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First time's the charm for Fenster in Marine Corps Marathon

At 37 years of age, Cate Pichon Fenster '93 has been running most of her life.

She was an award-winning runner at Pope High School in Atlanta and, later, on Furman's cross country and track and field teams. She ran while doing graduate work at the University of Alabama-Birmingham, and she ran after becoming a tenure-track member of the biology faculty at the College of Wooster in Ohio.

She has run all kinds of distances through all kinds of injuries and in all kinds of weather, but until she entered the Marine Corps Marathon in Washington, D.C., in October, she had never run more than 22 miles in succession. And even though it was Fenster's first marathon (26.2 miles) and she was one of 30,000 competitors, she found herself at the 16-mile mark leading every other woman in the race.

"Never having run a marathon, I didn't know what to expect," she says. "I wasn't even sure if I was pacing myself correctly."

She started to hurt "pretty bad" at the 21-mile mark, she says. One mile later, her legs went numb — and she had no idea how she would traverse the next four miles.

"I was running," Fenster says, "but I didn't know what my legs were doing."

Somehow, though, she maintained her pace to the finish and won the race in a time of two hours, 48 minutes and 53 seconds. That's just a little less than two minutes shy of the qualifying time for the Olympic Trials.

Not bad for a first try at the most demanding of distances.

"I never thought once about winning the race. There was no pressure. I just wanted to have fun and see what a marathon was all about. That's probably why I did as well as I did."

Fenster also finished as the top neurobiologist in the race — which was why she was

in Washington in the first place. She was on sabbatical from Wooster to do research at the National Institutes of Health, where she was studying cellular mechanisms of schizophrenia.

Although it's been almost 16 years since Fenster graduated from Furman, it should come as no surprise that she continues to achieve both athletically and academically. While majoring in biology, she earned all-Southern Conference honors in cross country, indoor track and outdoor track. In 1990 she was the conference's outstanding performer in cross country, and in 1991 she claimed the same honor in indoor track.

Fenster was inducted into the Furman Athletic Hall of Fame in 2002 and still holds the school record for the indoor 5,000-meter run with a time of 16:51.72.

After graduating she headed to UAB, where she earned a master's degree in exercise physiology and a Ph.D. in neurobiology. She served as a Teaching and Research Fellow for two years at Rhodes College in Memphis, Tenn., before going to Wooster in 2005. She is married to Steve Fenster, a fellow college professor and runner whom she met at UAB.

Her success in the Marine Corps Marathon has definitely piqued her interest in competing at that distance. The Marine Corps course is a particularly hilly one, which makes her time all the more impressive.

The current qualifying time for the Olympic Trials is 2:47, and Fenster believes she might be able to go as low as 2:44 on a flatter course.

Although she maintains a demanding teaching and research schedule, she says, "I'd like to keep training and run a couple of marathons a year just to see what might happen."

— VINCE MOORE

Photo: Tim Hipps/U.S. Army Photo



As Cate Fenster approached the 16-mile mark at the Marine Corps Marathon, she prepared to pass the only woman ahead of her. She had been slowly bearing down on the leader since the 10-mile mark, and she couldn't help but think there was something familiar about the runner.

It wouldn't be until after the race was over, however, that Fenster would discover what a small world it really is.

The runner she passed was Rebekah Potts, a 2004 Furman graduate who is currently working on dual M.D. and Ph.D. degrees at the University of North Carolina. Potts finished fifth with a time of 2:55.42.

Potts, a chemistry major, competed for the Paladins from 2000 through 2004. She was a Furman Bisher Academic-Athletic Scholar, captained the cross country, indoor and outdoor track teams, and received the Donaldson-Watkins Medal for General Excellence.

"Although I didn't know it at the time, it was pretty cool that two Furman girls were battling it out for the lead," Fenster says.