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**WOMEN  
RUNNING  
THE WORLD**  
PAULA MITCHELL

+

CELLAR CLUB "BEHIND THE VINES"  
HUNTING IN SOUTH TEXAS  
TWO NEW PREFERRED BUILDERS  
STAR STUDENT  
AND MORE

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# WOMEN ***RUNNING*** THE WORLD

By Krystal Mathis | Photography By West Vita

"It's just running!" That's how Paula Mitchell describes what she does. But to most people, it would seem like much, much more than that. See, Paula runs ultra-marathons. These are races that are over the 26-mile mark, sometimes well over the 100-mile mark, and often involve multiple days, overnight runs, global travel, extreme weather, and some incredibly remote, yet beautiful, places. While competing in ultra-marathons is an unbelievable feat in and of itself, it really is "just running" when you consider Paula's true purpose: teaching and encouraging other women to run. With running comes a feeling of confidence, self-efficacy, and empowerment that can change lives. Thanks to Paula, it has changed many lives!

Paula is used to long journeys, and her journey to being a super athlete started in Houston when she was a child. She explains, "My parents made me take piano, but I didn't really like it. I liked doing cartwheels, and handstands, and jumping off of stuff, and climbing trees! Finally, I talked my parents into letting me take a gymnastics class. I loved it, and ended up doing it competitively. I always liked sport, but I never really liked being competitive. I hate the part when someone has to win and someone has to lose."

"At college, I started out at UT and then graduated with my finance degree from Sam Houston. Then I went to work for a mortgage company, had a small mortgage software company for a while, and ended up going to work for British Petroleum initially as a computer-tech person. I gravitated to finance from there. During college and then after I wasn't really very active at all. I was just so busy

with life that I didn't make time for myself. I tried running...but I hated it!"

"I got married, had a child, and then divorced. It was tough being a single mother and trying to balance work life. It was really hard. Not the fondest of times, but my daughter and I kind of grew up together. She was young, I was young, and we both ate a lot of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. But it was a good time too; toddlers are fun and busy! And then I met my husband Kirk at BP where he was also working."

"After we got married, we moved to Indonesia for Kirk's job. It was definitely a different way of life! It was also in Indonesia that I rekindled my love of sport. There's not a whole lot else to do there. We lived in the middle of the jungle."

"The community where we lived did have tennis courts and even had an eleven-hole golf course. Basically, this course was just wherever they can fit in a few holes in the jungle. While you're playing golf there, orangutans would come right out of the jungle to see what you were doing. Sometimes we couldn't play and we had to wait for the orangutans to move. So, it definitely wasn't golf like we play golf in Cordillera!"

"I started to pick up running in Indonesia thanks to, of all things, *Cosmopolitan Magazine*. We didn't have restaurants or shops, but sometimes people would bring in magazines and books and stuff from home. We had a little bitty library, and a friend of mine found this article in *Cosmo*. I know, the utmost fitness magazine in the world!" she says sarcastically. "I needed to lose weight at the time and the article said you could jog for just









7 minutes to lose weight. We tried it a few times and didn't really stick to it, but I kept the article. Shortly after that we moved to Belgium."

In Belgium, Paula soon met another woman from the States. They became fast friends, and wanted to start exercising together for health. "We decided that we would start up jogging for 7 minutes, and then we'd go have coffee. It was going so well, we thought maybe we could jog for 8, 9, maybe 10 minutes. We did it for a while and then we decided 'let's be real runners.' We decided we'd do the Paris marathon. We trained for a few months. Of course, we had no idea what we were doing. We just thought it would be fun." "We signed up for it, and we really did it! I absolutely fell in love with it. I thought, 'so this is what people have been talking about.' My friend and I laughed a lot and had so much fun, and the two of us were not competitive at all with each other. We did every step together."

"My husband Kirk and my daughter Adrian came to Paris with me. It's great that my family is so supportive and so excited about my races. Though I do think there were a little bit like, 'why would you want to run 26 miles?'"

So why does Paula want to run 26 miles? "I want to run marathons because of the feeling of accomplishment," she says. "Plus there are other things that I just love about it. Even training for that first big race, you would never come home in a bad mood. I really enjoyed sort of decompressing and clearing my head. I was happy when I was running, and I really enjoy the whole journey. There's just something great about your own two feet taking you someplace."

After running a marathon, next Paula wanted to tackle an even bigger feat. She decided to take on Kilimanjaro. "We went with some friends and family and we went on this 6-day trek. We summited and it was beautiful. There was absolutely no competition. The goal was just getting to the top."

Competition is still not Paula's driving force. For her, "it's just about doing it. I'm really average in anything I do," she says. This comment seems funny from someone who accomplishes such amazing things, but Paula wasn't kidding. "No, I'm dead serious!" the humble Paula insists. "I can do almost anything, but I do everything sort of the middle. I don't win and I don't lose. But I do everything."

Next up, Paula and family made a move to London. Paula notes, "My friend who ran in Paris with me didn't keep running. She accomplished what she set out to do. She ticked that box and then didn't feel the need to do it anymore. But I ticked

the box and fell in love with it!"

"In London, a few of my friends and acquaintances had heard I was a runner. It's funny that they called me that, 'a runner.' I had done a marathon but didn't even know what I was doing. So those ladies and I ran together. What I discovered is just that runners are nice. They want you to join them, they want to help you. They are nice people."

"Around that time, a friend I had known in Belgium had moved to London also. She wanted to lose weight and she knew my story. So she said, 'why don't you train me and teach me how to run?' And I did. We did a couple little 5k's and 10k's together. Through that process of running with her and trying to teach her I realized I really liked teaching women how to run. I found my niche. I decided to start a running group. I kind of wrangled a few runners together and decided to try to figure out how I learned to run, and write it down and create a little program. It was to teach other people how to run, but also to make it easier for them and to make the whole experience better."

"In 2003, a few members of the club and I decided that we would go to Prague for a marathon. I found 3 girls who had never run before. We decided that we would train and do this race. We had a great long weekend there. There were 8 ladies there, some quite experienced and some beginners. Because I was training them, I ran with the beginners. We finished the race and we decided it was a good thing. We decided to keep on doing it."

"Then we went to Bucharest in the fall of 2003 and I trained some beginner runners for that. On the side, I would still do my own races. I was doing full marathons at that time. Probably a couple a year. However, the thing I loved the most was teaching women how to run. It's just running! But these women would start to look different, and 6 months into a program like that, they have more confidence. They realize that they're capable of so much more than they thought. They'd start taking on new challenges, and they became more assertive with their language and their decision-making. I got a thrill out of the training. The more my trainee thought she couldn't do it, the more I was drawn to seeing her through."

Around that time, Paula decided it was time for a change. Regular marathons were seeming less adventurous, and she preferred her training runs in nature to running races in the city. "I had really grown tired of the street racing thing. There was a guy that I knew who was a trainer at the gym. He had just done an ultra-marathon, the Marathon Des Sables

in Africa, and he said it was the most amazing thing he had ever done in his life. By then I had gotten quite comfortable with longer runs so I decided to take it on."

The Marathon Des Sables is not just any race. The Discovery Channel has ranked it as the "toughest footrace on earth." It's over 150 miles through the scorching Sahara Desert. But Paula doesn't back down from a challenge! She says,



"I signed up although I wasn't really sure at first, but my friend at the gym told me that I could do it. I definitely didn't know what I was getting in to, but I had a year to train. It was at that point that I started then getting a little more organized about my plan."



Paula began her training with a friend, but that friend had to drop out half-way through the training. It was tough for Paula, who loves running with friends. She says, "I really thought about if I could take on this challenge myself. But I happened to look at this little inspirational card I had. It said 'never let fear control your fate.' I looked at it, thinking, why would I back out of this race just because I'm terrified of it?"

You run with a map in your hand. You run, you find your way, and when you finish that day, you make your food, and you sleep, and you do it all over again the next day."

"Day 4 of the race was the long day which everyone sort of dreads and wants to get through. You run into the night. I was running on a big sand dune in the dark, and one foot fell into a deep hole I didn't see. I didn't fall or

then I went back to London, waited a couple days, and finally saw a chiropractor. Eventually the pain was so bad that I saw an orthopedic surgeon. Turns out, my leg was broken and I didn't know it! So I had months of being immobilized."

Far from being discouraged, Paula reflected on her time in the race with fondness. "Despite everything, that race was amazing. I found what I loved. It had been the biggest adventure. I met these



"So I went and it was awful," she says with a laugh. "It really was so hard but I loved every minute of it. Our hottest day was 123 degrees. You carry everything on your back: your sports drinks, gels, whatever you're going to eat, your clothes. Most days are about 25 miles.

anything, but it just sent my leg up into my hip and it was rattling. It was such a shocking pain sensation. Everything was hurting, but I kept running."

"The last two days of that race you have a marathon and a half-marathon. I finished it and felt so accomplished! But

incredible people. Only a few are trying to win; the rest of us help each other. If someone is in a bad way, you visit with them and share your food with them. I knew I loved it and I knew I was going to keep doing them."







"After my leg healed, I went back to the running group in London. By then it was big, probably 60 ladies. It was very rewarding to start this group and see it grow and see so many women touched by it. I was still training others and starting to tweak that beginner program. About that time, I set up a website for the running group. It still exists! We named the group Women Running the World. It's a play on words, but it also makes sense. We were doing so much traveling. We went to Cyprus, Portugal, Sweden, Jordan, Turkey, the list goes on! So we kept doing that, and the group was growing, and I was doing these ultra-marathons on the side."

"The next one I did was the Trans-Alpine. It's an 8-day race across 4 countries in Europe. You go through Austria, Switzerland, and finish in Italy. On that race, I took a girl with me who had come through my beginner program in London and who had become quite a runner. It was amazing to see her do that. When we started, she had been jogging for 60 seconds and running for 2 minutes."

"In 2009 we did the Trans-Rockies race from Beaver Creek to Aspen, Colorado. I was doing these "stage races" like once a year. Then I would find 2 and 3 day races in the UK and sometimes I'd do it by myself, and sometimes someone would come with me and they would do it with me. So those were a good way to sort of could teach people in the group how to do this without it being such a serious commitment. I still loved the shorter races."

Paula kept racking up the ultra-marathons and marathons, completing the Comrades Marathon in South Africa, the Himalayan Challenge in Nepal and India, and most recently the Grand to Grand at the Grand Canyon. With so many global races, it raises the question of what makes running so universal? Why does it appeal to so many people? Paula says it's because, "It's so easy. There are no excuses. All you need is a pair of shoes and you don't even need a pair of shoes! We were born to run. It's a natural thing for all of us."

In London, Women Running the World was growing by leaps and bounds. It seemed everyone wanted to be trained by Paula! "I would go out and run all day to train because I was training so many different groups. By the time I left London it was 165 ladies on the list. The more you run with these ladies, the more and better you know them and the better you can coach them. By then I had turned into a full-fledged coach. I was educated, and experienced, and I loved encouraging women and getting them to run."

As they accomplished more and more they learned to be determined, and be inspired, and be empowered."

Paula found her true calling helping other women accomplish their goals, but she learned a few other things along the way, too. "I'd say the biggest thing I've learned from the races is to be flexible. Often I don't have a language in common with other people at these races. It can be very uncomfortable to be in a race where instructions aren't in English. So I just kind of go with the flow, and know that it's going to be okay. You have to put your trust back in humanity. People are nice. Somebody will help you if you're in trouble, just as you would help someone."

Next up on the Paula's list is the Atacama Challenge, a 150-mile stage race in Chile's Atacama Desert, which is also the driest place on earth. It's even more arid than California's Death Valley. Fifty times more arid, as a matter of fact. The race is in October, but Paula is training right now. "I like the idea of figuring out how can I not only survive, but how can I make myself comfortable. I like to figure out new races. It's going to be 104 during the day, and at night it's going to be close to freezing. How can you be warm at night and how do you train for running in what is basically a moonscape? You're only going to be going up rock and sand. Just rock or sand. What food can I bring that I think I would like to eat. It's like a puzzle, and I love thinking about how can I do it, how can I train so that I'll be ready, and safe, and smart about it, but still enjoy it. Then I also know that I'll get to see all these friends that I've made through these races, and I'll get to meet new people, too!"

The trek from Texas to Indonesia, to Belgium, to London, and back again hasn't been simple. Paula says, "We'd been gone for a long time, and we both decided we wanted a place to come back to. The Hill Country was a great fit because we love the scenery and my parents live in Houston not too far away. We started looking in Austin and eventually found Cordillera Ranch when property was first available and it was a great fit." Kirk adds, "Even when we started looking over a decade ago, Austin was just getting too crowded and crazy. We wanted someplace quieter."

Paula explains, "When it was time to move back home, we were still in London and we knew it was going to take a couple years to build our dream home. Building a house from London sounds like a really awful proposition, but it worked out great because of Robert Thornton and his team with Great Homes. He

would send us pictures and if something really needed my approval he agreed to wait to move forward until I came back."

While waiting for the house to be completed, Paula and Kirk rented an apartment in Boerne for their trips home. Even then, they visited Cordillera often for the amenities and friendships. "I started playing with the ladies golf group, and they were all so friendly. Amazingly, one of the first weeks I played with them I had a hole-in-one and everyone was so encouraging." Kirk adds, "When you compare Texas to Europe, and it strikes me again and again, Texas is so friendly. In London no one speaks to you."

While Paula definitely loves the golf, even recently scoring a rare ace on the course, she can't decide what her favorite part of Cordillera living is. "They have a great golf system, with a golf pro, and the pro shop. It's great how they manage things, and they really teach you the game. But I love everything about Cordillera! One thing that particularly strikes me as interesting is that very few people are from here. In one sense that's a good thing for making friends. It's fun to hear their life stories, and hear what they've been doing with their lives, and how they chose to be here."

"It's also been great and different to be in a house that we own. When we were overseas, they were rentals, so if you hung a picture you paid for the hole in the wall. But this is really, really ours. We can start putting in a taproot here. My daughter lives in San Antonio now." Kirk adds, "With us being so international, the odds of the three of us even being in the same city were remote. But now we get to see her every week one way or the other."

In addition to training for the race in Chile, Paula has been working on getting some friends here in Cordillera to join her for other races. "One girl I met through golf, and one of them was working out really hard at the gym so I just introduced myself and convinced her to join me. So we're planning to do some races."

Paula doesn't think she will start a running group like she did in London all over again, but you never know. "There are some ladies out here that I've been twisting their arms, and some of them are going to do the half-marathon in San Antonio and are even doing a race in Las Vegas with me. So, I don't know. We will see what happens," Paula says with a grin.

Someday soon, you might even see groups from Cordillera Ranch competing in races worldwide. It would come as no surprise, since everyone already knows Cordillera women really do run the world! 