

Advanced

# Hero's Journey

## Lorraine Moller's Wings of Mercury

BY BRITTA KALLEVANG PUBLISHED: JUL 1, 2005

**Lorraine Moller is a hero.** A modern day Greek goddess, Moller has embarked on many odysseys throughout her life. She's a four-time Olympic marathoner—the only woman to complete each of the 20th century's Olympic marathons for women—holder of the longest winning marathon streak ever, an undefeated masters runner, a mother, and a coach.

But that's not the whole story. Moller is much, much more. The roles she fills and feats she's accomplished are only that. Moller will not be fenced in by anything, not even her own legacy.

As she rose in stardom, the New Zealander's interest in meeting challenges turned inward. Moller focused on her inner journey as an athlete and was less and less enticed by one-directional, linear feats. Breaking track records was pleasing, but she wanted more. Moller meditated on accessing her highest potential as both runner and multifaceted person, drawing on and expanding her energy source. She found herself deeply connected to ancient mythological archetypes.

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journey, the process of discovery, and the true nature of limitation. Moller's life path and running career from then on were colored by the affectations of mythological beings. As we know from

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these ancient stories, mythological beings were motivated to remarkable feats of strength through extreme challenge.

Moller has chosen to approach life with gusto. In Moller's world view, limitations are challenges to see "how far can you go with something. Limitations are necessary; they give you something to push against." Echoing the words of Campbell, Moller emphasizes the never-ending

process of action and awareness in breaking down limitations. She says, "when you get there, there's no there there."

### Encounter

The course of the 1986 Osaka Marathon led Moller to an auspicious encounter with a life-size statue of Mercury that stood in the center of the city. She took it as a personal sign and, empowered by it, opened her wings wider than ever. She won that race. This process of expanding beyond the belief of her capabilities continuously opens opportunities for Moller to cross thresholds. The more Moller Moller becomes.

She explains, "Mind is [the] governing mechanism that creates the body." As we grow as individuals, we outgrow our belief systems. Then we have work to do. Moller says, "Our belief systems are constantly needing to be upgraded, like computers."

"Part of being human [is the] creative thrust to improve ourselves and become more." As she explained in a 2002 talk at Active Endeavors in Boulder, CO, the important thing for runners is to learn more about themselves. When you do this, "you are more, you have grown, you've gotten bigger."

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### Lydiard and Beyond

All of Moller's influence is not mythology and visualization, however. In order to leave the nest prepared for the unknown, runners need to push from something solid enough to resist force. Moller chooses to use the Lydiard method as the means to facilitating this process of transformation. Aerobic conditioning is this cornerstone, the foundation of a strong long-distance runner.

Lydiard disagreed that in order to get faster the runner must tackle interval training from the early stages. He saw this as more of a quick-fix

strategy that, in the long haul, only results in injury. Instead, Lydiard emphasized easy miles first, combined with aerobic threshold (AT) or tempo training runs, to increase the body's ability to access and metabolize oxygen. The stronger a runner becomes, the higher the aerobic threshold. Reaching anaerobic states at this phase in training is counterproductive to producing speed. As Moller comically illustrates, interval training early on is "like putting fast wheels on a Volkswagen. You're better off with slow tires on a Mercedes. With the Lydiard system you can have both."

As a coach, Moller designs each runner's training schedule to include phases of heavier training, eventual speed workouts, and tapering as preparation for peaking. The Lydiard system allows the runner to "fine-tune specific to the distance you're racing."

"More endurance gives you more recovery," says Moller. "You can sustain racing through a whole season. [The Lydiard method] focuses on being good on the day you need to be good—to be your very best." Moller summarizes, "How fast you go depends on how well you can use oxygen. Speed is only as good as your endurance."

### **Rising Wings**

It isn't difficult to see how Moller's relationship to both spiritual and practical life transfers over to her current progressive coaching in Boulder, CO. Inspired by her personal icon, Mercury, the messenger god, Moller deemed her group of runners "Wings of Mercury." With a name like that, Moller's runners have a lot to live up to. But she doesn't expect more out of them than she expects of herself. That said, Moller has high expectations.

Randy Acevedo, a Wings runner, embodies Moller's philosophy. He's eager to see things anew. Acevedo's first encounter with Moller was at Fleet Feet Sports one blizzard night in 2004, when Moller was giving a talk. As Moller spoke, Acevedo "knew this was it. Everything was clicking."

Acevedo was drawn to Moller's champion charisma. Under the leadership of Tae Kwon Do masters for several years, he knew he couldn't compromise. He sought the same caliber of leadership in a running coach. "Being around Moller made me want to give more. She's an Olympic medalist." He says he knew that "if I gave more, she would give more."

Acevedo quickly realized he had his coach's full attention. He explains how she "shuts the world off and tells [him] what's going on." She coaches runners on what they need at that moment. "Lorraine explains what we're doing, why we're doing it, and then she does it with me," he

says. That includes running uphill.

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When Acevedo began the hill training phase, Moller had him visualize running uphill with a balloon tied to his chest. Randy saw the balloon lifting him up and over, a blue balloon. "I know what I'm doing now when I get to a hill," he explains. "I see the blue balloon." Up and over he goes. Acevedo says he "never knew what [he] could do" until he started working with Moller. "She knows something I don't."

Acevedo was primed to accept Moller's special approach to running. She says some runners "are ready to see differently, some aren't. If they aren't, they'll go to a military type who blows whistles at them, and that's fine—but it's not what I'm about."

Not every Wings of Mercury runner sees eye to eye with the spiritual component to Moller's coaching. Wings runner Nikole Johns explains that although she can't pinpoint any instance of self-expansion taking place, she "wouldn't have been able to get where she is now without [Moller]."

Johns says, "I don't believe to the extent Moller does. [I] haven't had the same experiences." Whether or not Moller and Johns share the same spiritual understanding is irrelevant. What matters is that Moller's passion for running and life has rubbed off on Johns.

In fall 2001, Johns decided to run her first marathon. Early into her training she discovered she needed more guidance and turned to Moller for coaching. Besides the fact that Johns's New Zealand husband knew of Moller's reputation, certain qualities drew her to Moller. She looks up to Moller's achievement in paving the path for competitive female marathoners, her understanding of the physiological aspects of running, and her general joy in life. Johns draws on Moller's passion and emphasis on not putting limits on yourself.

Johns also responds positively to Moller's encouragement to keep running fun. Moller displays startlingly accurate insight into how the typical runner's self-critical nature impacts enjoyment of running and performance. Moller explains, "I want [my runners] to have fun. When they back off and allow flow, mind, body and spirit fall into place. That's where the magical experience takes place, and it's joyful—not to say it's not hard work. [It's] the door to infinity."

Johns does have fun. "It's all connected. I know that when I'm running well, other parts of my life are going well. [Running] makes me a happier person," she says. Not only happier, but faster: When Johns joined Wings in 2001, her goal was to run a marathon in June 2002. "I qualified for the Olympic marathon trials in that race," Johns recalls. "With the Lydiard system I saw great progression."

Johns had been keeping track of her mileage by time—easy runs based on eight-minute pace. One day she was running along a bike path, feeling slow. She checked her pace to realize she was running seven-minute miles! Before her most recent marathon (2004) she had worked up to running closer to six-minute miles at the same easy effort. Johns handled a 110-mile week without injury. She has PR'd in every distance except the 10K, one of her future goals.

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Moller speaks of her happiness when her runners surprise themselves. "When you see runners take minutes off their time, learn to take brakes off and pace themselves, when [they] achieve results, more than they could have hoped for, they're forever changed. That's an empowering experience. We are all affected. Myself included," she says.

Wings runner Edie Stevenson names Moller as the one coach in her running career who puts her whole self into being accessible, supportive, and invested in the best interest of every runner. Stevenson explains how it "makes a big difference to [Moller] how I do." So important are her runners' performances and well-being that Moller attends as many of their races as possible. In 2004 Moller traveled to the Boston Marathon and Grandma's Marathon, watching as Stevenson won her age group both times.

"I've done really well [under Moller's guidance]," says Stevenson. Injured when she first came to Moller, Stevenson eventually tackled the higher-

mileage program Moller offers her runners. Yet high-mileage wasn't the formula that got Stevenson to this level. Four stress fractures later, Stevenson told Moller she couldn't do it anymore. Moller stuck with her. Stevenson tells how during this phase she would, "call [Moller] whenever. [She's] always there to discuss, always has ideas. She cares how I do. [She's] definitely thinking of me."

Training in the pool and committing to a weekly long run and two AT (aerobic threshold) runs to the road, Stevenson improved. In fact, she found herself on a very different path. Something that had been obstructing her so far shifted.

Many runners give up after so many injuries. Moller explains that "once you've done a lot of running, you can tap into it." The body is a memory bank where records of our entire lives are stored. Our experiences are "hardwired to our neurology; belief systems are recorded in our cells and function according to your belief systems." So as Stevenson upgraded her beliefs and refused to set immovable limitations, she blasted away from the pack and smoked her peers.

### Hero's Legacy

Bobby McGee, fellow coach in Boulder, and author of the book [Magical Running](#) (for which Moller wrote a foreward), appreciates Moller's "rare ability to introduce runners to the deeper aspects of running . . . in order to get more out of themselves and see their performance more as part of the journey than a definition of self."

McGee summarizes Moller's influence as a coach to inspire runners to "the true purpose of all endeavors, where people put their heart and soul into it, fulfilling their life purpose."

That's a hero's journey for all of us. We deserve a happy ending.

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