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Mary Wittenberg: I never intended to become a lawyer. You know the risk of sometimes you get in a race that's not actually the race you want to win, and you're in it, and all of a sudden it's 10 years later. I'm like, "Whoa." They're shaking my hand the day I make partner. I'm having an existential crisis. Tears are streaming and everybody's saying, "Oh, she's so happy. She made it." And I'm thinking, "No. What? This was not my goal. I want to work in sports."

00:00:31

Rob Simmelkjaer: Hey, everybody, and welcome to Set the Pace, the official podcast of New York Road Runners presented by Peloton. I'm your host, Rob Simmelkjaer, the CEO of New York Road Runners, and with me is not only my co-host, not only Peloton instructor, but Napa Valley Trail Marathon Champion of 2026, Becs Gentry. Becs, congratulations!

00:00:53

Becs Gentry: Hi! Thank you. Wait. My prize purse.

00:00:58

Rob Simmelkjaer: Let's show it. Let's show it. Her prize purse. For those who are listening and not watching, her prize purse is a purse.

00:01:08

Becs Gentry: A chicken.

00:01:08

Rob Simmelkjaer: Yeah, it is an actual purse with a-

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Becs Gentry: It's a winner, winner, chicken dinner purse.

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Rob Simmelkjaer: A purse in shape of a chicken. I love it. Brilliant and lovely. And congratulations.

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Becs Gentry: Thank you. Thank you.

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Rob Simmelkjaer: So we didn't talk much about the fact that you were doing this. I know you wanted to kind of keep it on the DL a little bit. And so you go out to Napa Valley, you run the ... This was your first trail marathon?

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Becs Gentry: In 10 years.

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Rob Simmelkjaer: In 10 years?

00:01:31

Becs Gentry: Yeah.

00:01:31

Rob Simmelkjaer: And you win and you win by a lot, by the way, like 20 minutes. Congratulations. Tell us about this race.

00:01:39

Becs Gentry: Thank you. Yeah, I kept it on the down low because many reasons. I live in a world where I think when I tell people what I'm doing publicly, it can get blown up into something a lot bigger than it is to me, or at least it can feel like it's becoming something bigger than I need it to be. And I don't take that external stress and pressure very well. So I've decided to keep most of my races to myself moving forward. So if I don't do well, it's only me I'm going to be disappointing.

00:02:17

Rob Simmelkjaer: Yeah, yeah. I get it.

00:02:17

Becs Gentry: And I know I don't disappoint my family and my close friends and my daughter, et cetera. So it just takes the stress levels down a minute.

So yes, I've been training my butt off for this. This was a kind of training run in itself in a weird way for other stuff that I have coming up in the remainder of the year, but it was awesome to be back on the trails. And it was a solo trip. Austin and Tallulah stayed here in New York. And I took the weekend before my 40th birthday to spend a bit of time doing the things I love and just relaxing. And you don't have to be a parent to understand this, but when you're needed by a lot of people, be it at work, professionally, or socially, or yes, if you are a parent as well on top of that, it's just sometimes nice to go away by yourself and be on your own clock and do things that really fill your cup up so you come back feeling like you can give everything to everybody else for another period of time.

So it was a lot of fun. Rob, we're recording this on Tuesday. The race was on Saturday. I'm getting more and more sore by the day. It's ridiculous.

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Rob Simmelkjaer: I love it when the sworn is increases. I think the Tuesday is usually the peak-

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Becs Gentry: It's normally two days, so I was like ... Yesterday, I was like-

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Rob Simmelkjaer: ... although you ran on Saturday, so it's day three. Yeah.

00:03:41

Becs Gentry: Yeah. Monday, I was like, "Monday should have been the worst day." And it was pretty bad yesterday. And I got a run in before I had a 11-hour travel day back from Napa. But this morning, it wasn't worse, but it was the same. I was like, "Come on."

So I'm just attributing that to a long travel day yesterday, a lot of stagnating in my seat. So I'm going to try and be more active. I tried to run again this morning and it was 20 minutes of looking like Bambi on ice, but it's fine. I moved, the blood is pumping the lactic acid hopefully out of my system, and we'll get back to work.

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Rob Simmelkjaer: Was this your first marathon since the Great World Race or had there been another one?

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Becs Gentry: Yeah.

00:04:23

Rob Simmelkjaer: It was, right?

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Becs Gentry: Mm- hmm.

00:04:24

Rob Simmelkjaer: So how did that feel? I mean, after doing seven in seven days to get back ready to run that distance, what did it feel like?

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Becs Gentry: I mean, it's so different, road racing to trail racing.

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Rob Simmelkjaer: Of course, yeah.

00:04:38

Becs Gentry: I was thinking about that and it was very, very difficult for me to pull comparison because I feel when I'm doing road miles, they drag a lot longer than doing trail miles because of the technicality, the variation in pace, the variation of your heart rate, breathing, all of these things that seem to pass the time quicker, easier, however you want to coin it. And for me, training for this has been really fun. Normally, I don't go into Central Park and do multiple loops of Central Park because of the hills. You may run one or two, but I've been doing it a lot and it's been really fun to add in those hills and feel that fatigue. And then even getting onto some trails has been good, but nothing compared me to this.

And I promised myself. It was four loops of the same grueling course, and I said on the first loop, I was like, "All right." I was by myself from the start and I just said, "You got to find something new, not just a body pain, something new in nature on every loop to keep yourself occupied." And that worked really, really well. And it did seem to pass. It was 40 kilometers in total, so just shy of the actual marathon distance, but just under 5,000 feet of elevation we climbed-

00:06:02

Rob Simmelkjaer: Jeez.

00:06:02

Becs Gentry: ... which was pretty gnarly.

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Rob Simmelkjaer: 5,000 feet. That's bananas.

00:06:06

Becs Gentry: Yeah. Somebody said that's halfway up Everest. I was like, "No, I don't think that's right."

00:06:10

Rob Simmelkjaer: Not quite. No.

00:06:10

Becs Gentry: No.

00:06:11

Rob Simmelkjaer: But still, that's a lot. That's a lot.

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Becs Gentry: Yeah. It's like-

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Rob Simmelkjaer: That's like sea level to Denver, Colorado. I mean, 5,000 feet is nuts in one run.

00:06:21

Becs Gentry: No, it wasn't easy. And then on the third loop, I happened to see the sign that was like, "Rattlesnakes are in the area." I was like, "Oh my God. What now?" I'm English. I don't know how to deal with those.

00:06:33

Rob Simmelkjaer: I don't think too many Americans want to deal with those either. Well, incredible accomplishment. Proud of you.

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Becs Gentry: Thank you. Thank you.

00:06:39

Rob Simmelkjaer: Good luck with the recovery. I'm sure you'll be great and back on the tread before you know it. But by the way, the most impressive accomplishment, it might have been actually getting out to California and back-

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Becs Gentry: Yeah. Oh, God.

00:06:49

Rob Simmelkjaer: ... given what's going on with air travel these days. I can only imagine what that was like.

00:06:54

Becs Gentry: Yeah. Honestly, I will be unlike every other scaremonger on the internet, I had absolutely zero problem.

00:07:01

Rob Simmelkjaer: Wow. Brilliant, brilliant.

00:07:02

Becs Gentry: There was no lines at any TSA. I'm very lucky to have TSA and CLEAR, which I think a lot of people do now because credit cards do offer great deals on those things. And I walked through both ways. I literally walked through as normal, if not even smoother. One flight was early in the morning and one flight was at lunchtime.

00:07:25

Rob Simmelkjaer: Wow.

00:07:25

Becs Gentry: So I can't tell you, but I have another flight

on Friday, so I'll tell you then if that one went well.

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Rob Simmelkjaer: Clearly this was meant to be. Clearly this was meant to be for you. So congratulations. Incredible.

00:07:35

Becs Gentry: Thank you.

00:07:36

Rob Simmelkjaer: Well, speaking of legendary running figures, coming up on Set the Pace, New York Road Runner's legend, not just a great runner, but a former CEO and race director here at New York Road Runners, Mary Wittenberg, who also just entered the Running USA Hall of Fame last month. She will join us to talk about how she helped change women's professional marathoning, and of course, New York Road Runners. So Mary, coming up in just a second.

00:08:03

Becs Gentry: Peloton's most advanced tread yet is here. The new Peloton cross-training series Tread Plus, powered by Peloton IQ. Designed for runners who want top-tier performance, it features premium hardware that makes every run and workout more efficient, effective, and motivating, and it accelerates your personal growth mile after mile.

The rubberized slap belt cushions every single step and creates an energizing running space for each stride. And with strength workouts, you can stack right into your routine. You'll build lower body muscle to support stronger runs. With auto-incline adjusting automatically to match instructor queues, your intensity stays exactly where it needs to be so you can stay in the zone and focus on your workout.

Experience our most advanced tread yet at [onpeloton.com](https://onpeloton.com). Peloton, the official digital fitness partner of New York Road Runners.

00:08:59

Rob Simmelkjaer: Our guest today was a champion of the 1987 Marine Corps Marathon, and from there, she eventually went on to lead New York Road Runners. Mary Wittenberg guided NYRR and the New York City Marathon through a decade of explosive growth. She was also in the room for a pivotal decision in 2002 giving elite women their own front-of-the-race start so the competition and the cameras could finally follow the women's race on its own terms.

Of course, if you ask Mary, she'll tell you that it was a team decision, not just hers, but she certainly played a big role in making it happen. And it is great to have my predecessor, one of them, Mary Wittenberg, back with us on

Set the Pace.

Hey, Mary, how are you?

00:09:43

Mary Wittenberg: Hey, Rob. Thanks so much for having me. Hey, Beccs.

00:09:46

Beccs Gentry: Hi. Thank you for being here. We are so honored to have you here and so excited to have this conversation.

00:09:52

Mary Wittenberg: Well, I have to start with lots to congratulate both of you on. Rob, that New York City Half, I now think it's the prettiest urban marathon in the world and so much great energy and vibes, so well done to you. And Beccs, winning outright your first trail run in ages is really remarkable.

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Beccs Gentry: Thank you.

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Mary Wittenberg: So you guys are crushing it.

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Beccs Gentry: Yeah, we're just a dream team over here getting things done.

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Rob Simmelkjaer: I'll let her do the running. Yeah, she does the running, I'll do the other stuff.

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Beccs Gentry: I'll do the running. You do the running of the show. There we are.

00:10:20

Mary Wittenberg: Yeah. Well, you're pretty good at that too.

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Rob Simmelkjaer: That works fine. That works just fine for me. Absolutely.

By the way, Mary, congratulations on being inducted into the Running USA Hall of Fame.

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Beccs Gentry: Hall of Fame.

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Rob Simmelkjaer: A very exciting honor for you and well deserved for someone who's lived their life, a lot of their life in this sport, in this space. What did it mean for you to be honored at Running USA, which for those who don't know is kind of the industry trade group of the running industry? And Mary was honored there just recently last month.

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Mary Wittenberg: Well, thanks so much. I've got to say, I was super honored to receive that award on behalf of so many New York Road Runner members and teammates over the years because that's how we accept these awards. They're not about us as individuals, but about the teams we've worked with over the years. So, that meant a lot.

What was extraordinary and makes me well up is Ted, our dear Ted Metellus, flew in to present this award. And I've got to say, I learned something. If I ever present someone else with an award, I'm going to go back to what Ted did. Guys, he was ... I didn't even know all that about my life. First, he's so busy as it is. He made the time to come in and then was so thoughtful. It meant so much to me.

So, of course, a big thanks to Running USA and for recognizing us as an organization and me as a leader within our team, but to have Ted do that just meant so much and reminds us what this is all about. When we get to put on these events together and help build community in running, it's the same for us. It's about the people. And I was able to work with Ted in his earliest days in the 2000s, actually, early 2000s, and we always wanted to recruit him back and to see him. And Rob, you leading the way with your incredible team just means so much. I'm so cheering all of you on. And to have him make the time to be there and make the real effort as he did just meant so much. So, thank you.

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Rob Simmelkjaer: Aw.

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Becs Gentry: Well, well deserved. You're an icon. You have been for a long time. You continue to be inspiring to all of us. And yes, Ted has a way with knowledge and words. The way he expresses his knowledge of, whether it's actual history of the sport or people, is such a skill. It's not many people can do it the way Ted Metellus does. It really is incredible. So, I want to watch that back. If we can find that anywhere, please can someone send that my way so I can have a good cry?

All right. Mary, let's roll it back, back, back, back to

when you first came to New York City and when you first joined the New York Road Runners club team. What was the running scene like back then?

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Mary Wittenberg: It's wild to think back. First, I'll tell you what we had at New York Road Runners because of Ted Corbitt and Fred and Kathrine Switzer and all those, Nina Kuscsik who came before us. We already had the five-borough marathon on so much of the course that's the same, including the Verrazzano. We already had a half-marathon in every borough. There was 1,000 or 2,000 people in it, but we had some degree of a half. We already had the Pride Run. We already had the Mini.

So we had this incredible foundation as an organization, but we also had, as Rob's heard me say, it was a bit of an organization in mourning in the late '90s because Fred had just passed away. And the running scene was very different. I remember being struck by how the top runners were in their 40s. Really interesting, right? Where were the 20-year-olds? And definitely Fred had brought in the concept of all paces and a race for every pace. But I've got to say, everything felt like a race.

So a race is a different level of appeal than a run and an event, and the chance to really build these as events was so clear. And again, it was always early days. So many ideas I thought, "Oh, we thought of this idea." I look back, I'm like, "Well, Fred was already... Someone else was already talking about it, the generations before." But it was clear that, one, we had to elevate the logistics and the basics of races again, and then really the opportunity was to make them more events.

So we had about 1,000 people, which again was big relative to some other events in most of the weekly races. Again, I think it was close to 2,000 in the borough halves. They used to all be halves at the time too, actually. Know how we have the Queens 10K now and the Bronx 10-miler and the New York City Half. We had one charity at the New York City Marathon, Fred's team. Obviously, Memorial Sloan Kettering, we had five kids in a running program. We had a lot of energy and sort of so much opportunity in front of us. Much more male, not nearly as diverse, and kind of more of a serious feel, even though we had the sense of a race for every pace.

So there was a lot of opportunity, and when times are tough... And New York had kind of fallen behind Chicago and London at the time with the marathon when my first marathon, two weeks in, the head of J. P. Morgan Chase Marketing grabbed me by the wrist and said, "Get to London and Chicago because you guys are falling behind. And by the way,

we're leaving as your primary sponsor."

So what's good about joining at moments like that is people were aligned with, "We need to find a way to get more people running and we need to elevate our game a bit." So we were very lucky as a generation to try to build American distance running back, to really ... Rock 'n' Roll had already started the charity programs, so that opportunity was becoming clear. London had already been doing the same through their marathon. So you could see what wasn't there, and so we had a lot of opportunity to just try to get more people moving and get our team excited about it again.

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Rob Simmelkjaer: Yeah. Mary, we mentioned your personal running history and your win back in that Marine Corps Marathon in 1987. Did you think of yourself as an elite runner? Where was your mindset in terms of your own running in that late '80s and '90s? How focused were you on your own results versus where you end up going, which is a leader in the industry?

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Mary Wittenberg: Not at all on my own running, and I'll tell you why. I grew up in Buffalo, New York, the oldest of seven. Sports was huge in my life and sports made a real difference. So I always wanted to work in sports and I always wanted to be part of sports, but I wasn't very good at most sports, like basketball and softball and others. So I actually was a rower and that's how I found something I was better at, in addition to cheerleading and gymnastics.

So I did not think of myself as a runner, and I'll tell you why. I got to law school and I was 22, I had just turned 23, and I was finding I loved distance running and I ran with the men's team at Notre Dame. And here's one of my very first race experiences 40 years ago, which is crazy. I was in South Bend, Indiana, I just turned 23, as I said. I went down the road. I'd never run more than 13 miles, and I ran the Chicago Marathon because I was like, "I'm going to be a lawyer. I should just go do this."

And again, I was running with the men at Notre Dame so I was running hard, the short distances, and I'm in this race. And you know when you come from other sports, you try to win. You try to win, right? So I'm in this race and I love-

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Rob Simmelkjaer: What year was this, Mary?

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Mary Wittenberg: Chicago, 1985.

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Rob Simmelkjaer: Okay. God, two years before you won Marine Corps.

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Mary Wittenberg: Wait, wait. I'm sorry. Yeah, Chicago 1985.

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Rob Simmelkjaer: Okay, okay.

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Mary Wittenberg: And I'll tell you why I was recently reminded of all this. So I'm in the race and I come in 16th place, like, "16th place?" But that didn't feel like ... I'm like, "16th place?" I didn't think I was going to win or anything, but I didn't think I was so great.

Well, it ends up that was one of the greatest women's fields ever assembled anywhere. Joni, Joan Benoit Samuelson, American record 2:21:21, Rosa Mota, Ingrid Kristiansen, the big three in the sport. And it was this moment when the Chicago Marathon was at an incredible high. They had a huge sponsor in Beatrice. So it was one of the best fields ever, but I was like, "I'm 25 minutes behind." I ran 2:40-something. "I'm 25 minutes behind Joan Benoit Samuelson." So I wasn't thinking. I thought, "This is cool."

What was very cool is I would've qualified for Olympic Trials if it had been a qualifying window. So that became, "Oh, well, that would be kind of cool to do." And so that became the goal. But even it was never ... I'll tell you how I think it influenced my time at Road Runners. It was never a thought that I would run full-time, that I would ... I considered staying for a year and getting an MBA at Notre Dame so that I could try to qualify for the trials, but I had school loans and it just wasn't something I thought of as really possible.

So I didn't really think of myself as a big-time runner, but I absolutely loved it. And the Olympic Trials qualifier became a real opportunity for me and something that I thought would be kind of cool to do and meaningful. So that's where the more competitive side, that became my goal. But being in that race with Joni, it was like being in a different league.

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Rob Simmelkjaer: Yeah. I mean, you could easily see how, with a result like that, if you had wanted it, you could have really focused on running and focused on-

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Becs Gentry: Yeah. Your whole trajectory could have changed.

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Mary Wittenberg: Well, I think what it's ended up doing is I'm always drawn to supporting athletes. And so in those years, American distance running wasn't really ... There were no more groups. And so Road Runners, we brought groups together. And I think so much of my passion around providing support around athletes is I always did have this inner, "Oh, wouldn't it be amazing to have a coach?" And I was lucky to have my Notre Dame coach for the men's team, but it's not like I had a coach when I graduated law school. And there wasn't a lot of support around it.

So even when we hosted the trials, and everything we've ever done, and you guys are doing great stuff, now I do think you have to put support on athletes. I don't think I was ever going to be in the very top of the American group, but I certainly would've been better. And also, certainly I look back and we know a lot more now about lifting and I was always hurt. I wasn't eating right. I wasn't doing anything but running. So all of which makes me want to pour back into other people when we want to help them know everything and be as supported as possible in their running.

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Becs Gentry: Which is incredible what you've been doing ever since then. But talk to us a little bit about then that two years in between doing that 1985 Chicago Marathon, being on that cusp. Because you say, if the greats of the time hadn't run, you would've been very, very high up in the ... There was a lot of what-ifs or what-could-have-beens that had happened. Then what happened in that time between Chicago '85 and Marine Corps '87? What was your thought process and how did you feel going into that run?

00:22:07

Mary Wittenberg: I am so humbled. I'm a little embarrassed, guys, having me talk about serious running with both of you. But at the time when I was at Notre Dame, because I was running with the men's team, I never ran more than 40, 45 miles, but everything was hard. I could hardly breathe all the time. So that led me to a 2:46:00. When I had graduated, I went to Richmond to work in a big law firm and I was running a lot more on my own and with the local running community, which was amazing. So as an aside, watching Keira D'Amato come out of Richmond has been very fun because it was a very similar experience to mine, except she was a lot faster. But then I went the other way and I started running a lot, like 90 miles a week, 100 miles a

week, 70 miles was low week. And of course, that netted my mainly getting hurt, but I ran 2:44:00. And when I went to Marine Corps, I went to Marine Corps because I really wanted to try to qualify for the trials. I was a first-year associate. My boss let me ... I left every day at 3:30 to run with the Richmond Cross Country team at University of Richmond. And then I went back to work, of course, stupidly till 11:00 PM because I wanted to be a good first-year associate. And I look back, again, that's where I advise other people. If we're lucky, we get a long life. You don't have to do it all at once, but I didn't want to be any different than any other first-year associate, kind of silly.

So I'd run, work, run again, and go back to work. And as a first-year associate, it was also nice that I had something people would talk to me about other than legal cases and deals. So Marine Corps was the easy event to do because I was in Richmond, so it was 90 minutes away. And it was one of the greatest running experiences in my life because I was only going out. It was my second marathon. My first marathon was amazing because I was only going out to do it and finished. My second marathon was amazing because I was just going to run a time that I had already run. I was trying to run 2:46:00 because it was in the qualifying window.

So both times I had very positive experiences. I don't even think I broke a sweat. It was a cold, cool day, and I was running within myself. And there were three of us that qualified for the trials that day. And by going out so steadily, I gradually was reeling in this amazing first-time marathoner who had gone out really fast. And so I ended up winning the thing and Bill Rodgers interviews me.

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Becs Gentry: Wow.

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Mary Wittenberg: And so all these fun things that years later comes back around, but I was really lucky. And again, it's not until you hit the harder moments in running that you really appreciate the really good days, but that was a really good day and really fun because my work colleagues were all there and I got to qualify for the trials and it was cool.

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Becs Gentry: First I heard-

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Rob Simmelkjaer: I don't think I've ever asked you about that

trials run, Mary. What was that like? Where was it? And how did it go?

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Mary Wittenberg: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Okay. Well-

00:24:56

Becs Gentry: Yeah, I was going to say, where was it?

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Mary Wittenberg: Pittsburgh.

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Becs Gentry: Oh! Was it hilly?

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Mary Wittenberg: So here's what's crazy about ... Hilly. Here's what's crazy about my generation. It took me years later to realize it was only the second women's trials.

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Rob Simmelkjaer: Wow.

00:25:11

Mary Wittenberg: I mean, that's crazy. But when you're in it, you don't know. Same with rowing. It was only three years into there being a women's rowing program. And I was a coxswain for the men's team. We didn't even have ...

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Becs Gentry: Wow.

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Mary Wittenberg: But even when you were ... I was the generation that got to be in things, but you didn't realize just how close we were to not having the same opportunities. But at Pittsburgh, I was the first official dropout.

So I was interviewed on TV, my first TV interview probably, other than probably Marine Corps, but crying because I had had knee surgery in January. The trials were, I don't know, 110 days or something later. And I, of course, again, I was young, so I wanted to be my best instead of just getting strong enough to be there. So I really pushed it and I got hurt the weekend before with an L5 lower back disc issue. So I had to get a cortisone shot and get the waivers and all of that to be able to do that, but I was hurt and dropped out at mile two.

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Becs Gentry: Oh, oh, oh.

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Mary Wittenberg: Oh, well. Again, all of which just fueled my passion to come back and help other people when they got their shot.

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Becs Gentry: Yeah. But also, alongside your law career, really being the start of your law career taking off and you're doing this too. So that's a massive point there of women still had to do everything. You say you were the second trials and you weren't aware of the change really that had happened, but you were still doing everything.

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Mary Wittenberg: Yeah. And it's still where we learn about ourselves too. I'm someone who has to, I need to put boundaries on things because I'll go too hard. And that was a good example of learning, okay, maybe finishing would've been something to really be proud of. But at the same time, that's okay. I'm glad I went for it, but this is the beauty of getting lucky to have more years and life behind where you can look back and learn from all of it.

So it was an extraordinary experience. I still think it had to make a difference in my New York Road Runner interview. This year I was at the Marine Corps Marathon and this extraordinary woman won it and qualified for the trials. And I talked to her right after and she's a financial advisor. And I said, "Do you ever think about working with athletes?" She said, "Sometimes." And I'm thinking, "Wow, your life could change by qualifying in Olympic Trials and winning the Marine Corps Marathon just like I did." And it might not happen today, it might be five years from now, but it's going to matter to an athlete that she wants to represent that, by the way, she had done this.

So I still think, and so many athletes way, way, way, way, way better than me, never get to win, right?

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Rob Simmelkjaer: Mm-hmm.

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Mary Wittenberg: The best in the world often are second, third, fourth, fifth.

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Rob Simmelkjaer: Absolutely. In this sport, yeah. No doubt.

00:27:58

Mary Wittenberg: They don't get to win. So I always feel very

lucky for the experience of Marine Corps, and I bet it helped me when I was interviewing at New York Road Runners.

00:28:04

Rob Simmelkjaer: Yeah, yeah. So tell us about that first interview. What were you interviewing for in your first interview at New York Road Runners?

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Mary Wittenberg: It's wild to look back. I think it was director of administration. It was with the whole board.

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Rob Simmelkjaer: Wow.

00:28:20

Mary Wittenberg: It was a lot of people right from the beginning. And Allan, the greatest opportunity working with Allan Steinfeld was amazing because Allan was desperate for a partner. And he was trying to do Fred's external job, his rocket science logistics job and be both, and he needed a partner. And I walked in the door and I walked in the interview, I'm sure they were interviewing a lot of other people, and I just had a connection with Allan and could see that we'd be highly complimentary to each other. And I interviewed with the board.

But Rob, I had never run a P&L. I was doing corporate deals, so I had high-level business experience through, but I didn't know about a P&L. I certainly didn't ... I had done some sponsorship deals as a lawyer, but I look back and I think, "Oof, they took a risk hiring me," but a lot of passion around running. And especially when we had to elevate the event side, it is incredible how much being a participant really matters in the jobs we do because you really know what people-

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Rob Simmelkjaer: You get it. You get what runners are going through, what a day of a runner is like and where the stress points are and what the needs are. And it is really important to that.

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Becs Gentry: Yeah, the whole process.

00:29:45

Rob Simmelkjaer: So I'm sure that gave you a pretty significant advantage, your running history. And so you were doing that.

And tell me about your early days at Road Runner, as

you're working, of course, up at the townhouse up on East 89th Street, which I wish I could have experienced. I picked up a couple of bibs there back in the day, but I never had a chance to really go and see what it was like working there.

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Becs Gentry: I know. It sounds so cool.

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Mary Wittenberg: So it was a huge leap. I had been in my law firm. I actually had made partner. I was in Park Avenue at the MetLife Building in this-

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Becs Gentry: Oh, gosh.

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Mary Wittenberg: And again, I grew up very modestly, but here we were, Oriental rugs, seeing this whole big law firm scene. And I was so ready for Road Runners. I thought I'd work at another sports league or otherwise. I didn't even know there were jobs for running, so I was so excited about this. And I walk into the building one day and there was this pushing everyone out of the building. It was too busy. We had to get the runners out of the building and the brown rug was all sort of wet and moldy.

And all that, I was like, "Okay, I'm ready to ... Okay, we're going to welcome the runners. We're going to make this great." And then what I didn't realize is there was some real internal conflict that I was not used to. And it became clear part of my job was going to be settle tempers, help everyone get along.

And it was only one weekend for one night that I thought, "Whoa, what have I gotten myself into?" And I never looked back after that because it was fun to bring people together and help get people aligned and help see the best in everybody where there was a fair amount of stress and intentions that are always natural between sponsorship and the event team, but I love working through it all. But I never looked back, but I've got to say for a minute there ... And of course, pay cut, the whole thing. It was a big, big change, but I had one moment of saying, "What did I do?" And ever since, it was the greatest decision of my life, other than marrying Derek.

00:31:48

Becs Gentry: Aw. He's a legend too.

00:31:48

Rob Simmelkjaer: Aw, love that. Hi, Derek.

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Becs Gentry: I have to ask though, Mary, what was your driver to leave? The traditional sense, you'd made partner as a lawyer. You'd gotten to a really, really high caliber in a career that is very demanding. What made you want to not just be a runner anymore, but change your career path to become a professional within the running world?

00:32:19

Mary Wittenberg: I always wanted to work in sports and always had this missionary side. So I never intended to become a lawyer. I am not a lawyer by nature in any way, shape or form, but you know the risk of sometimes you get in a race that's not actually the race you want to win and you're in it and all of a sudden it's 10 years later. I'm like, "Whoa." They're shaking my hand the day I make partner. I'm having an existential crisis. Tears are streaming and everyone's saying, "Oh, she's so happy she made it." And I'm thinking, "No. No. What? This was not my goal. I want to work in sports."

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Rob Simmelkjaer: It's fascinating. It's fascinating listening to this.

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Becs Gentry: Wow.

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Mary Wittenberg: You felt this?

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Rob Simmelkjaer: Well, Mary, I mean, aside from the-

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Becs Gentry: A lot, yeah.

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Rob Simmelkjaer: ... elite running thing, and I was a baseball player, not a runner, but other than that, there's so many parallels when I listen to you tell this story to my path. You know this. I went to law school. I ran my first marathon just for fun, but around the time I was graduating law school. I also was at a big law firm. I also took a big pay cut to go work in sports. This was back when I went to ESPN in 2002, I guess is when I started.

So all very similar things, differences obviously, but when you talk about always wanting to work in sports, wanting to

do something that was more than just making money and the mission-aligned ... And I didn't go as far as you in the law. I didn't stick around and make partner because I used to always hear people who made partner tell the joke.

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Mary Wittenberg: Smarter than me.

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Rob Simmelkjaer: There's a joke that lawyers tell about making partner at a law firm, which is it's a pie eating contest, and the prize you get for winning is more pie, which is just more of the work-

00:34:01

Becs Gentry: Oh, that's petrifying.

00:34:01

Rob Simmelkjaer: ... that you just did.

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Becs Gentry: That's petrifying.

00:34:01

Mary Wittenberg: Correct.

00:34:01

Rob Simmelkjaer: You get to do a lot more of it, right? So I felt the same way about not wanting to have that moment of making partner. I got out of there earlier, but it's a very similar path, Mary, which is really interesting.

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Mary Wittenberg: I've always appreciated that our through line is passion, and from your story of seeing Boston and knowing what it means. And also, I think we can really appreciate what running means to us in our life when we don't get to do it as a job. So it makes us extra, extra appreciate it. And my now being back with Let's Do This, I have an even greater appreciation of what a truly unique space and opportunity because we're helping other people do what has made a difference to us. And the more people we can allow to do that, the better.

So that was the moment that I committed. And you make partner, you kind of got to stay. And I had all these great people I loved that I worked with, but I knew I had to make a change. And again, if we're lucky, life is long enough to let us do these things. And it was the greatest privilege ever to get to make that move and work with our amazing running community-

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Becs Gentry: Yeah. Oh my gosh.

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Mary Wittenberg: ... and team at Road Runners.

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Becs Gentry: And you went on to make some really incredible changes. And selfishly, I do want to skew this conversation towards the changes you've made for women in the sport here. And you've already touched on how you were of a generation that you had to train with the boys essentially when you were running with the guys, when you were rowing with the guys, when you skipped out of work. And it was that ethos of training was you almost had to be one of the men back in the day in order to be that strong or to show up, and it's a different kind of grit.

So do you think your experience of that as a younger woman led you to make some of these decisions that we're going to talk about shortly in your roles at New York Road Runners?

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Mary Wittenberg: Definitely. We had all the years of access, making sure women were getting access, and we still have a long way to go, especially on the work front. But we, although there is an extraordinary ... Rob, you have, as you know, you've built and you're part of an extraordinary team of women leaders at New York Road Runners.

But especially for the athletes, and remember, and this is so meaningful that you were just in Kenya, Rob, especially in the late '90s, '94, it wasn't until Tegla Loroupe won the New York City Marathon as the first African woman to do so, and in the late ... And what we were so aware, I joined in the late '90s, '99, and in '98, Tegla had to do the wash of the men in the training camp. That was common.

So we had to get access, then we had to get equity. By the time we're at that age, we're at that period, it's about equal prize money. And so we had equal prize money. It was not true. I couldn't believe it, but it wasn't true around the world. And of course, what took me a while to realize was golf, tennis, and running as the individual sports, the women were paid, in the US, we paid the women equally faster, so that was an advantage. But around the world, it was still not happening. And certainly in team sports, it wasn't happening.

But after equity, it was about visibility. And we're still working on access, we're still working on equity, but visibility. And what was happening in our marathon is the women were buried within all the men running around them.

And so you couldn't see them. And these are the greatest athletes in the world. So the specific, the idea of how the women ended up going first in the marathon was Lornah Kiplagat at a lunch said, "Hey, why don't we have the women go first?" I'm like, "Why don't we have the women go first?" And Allan, we walked over at lunch. You're still going to Bacco for lunch. We walked over and, "Allan, what do you think?" He's like, "Yeah." We're like, "Okay, let's do it."

So it came, again, the best way many of these ideas do, that was from Lornah. And then our team saying, "Let's do it." And here's what I love most about this. It is way harder for the women to run the New York City Marathon out front than it was when they were tucked in because they were tucked in with effectively pacers all over. And so it was really all the women who said, "Hell yeah, we're in. Let's do this."

And so it changed a lot in terms of how people even see the New York City Marathon. And the women have so often been, I'm just looking for my charger, the women have so often been the lead story in New York for many, many years, and I think that visibility was a big part. And again, building on the women before us with Nina and Kathrine and others who very much set a stage of in New York, women are going to be seen and celebrated.

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Rob Simmelkjaer: Was there a lot of pushback to that decision, Mary? I can imagine maybe broadcasters or sponsors or fans might ask, "Wait, why are you starting the marathon with the women?" I could see how that conversation might've gone back in 2002.

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Mary Wittenberg: You can imagine there are a lot of conversations, including really starting in 2001, the wheelers, the pro wheelers. So starting the men and women pro wheelers upfront, then the women. So guess what? Yeah, the men were fourth in line. The pro men were fourth in line. We had pro men, pro men and pro women wheelers, then we had the women.

And again, what was so cool about that is each of those, the wheelers start, the women start, they were celebrated on TV. So the big thing was, could we move the television windows earlier? And I got to say, at the time it was NBC, and you were probably there at the time, and they were great.

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Rob Simmelkjaer: Still ESPN at the time, but yes.

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Mary Wittenberg: You were probably in college, but-

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Rob Simmelkjaer: I was at ESPN, yep.

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Mary Wittenberg: Okay, ESPN. But NBC and ESPN have been great to us over the years. So as was PIX way, way, way back, but they actually were great about it. So we went earlier and then the logistics team, we had to move everything back and then eventually we added the waves.

But no, I think people were really good about it, actually. We had more stress around dropping the pacers. TV was really nervous for the men and the women to just let them run because it used to be the theory was the pacers kept the men and especially the women, because there weren't as many, but they kept them together until the Queensboro Bridge. So the theory was ... And we were like, "But we're not a fast race. We're about competition from the beginning." So there's a lot of stress around, would we be looking at one person for the whole race instead of a competitive race? And we ensured, and Sam and David did a great job, that the pro fields were deep and these were people that wanted to really be here and race hard. And sure enough, it worked out great, but there was a lot of stress around that decision, I remember.

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Becs Gentry: Mary, talk to us a bit about the sports side of it. So when it comes to the agents back then, and I'm sure it was a very different world, but you said it would be tougher for the women to run this race, therefore because they have no shield from the guys. And for our newer runners, that's just basically when runners, they can have a bit of an advantage if you tuck in behind a pack because it can block wind.

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Mary Wittenberg: Huge.

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Becs Gentry: New York's a windy place. It can help. It's like drafting in cycling if you're on your Peloton. And then so when it comes to the women going out by themselves, as you say, therefore their race is going to become harder. So how was it for the agents and the negotiations for all of these professional women to come to that race with this in mind?

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Mary Wittenberg: It was hard with the agents in the countries who care about time most. And again, we've never been a time course. We don't care about time. I mean, it's nice when you have a course record and yay to breaking the women's course record last year on the running side, but that's where it was hard.

And we left money on the table. At the time, we were always ... We still are waiting for a Japanese winner of New York. We always wanted more Japanese TV. We always wanted Japanese sponsors and we weren't going to get them. They were going to go to Berlin and Chicago and that was okay, but it was more convincing agents and helping everybody adjust deals because a lot of the shoe deals, as you guys know, there's the upfront prize money, but a lot of the money is behind appearance fees and also the shoe companies paying the athletes bonuses, and a lot of those bonuses were based on time.

So over a period of time, we were able to convince everybody, "No, no, New York is worth the crown. They should be getting big bonuses for New York without regard to time." And even we had time bonuses. We got rid, I'm sure we still have some time bonuses, but we got rid of some of that and just tried to up everything, make the win and the podium really meaningful so that the athletes could make as much money or more money and benefit from running here. But then we had to do things too like work with the World Athletics because time would also be the way you got qualifiers for Olympics and world championships. And what if we had a hot year or a really cold year? So then we got to where, as part of the creating the majors too, but where finishing in our top 10 would count as a time qualifier in other places.

So there's all these, as you know really well, but maybe the outside world doesn't know, you have an idea that sounds really good, like more visibility of women. You got to do all the work around that to make sure they fully get the benefit, especially as professional athletes.

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Rob Simmelkjaer: So we're wrapping up Women's History Month, Mary. What is one thing you'd like to see happen in sports, in running that hasn't happened yet? When you look around the landscape, is there one thing you look at now and you're like, "Oh, why is it still this way?"

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Mary Wittenberg: I think especially globally, globally, we still need a lot more women to have fully equal opportunities on the playing field and in jobs in sports. So we're definitely

getting there in the US. I think running has led.

I think in running, our biggest issue now is I wish we had a pro tour for the professional athletes because they're just not getting paid well enough to make a living. And so you end up with people who can afford to do it and not everybody who would be fully able to be a great athlete. And Road Runners, Rob, you guys have done an extraordinary job and continue to be a real force, as have many others supporting from there, whether it's Chicago or Land Trek Club and CIM and all these others, but it's hard work to have a professional opportunity. So definitely would love to see the athletes be able to do more of that.

Definitely we're seeing now in this huge running boom that we've never seen before, I wish for women and men we could have a little more appreciation for each other. When people run, no matter what the pace, is extraordinary, and people who run for charity is extraordinary, and people who want to try to run to hit some time is extraordinary. It's all good. The beautiful thing is it's all good and we're here for all of it.

So a little bit more in general for everybody of just, "Hey, let's recognize the superpower and everyone to just come be a part." And our roles on the organization side or now mine on the technology side and supporting organizers, let's realize there's a lot more work to do to get more people to start and finish lines and let's keep welcoming each other because it's not just the organizers hosting, it's the city who's hosting, it's the run clubs who are hosting, it's the crew. Let's all be really great and keep welcoming other people to running and we'll end up creating more and more opportunity. And I don't love the closed-off feeling. There's a lot of ways to run and let's keep building that and welcoming more people.

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Rob Simmelkjaer: Amen to that.

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Becs Gentry: That is a beautiful, beautiful thing. I want to give you one more question to wrap it up on a high note because of your experience and your knowledge and the fact that I know Rob and I both see your huge smile at so many races. I can be in a race in Europe and I will know Mary will be there at the finish line with a smile on her face. So what do you see today though in professional and kids races or whichever it is, whenever you get to a race, what makes you proud?

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Mary Wittenberg: Oh, just of every person who gets out there

and takes another step. We know the satisfaction is it's not so easy all the time. So everybody who gets out there and our roles are ... I thought about it today. Now I'm into run commuting because if I don't have time, I have my sneakers and my black pants on and I'll run to Columbia later at the end of the day. It's okay.

And so part of our job is showing people, you know what? Some people ... We have a lot of privilege to fit running in our lives. And how do we help other people always fit running in their lives, even if there's no time or there's ... So I feel like I'm proud-

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Rob Simmelkjaer: I always say, Mary, running is an underrated form of transportation.

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Mary Wittenberg: Exactly. It's the best.

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Becs Gentry: It's the best.

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Mary Wittenberg: So when I see someone-

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Becs Gentry: (inaudible) you.

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Mary Wittenberg: ... running for a bus, I'm like, "You got it. You got it. Go get that bus." But just proud of seeing everybody who puts a foot forward and really proud of, I got to say, Rob, for you and your team and every event organizer. It's way easier to run than it is to work the events, and so hats off for all the effort that goes into supporting runners. And that makes me super proud and super proud of the way the current Road Runner team does it. I feel like you're a close team and you involve the community, and Becs, you're part of that. And there's getting a result and then there's the way you do it. And I feel like there's really positive, inclusive, warm feeling from the Road Runner team and so many of the teams I'm really privileged to work with now around the world.

This last weekend we had ... Think about this. There was the Warsaw Half, the Rome Marathon, the Chicago Shamrock, the Shamrock Virginia Beach. Small, large, there's races everywhere every weekend. And so the last point I'll make that I think we can do together, this is a huge global sport that is best on a local level everywhere it is. We don't somehow get credit as a sport. We see everybody in global football

shirts, soccer, which I love, and especially the women, especially Gotham, but if you look at all the running shirts around the world, there are a lot of people running.

So this is a real moment of cities and towns everywhere having events, and that makes me proud because I think some of our Ted Corbitt and Fred and others before us all were part of creating an environment where people ran on the streets and in the parks. And that is happening in a huge way all around the world. And that is so powerful in the lives of people and in their neighborhoods and super proud of everybody who's out there doing that, making it happen.

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Becs Gentry: Thank you.

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Rob Simmelkjaer: Mary Wittenberg, great to see you. Thanks for being with us today. Appreciate you.

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Becs Gentry: Thank you, Mary.

00:49:45

Mary Wittenberg: I appreciate you guys. Always a lot to say. Bye!

00:49:49

Rob Simmelkjaer: New York Road Runners is a nonprofit organization with a vision to build healthier lives and stronger communities through the transformative power of running. The support of members and donors like you helps us achieve our mission to transform the health and wellbeing of our communities through inclusive and accessible running experiences, empowering all to achieve their potential. Learn more and contribute at [nyrr.org/donate](http://nyrr.org/donate).

That does it for another episode of Set the Pace. We want to thank Mary Wittenberg for joining us. And Becs, it's always fun talking to Mary because in this job I realized how much has changed here, and Mary was a person who changed a lot of it.

00:50:31

Becs Gentry: She did. She sure did. And she's an absolute icon in the running world and always, always, everyone's biggest supporter. I think if you've run alongside her or you've run towards her at a finish line, you know that she is the running world's biggest, biggest, loudest, most wonderful cheerer.

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Rob Simmelkjaer: Absolutely.

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Becs Gentry: So from the bottom of our hearts, and especially as a female runner in the world, I have a lot to owe and thank Mary for.

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Rob Simmelkjaer: All right. Well, if you liked the show, please leave us a five-star rating. Leave a message. We'd love to hear from you.

00:51:04

Becs Gentry: We do.

00:51:05

Rob Simmelkjaer: Enjoy the miles. We'll see you next week.