

Leslie Carson

December 22, 1963 -

The matriarch of the well-known Carson family of runners, and mother of fellow inductee Lindsay, Leslie Carson was one of Canada's best female marathoners at her peak.

A Nova Scotia native, she ran her first marathon in 1983, at Montreal, and two years later, she finished second in the Canberra Marathon, and 10th in the Sydney Marathon (2:55.00).

In 1986, she won the Halifax Marathon—her first marathon victory, in 2:55—and posted other marathon wins in Ottawa (1998), Niagara (2003) and Buffalo (2004), and was ranked third in her age group for Canada. A Cambridge Athlete of the Year nominee, she was also a decorated university runner when she returned to school at the age of 36 for her Masters degree.

The mother of three returned to running in 1994, at the age of 31 after a nine-year absence to raise her children and concentrate on work; she finished third at the Detroit Marathon in 2:45.32, and then took seventh at the Rome Marathon in 1995, clocking 2:45. She had been invited to compete in Rome, all expenses paid, based on her finish at the Detroit Marathon.

As preparation for Rome, she ran a 10K race in Peterborough, and did a 20-mile run on the treadmill at the Cambridge YMCA, which was probably a record treadmill run at the Y to that point. "It was one of those really cold Sundays," she noted of the late February 1995 run.

"Usually they recommend a good 10K race a couple of weeks before a marathon," she said.

In Rome she hit the wall after being on a 2:40 pace, and finished in 2:46.16. "I hit the wall quite early after only 18 miles; it was quite humbling," she said.

As good as she was at the 26.2-mile marathon, Carson favoured shorter races. "My favourite distance lies somewhere between 10 miles and a half-marathon," she told the *Cambridge Reporter's* Brent Long. "Ten K is too short, it's too much like a sprint for me."

Carson was invited to compete at the Kawaguchi Marathon after being the first Canadian female finisher, and second female overall, at the Vancouver Marathon on May 7, 2000. Vancouver and Kawaguchi's nearby neighbour, Yokohama, are sister cities.

Six months later, on November 26, 2000, Carson won the marathon in Kawaguchi, Japan, in a personal-best time of 2:43.35. and, after winning a bronze medal at the 2001 Canadian University Championships, she received what she considered the best news of her running life; in July 2001 she was named a member of Canada's national team.

At the Francophone Games in Quebec in late July 2001—the Francophone Games are held every four years and bring together all of the world's French-speaking countries for athletic competition—Carson captured bronze for Canada in 2:50.02 behind France's Michell Leservoiser and Madagascar's Clarisse Rasoarizay.

By then, Carson had returned to school—in 2001 she was awarded all-Canadian status—to earn her master's degree at the University of Guelph, helping her team to several top-three finishes.

When she joined the Guelph team in the fall of 2000, her teammates were concerned. Not that she was a 36-year-old wanting to compete against 20-year-olds, and not even because she was a mother of three. They were concerned because she was a pretty big name and just might prove to be the best runner on the team. Some of them were intimidated.

She blazed new trails that fall as a member of the nationally-ranked University of Guelph Gryphons cross-country team. Carson's Waterloo coach, Pete Grinbergs, was impressed by her determination and talent. "Isn't it amazing to be 36 years old and think that it is possible to win a medal (at university)? It's everyone's fantasy to do something like this and she's actually living it."

Grinbergs knew that Carson would have an immediate impact at university. He also believed she would be the team's best runner, on a nationally-ranked team that boasted some strong talent.

"She's a determined individual. I think she'll be great for them. It's inspirational. It's pretty impressive that she's always managed to find a balance between running, raising children and working full-time."

Carson wanted to do more than just run. "I want to be a strong team leader for the young girls. I want to encourage and help motivate them."

To get her feet wet before going to Guelph, she competed in a university cross-country meet as an open competitor, handily defeating Guelph's lead runner, an all-Canadian, and winning the event outright.

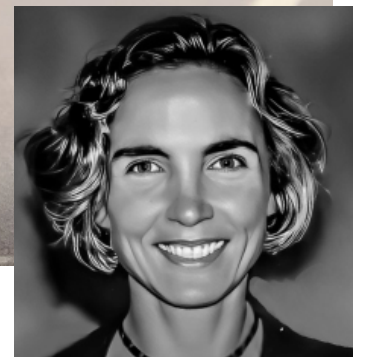
In May, 1998, on Mother's Day, Carson captured the National Capital Marathon, beating Hong Kong Olympian Winnie Ng, the favourite, who had come to Canada that spring to visit family and to win the prestigious race.

Ng had been a member of Hong Kong's 1984 Los Angeles Olympic team, where she finished 31st, but couldn't maintain the pace set by the Cambridge dietician.

"Carson, who is more accustomed to breakfast in bed for Mother's Day than running a marathon," wrote The Ottawa Citizen's Martin Cleary, "won by almost five minutes with a time of two hours 49 minutes 5.4 seconds. She earned \$1,500."

Ng, who expected to win, said "the winner (Carson) was too strong. She was too fast at the beginning."

"It's always nice to win," said Carson, accompanied by husband John and children Lindsay, then



As a member of Canada's national team, Leslie Carson, left, won bronze at the Francophone Games Marathon in Ottawa in 2001 (George Aitkin photo). Top, Carson wins the 1998 National Capital Marathon in Ottawa, beating Hong Kong Olympian Winnie Ng.

8, Oliver, 7, and Oscar, 5. "It's extra special to win on Mother's Day."

Carson and husband John—he held longstanding provincial track records—were both well-known runners at various road races throughout southern Ontario during the 1990s. John, who created and manufactured a nutritional bar called the Tastejammer, chalked up many victories over some of Ontario's best runners.

"I'm highly motivated," said Leslie, "and that encourages others. They see that I'm just a normal person...who goes to work, is late getting kids to soccer practice like everyone else, and who walks the dogs and makes lunches."

She proved that female athletes can raise a family, work full time, and excel at the highest levels of sport. Whether it was as a member of the Cambridge Can-Am Games torch relay, or as a member of Canada's national team, Leslie Carson was an inspiration to men and women.

She believed that women generally neglect themselves in the face of overwhelming demands of daily life. "They miss out on that 'me' time, but running gives you more energy for your children, your husband and work."

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