.2 last circuit saw her rocket from 9<sup>th</sup> place at the bell to finish 3<sup>rd</sup>, making the team for the World Championships in London, along with fellow Boulder resident and CU grad, Simpson, who won, and Kate Grace.

I was there with Quamel Prince, an 800-meter runner I had begun coaching just six weeks earlier. It was exciting to see Sara run out of her mind in person, knowing my meet had been an important stepping stone along the way. Her breakthrough run became one of the biggest “feel good” stories of the summer among running fans, and it was a vicarious win for people everywhere trying to fit their running

into jam-packed schedules. It resulted in an outpouring of support from the running community at large, but especially female runners with kids.

Vaughn’s performance was notable, for two main reasons. What most casual track fans, and many writers, focused on was the fact that, while most of her competitors are full-time athletes, Sara was a working mother of three.

But there was another distinguishing factor. Just about every other runner who made the team for London had a pretty solid contract with a shoe company. Vaughn did not. She had been a part of the Brooks ID program for three years, which meant she received shoes and apparel, as well as some (increasingly hard to attain) performance bonuses from the company. But these bonuses amounted to no more than \$2000 per year.

Vaughn had spent her allowance for Brooks gear by May of 2017 and opted not to re-enroll in the program, keeping her options open for inking a more formal sponsorship with a different company. While she sported the look of a Brooks-sponsored pro in Sacramento, she had bought her own training shoes at a local running store before the event, and actually raced in Nike spikes donated by a friend.

But whatever. She was headed to the World Championships! Six weeks later, in London's Olympic Stadium, she lined up in a stacked 1<sup>st</sup> round heat that would be won by eventual world champion, Faith Kipyegon of Kenya. Sara had a fantastic run, lowering her PB by another two full seconds to run 4:04.56 and, despite only finishing 8<sup>th</sup>, she advanced to the semi-finals.

In the semis, she placed 10<sup>th</sup>, clocking 4:06.83. Now that was a disappointing run, but 10 weeks earlier it would have been a PB. Such is the nature of our sport with its ever-changing goal posts. She would finish the season ranked #6 in the U.S and #36 in the world (4:04.56)

Despite Vaughn's "feel good" story going - for want of a better phrase right now - viral, she returned from London a 4:04 metric miler with still no contract in hand, and now she would need to work extra hard in the fall and winter to recoup the expense of her track season.

Moreover, a non-championship year (2018) was around the corner - a time during which shoe companies ordinarily tighten their financial belts. At 31, with three kids, and not being able to join one of the groups to which most shoe companies' resources were directed, Sara was basically flying solo. But that's okay. Vaughn isn't one to dwell on the negative or ponder self-pity. She just plugs away. When you have three kids it's just what you do. You get on with it. In 2018, Vaughn clocked 4:05.88 in a meet in Barcelona, her second fastest ever, good enough to rank her #9 in the U.S, and she also clocked her mile PB of 4:27.31. Yet still no contract.

Sara didn't race in 2019. On August 31<sup>st</sup>, she gave birth to her 4<sup>th</sup> child, David. She was already plotting her comeback and path to the 2020 Olympic Trials before her son was born.

About MCD C Sara says "It's the type of race I want to keep coming back to. I've gotten to meet so many great people there. I love the idea of host families. It's unique, it builds relationships, and helps create fans of the sport."

She was planning to compete in Nashville in 2020, and just like in 2016 it would have been 10 months after giving birth, but with no confirmed races on the immediate horizon, her next competitive outing will be a 5K race against Brent. "You need something to keep you motivated," he told me. "We're racing a 5K. You have 6 weeks."

So we can look forward to the *Vaughn vs. Vaughn 5K*, slated for the weekend of June 5-6. The venue is to be determined. "Right now, there are no tracks open in Boulder County, so we'll see," she says. "Brent has just been doing mostly trail running, just an hour or so most days. It will be fun." Let's hope it is live streamed so we can tune in, but let's be frank. There is little fun involved in racing 5 kilometers at 5500 feet.

It is probably fair to say that, for Sara (and Brent), the Coronavirus delaying the Olympic Trials, Olympic Games, and World Championships is a silver lining of sorts amid the large black cloud that is lingering. After all, she now is not in such a rush to be race-ready and can take a more patient, measured path towards her next track season. When the time comes to pin on a bib number again, Vaughn will be ready. Count on it. She just got another dose of mom strength.

More on Sara:

ESPN story on Sara's path to 2017 Word Champs:

[https://www.espn.com/espnw/life-style/story/\\_/id/20230338/sara-vaughn-unexpected-path-track-field-world-championships](https://www.espn.com/espnw/life-style/story/_/id/20230338/sara-vaughn-unexpected-path-track-field-world-championships)

Great story on Sara's return to competition in 2020 after having her fourth child:

<https://www.womensrunning.com/culture/sara-vaughn-big-2020-goals/>

Story on the scholarship program Sara set up for parents pursuing undergraduate degrees at Colorado:

<https://www.womensrunning.com/culture/sara-vaughn-scholarship/>