



# Golden Girl

Romanian runner **Constantina Dita** took a daring lead during the **2008 Olympic Marathon** and won gold. But this unconventional Olympian didn't just get lucky—she proved a lifetime of hard work and determination can pay off. BY JAYME OTTO | PHOTOGRAPHS BY VICTOR SAILER



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## Constantina Dita

positions herself in the front row, toeing the start line of the women's 2008 Olympic marathon. Four years earlier, she'd suffered a disappointing performance in Athens, Greece, struggling through heat exhaustion to finish the race in 20th place. But the 38-year-old Romanian runner senses this race might hold a different ending. Beijing's stifling heat has eased to 73 F. In her second Olympic bid, Dita craves one thing: redemption.

At the starting signal, 81 of the world's greatest female runners take to the flat course, winding through the heart of the capital. Within the first 100 meters, the petite Dita falls to the back of the pack. "There was so much jostling and pushing, I figured I'd get knocked over otherwise," she says.

After the first three miles, the runners start to settle in. Dita, with a muscular stride, works her way back up to the front, staying just outside the thick of the action. Once again in position at the front, Dita concentrates on her race plan. She's well known for aggressively charging for the lead and then being unable to maintain her pace. She took off in front during the 1997 Paris Marathon and was so exhausted she had to walk from mile 22 to the finish, ending in 14th place. At the infamous World Championships in Edmonton, she led for more than 18 miles, but hit the wall and finished in 10th place. Having learned from her mistakes, Dita has a different plan for today: Stay with the main pack for the first half of the race. After that, if she feels good, she can go faster.

And go she does. About 18 miles in, Dita breaks free from the pack.

"I kept looking over my shoulder to see if any of the girls were going to come with me, but they didn't," Dita says. Alone to set the pace, she puts a 30-second gap on the pack. Still in first at the 24-mile mark, Dita kicks into high gear, extending her lead to more than a minute. Fans worldwide hold their breath: Can she sustain it?

"It was a brilliant move," says Glenn Latimer, the 61-year-old international administrator for the London Marathon and secretary general of World Marathon Majors, an alliance of the world's leading marathons. "She's made moves like that in the past, only to fade. So the others thought nothing of it; they let her go. But they ran out of real estate to catch her."

When Dita hit the turnaround before going into the stadium, she caught sight of the chase group. "There were four women, but they were about a quarter of a mile behind me. That's when I was sure I would take a medal," she says.

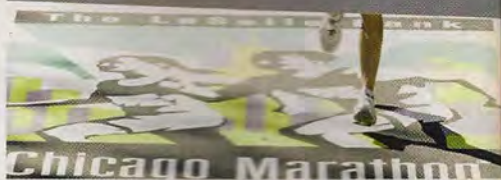
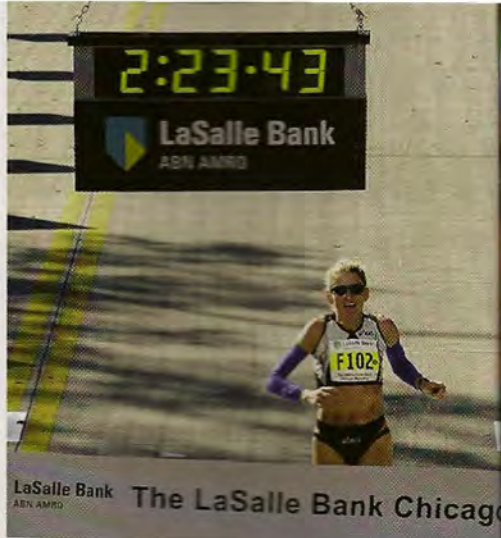
She entered the stadium uncontested and raised both arms in the air as she crossed the blue finish line. "I could not believe I had won the gold in the Olympic Games," she says.

Dita completed the race in 2 hours, 26 minutes, 44 seconds, giving Romania its first women's Olympic marathon title. She is the oldest person, man or woman, to win the event.

### Following Destiny

"Do you believe in destiny?" Dita's coach of eight years and ex-husband, 33-year-old Valeriu Tomescu asks me from the head of the kitchen table in Dita's home just outside Boulder, Colo. Dita sits to his right, clad in a red New York City Marathon Lycra hoodie and pants. Her eyelids, done up in hues of lavender and ice, highlight intense blue eyes shrouded in heavy lashes. Those eyes slide from me to Tomescu, and back again. She scrutinizes me as Tomescu continues, "That's how Constantina runs. It's an instinct."

An Olympic destiny was not something Dita imagined growing up on a farm in southwestern Romania, where she worked alongside her five siblings. Balancing farm chores before and after school left little time for anything else. In high school, a teacher noticed her running speed and encouraged her to enter a race. Dita placed third. "I must have had some power in me from all the farm work," she says, "because I had never trained a day in my life, never played sports." By the time she graduated, she was competing in a feeder program for the Romanian National Team.



### THE ROAD TO GOLD

## 1987

Enters her first race at age 17 and places third.

## 1997

Earns a spot on the Romanian National Running Team.

## 2003

Qualifies for the 2004 Olympic Marathon in Athens; places second at the LaSalle Bank Chicago Marathon.

## 2004

Wins bronze at the IAAF World Half-Marathon Championships; wins the LaSalle Bank Chicago Marathon.



From top left clockwise: Dita wins the 2004 LaSalle Bank Chicago Marathon; with the pack at the 2008 Olympics (#2716) and taking the lead; with her family in 2005; sprinting to win the 2005 IAAF World Half-Marathon Championships.



But even natural talent has limits, and Dita found hers five years later. Under an ambitious racing schedule, which ranged from short sprints to marathons, she trained three times a day, including group workouts where she was forced to run outside her own pace and rhythm. At age 23, her body began to deteriorate; sciatica, a painful nerve irritation that radiated from her low back down the back of her thighs, set in. She argued with her coach about what she felt was an unsustainable training regimen. When her race performance started to decline, Dita knew something had to give. "I could barely walk," she says.

She stood at the crossroads that every professional athlete dreads—one that forces a choice between health and career. On Dita's shoulders also sat the weight of a bright future she had only begun to dream was hers for the taking. As a 14-year-old farm girl, she'd barely noticed when a Romanian woman, Maricica Puica, had taken Olympic gold in the 3,000 meters. Now, after devoting half a decade to the sport of running, Dita believed she had more than just long, blond hair in common with the great runner. If Puica could do it, so could she.

But destiny doesn't always follow a linear path. Dita decided to stop running competitively.

### The Rewards Of Rest

Dita took two years off from the sport and had a son, Raphael, in 1994. During her pregnancy, Dita began to feel the urge to run again. And being a single mother gave her new incentive to succeed in the sport. She realized that by becoming a world-class runner, she could secure opportunities for Raphael that she'd never had. Six months after he was born, she began running again. "I started easy and was surprised by how good I felt," she says. "Giving birth does something amazing to a woman's body; it makes you stronger than you were before."

She began training again, making an

**2005**

Places second at the Flora London Marathon; wins the IAAF World Half-Marathon Championships.

**2006**

Wins silver at the IAAF World Road Running Championships in the 20k.

**2007**

Places third at the Flora London Marathon.

**2008**

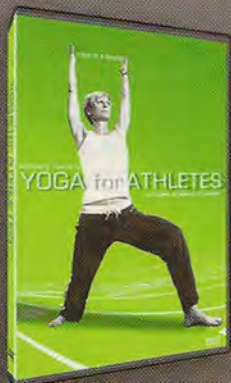
Wins Gold at the Beijing Olympics Marathon.

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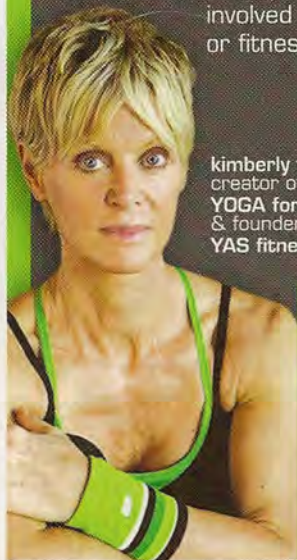
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arrangement with her sister to watch Raphael during her morning workouts. For the afternoon session, she brought Raphael along to the stadium. She contacted her old coach, who reluctantly agreed to her terms: no more three-a-day workouts, and she controlled her race schedule. Dita improved quickly.

But the life of an elite-runner-in-the-making came with sacrifices for the young mother. When she qualified for the National Team, earning a place at a Romanian Federation-run training camp, the 27-year-old was separated from her toddler for more than a month. When asked about that experience, Dita averts her eyes. "It was hard for me," she says.

"Tell her," Tomescu urges.

Dita opens her mouth to speak and then closes it, looking at me with a mixture of apology and relief at not being able to find the English words to elaborate.

"She cried every night," Tomescu says quietly.

### A Powerful Pairing

Tomescu and Dita met at a training camp in the summer of 1999, in the Transylvanian Alps. Dita was preparing for the World Championships marathon in Seville. Tomescu, an 800-meter runner with a degree in sports physiology, was there to help train female middle-distance runners. The pair clicked in more ways than one; they were married in less than a year. Shortly after, Tomescu became Dita's coach, despite the Federation's disapproval. "They said he was too young," Dita says. "But he understood my specific training needs."

In the coming years, Tomescu focused Dita's training on road races and the marathon, and incorporated high-altitude training into her routine. They spent six months a year in Boulder, Colo. All of her personal bests—the 5,000 meter, the 10,000 meter, the half marathon and the marathon—were set during that time period. She also qualified for her first Olympic race, in Athens. Destiny seemed back on track.

But that 100 F Athens race didn't go as planned, and it exposed a hole in Dita's training program: She wasn't prepared to compete in extreme weather conditions. The pair used the searing Boulder summers to add high-intensity heat to her training, planning for the expected swelter of the 2008 Beijing games.

Meanwhile, their marriage wasn't going as planned either, culminating in a divorce that finalized just three months prior to Dita's second Olympic bid. It couldn't have come at a worse time, causing a four-month split in their professional relationship, when the stakes were the highest.

But with an Olympic medal on the line, they eventually put aside their emotional differences.

"Destiny," Dita reminds me.

### Better With Age

Dita enjoyed the gold-medal glow after the Olympics, taking a few months to travel, shop (one of her favorite non-running activities) and run in publicity events.

Since returning to training, she follows a program of two workouts per day, ramping up her volume over the course of the month. "It's a gradual build," she says. "At my age, there is a delicate balance between building up and tearing down."

But Dita doesn't plan to rest on her laurels. She's going to focus on some big-name marathons in 2009, including Chicago and London. As for the 2012 Olympics, she says, "As long as I'm healthy, I'd like to participate."

"People ask us what her secret is," Tomescu says. "The secret is there is no secret. We take an individualized approach to Constantina's training, backed by science." Tomescu constantly monitors Dita's vitals—from her heart rate to her blood pressure. He even goes as far as to prick her finger during intense interval workouts. "If I feel awful on a training run, these tests tell me when I should push through and when I should back off," she says. "There is never any guessing."

But she disagrees with Tomescu regarding her lack of a secret. "It's better that I show you," she says with a wicked smile. Pushing her chair back, she bounces to her feet and slides across the shiny hardwood floor in her athletic socks. She uses the pantry door to break her skid, opening it in the process. There, amid a pyramid of canned peas and beans, sit two large boxes of chocolate—the good Belgian kind. Dita reaches for a piece from her stash, gesturing for me to do the same. "As long as there is chocolate to eat," she says, "you will find me running." ■

Jayne Otto is a freelance writer based in Boulder, Colo.