

# Dathan Ritzenhein

by Don Kopriva

**D**athan Ritzenhein firmly established himself as a future distance star in the fall of '99, when as a high school junior he won the first of his two Foot Locker cross country titles.

After a solid collegiate career at Colorado that included an NCAA cross title and an American Collegiate Record in the 10K but was marred by a stress fracture, the Michigan native turned pro. He has since made the Olympic Teams in both '04 (10K) and '08 (marathon), and despite nagging injuries, he has missed little training.

At 5K, 10K or a marathon, Ritz is among the favorites virtually any time he's on the line and even though his Beijing spot is assured in the 26-miler, he intends to win the Trials 10K.

## Ritzenhein In A Nutshell

•**Personal:** born Grand Rapids, Michigan; December 30, 1982; 5-7/117 (1.70/53); wife Kalin, daughter Addison (8 months)

•**Schools:** Rockford (Michigan) HS '01; Colorado '04; now represents Nike

•**PRs:** 1500—3:42.99 ('02); 3000—7:35.52 ('07); 5000—13:16.06 ('07); 10,000—27:35.65 ('06); Half-marathon—61:26 ('06); Marathon—2:11:07 ('07)

•**Coaches:** Brad Prins (HS), Mark Wetmore (Colorado, pro), Brad Hudson (pro)

•**Major Meets:** 5000—11) US '01; 4) NC '02; 2) NCAA '04; 3) US '06. 10,000—22) OT, dnf) OG '04; 3) US, 9) WC '07. Marathon—11) NY '06; 2) OT '07

•**Cross Country—**1) FL '99; 1) FL '00; 2) AJ, 3) WJ, 4) NC '01; 5) US, 24) WC '02; 1) NC '03; 1) US, 62) WC '05; 4) US '06; 3) US '07; 1) US '08

•**U.S. Ranks:** 3000—8 ('05), 3 ('07); 5000—8 ('02), 3 ('06), 5 ('07); 10,000—5 ('04), 3 ('06), 3 ('07); Marathon—2 ('07)

**T&FN:** Now that you've made the Olympic team in the marathon, do you see yourself primarily as a marathoner or as a 10K runner?

**Ritzenhein:** I definitely see myself in kind of a transitional period right now. I haven't done all the things I want to do in the 10K yet and I think I've got a lot that I can still accomplish.

But I definitely see myself with a lot of potential in the marathon so I think over the next few years I'll kind of transition over into being a full-time marathoner.

**T&FN:** Along that line, do you see yourself doing more road stuff than track; eventually avoiding track altogether?

**Ritzenhein:** Eventually, I think

I'll end up being like that, but I think through this next Olympic cycle I'd still like to improve my times on the track and get some faster PRs at some shorter distances.

I enjoy doing road races and things like that, so I'll do those, but I would like to do some of the faster stuff because I think I have a lot of room for improvement, like the 5K and 10K.

**T&FN:** You were relatively young when you

ran your first marathon. Have you had any second thoughts about it?

**Ritzenhein:** A lot of people say, "Once you go to the marathon, you're not coming back." Now that I've run 8:11 for 2 miles and 7:39 for 3K and a PR in the 5K that proves that theory wrong a little bit.

That's to a certain extent—I'm not fully into the marathon yet. But when you get to the point where you're running two marathons a year, that starts to be a big commitment... that's the direction you're going at that point. I'm trying to hold off on that for another year or two, just to give myself some more options on the track.

I think I made the right choice, because running that first one early really gave me a lot of experience in and fear of the marathon, which I think really helped me to make the Olympic team.

**T&FN:** You mentioned fear...

**Ritzenhein:** There's nothing you can do to prepare yourself for hitting the wall at 20 miles. I think without that fear you don't get a full respect for the event; how humbling it can be.

It's something that I'll take as a lesson for all my future marathons because I definitely don't want to experience that again. It gives me such respect for the event; people who have never hit that might feel overconfident and you can definitely put yourself in a hole.

**T&FN:** Is the switch from 5 & 10Ks to the marathon analogous to going from high school to college distances?

**Ritzenhein:** It's so much different. For a marathon, everything is so moderate that in training sometimes, you can feel, "Oh, this is so easy." It's definitely hard doing all the mileage and the long runs. And you definitely get torn down, but you think, "I can always do more," or, "I can go harder."

In the race, it's amazing how hard it actually is. It's like nothing else. I think you can't just jump into it. You have to be prepared for it. It's another one of the reasons for me going early, that hopefully when I'm at my physiological peak I will have mastered the event as well as I can and learned as much as I can so I can do the best when I should be doing the best.

**T&FN:** One thing that every marathoner knows is the diabolical nature of the event itself is that you never really do master it.

**Ritzenhein:** I think that's true. It seems that there are so many good athletes, who it seems like they have it, and then they struggle for a while, and sometimes they come back and sometimes they don't. It's

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the nature of the beast, I guess.

**T&FN:** *Those of us who know you and have watched you run for years think of you as very tough mentally, running when hurt, running to the point of total exhaustion, training when hurt. Has that mental toughness paid off in the marathon?*

**Ritzenhein:** Definitely stubbornness [laughing]. Mental toughness, yeah, it does maybe in the day-to-day training that you're not able to slack off on double runs, but you have to be prepared and if you're not physically prepared, no matter how tough you are, the day of the race in the marathon, it's not going to work. So the mental toughness comes in the preparation.

**T&FN:** *I don't think I've ever heard you say it was so bad you wanted to quit.*

**Ritzenhein:** It was so difficult for me because it didn't come easy to me like previous training had. I was struggling with nagging injuries, I was anemic, we had the new baby, it had been a long season—it was just very challenging for me. There were so many times I said, "Well, I'll just concentrate on the 10K this year," but I stuck it out and it paid off.

**T&FN:** *Are you 100% committed to the marathon for Beijing no matter what happens with the 10K in the Trials?*

**Ritzenhein:** Yes, I'm 100% committed to the marathon. But I am going to run the 10K. It's right here in my backyard and I'd like to defend the home turf. For me, it'll be pretty good. I'll be the only one on the line who's relaxed and calm.

**T&FN:** *It's got to make for such a relaxed mental outlook for you.*

**Ritzenhein:** It only comes around every four years and I'll be the only one with his ticket stamped, so I'm definitely going to be the most relaxed person there.

I have nothing to lose. I'm not concerned about protecting a spot, getting top-3, so it'll be all or nothing. I'd like to win in front of the home crowd. It would do nothing for me to get 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> so I'm going for the win.

**T&FN:** *This year, it seems you've had a couple little nagging things that have kept you out of the 8K, out of World Cross...*

**Ritzenhein:** I got to the point where I was trying to press through things. I started training after the marathon, was a little banged up, and things started to come around by Christmas, so I went over in mid-January to preview the course, because I really wanted to run World Cross, but really wasn't ready physically.

The engine was there—I'm always ready aerobically—but muscularly I really wasn't ready for a technical race. I came away banged up and not until just now am I ready to be 100%. But I've had numerous things pop up that have had

me putting in time on the old treadmill.

In the meantime, I won U.S. Cross, but was banged up through that, but we got to the point where we said let's be ready for August.

**T&FN:** *What's your timeline now?*

**Ritzenhein:** From now until June 1, it's just getting back into shape to train hard. I've taken my last break now. I'm going to inch my way

## More Games To Come?

Once Beijing is out of the way, and he'll still be only 25, can Dathan Ritzenhein realistically think of another trip—maybe even two—to the Olympics?

"I think we talked once that now I've made two teams—and there are very few people who've made three and maybe only a handful who've made four teams—I'd be lying if I didn't say those were goals," he admits, "but I want to concentrate on this year. I know nothing's a lock for the future; that's how good American distance running has gotten.

"You can think of when we've looked at someone and said, 'He's going to be the guy,' and then he ends up not making the team. Well, I don't want to be that guy. I want to make this Olympics special because you don't know what the future holds. I don't want my Athens experience to be my best one, so that's going to drive me this summer to do as well as I can."

Does he think he still has a lot to accomplish?

"If my career ended tomorrow, I'd be happy with the effort I gave it but disappointed that I didn't accomplish all that I set out to do," he says. "I realistically could have about eight good years left, but when the time comes to give it up, I don't want to have regrets."

into shape where I can handle the workload of 120-mile-plus weeks, long hard runs. Until then, just some fundamental stuff that will get me in good shape where I can run a reasonable race, but not be super-ready for anything other than training.

Once June 1 hits, that's 12 weeks out, and I'll put in 5 until the Trials 10K, which will be a nice break to see where I'm at, and then 7 weeks to go. That's the bulk of the training... the really long runs.

**T&FN:** *Will you go to China early?*

**Ritzenhein:** I will go to the U.S. training camp. You have to be there by Opening Ceremonies. It'll be good for acclimatization to the heat, humidity, time change. You want to stay out of the pollution as long as possible, probably until three days before the race.

**T&FN:** *You've been in Eugene almost a year now. How have you and your family adjusted?*

**Ritzenhein:** We really like it a lot. The one thing we dislike is how far away it is from everything else. You're all the way on this side of the country which is nice if you're going to Asia. But I race in Europe a lot and our folks are back in Michigan.

From a running standpoint, I've had a really solid year since I moved here and it's been a good choice for that. I haven't been able to

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## Ritzenhein Interview

take much advantage of the good weather this winter. But I've gotten to know the garage pretty well with all the time I've spent on the treadmill.

**T&FN:** We've always joked about how impatient you are, and you admit to being stubborn... boy, there's a lot wrong with you, isn't there? To what do you attribute your newfound patience?

**Ritzenhein:** [Laughs] I definitely am still an impatient person, I guess. But with time, as you age, you pick up wisdom; that you're not all-knowing, that you don't always plan things right, that you're not always going to be able to change the situation that you're in. A lot of disappointments have taught me that. Those are life lessons, too, that I've learned through running. It's made me a more mature person, too.

**T&FN:** Now you're 25 and a veteran who's done so much more at that age than a lot of guys have done... You're not burned out yet. So how have you managed to maintain your competitiveness, your drive to win?

**Ritzenhein:** There's a lot of expectations when you're young, and there are only a few people who've gone through that. One thing I'm really proud of is that I recently found out—I don't know if it's all track & field or just distance running—is that I'm the youngest person ever to qualify for two Olympic teams, I guess. I did feel I was the young guy in the sport up until the past year.

**T&FN:** I don't think anyone's calling you "Old Mr. Ritzenhein" yet.

**Ritzenhein:** No, I'm definitely not old, but I don't feel like I'm the young rookie anymore. I have as much national and international experience as anyone. I always want to seek out, to race people who are good, not to shy away from things. I've made a lot of steps but am not at the level I want to be at yet.

That's what keeps me going every day. I want to look back and not have any regrets on my career.

**T&FN:** Having married Kalin, and having Addy, how has that changed who you are or how you look at things?

**Ritzenhein:** They trump anything I could do in my running career. It's a choice I made. Kalin and Addy are what are most important to me. I wouldn't give up them for anything in the world. It makes me better as a runner, gives me a purpose outside myself. Their reliance on me is one more reason for me not to give in on bad days.

**T&FN:** Post-Beijing, what?

**Ritzenhein:** I look for a big break [laughs]. Since Athens in 2004, I have not taken a break. I've really tackled this 4-year cycle, even with injuries. A lot of people think I must be so talented because I come back so fit, but it's because of what I do when I'm injured—hardly anyone would do that—I work harder than when healthy and training. And after that break, I'll attack the 4-year cycle and do it again the next time around. □