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Deadpan walking: Shaver sets sights on 2016 Olympics

YOU CAN LAUGH. Erika Shaver doesn't mind. In fact, she thinks it's kind of funny, too — even now that it's a very serious focus of her life.

Such is the fate of the race walker (and yes, it's two words according to the International Amateur Athletic Federation), who almost universally elicits snickers from people who witness the decidedly unusual movement for the first time.

"It looks funny. When I first started I thought it was funny. I didn't want to do it," Shaver admits. "But there's something about it I just really like. People don't get it. They watch it, and they're like, why don't you just run? If you were a swimmer, why would you do a butterfly instead of a freestyle? It's just a different event."

Perhaps race walking amuses us because the very concept of walking when you're racing is counterintuitive, and race walking only undermines itself further by not looking very much like walking, anyway. The rules call for a specific form — one foot must be on the ground at all times, and the front leg must be straight when it lands. To the untrained eye, the competitors appear to be trying to reset a dislocated hip.

Shaver, however, sees only beauty in master race walkers. "For me it's a lot more challenging than running is," she says. "When you first start out it's the technique, trying to keep that for the distance. It's definitely hard, especially when it comes down to the end of the race. You're tired. When you watch people who are really great at race walking, though, they're just flying. To me I just think it's really pretty."

Maybe, if you're open-minded enough, you'll learn to see the same thing. Perhaps you'll even catch sight of the Furman sophomore at the 2016 Olympics, wearing the colors of Team USA.

Shaver didn't take up the sport until late 2008, but she is already one of the country's best in her age group (she's 19). Last February she set a personal record with a first-place time of 52:36 in the 10-kilometer race at the U.S. team trials to qualify for the national squad that competed the next month at the Pan American Race Walk Cup in Medellin, Columbia.

There she was the top U.S. racer and finished 13th out of 21 competitors from countries throughout the Americas. "USA Track and Field paid for the travel and food. It was all covered. I got to wear a Team USA uniform. We got warm-up jackets and everything," Shaver says. "It was really cool."



FURMAN SPORTS INFORMATION



To see Erika in action, scan here with your smart phone or click the YouTube link at www.furman.edu and scroll down the list of videos.

In June she was one of the top two finishers at the Junior Nationals in Eugene, Ore., although her time of 53:20.06 was just short of qualifying her for the Pan American Track and Field Cup. Now it's time to step up (pun intended) to the 20K raced by adults.

"I've pretty much done all the races I'm going to do as a junior, so I'm going to start working on the 20K. I actually did my first one in May, and it went pretty well," Shaver says. "I ended up walking an hour and 55."

She'll have to get down to 1:48 to reach the Olympic Trials and 1:38 for the Games themselves, so she knows that London 2012 "might be a little too much of a stretch." But she and her coach, Ian Whatley, are serious about Rio de Janeiro in 2016.

An Englishman who lives in Greer, S.C., Whatley was a college teammate of track legend Sebastian Coe and has been a world-class race walker for decades. He says that Shaver has the right kind of body for the sport, but he is even more impressed by her mental dedication to solitary training.

Still, Shaver's participation on the Furman cross country team has been critical to her well-being. Race walking is not recognized by the NCAA, but Shaver, a native of Dayton, Ohio, was drawn to Furman and former coach Gene Mullin's offer to help her in any way he could. "The coaches here have been fabulous, and they've supported me. That was my biggest worry," she says. "It's been great to be a part of a team."

Whatley adds, "Doing something that looks a little odd all by yourself all over campus is a terribly stressful place for a freshman. So we thought being a 'walk-on' to the cross country team would be a good place to be.

"I look forward to seeing two years from now, three years from now, how fast she can go. I think she has more potential than she wants to admit, but she'll get all excited and nervous if she hears how fast I think she can go. So we won't do that."

— RON WAGNER