



Forced to drop out of the 2008 Olympic marathon with a broken foot, America's greatest female distance runner, Deena Kastor, dishes on her time away from racing.

# Time to Heal

By Jayme Otto

The overcast 75-degree August morning was a pleasant surprise for the women Olympic marathoners in hot and humid Beijing. Sporting a white baseball cap over her cropped blonde hair, 36-year-old Deena Kastor started at the back of the pack. She ran stealthily, pacing herself with the hopes of eventually taking the lead.

This strategy had worked in Kastor's favor during the 2004 Olympic Games held in Athens. For a majority of the race, she trailed two minutes behind the lead pack of marathoners. It wasn't until the 25-mile mark that she moved from 18th to third place—taking home bronze.

In Beijing, Kastor had her eyes on the gold. With one medal already under her belt, she was heralded as the fourth fastest woman in the world and America's greatest distance runner. "I thought I was prepared for anything," she says from her home in Mammoth, Calif.

The pace was painfully slow—the announcers even referred to it as a jog. Nearly three miles into the race, almost all 82 starters were still together. Suddenly, a runner in a white cap stopped, fell to one knee. Kastor heard a sound no one else did—a pop, like a wooden popsicle-stick had snapped. She paused for a moment and then attempted to stand.

However, she was unable to put weight on her right foot, and fell back to the ground. "I knew my foot was broken," Kastor says, "even though I'd never broken anything before."

Sitting on the pavement, Kastor watched her foot swell as she waited for the van that would take her back to Beijing's "Bird's Nest" National Stadium. She wracked her brain for a reason why. "I didn't understand how in all the preparation, my body failed in the precise moment it was supposed to be prepared to fight," she says.

Once on the "sag wagon," Kastor was given a towel to clean up. Having raced less than three miles at an easy pace, she had barely broken a sweat. She put her face into the towel and sobbed. The throbbing pain in her foot had escalated to the point of nausea, but thoughts of all the effort she and countless others had put forth preparing her for this day hurt much worse.

As she approached the stadium, Kastor vowed to find some source of strength from the experience. The tears suddenly stopped. "I still didn't understand why my bone broke at such a slow pace, at such an important moment, but it happened and I wanted my family to know I was okay," she says.

Kastor steadied herself in the van, while her mind searched for some sort of silver lining around the dark cloud of *time off* she felt looming over her. She looked at her foot, now the size of a football. She considered everything she had put her body through over the years. Pushing the limits of her potential, grinding out another mile, forcing a faster pace, dry heaving on the side of the road, and charging every hill in her mountainous town. She was struck by how much she loved running—especially running hard.

Then an overwhelming sense of gratitude surged through her. She felt grateful to her body for putting up with, and beautifully adapting to, her career choice. “I realized in that moment that my body had had enough,” she says. “It needed a rest and I would honor it.”

### The Beginning

Kastor wasn't always an athletic force to be reckoned with. She admits that she was terrible at every sport her parents supported. She'd tried softball, soccer, even ice-skating. “It wasn't until that first day of track practice, when I was 11, that I found myself,” she explains.

As a teen, Kastor enjoyed running in the Santa Monica Mountains, through Ronald Reagan's old ranch, Paramount Ranch and Malibu Creek State Park. For her, running was social and adventurous. “I never wanted to turn around because there was so much more to explore,” she says.

Kastor credits her early coaches, particularly Vicki Fox and Bill Duley, for fostering a healthy outlook on running. After a successful undergrad career at the University of Arkansas, where she won seven Southeastern Conference titles, Kastor moved to Colorado to train with Joe Vigil, who guided her to the Olympic bronze in 2004. At Vigil's retirement, Kastor headed to California to join Terrence Mahon's training group. Under Mahon's tutelage, in 2006, Kastor became the first U.S. woman to run sub 2:20, winning the Flora London Marathon with a time of 2:19:36. Three weeks earlier, she'd set a new half marathon record of 1:07:34, taking second in Berlin.

Kastor's achievements put the U.S. back on the map in the sport of distance running, kicking off a long-anticipated revival that now includes the likes of Ryan Hall, Kara Goucher and Tera Moody. At the helm of this new era of U.S. running was an unstoppable Deena Kastor.

### The Break

When someone thought to be unstoppable is halted, the results can be ugly. Kastor suffered a complete fracture of her third metatarsal. She would be in a boot and crutches for nine weeks, and it would be three months before she could walk again. But a positive Kastor chose to look on the bright side. Her recovery required no surgery, as the bones seemed to reset themselves. No doctor could prove this, but Kastor believes her attitude shift—from anger at her body to support of it—facilitated the healing process on a physical, as well as emotional, level.

During her time off, Kastor perfected final recipes for

her cookbook project, entertained (one of her greatest passions) and took a trip to Paso Robles, Calif., where her favorite wines are produced. Kastor helped out with television coverage during last year's Bank of America Chicago Marathon, and appeared on behalf of her sponsor ASICS at the ING New York City Marathon.

Kastor was surprised that the hardest part of her recovery was not being sidelined, but rather having to rely on her husband, Andrew, for simple tasks such as taking things from the oven, helping her get into the shower, or even just grabbing a glass of water. “I'm independent,” she says, “and it's so hard for me to ask for help.”

She found that she missed the little things the most, like taking her Labrador, Aspen, for walks. While she experienced frustration and discouragement, it was e-mails and letters she

received from friends, family and fans that lifted her spirits.

As for the mystery of the break, Kastor originally suspected a calcium deficiency. She was close—tests revealed that her vitamin D levels were almost non-existent. Vitamin D is essential for calcium absorption; without vitamin D, bones can become thin, brittle and soft. To minimize her risk of skin cancer, Kastor had always worn sunscreen, a hat, glasses and long-sleeved shirts whenever outside. She'd effectively blocked the sun's damaging rays, but also one of the best sources of vitamin D. Kastor now eats extra leafy greens, which are naturally rich in vitamin D, and milk and dairy products fortified with it. She also takes 2,000 IU of the vitamin daily.



PHOTOS BY VICTAH SAUER

## The Comeback

Kastor let her foot guide her, carefully evaluating when it could take the pressure of her body weight, when it could walk unaided down the street, and when it was strong enough to try to run. Nearly four months after she dropped out of the Olympic marathon, Kastor ran for five minutes. Sort of.

"It wasn't a straight run," she explains. "I walked for one minute, then ran for one minute until I had five total minutes of running." But what a five minutes it was. She felt invigorated, uplifted. "What a great sport that the simple act of putting one foot in front of the other for as little as five minutes can lift your spirits."

Coach Mahon remembers her fragility those first few weeks and how he and the rest of the Mammoth running group watched in admiration as Kastor began to trust the resiliency of her body again and start training. "We all knew that it would take a lot more than a broken foot to keep Deena from running," he says. "I am continually impressed by her ability to dig deep and find the reserves to do what she does."

Despite his faith in her capabilities, Mahon didn't think it was prudent for Kastor to jump right back into her regular training program of two runs a day, six days a week. Instead, he created a revised plan that included aqua running using an underwater treadmill, cycling and mountain hikes. "Our focus was to strengthen her legs and restore

her confidence," Mahon says.

By early 2009, Kastor was running normally again. She scheduled some races, including an 8k in Chicago and a 10k in Scotland, which she won. At San Francisco's Bay to Breakers in May, her foot felt tight and sore. She added more therapy to her training in the weeks following, but nothing helped. By mid-summer, she conceded that she needed more time off. She took a full month off, disappointed but adamant about her pledge to be good to her body. Banking on a hope that she'd be better in the fall, she scheduled October's Bank of America Chicago Marathon as her next major race. She chose Chicago because it was a course she felt comfortable with, having won her first marathon there in 2005.

Kastor remained unsure whether she'd be fit enough to race Chicago up until early fall. She'd run a half in New York City that didn't go well. But she was able to return to her regular training program, and soon her performance started improving. Each week seemed better than the last. Thrilled to be racing a marathon again, Kastor's not taking a single stride for granted. She's ready to embrace all the emotions and challenges that come with racing long distance. She says she's not afraid. "My body feels strong, and I always give the best I can."

## Back in the Game

The best she could was not enough to get Kastor on the podium in Chicago. Finishing in 2:28:50 on a chilly October day, Kastor



**2000** U.S. Women's Olympic Trials 10,000m champion

**2003** Flora London Marathon – 3rd

**2004** Athens Olympic Games Marathon – Bronze

**2005** Bank of America Chicago Marathon – 1st

**2006** Berlin Half Marathon – 2nd

**2006** Flora London Marathon – 1st

**2007** U.S. Outdoor 10,000m champion, U.S. 15,000m champion, U.S. XC champion

**2008** U.S. Women's Olympic Trials marathon champion

missed her goal time by three to four minutes. Reports came out immediately afterward that dubbed Chicago a "nightmare race" for Kastor who suffered bowel issues around the three-mile mark that forced her to pull off the course. "I waited until 36K when I couldn't wait any longer," she says. But Kastor's not looking to make excuses. "Regardless of this disappointment, I am happy with how strong I felt during the race."

For the girl who never wanted to turn around while running the hills of California, it was just one more adventure. Mahon is also keeping things in perspective, judging the race as just a first step. He and Kastor are already looking ahead to a spring marathon. Beyond that, Kastor is looking to her next Olympic opportunity—London 2012. She'll be 39, just a few months older than Constantina Dita was when she won the 2008 Olympic marathon that Kastor was forced to abort. "It is my intention to earn the medal I didn't bring home from Beijing," she says. ■

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