

HIGH COUNTRY RUNNING

Redefining success after my 4th Boston Marathon

BY SARA HALL
Special to the Daily Sun

A week ago, I crossed the finish line of my fourth Boston Marathon. As I walked through the chute and toward my agent, I could see his unsure expression. Was I happy? Disappointed? I finished 18th with a time of 2:26:32.

I had high expectations for the race, especially after completing one of my best marathon buildups in my 10 years of training for the event. I had taken a swing out there — going out at sub 2:20 pace — but paid the price when I hit the big hills at the end. On paper, it wasn't my best performance (my per-

sonal best is exactly six minutes faster). My immediate reactions were that it wasn't bad, but it also wasn't great, and I, too, was sort of walking through how I felt about it as I walked toward my agent.

Over the years, how I evaluate performance has changed. In my teenage years I was desperate for affirmation from others. At an age of insecurity, I subconsciously focused on meeting the expectations of others. Did I perform according to how I was ranked? Did my coach and parents seem happy? Did the anonymous message boards approve? When love and belonging felt like they were on the line every time, it be-

came a recipe for anxiety and fear of failure. This fear crippled my performances and kept me from taking risks in races. Fortunately, I soon learned that this was a slippery slope.

As the years went by, my identity became more rooted in who I was as a person outside of running. I knew I was unconditionally loved regardless of my performances. No longer feeling like my self-worth was tied to running, my races improved. I took more risks, and even when they didn't pay off, I was able to learn from it and quickly move on to the next one.

For a long stretch of years, I was able to set PRs by about a min-

ute a marathon, going from 2:31 to 2:30 to 2:28 to 2:27 to 2:26. Linear improvement was addictive, and I lined up with a "personal best or bust" mentality. This pressure I felt solely by my own making.

Time goals can be fun to chase, but they do not take into account the factors outside of your control. To this day, the best marathon buildup I've ever done was before the 2021 Chicago Marathon. All buildup I was focused on running the American record and improving upon my 2:20 the previous December. Chicago ended up getting a humid day in the 80s, and I strug-



Sara Hall poses with her family after a race.

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gled to the finish far off from my goal. In that moment, I relearned that I had to be able to evaluate my success by more than externals.

Now, at the age of 42, I still believe my best performances are ahead of me. I also realize the window for personal bests and record-setting runs won't last forever and I'll eventually need to make and measure goals in a different way. After the races that fall somewhere in the middle, like Bos-

ton, I've learned to ask myself: How did I show up? What was my self-talk like out there? Did I choose courage over fear? Did I keep my peace?

The time-centered goals are fun and flashy and what often get us out the door. But focusing on your craft and defining success aside from the externals is the secret to being a lifelong, joyful athlete.

Sara Hall is a mom of four, professional runner for Asics, 2:20 marathoner and former half-marathon American record holder.