

SPORTING (/COLUMN/SPORTING)

How the ‘Shalane Flanagan Effect’ Works



Shalane Flanagan celebrated winning the New York City Marathon in Central Park on November 5. Elsa/Getty Images

By Lindsay Crouse Nov. 11, 2017

When Shalane Flanagan won the New York City Marathon last week, her victory was about more than just an athletic achievement. Of course, it's a remarkable one: She's the first American woman to win in 40 years, and she did so in a blistering 2 hours 26 minutes.

But perhaps Flanagan's bigger accomplishment lies in nurturing and promoting the rising talent around her, a rare quality in the cutthroat world of elite sports. Every single one of her training partners — 11 women in total — has made it to the Olympics while training with her, an extraordinary feat. Call it the Shalane Effect: You serve as a rocket booster for the careers of the women who work alongside you, while catapulting forward yourself.

“Shalane has pioneered a new brand of ‘team mom’ to these young up-and-comers, with the confidence not to tear others down to protect her place in the hierarchy,” said Lauren Fleshman, who became a professional runner in the early 2000s, around the same time Flanagan did. “Shalane’s legacy is in her role modeling, which women in every industry would like to see more of.”

Here’s how it worked until Flanagan burst onto the scene. After college, promising female distance athletes would generally embark on aggressive training until they broke down. Few of them developed the staying power required to dominate the global stage. And they didn’t have much of a community to support them; domestic women’s distance running was fractious and atrophied. In 2000, for example, only one American woman (<http://www.nytimes.com/2000/02/27/sports/olympics-a-long-triumphs-in-the-olympic-trials.html>) qualified for the Olympic marathon, after training alone in her Anchorage home on a treadmill.

But things changed after 2009, when Flanagan joined Jerry Schumacher’s fledgling running group in Portland, Ore., called the Bowerman Track Club. She was the team’s lone woman, and worked with him to create something new: a team of professional female distance runners who would train together and push one another to striking collective success. They were coached by a man and surrounded mostly by male runners, but over time Flanagan and her teammates outperformed the men in the national and global arenas.

Instead of being threatened by her teammates’ growing accomplishments, Flanagan embraced them, and brought in more women, elevating them to her level until they become the most formidable group of distance athletes in the nation. National championships, world championships, Olympics: They became some of the best runners in the world.

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One of them, Emily Infeld, joined the club in Portland after college, but developed one stress fracture after another. She contemplated quitting in 2014. That December, Flanagan took her aside for a glass of wine and a talk.

“I was really struggling — I cried and told her ‘I can’t do it, my body isn’t built for this,’ ” recalled Infeld. “And she totally changed my mind-set. She told me that of course this was bad, but she believed I could do better. I got better, we trained together and she held me accountable. It’s completely changed my career.”

By the following August, Infeld had become one of the fastest runners in the world, taking a surprise bronze in the 10,000 meters at the World Championships.

This is not all selfless acts of mentorship; the camaraderie Flanagan has fostered with her teammates served her well.

“I thoroughly enjoy working with other women,” Flanagan told me. “I think it makes me a better athlete and person. It allows me to have more passion toward my training and racing. When we achieve great things on our own, it doesn’t feel nearly as special.”

In fact, it arguably made the difference in securing her spot in the Olympics last year.

On a searing day in Los Angeles at the United States Olympic marathon trials in February 2016, Flanagan and her teammate Amy Cragg broke away from the pack early in the race. They had spent months training together for that day and ran stride-for-stride in matching uniforms. But toward the end of the race, Flanagan’s face turned red and she began to wilt, staggering a bit as their advantage narrowed.

Cragg slowed down and urged her on, pacing her over the few final miles and even fetching her water so Flanagan could conserve energy, a remarkable demonstration of support on a racecourse. Flanagan barely made it across the finish line, where she collapsed into Cragg’s arms. But Flanagan was able to make her fourth Olympic team and go on to become the top American finisher in the Olympic marathon in Rio, in sixth place.

“We had run thousands of miles together; we had worked so hard for this. She had been there every step of the way, struggling with me,” Cragg told me a few months after the race. “We all have someone like Shalane where you’re kind of dependent on her, who has your back and would do the same thing.”

This year, Cragg took the bronze medal in the marathon at the track and field world championships.

Flanagan's leadership style doesn't fit the "girl boss" leadership archetypes that are flourishing in pop culture, the Ivanka Trump feminism (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/13/opinion/sunday/ivanka-trumps-dangerous-fake-feminism.html>), with its shallow claims of support for women, that yields no results. (Ms. Trump's kind of feminism may attract cheers at races, but it does not win them.) Flanagan does not just talk about elevating women; she elevates them. And they win.

The Flanagan kind of feminism — a ruthless adherence to goals — rarely makes for interesting stories in the moment. It took Flanagan from the time she turned professional, in 2004, until this year to win a major international race; years of tedium and drudgery, and robotic routine (churning her legs through 130 miles a week). She went on her first vacation in seven years of marathon training after suffering a stress fracture this spring. It's not fun, and it's not relatable.

To be sure, Flanagan's unapologetic competitiveness is not universally popular, but she is respected for it. Flanagan boldly acknowledged the work she put into her marathon training and was unabashed about wanting to win before the race. Her victory in New York involved fist-pumping and profanity-laced affirmations as she crossed the finish line in front of millions of viewers.

We usually see competitive women, particularly athletically excellent women, only in one of two ways: either competing to defeat one another, or all about team over self. But that's a flawed, limiting paradigm. The Shalane Effect dismantles it: She is extraordinarily competitive, but not petty; team-oriented, but not deferential. Elevating other women is actually an act of self-interest: It's not so lonely at the top if you bring others along.

So, it was no coincidence that, with the support system she spent years building for herself, it was Flanagan who finally prevailed.

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