

# RUNNER'S WORLD

## Shalane Flanagan: "I Ran to Win"

**In an exclusive interview, top American woman reflects on her front-running Boston and plans for coming back.**

By David Willey; Image by Robert James Reese

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Shalane Flanagan was leading the lead women's pack as they approached the town of Wellesley.

On Monday, Shalane Flanagan ran the Boston Marathon in 2:22:02, faster than any American woman had ever run this storied course. That broke her PR by more than three minutes and was five minutes faster than her Boston time last year, when she finished fourth. But this year, it was only good enough for seventh place against the fastest field in Boston history. Defending champ Rita Jeptoo of Kenya won in 2:18:57, breaking the course record by nearly two minutes. Buzunesh Deba and Mare Dibaba, both of Ethiopia, finished second and third, respectively, with times that also broke the course record.

But they had Flanagan to thank for their gaudy numbers. She ran the race "her way," leading from the gun and setting a fast early pace that she hoped would break up the pack and give her enough cushion to hold off pursuers in the final 5-K. Instead, Jeptoo and the others hung with her and, just past mile 20, surged away from her at the base of Heartbreak Hill.

Heartbreak, indeed. Flanagan, a hometown girl who grew up cheering for her father, Steve, as he ran down Boylston Street, desperately wanted to win this race. In fact, she had said that winning Boston—especially this year—was more important to her than an Olympic medal, a world record, or any other running honor.

Two days after the race, Runner's World Editor-in-Chief David Willey, who had covered the race on Twitter from the women's press truck, spoke with Flanagan as she recovered at her family's home in Marblehead.

### **How are you feeling? I can't believe it's been two days already...**

I can't believe it's already been two days, either. I keep saying the race was yesterday. I've lost total track of time. I'm really tired but a good tired, a very rewarding tired. I've just been spending time with my family. We had a really nice gathering at my parents' house yesterday, so I spent like six hours meeting and greeting a lot of old friends. It was a really fun day. Today has been more about decompressing.

### **Have you been out for a run at all?**

No, no. Yesterday, just standing around talking to people was a feat in and of

itself. Today we went for a nice, easy walk around town with our dog. I don't know if I'll run even tomorrow. I may go to a spin class with my dad to flush out the legs a little bit, but I probably won't try running until Thursday or Friday.

**So how does your race feel to you now, two days out? Have your thoughts about it changed, compared with right when you finished?**

When I finished I was pretty emotional. I was proud of myself, but at the same time I was somewhat devastated to not have been in the fight to win it in the last five miles. But at the end of the day, it was the best I could put forward, so there's not much to regret. I ran to win. I didn't have any self-preservation out there. I poured everything I had into my preparation and set out to run 2:22. I thought that would be good enough to win on the Boston course, and history would tell you that. But obviously it was a phenomenal day and everyone came to run really, really fast.

My coach [Jerry Schumacher] and I can say we did a good job and ran the race we thought would give us the best chance to win. I felt like I couldn't let it get to a sit-and-kick race because I know Jeptoo can have a devastating finish. Her last 5-K was just phenomenal, and she ran mile 24 in 4:48. There's not much I can do about that. There aren't many people in the world who can deal with that. I think I gave myself my best chance to win, but I can't be too bummed about it, to be honest. Maybe down the road, the stronger and older I get, I could maybe run that, but as of right now, I can honestly say I could never do what Jeptoo did in the last 5-K on Monday. It's just not within me.

I got some really nice messages and encouraging e-mails from some really respectable people. Lauren Fleshman wrote me a phenomenal e-mail and said that Rita and the East Africans didn't let me go because they respect me. In a way it's a compliment. I actually got a lot of great compliments from my competitors who finished ahead of me. They encouraged me and said I set up the race to be great. They were very appreciative of the fast times, because they knew that if I hadn't been there, they wouldn't have set big PRs. So they were very gracious and grateful and respectful. They told me to not be upset and said that one day I will win the race. They encouraged me to go for a fast time because they feel like on a flat course I can cut at least a minute or two, if not more. So overall it was a really positive experience.

**In the postrace press conference, Rita Jeptoo looked directly at you and gave you credit for pushing the pace so early. Did you hear from her later?**

Yeah, Rita gave me credit again at the awards ceremony that night, and credited me with her record run and she said she actually didn't want to run that fast early on, and I think she was a bit frustrated. But she told me she couldn't let me go. If she gave me any room, she may not make it up. It was too much of a gamble, so she just had to stick with the pace. I guess it's a consolation prize to have the respect and admiration of some really great runners, and to have your competitors compliment you like that.

**Were you aware in those early hard miles, when you were consistently running just over five-minute pace, that you were making Rita and the others uncomfortable? What was your thought process at the beginning?**

I set out to run my own race and what was comfortable. In my training runs on the course, I practiced to run 5:20 to 5:25 pace, but we never ran the tangents because there was traffic and I couldn't be zigzagging all over the road. So my coach had warned me that based on the same effort level, I'd probably have a few splits early in the race that were faster. He told me not to be scared if some of them were sub-5:20 and that inevitably I was going to slow down. I should just embrace it and run by feel and not be a complete slave to my watch. He

said, "It's okay to check a few splits and use them as parameters for your energy levels," and that's basically what I did. I took a few splits here and there, and I hoped the pace would deter the group and that they'd kind of let me go. But they didn't. I didn't ever look back. It's not how I operate. The only time I knew if anyone was really there was if there was a quiet spot and no one was cheering. Then I could feel them behind me. Or through the fluid stations, they would surge in front of me and I could see who was around, but I actually never saw Rita until...I think she never entered my vision until we hit the Newton hills. So I thought maybe she had hung back and let me go. I thought I only had maybe four women that I had to deal with. But once they started surging past me on the hills I realized, *Oh, I've been pulling along a really big group.* I didn't realize it was so big. But, you know, I was running my race and I wasn't consuming myself with everyone else. I think it was the best way to operate. But I knew deep down that Rita is such an amazing athlete and that she would've had to have a really off day to not be there.

**Coming out of a few aid stations, Deba did seem to shoot out and take the lead. When she did that, did you feel it was important to get back out in front of her?**

Yeah, I thought about tucking in a little bit, but every time I did, I felt like they were purposefully slowing it down. They were trying to like rein it in, and that was not the point. I didn't want any lulls in there and I didn't feel like I needed a break. It was more like, *I feel good. I feel comfortable leading. I feel comfortable dictating the race.* I wanted to use that as an advantage and show them I'm not backing down. And I was hoping to frustrate them, so they'd be like, *Gosh, she's relentless. She's not backing off.* I did all that, but obviously running a PR, a natural fatigue set in through the hills, so....

**They seemed to throw in a surge just as you were getting into Newton, and you seemed to answer that. Is that what happened?**

Yeah, I think as we crested past mile 17 by the hospital they were throwing in some surges. But I knew the tangents pretty well, so I was able to save a little energy. I was thinking, *Okay, just save something for Heartbreak.* But Heartbreak really did kind of...that was a key turning point. But I was still optimistic as I came off the top of Heartbreak. I thought, *Okay, they're just throwing in a surge. They may slow down a little bit. There may be a regrouping coming off the hill.* I kept them in sight, but I think when they decided to run a sub-five-minute mile, they literally escaped my vision, and I was in disbelief that I couldn't see them anymore. So that was a little frustrating. I was thinking, *Gosh, I must have really slowed down. This is going to be bad.* But I didn't really slow that much. I was still clicking off 5:20 or 5:30 miles, really consistent. It was more that they just took off.

**Was there a moment that you realized that you probably weren't going to be able to win?**

Yeah, when I saw Jeptoo assert herself with such authority. I knew that when she decides to go, it's pretty much game over. So winning wasn't really a possibility, but I still had hope I could catch the others. Sometimes when people are competing, they misjudge their energy levels over the last few miles and it can...once you feel like you're not winning the race, all of a sudden you get this deflated feeling. I was hoping the other women would feel a little deflated as Jeptoo was pulling away and maybe I could pick up a little bit. But that didn't happen. They all finished really strong.

**When you talked to RW's Nick Weldon for our May issue, you said your ideal scenario would be to show up superfit, with good conditions, a slight tailwind, and that maybe you'd be able to run a 2:22. Looking back, it seems like everything went exactly according to plan. Does it still feel that way now? Do you feel like you made any strategic mistakes or could've done anything differently?**

Yeah, it's kind of eerie how I predicted that. There was kind of a tailwind, but it was a very honest day. It wasn't like some of the past tailwind years, which would have been crazy because there's potentially a two-minute advantage on some of those really big tailwind years. It was just a good, solid day to run. So I feel good about my 2:22. But when I said that, it was kind of haphazard, like a daydream, *Oh, wouldn't that be nice to run 2:22 in Boston*. It's a hard course, and if you look at the history of people who have run 2:22, there aren't a ton of names. So when my coach told me that he thought I could run that, I thought he was a little crazy. But I asked Jerry as soon as I finished what I could have done differently, and he was like, "Shalane, there's nothing." I think it's just one of those things that you keep chipping away at, getting better with age and with time. It's only my fifth marathon and only my third major. It's easy to get greedy and want things immediately, but you just have to have patience.

**Based on your experience last year, how did you change your training for this year's race?**

We took the time to make six separate trips from the West Coast to run on the course starting in September. I would fly in on a Wednesday and leave on a Friday. I was doing some really great long workouts, and I became more comfortable on the roads because of it. It really jumped my fitness level and my ability to execute and grind away. But overall we were just really intelligent. I basically did one long run a week, and if it wasn't a hard effort, it was almost a three-hour run. So just a lot of good long stuff mixed in with good recovery. I never overdid it, nothing too crazy. I didn't do a ton of track workouts, maybe only a month's worth to sharpen up a little bit.



Shalane Flanagan training in January on the Boston Marathon course. Photo courtesy of @jhboston26

**How long were those runs that you were doing in Boston, and were you doing them at marathon pace?**

Yeah, it's amazing to track my fitness. In September, I was out of shape and had a very hard time just doing two-mile repeats on the course. I think we did eight or 10 miles' worth, and I struggled to run two-mile segments at 5:25 pace. It's funny to think that now I just ran 5:25 pace for 26 miles. It just shows it's nice to have room for growth of fitness. I think we had one continuous 18-miler and one that was broken up into different chunks, but all at marathon pace, at 5:20 to 5:25.

**What was your weekly mileage like?**

It's hard to say because I measure my mileage a little differently than most people. I go by the Badger system, so most of my mileage is counted at eight-minute pace per mile. So if I do an 80-minute run, I only count that as 10 miles. I think I maxed out at 115, so if you were to measure how normal people

do, that could have been a little bit over 120. But, in general, hovering around 110 miles was kind of my comfort zone, where I was able to still get in really good quality.

**What about the expectations heading into the race—saying so publicly how badly you wanted to win, appearing on magazine covers, doing the "60 Minutes" interview. The expectations seemed to build as the race got closer. Did you feel those and do you like it that way?**

The attention is great, and it's great to hopefully be an inspiration in the sport. But to me, that's all just fun hype. I don't look too deeply into it. It's a privilege to have some attention, but I don't feel like it added any pressure. Like I said, our plan for executing the race was to be aggressive early on, but it wasn't "60 Minutes" or magazine covers that dictated my race by any means. None of that has any negative effect on me.

**Last year, you talked a lot about how loud and supportive the crowds were when you and Kara [Goucher] were both running. How did the crowds compare this year? At the press conference, you said at one point your ears hurt and your insides were almost shaking. What was that like emotionally and what kind of things were you hearing?**

Some of the sections were just so loud, it's not like you could decipher one voice from another. It was almost like the ground was shaking. It was, like, obnoxiously loud. It was insane. Compared to last year, I'd say multiply everything times 10. At times I treasured a little bit of quiet where I could hear my own thoughts. But it was all amazing, positive support. There was one time along a quiet section around mile nine when we were near a pond or a lake and two kids on scooters were trying to keep up with the women's pack. They were on the other side of the road, but I remember hearing one kid say, "Whoa, you guys are really moving!" I don't know if anyone else heard it but that made me giggle.

**Was it a struggle to manage your emotions with the crowds so loud and supportive?**

I didn't have trouble early on. I was very just within myself and calm, but it's natural in a marathon that as you start to fatigue, you also get a bit more emotional. At least I do. I tend to ride on emotion toward the end of the race. So in the last mile I was very tired and starting to get the chills, not feeling so good, and the crowds were just so amazing. I wanted to finish really strong. I wasn't feeling very strong but I wanted to appear strong. I think that was when I started to get emotional, because I wanted to appear like superwoman for everyone and come in looking great. That last mile was really emotional to me, because you want to soak it in, but with every step you try to go faster and your body is basically revolting. So I felt completely drained emotionally and physically at the finish.

**What do you say to yourself in those moments when you're feeling awful but wanting to look and run strong?**

One thing that Jerry always says to me about finishing workouts, when he knows I'm laboring and losing focus, he always tells me, "Keep your s-t together." So in my head, I was like, *You gotta keep your s-t together*. I just try to be as calm as possible but also try to muster every little bit of energy that I can. Sometimes I'll be like, *Okay, don't be such a wuss, there's gotta be a little bit more*. But it's really tough when you're so tired.

**After you turned onto Boylston, did you notice one or maybe both of the spots where the explosions happened last year?**

That didn't enter my mind. When I came onto Boylston, I think I was just so happy to see the finish line. But I felt so safe the entire time. I'd only run

Boston once previously but I did notice little, unobtrusive things that were different. For example, I don't remember having as many guardrails along the course. It wasn't bad, but I remember feeling like the fans were a little bit closer last year. And on Monday, there were a lot more cops standing between the barriers and the athletes. There were more cops on the road, on the course. But I wasn't ever afraid during the race. It felt like a big celebration. I don't think I've seen more people be so happy. People were smiling the entire day, I think.

**At what point did you realize that Meb [Keflezighi, the first American man to win since 1983] was in the lead?**

I didn't feel so great when I finished, so I was a little bit out of it. But as we were making our way back to the hotel, my coach said, "Meb is winning." I said, "You're kidding me." He said, "No, Meb's winning. He's probably going to win."

**What did you think about that?**

It didn't surprise me because Meb is just...he just always seems to come when it really counts. It's amazing. He has the ability to deliver on the best stages. So I was floored and then ecstatic. I felt relieved that someone was able to deliver. If it wasn't me, I was just happy that someone was able to bring the city an American victory.

**What was the rest of your evening like, as far as recovering and processing the race? Did you have your traditional burger and beer?**

I did the press conference and then I was trying to track my husband down. [Steve Edwards ran his first Boston in 2:37:18, another family PR]. I found him back in the hotel room in, like, the fetal position. We were both kind of a hot mess, to be honest. We were both really dehydrated. I didn't take in enough fluids early on. So we struggled to get some food down. I think he had an ice cream bar, and I got a little bit of food in but not much. And then we met up with some family and friends at the Copley bar, and I had a beer with Joanie [Joan Benoit Samuelson won the 55-59 age division in 2:52:10] to celebrate the day. Then we went to the awards ceremony and met up with a bunch of athletes and family. But it was an early night. Our stomachs were not happy from all the dehydration and running hard.

**How is Steve feeling now? A 2:37 is really impressive.**

Yeah, he was a 100-meter runner in college and he's not the smallest guy. He's like six-two and 180 pounds. When he finished, he said, "Shalane, that was so hard. That course is brutal." His previous PR was on the Eugene Marathon course, which is pretty pancake flat, so he wants to do another marathon now and run even more of a PR. He enjoyed it a ton, but yeah, he's hurting. He's been napping, like, every two hours. We're both super happy to have run it, and our family enjoyed having two people to cheer for.

**I noticed on a couple of occasions that you were carrying a water bottle with you for a minute or two coming out of aid stations. I wondered if you were having trouble with fluids. Is that common for you?**

Everyone is different in how much they need to consume. I drink to thirst but I put about four ounces in my bottles. That's what's been recommended to me, and I try to consume as much as I can because the calories are good, the carbs are good. Toward the middle of the race I was genuinely looking forward to my fluids, and I was really thirsty so I was drinking all four ounces. But I don't like to overwhelm my system too quick. I don't like to just chug it down. I take small sips, so I carry it with me for a while. It's not like the bottle is heavy or anything, so I just take my time. But I didn't have any trouble until the last five miles, and then my fluids started coming up a little bit. That might have been a sign of dehydration. It was uncomfortable, for sure. It's not fun to revisit your

fluids and it's not fun to get the chills but I don't think it affected my race in general.

**I've got to ask about your pink shoes and pink shades and your compression socks, which is such a cool look. How much thought do you put into that in before a race? Does it give you a certain kind of feeling when you're out there competing?**

Jerry would hate if I admit that I care what I look like. He's used to dealing with a bunch of dudes who could care less what they wear. But you know what? I do think it's fun to look sharp, and I hope running looks cool. I like to inspire people. We're in the inspiration business, so it's nice to be able to work really hard, put yourself in the best position possible, and then draw attention in a positive way. I would hope some little girl says, "Oh, that girl looks cool. I want to be a runner." Not that I'm super meticulous about it, because the shoes I wore were basically the same ones I wore last year. They're actually bright orange, obnoxious orange. Nike gave me brand new shoes to wear this year but I did a composite and everything didn't feel right, so I stuck with shoes from last year. And it just so happened that I had a pair of sunglasses they'd given me recently that had the same orange to match. So some of it is calculated and some of it isn't. We have become the Bowerman Track Club, so our new team colors are red and black. From now on, I will pretty much be in red and black. I guess it all looked good. I try to make it look somewhat cohesive and not completely random.

**You seemed to say at the press conference that you will be back to run Boston again next year. Is that right?**

Yeah, I pretty much put that out there. I didn't even talk to my husband or Jerry about it, but I think it's an understood thing. Jerry knows that my number one passion and goal is to win Boston. He knows I won't feel fulfilled as an athlete without that on my resume at the end of the day. So until I win, we're going every spring back to Boston. It was kind of spur of the moment, but I guess it's publicly known now. It's not like I even told [the Boston Athletic Association]. So hopefully they'll have me back because I intend to be here.

**Something tells me they'll have you back, Shalane.**

Okay. [Laughs.]

**Is there anything you can think of right away that you might change in your training in preparation for next year?**

That's something that Jerry and I will have to sit down and talk about. We haven't gone over the race in detail. He just told me he was proud of me and he felt like we did everything possible. But you know, he's always tinkering and thinking. He's a perfectionist, and I guarantee that when I get back to Portland, he'll have a list of ideas. But I genuinely think that there's not going to be much to change. I don't think I ran a bad race, and I just think it's a matter of timing. It's just years of work that I'll put in, letting the training sink in, letting me marinate as a runner. Eventually it will yield some really phenomenal results.

**There's a pretty widespread feeling that this race fulfilled everyone's hopes and expectations. Amby Burfoot called it "the best day in running history." Do you feel that way? If so, what do you think your contribution was to that?**

I think that's an awesome statement. He knows his history and he's been part of a lot of races, so that has a lot of weight and meaning. First of all, I think there were beautiful performances. Everyone contributed in their own way and made the day extremely special. I was impressed with every single American athlete. They all knew how important the day was, and everyone rose to the occasion. I think we painted a really beautiful piece of artwork, to be honest. I guess my contribution would be that I ran my best and brought out the best in my competition, as well.

**Do you know what the rest of your year might look like?**

We'll honestly work back from April 2015. That's how I'm going to operate from here on out, with the exception of Rio [the 2016 Summer Olympics], which obviously is very important as well. So we'll work back from this time next year and whatever complements Boston, we'll do. It would be nice to really push myself on a faster course, so maybe that will be in the cards this fall. But it would be fun to dabble on the track, too, just because I don't like to get too far away from it. I had very few track workouts this buildup, but some great indicators that I could run some really great times on the track. So if I come back okay, I would like to hop on the track mixed in with some bucket list road races that I haven't run yet. Joanie really wants me to run Beach to Beacon, that kind of stuff, so I'll be back on the East Coast this summer to do some fun road races.

**We're excited to have you at the Runner's World Heartbreak Hill Half and Festival in June. Any chance that you'll run one of those races, even if it's just for fun or a training run?**

Oh yeah, for sure. I'll talk to Jerry but I don't like to just stay on the sidelines very often. I don't like to sit and watch. I need to join in on all the fun. So yeah, whether it's the half or the 5 or the 10, I'll be doing something.

**Last question. There's been a yearlong buildup to this race for the whole running community but for you in particular. Now that it's in the rearview mirror, do you have any sort of postpartum feelings about it?**

It's funny that you say that, because we were just talking about that at breakfast this morning. After major races, I typically have a week or two of doldrums, like, *Oh, I can't believe it's over. What's next?* I'm sure that so many people are feeling that way, because Boston this year was just so awesome and exciting to train for. I haven't felt that way yet because I feel like I genuinely got everything out of myself. The preparation was so much fun, and I know there's going to be another Boston. Had the race not gone as well, I think I would feel really, really let down. But I see a lot of exciting things on the horizon, so it hasn't created that kind of weight for me right now. Talk to me a week later, maybe it'll be different. But right now, I'm feeling good, and really motivated and encouraged to come back next year.