

T&FN INTERVIEW

Molly Huddle

by Jon Hendershott

With '14 being a non-championship season, Molly Huddle was able to take far more road trips than in past years.

The 30-year-old Notre Dame grad expects to run 10 road races by late November, the most in her career. By the end of September she had won 3 USATF road titles to boost her total of national macadam victories to 11.

Yet the New York native hasn't lost her winning touch on the track: she won her second national 5000 title in Sacramento in a pulsatingly-close finish with Shannon Rowbury. Then in Monaco she cut down her own American Record by some 2 seconds to 14:42.64.

Does this year's greater emphasis on the roads mark a change in the racing approach of Huddle and coach Ray Treacy? The London Olympian shared some thoughts with us from her home in Providence:

T&FN: Having run a half-marathon in March and now a 20K, might they indicate a possible move to the marathon?

Huddle: I definitely do want to run a marathon, either next year or the year after the Olympics. So I do think it's important to get to the point where I can finish a half-marathon without fading. Just feel stronger at the longer distances.

But mostly doing the longer road stuff this fall is serving the purpose of moving up to the 10,000 for next summer. I think this will help me get an earlier base, even though I will take a break after this fall.

Also, more roads is something I would do in an off-year, just for fun. I don't know that I'd do all the road races next year. I still will do the 5000—and I hope to be [at the Worlds] around this point next year.

T&FN: So did running 30:47.59 for a 40-second 10,000 PR tell you that that's where your future probably is?

Huddle: I had been waiting for a PR around 31-flat for a couple of years, but it seemed that I never was able to line everything up on the day. Stanford often is the only chance you have to run a really fast 10K all year. So I was really glad I took advantage of it this year.

I do need to get a little more comfortable with the pacing of a 10K and still be able to find some kind of a kick at the end, rather than just

hold on. If I want to improve my place at the world level, that's the next step.

I'm hoping to get more of a handle on it, but running a faster time definitely gave me more confidence.

T&FN: How did the 20K go?

Huddle: I probably wasn't as fully-prepared as my training partner Amy Hastings, who placed 2nd.

She was still doing marathon workouts where I had done only a couple of them. So I think I would have felt better if I had done a couple more weeks of that kind of work.

But I was really happy to win. I think

I handled the heat a little better than Amy. It was very humid. The weather probably was the biggest competitor in that race.

I think everyone slowed down a lot by the end, even if they went out conservatively. I had the slowest mile in a race since I was like 13 [laughs]. I don't run 6:00 miles too often.

T&FN: This year you will end up running 10 road races compared to highs of 4 in '10 and '13. Is that just another part of a measured buildup toward the 10,000?

Huddle: I think it's partly that the off-year affords me the chance to do more road races. A wider variety of distances and just more races in general because I'm not peaking for a specific week of the year on the track.

Also in those other years... like in '11 I was injured [plantar fasciitis] and in '12 I wasn't running very well by the end of the year.

I did run well in '10, when I got my first 5000 American Record. And I have been running well now, so it works to keep going into the fall when the road races come around. So it's a little bit circumstantial that I've done more road races in '10 and '14 but also part of it is being the off-year, too.

I do notice, also, that in the seasons where I do more roadwork, I have a little more strength than usual. Those races are

Huddle In A Nutshell

•**Personal:** Molly Ann Huddle was born on August 31, 1984, in Elmira, New York; 5-4/ 110 (1.63/50)

•**Schools:** Notre Dame HS (Elmira) '02; Notre Dame '06; now represents Saucony

•**Coaches:** Ed Shelling (track) & Bob Huddle (XC) (HS); Tim Connelly (college); Ray Treacy (pro)

•**PRs:** 1500—4:08.09 '13; Mile—4:26.84 '14; 3000—8:42.99 '13; 5000—14:42.64 AR '14; 10,000—30:47.59 '14 (2, 4 A) Half-M—1:09:04 '14

•**Major Meets:** 3000: 1)USJ '03; 9)NCi '04; 7)NCi '05. 5000: 4)NC '03; 3)NCi, 3)NC, 7)OT '04; 2)NC, 9)US '06; 3)NC '07; 10)OT '08; 2)US '10; 1)US, 10h)WC '11; 2)OT, 11)OG '12; 2)US, 6)WC '13; 1)US '14

•**U.S. Road Titles:** 5K—'10, '12, '13, '14; 10K—'08, '09, '10; 7M—'09, '14; 10M—'09; 20K—'14

•**U.S. Rankings:** 5000: '03—9; '04—9; '07—7; '08—8; '10—1; '11—5; '12—1; '13—2
10,000: '06—9; '07—9; '08—4; '09—6; '10—3; '11—5





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longer where if you're on the track, you're doing 1500 to 5K-range stuff. I like it, being able to kind of change the seasons a little every year.

T&FN: *That plantar injury in '11 hit in the summer and wiped out more than a month of training so that you didn't run well at the Worlds in Daegu. In doing more road training now, is there any fear in you or Ray about overuse problems from training on roads?*

Huddle: Actually, that's another part of what we do: getting off the track helps a lot. I think that's where a lot of my stress comes from. When I can do a good portion of my workouts on the road, I tend to stay healthier.

Usually I can get through the racing on the track; it's the workouts that get to me. So it's been good because I usually come out of the road races a little less beat up than track races.

T&FN: *Are you looking ahead to basically the next two championship years? Or the 3-year cycle of '15-'16-'17, or even just a year at a time?*

Huddle: I'm definitely taking it a year at a time. For next year my main focus is to finish higher at Worlds than I did last year [6th in the 5000], even though the 10K will be a new event. I see that as the box I'm kind of in for my career right now.

Depending on how it goes next year, I may stick with the 10K or I might go back to the 5K, or even up to the marathon. Next summer will tell a lot—and hopefully it will go smoothly.

T&FN: *It seems the 10K could almost become a “middle distance,” in that you could drop down to the faster race at 5000 or move up to the marathon. You were a 3K-type runner in high school and early college, but what did you think about the 5000 and 10,000?*

Huddle: My thought as a college freshman was to try to make nationals in the 1500. But the first 5000 I was allowed to run was at Mt. SAC in '03 [15:36.95 U.S. Junior Record] and it just felt really natural. So it became my event right away and it still is my comfort zone.

But it's funny because when I was in college, the 10K was an event that didn't have quite the depth of talent in the NCAA that it has now.

It seemed like a lot of the talent was going into the 1500 and 5000 then, rather than move up to the 10. I think my coach thought along those lines, too. But he did let me try kind of a test 10K at the Big East my junior year and then I ran the 10K at U.S. nationals after my senior year.

I don't know if I just lacked the

training, but it was a bit of a shock [laughs]. And you don't get to do that many in a year. I'm still wrapping my head around it, but I definitely feel more comfortable in it.

T&FN: *You had that very tight finish in this year's U.S. 5000 and said you had been working on sharpening your finishing kick. So is it important for you to have that speed, whether for a 5 or 10?*

Huddle: I think that my weakness is just

Having A Helpful Hubby

Molly Huddle married Notre Dame teammate Kurt Benninger, a 3:38.03/13:30.27 performer, in '09. What have been the benefits of having her husband still involved in running and knowing what top-level training is like and the demands on a runner?

“Kurt doesn't compete anymore. He still runs and does workouts, but he is pretty much just helping us with our training. He is trying to get more into the coaching side.

“I think it's just a lot easier not to have to explain things to him. He knows what it's like from having tried to make it himself. He knows that little things *do* matter: your sleep, what you eat, what you do in the days before a race, how travel is. Someone on the outside might think you're being a little crazy, but he just has that understanding.

“He has been really generous, like going to Europe the past two years to help me so I'm not alone. He has helped with workouts. It's been good and I'm really lucky that right now our life allows it. He's not really tied down to anything, workwise.

“He competed in Europe himself, but he's now okay going for me. So it's been good all around. I think a lot of the top women have husbands who are okay with going and helping them out.”

being there at the world-class level and having fallen off before the bell rings. So I need to get stronger. I think my strength for the 5K is pretty good. We seem to have hit the sweet spot there.

But for the 10,000, kind of my weak point is that I tend to drift off. If you're not right on someone, that's when the race ends. More than the tactical side of it, we focused on maybe a few extra reps and just getting that volume. I just try to get into taking every split as it comes. For me, physiologically it just seems to get to me. I'd say it's probably lack of volume and I just need to do a bit more.

T&FN: *Yet what was your reaction to PRing by about 40 seconds in the Stanford race?*

Huddle: I was thrilled with that. I had had a couple of times—not this year but the last couple of 10Ks I ran before Cardinal—where I felt a little bit off. I was just glad to come away without any major problems. That's what came out of it; a time I had been shooting at for 3–4 years. We were aiming at 30:50, maybe 30:40.

I just felt like I could do that, but before I ran that time, I thought sometimes that maybe I wouldn't be able to step up to the 10K. So it kind of opened that door for me and I was

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Molly Huddle — continued

happy with it.

T&FN: Then you had the super-close USA 5000 before going to Monaco for a different type of competition: a Diamond League race against the Kenyans and Ethiopians. What kinds of adjustments did that elite level of racing require?

Huddle: I kind of feel almost a sense of freedom in a Diamond League race. I'm not looked at by the field much. I'm not expected to do anything and I feel I can just react and I'm not in charge of anything.

I just hang on for as long as I possibly can. So it's a simple kind of strategy. You just have to tough it out and hang on. I mean, there is the element that you can't go too hard or you will fade pretty badly.

But at USAs, it was a lot more stressful for me because tactically I don't get a lot of practice in the longer distances. It tends to be that whoever hangs on the longest wins.

I knew there would be some finer points that I didn't want to mess up in the last few laps. So I would say that was the harder of the two

Huddle's Running Genesis

"I think in the 5th or 6th grade I did some summer road races with my dad. I didn't run every day; at that point, it was just like training runs. My dad did a lot of road running, so it was always in the house.

"In high school, I also played basketball and soccer, but I was always better in the running side so I just gravitated towards that after a while. I really put my entire focus on it my senior year.

"I gave up the other sports to try to make the Foot Locker cross country. I had a good season and did make the finals. I kept running all season and my PRs came down a lot.

"I got really serious about it at Notre Dame. I was fully invested in trying to win an NCAA title, although I wasn't really sure that I could run professionally. I think my [frosch] 5K PR gave me a glimmer; it qualified me for the U.S. championships.

"But I wasn't at all sure what it really required. My last two years, I started to ask questions of experienced runners like Luke Watson; trying to become more realistic about what I could do. I had my eye on the prize from there.

"I was kind of lucky, though, to graduate and get a sponsorship from Saucony despite not having won anything in college. But it was good timing, I guess, and everything just lined up well."

races for me. I felt like there was a little more pressure to do the right thing at Nationals.

T&FN: Yet you must have been thrilled with your time in Monaco?

Huddle: Definitely. I wasn't sure what to expect. I was in good shape but I wasn't sure if it would be there that day. So much depends on the pacing, but I got real lucky with that.

Immediately after, I saw that I was under the AR by a few seconds; I thought it would be closer than that. So I was shocked.

Then a few hours later, I thought [laughs], "Why couldn't I have gone a few seconds faster and got into the 14:30s?" That immediately brought me back down to earth, but it was a great night. And I will remember that for the future.

T&FN: Can you say—if you have even had them yet—what have been the most satisfying races of your career, both on the track and road?

Huddle: Hmmm, that's a good question. Well, any U.S. championship on the track has been satisfying. So '11 and then this year. Fortunately, I've won two times and it's pretty special to win those. I never won an NCAA title, so I think there was a question mark if I would ever do that.

The American Record in Brussels [14:44.76 in '10] was probably one of the most satisfying because that was the first year I broke through at the top level. It was an exclamation point at the end of the year with that race.

Also, it changed the way I approached all the racing I did after that. There was just more confidence and knowledge of what I could do when I really had everything put together. So probably those two track races.

T&FN: Any road races that have been particularly satisfying for you? Or is that still quite a new area for you to explore?

Huddle: I would say the first-ever U.S. title, at the Tufts 10K in '08. That was at the end of a pretty bad year for me, so that was special. Also winning this year's New York Mini 10K was pretty surprising. When I look back at the list of who had won the Mini before, I felt pretty grateful to be on there. That probably was the biggest road race I've ever won.

T&FN: You say you started asking questions of older runners in college (see box). Presumably you knew that distance runners benefit from age and the accumulative effects of training and experience? So you didn't have to be highly successful 5 minutes ago.

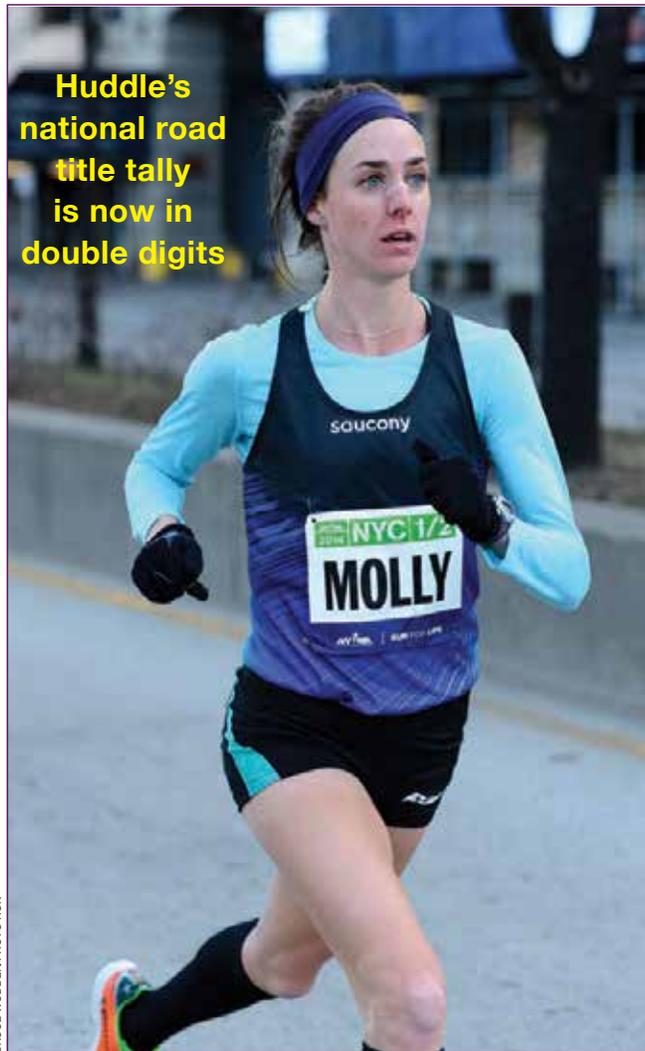
Huddle: I was just never totally sure that I would get better. So I had kind of a sense of urgency—and I guess I still do some. Feeling a need to make things happen. But things have been going good and Ray has been great at bringing me along. I feel like every year I've done better than the year before.

T&FN: Do you and Ray think about trying to run specific times—like getting into the 14:30s in Monaco? Or you just try to win races or what?

Huddle: Based on workouts, Ray is pretty good about predicting where I should be, both timewise and placewise. Both Stanford and Monaco were some seconds faster than he thought I could go [laughs]. I was kind

of in the middle of his range on both. I think he definitely believes there are a few more seconds in there.

He thought I could go in the high 14:30s in Monaco. He said 14:36 or thereabouts. If I had to look back and find a mistake, it was maybe that I was fading too much over the last lap. But then, he admits too it could have gone the other way: I could have crawled home and not



Huddle's national road title tally is now in double digits

BRUCE WODDER/PHOTO RUN

even PRed. We always dissect races and he's pretty specific about goals.

T&FN: If someone had been able to tell you when you graduated from high school, or even college, that one day you would be a multiple national champion and an American Record holder, could you have believed that?

Huddle: I probably would have said, "No way." I remember when 15-flat seemed like the moon to me.

T&FN: Are making championship teams and placing as high as possible now your prime goals?

Huddle: Yes. The next two years, that's all I'm wanting to do. That will be the focus for the next Worlds and Olympics; whatever event I can do and whatever changes I need to make in my training to be able to do that. Be able to walk away from those meets feeling I finished as high as I possibly could. □