Sarah Sellers and the Craziest Schedule in Running

The surprising runner-up in last year’s Boston Marathon wants to be an elite runner while keeping her job as a nurse anesthetist. She insists that being busier makes her faster.

By Matthew Futterman

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In a world filled with Type A people striving to achieve the ultimate juggling act, Sarah Sellers is a worthy competitor.

Sellers is the American nurse anesthetist and long distance runner who came out of nowhere last year to finish second in the chilly deluge that was the 2018 Boston Marathon.

A year later, Sellers, 27, is headed back to Boston for Monday’s event. Logging up to 120 miles during as many as 11 weekly training sessions, she has lowered her personal-best time for 26.2 miles to 2 hours 36 minutes from the 2:44 she ran in Boston. She believes she can run under 2:30 soon, and has her sights set on the Olympics next year or in 2024.

Oh, and she still logs 30 hours a week at her day job.
In an era when success in sports is supposedly all about hyperfocus and specialization, Sellers’s approach to long distance running is a throwback, an experiment in whether there might be a better way. Her decision to keep working at Banner-University Medical Center Tucson is not about the money or fearing that she will lose her career in medicine if she runs full time. She says doing it this way is going to help her run faster, especially now that her struggles with disordered eating are behind her.

“If I quit my job and trained full time, I don’t see it going well,” she said in an interview last month in New York, before she ran the New York City Half-Marathon. “I’d be a stress case and I’d be more injury prone. When I balance the two, I think I have better perspective.”
To those who know Sellers best, her borderline-bananas juggling act is about what they have come to expect.

Paul Pilkington, her coach now and when she ran at Weber State University in Ogden, Utah, said Sellers’s drive to push herself to the edge had been driving him nuts for years. Pilkington used to pair her with a slower Weber State teammate on recovery days and order Sellers not to push ahead. She would anyway.

In February, in the middle of her preparation for Boston, she traveled to Ogden for vacation. The training schedule called for her to push to 120 miles that week. She did that, and also went on daily hikes, including scaling two peaks above 8,000 feet. One day, she went skiing.
Sellers runs alone, when only the occasional coyote or wild pig is out.

Sellers’s ambition to hold down a near-full-time job and be an elite runner does not have much precedent in recent times. Steve Jones, the former British marathon champion, held the marathon world record in the 1980s while working as a technician in the Royal Air Force, but that was a different era. The world record is more than six minutes faster now.

Ben Rosario, the coach of the Northern Arizona Elite, a training group based in Flagstaff, set up the team so sponsorship money from the shoe company Hoka would allow runners to train full time, as nearly all the top American and international runners do now. But he said a runner like Sellers, with a full life outside of the sport, can avoid living and dying by each workout. One of Rosario’s runners, Kellyn Taylor, balances her training with taking care of her toddler and preparing to become a firefighter, while others need the rest.

Those who believe Sellers will not be more than a middling marathoner point to her age and best times, which are far from world class. They say the second-place finish in Boston was a fluke, pulled off on a day of driving rain, 20-mile-per-hour headwinds and 40-degree weather that felled several elites from warmer climes. She is on the verge of her late 20s, they say, and has never broken 2:36, which is more than 20 minutes behind Paula Radcliffe’s world record, 2:15.25.

And yet, Sellers is young in terms of her life as an elite distance runner; it often takes five to 10 years of dedicated training for a marathoner to reach a peak. Sellers is just getting started after finally figuring out how to take care of her body.
Sellers, running through her neighborhood in Tucson, believes she has years to go before reaching her peak. Rugile Kaladyte for The New York Times

Always talented, Sellers was prone to illness and injury in college. She sustained a stress fracture in her foot that essentially wrecked her senior year.

The fracture was not simply bad luck. It was the result of Sellers’s tendency to make every workout hard. She was always dissatisfied with her performances, even when she set personal records. When she looked in the mirror, she always saw someone who was slightly heavier than she thought she should be, so she deprived herself of food, even when she was hungry. It was perfectionism taken to a dangerous level.

The doctor she saw to treat her stress fracture told her she would recover with enough rest and physical therapy, but unless she started eating better and training smarter, the injuries would return. Not eating enough had weakened Sellers’s bones.

Sellers ignored him. As promised, she was hurt again, sustaining a tibial stress fracture that finally forced her to cut way back on her running during graduate school in Florida.

She barely ran for a year, and then slowly began light training and entered the
occasional race. Even without speed training, she sometimes won. Once she worked an overnight shift until 7 a.m., then rushed to make the 7:30 a.m. start of a half-marathon that was near the hospital.

Sellers, with her dogs. She says she loves to run but does not want the sport to dominate her life.
Rugile Kaladyte for The New York Times

After graduating in 2017 and moving to Tucson, where her husband, Blake, is a resident in orthopedic surgery, she entered her first marathon in September 2017 in Huntsville, Utah. She won with a time of 2:44.27. That led to an invitation to start
with the elite women at Boston last year.

Then freezing rain fell, the field thinned, and 2:44.04 later, Sellers finished second.

In the postrace news conference, she wore the same souvenir shirt the other 30,000-odd runners got when they picked up their bibs. She became an overnight sensation — the scrubs-wearing nurse anesthetist who nearly won the Boston Marathon. Three companies, including Altra Running, a Utah-based footwear and clothing company, signed on as sponsors.

Sellers said she never really thought about quitting her job to train full time, despite her grueling schedule.

Her husband hears her padding out of the bedroom when it is still dark for her morning run. He will walk into an operating room a few hours later, and there she is, administering the anesthesia.

“I’m a surgery resident, and she’s busier than I am,” he said.
Sellers stretched during a run with her husband, Blake Sellers, along the Rillito River after a 10-hour shift at the hospital.  Rugile Kaladyte for The New York Times

She usually works for as long as 10 hours at the hospital on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday. She rises as early as 4 a.m. to run up to 12 miles and arrives at the hospital at 7 some days. On morning runs, she is almost always alone in the darkness and dawn light, save for the occasional coyote or javelina, a wild pig as large as 50 pounds that roams Tucson streets in the dark.

After work, she will often run at the track. Sometimes, she lifts weights.

Thursday through Saturday are downright relaxing. No work, and just two hard workouts on Thursday and Friday and then a long run of 20-plus miles on Saturday. She does not run on Sundays, though she sometimes hikes.

Sellers said the hospital gave her perspective. After standing over a car accident victim fighting for his life, a bad workout or a disappointing race does not seem like a big deal.

She is considering a leave from the hospital before the Olympic trials in February. That would allow her to train at altitude for a few weeks with a group, and maybe nap between workouts. And yet, the idea of having all that time makes her twitchy.

Would running turn into a job instead of a joy? And what would she do all day?

“Nothing against full-time runners,” she said. “I honor what they do, but it seems like they have a lot of Netflix time.”
Sellers running before her 10-hour shift at the hospital. Rugile Kaladyte for The New York Times