

## T&FN INTERVIEW

# Boris Berian

by Jeff  
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Last year's surprise find in the 800, Boris Berian is now a world champion. The 24-year-old Coloradan, his running career given a jump start by Carlos Handler and the Big Bear TC, has only been training at a high-level for little more than a year.

Understandably, the media has fallen in love with Berian's story, from flipping burgers at McDonald's a year and a half ago (see sidebar) to the podium in Portland.

With the action moving outdoors for the Olympic season, we caught up with Berian to find out what he makes of the big changes the last 18 months have brought:

**T&FN:** What's life been like for you since winning your gold medal? Did your victory surprise the people close to you?

**Berian:** It's been pretty crazy. Everyone's

### Berian In A Nutshell

•**Personal:** Boris Alexander Berian was born December 19, 1992, in Colorado Springs, Colorado; 6-0/157 (1.83/71)

•**PRs:** 400—46.93(A) '11; 600—1:15.51i '16; 800—1:43.34 '15; 1000—2:30.54i '12

•**Schools:** Widefield HS (Colorado Springs, Colorado) '11; Adams State '12; currently unsponsored with the Big Bear TC

•**Coaches:** Fred Marjerrison (HS track); Erik Nelson (HS XC); Damon Martin (Adams State); Carlos Handler (pro)

•**Major Meets:** 800—1)NC2i , 1)NC2 '12; 5sf)US '15; 1)USi '16; 1)WCi '16. 600—5)USi '15

•**World/U.S. Rankings:** x/1 '16

just really excited. They thought I could do it. I was telling them I was pretty confident, but it still just amazes them.

**T&FN:** Does it feel like you're living the dream yet?

**Berian:** Not really. It's definitely exciting, but it's still in the middle of the season. I'm working on outdoor now. Everything is just going good right now. Everything is running smoothly. I'm on track to where I want to be.

**T&FN:** Where does your story really start?

**Berian:** My sister, Leslie Banks. She's older than me. She was good at everything. She was a state champion in track and she was also great in basketball. I saw her just being really good at everything. She was a big inspiration.

I really wanted to be like her. I remember going to her meets and watching her run. That stuck with me. As soon as there was a track team that I could join, I started running in seventh grade.

**T&FN:** Were you successful from the start?

**Berian:** I started out as a 100/200 runner.

By the time I got to high school, I kind of found out that I actually suck at the 100 and 200 [laughs].

My coach then put me in the 400. That's when my competitive instinct began to emerge, my freshman year. I just wanted to prove myself to the upperclassmen that I could hang on with them a little bit. My sophomore year, I kind of lost that. I really didn't enjoy the 400.

But then my high school coach, he talked to me. He saw a lot of potential in me. He told me to change my attitude. He saw a lot of success in running for me. The distance coach, he somehow convinced me to join the cross country team my junior year.

So I did cross country in the fall, stayed in shape, continued running with some of the long-distance athletes through winter, and then track started up and my times came down a lot my junior year. That's also when I started doing the 800. I won two state championships that year, in the 400 and 800.

**T&FN:** Would you say you willingly ventured into the 800?

**Berian:** I actually volunteered to do the open 800. My sophomore year of high school, I already hated the 400 with a passion. We had a home JV meet, so the head coach, he puts the 400 runners on a 4x8 team. I was just furious. I already hated doing one lap, and now you're going to make me do two laps?

I end up doing it, and for some reason I ended up liking it. I had no idea what my split was. If I had to guess, it was probably 2:30. Really, really slow but I kind of moved into it. The rest of that year I led off the 4x8 varsity team and was running like maybe 2-flats. Then coach let me do the open my junior year.

**T&FN:** You liked cross country?

**Berian:** It was actually really fun, surprisingly. I used cross country to get in shape for track. It's not like I went into cross country already in shape. I ran like 17:30, let's say. I wasn't too bad.

**T&FN:** When you graduated from high school did you think that a serious running career lay in your future?

**Berian:** A little bit. I definitely took it more seriously. I wanted to do big things in college. I was getting way more serious. I wanted to see how much I could improve with college-level training.

**T&FN:** Overall how did the Adams State experience go for you?

**Berian:** It was pretty cool. The training was awesome. I liked it a lot. Freshman year I won indoor and outdoor nationals in the 800, so that was a pretty big improvement right there.

The rest of the years, because I was ineli-



KIRBY LEE/IMAGE OF SPORT



**“Our workouts, they’re real hard. At the end of the day, we’re all just exhausted, taking naps and stuff like that. One all-out 800 race—that’s easy compared to the workouts.”**

gible, everyone just thinks that I came out of nowhere, that I went from 1:48 to 1:43, but I wasn’t able to show my progression in races while I was progressing in training. I was still training through the years that I was ineligible, for two more years.

**T&FN:** *What’s the story behind the ineligibility?*

**Berian:** Really, I just never liked school. The motivation that was needed, I just really had none. I would go to class, but I just didn’t care.

**T&FN:** *So you left after 3 years?*

**Berian:** I just wanted to run. And I came to the conclusion that I wasn’t going to get my grades up. That was kind of holding me back in school. So I made a little simple plan, I was going to train on my own. Get some money and travel to meets by myself.

My family was supportive. They were kind of pushing me to get other jobs. Go to the police academy or join the Air Force, stuff like that. But they were still supportive with the running: “All right, if you still feel like you really want to run, then we’ll help you out with whatever you need.” But they were still pretty mad about me leaving school.

**T&FN:** *So what did you think when you heard from coach Handler?*

**Berian:** It was a simple Facebook message. It was just asking me where I was, and where I had been the past couple years, and if I was still running, and if I was, was I interested in joining the team.

“Right away there, I was just like, “Heck yeah. This should be a great opportunity.” I asked a little bit about the program, what they did, and I didn’t even care that they were all in California. I just wanted something. And this was better than just training by myself, making up stuff. I would actually have a coach again.

He contacted me middle of October, he gave me workouts for the month of November and then I flew out in December.

**T&FN:** *Did you feel like you had to prove yourself as the new guy?*

**Berian:** Not too much. Carlos is a real cool guy; the team was really chill. He said, “Just have a positive attitude, work hard, and

you’ll fit in perfectly.” The whole team, we just joke around and have a good time. We’re a serious team when it comes to running, but really we’re just a whole bunch of goofballs.

**T&FN:** *One of the key athletes in the club is Brenda Martinez, who is married to coach Handler. Has her world-class experience been helpful to you?*

**Berian:** She’s a great leader. She helps me

## Would You Like Fries With That?

The media has had a field day with Berian’s “from-McDonald’s-worker-to-world-champion” narrative. In truth, he says, the job wasn’t as horrible as some people assume it was.

“Not really,” he clarifies. “It was just a 2-man crew at a small McDonald’s inside of a Walmart. I either worked the counter or I grilled. It was a pretty chill job, really.”

The hardest part was keeping his running going without the support of the Adams State program. Uncoached, he tried to follow a similar schedule. “I kept a log of workouts that we ran at Adams State, and so I was going off those.”

Getting to races was equally difficult. He made it to one in 2014, an open meet at Western State, where he won the 400 in 47.49.

But no 800s. “The workouts I was doing were getting so much faster and easier, but I couldn’t see how fast I could actually go in a race. It was killing me inside.”

He ended up taking most of the summer off. “It wasn’t until about middle of August in 2014 that I started getting back into the running swing of things.” By mid-September, he was running mile repeats. A month later, he heard from Carlos Handler, and he was on his way.

with a lot of the stuff that goes on the big meets. I ask a lot of questions about that. She’s a really good role model.

**T&FN:** *When you emerged last year, running PRs in your first three 800s, what kind of reaction did you get from people?*

**Berian:** They asked me where I came from, and who I’m training with.

**T&FN:** *Then came that big breakthrough, running 1:43.84 in New York against [WR holder] David Rudisha. How did that play out?*

**Berian:** It was super exciting being in a race against Rudisha. I like being a frontrunner, so pretty much every race before that I took the lead right away and just kind of hung on by myself and kept pushing the last 200. So going into this race I was uber-excited because I was pretty sure, no matter what, I was going to PR if I just hung on as long as I could. I wanted to test my fitness. I knew I was the strongest I’d ever been. It was a simple plan to just get right behind him, match him stride for stride, and just hold on for the entire race.

**T&FN:** *Was there any intimidation factor?*

**Berian:** Surprisingly, no. I was real excited being there, racing the most competitive field that I’ve ever lined up against up to that time.

**T&FN:** *Your coach has told us that breakthrough led to some big pressures on you in the 2 weeks leading up to USATF.*

**Berian:** It was weird. Everyone saying I’m

## Berian — continued

for sure going to make the team or for sure going to win. I tried not to let it bother me too much, but it was still a case of people saying, “He’s taking over, so he’s definitely got the win.” I was just, “I guess I’ve got to win.” I was actually really nervous, going through the rounds and just trying to fulfill those expectations.

**T&FN:** You failed to make the final, which had to have been a harsh learning experience for you.

**Berian:** Really, what I still go by now is just anything can happen in running, no matter how good you are. You can have a good day, you can have a bad day. Doesn’t matter what you try, just sometimes you can’t do what you want to do in a race.

In workouts after that, I was just kind of like, “Whatever. It’s done and over with. There’s nothing to keep looking forward to now that I didn’t make the team.” I just wanted to finish the season.

**T&FN:** Yet, somehow you got out of that slump to run 1:43.34 in Monaco and become the No. 5 American ever. How?

**Berian:** Once I got into Monaco, everything from USA’s just kind of fell off my shoulders. I went to Europe and it was just, “I want to have fun now, and see what else I can do and see how much longer I can race.” And going into Monaco, I had a really good premeet. There was a lot of energy there.

It was a super exciting race. I saw myself catching Mo Aman. I saw him slowly coming back to me and that gave me the extra push to let go, keep pushing, and see if I could catch him. I passed him and a few others. When I got to the line and saw the time, I was like, “Wow this is pretty crazy, I PRed again.”

**T&FN:** You only had one other European race, in London, but why does the result look so different?

**Berian:** It was interesting. We went out the first 100 really quick. By the time we started cutting in, I looked over to my right, over to my left, I was like, “Crap, I’m in the lead, I’m

ahead of Rudisha now.” But I didn’t really want to slow down, so I just kind of went with the pace to see what I could do. The crowd got really loud and that got me going too. The last 200, I just kind of wanted to see if I could keep on pushing it. In the last 100, that’s when everyone just kind of passed me.

So I’m still doing that. I’m a lot stronger than I was compared to last year. These two indoor races taking the lead and being able to hold it despite going out real fast, I have much more confidence right there. It’s more relaxing going out and racing from the front. I feel like it’s just me racing out there by myself.



Berian & Eric Sowinski gave Team USA a pair of Portland 800 medals

I wasn’t down; I was actually kind of happy. It was a really fun race to run, even though I got last or whatever. It helped me with how I approach running. Instead of going out all the time, going hard in every race, it helped me come up with a plan of how I should run against those sorts of runners.

I always ask myself, did I give it 100%? In London, I gave it everything I had, and I still ended the race with a smile, even though I did pretty badly.

**T&FN:** Are you trying to use other styles of racing this season?

**Berian:** I was going to try to do it indoors, starting with USA’s. I wanted to see what it was like running second or third, but I guess just being so stubborn, I took the lead again.

**T&FN:** Is the 800 the perfect event for you?

**Berian:** I would say yeah. It’s basically a super sprint, but at the same time with the endurance I can compete with the world. Later this year I’m going to try to get into a 400. And I might try a 1500. That would be interesting.

**T&FN:** Have you set any time goals for this year?

**Berian:** Hopefully I can try to get the American Record in the 800.

**T&FN:** You’re still without a major sponsor. Is it safe to assume that the gold medal has generated a lot of interest?

**Berian:** It’s pretty wild, but I talk to my agent Hawi [Keflezighi] like every other day, text him here and there. Everything is good right now. I’m not worried at all. He’s taking care of a lot of things. I’m just focusing on running and training.

**T&FN:** And racing.

**Berian:** Racing is definitely exciting. I get really anxious to race. Our workouts, they’re real hard. At the end of the day, we’re all just exhausted, taking naps and stuff like that. One all-out 800 race—that’s easy compared to the workouts. I go into that excited. I get to see what my fitness level is from the workouts. It’s just really fun.

**T&FN:** Where would you hope this running career takes you?

**Berian:** I just want to keep running as long as I can because it’s really the only thing that makes me happy. School, I didn’t do so well in but what kept me going was knowing that I was able to run, just holding onto running. As long as I have running, that’s what keeps me sane. □

## Handler Went In Blind

True story: when Carlos Handler offered Boris Berian a second chance at the sport with the Big Bear TC, he had never seen him run.

“I had no idea what he looked like. Let’s just say that,” admits Handler, who had heard of Berian 3 years earlier from legendary coach Joe Vigil. Handler was curious why Berian had fallen off the radar: “So I reached out to him.”

All of which raises a compelling question. Are there more world-class Boris Berians out there, waiting to be discovered?

“I think they’re everywhere,” says Handler. “We spend so much time focusing on the national champions, the people that are at big D1 schools and we don’t look at the people who maybe have a story behind them, who maybe quit school, or

maybe they lost a parent and quit the sport.

“Maybe after college they go to an environment that doesn’t work out for them. They just don’t match with the coach and they say, ‘Hey, you know what, I’d rather start working.’”

“Here in America we have so much talent to pick from, it’s just about looking and actually recruiting.”

What does Handler look for? “Speed. Everything else is strength; you can build strength. But speed, that’s God-given. You’re not going to build too much of that. Either you have it, like Boris, or you don’t.”

But Handler insists there’s a more important factor: “The people you want, are the people who are willing to fight for everything they have. The people that come from nothing. They’re going to fight for every single inch, like Boris.”