

# A HEALTHY HERRERA SPELLS TROUBLE FOR THE COMPETITION

By DON SIKORSKI  
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Standing at the half mile mark of the Tarzan Brown Road Race this past November, I watch Stephen Herrera cruise by effortlessly, well out in front of the next 692 runners that, by comparison to Herrera, seem to be slogging along in slow motion. Herrera finishes the 5.5 mile course in a brisk 28:21, a solid minute and a half up on his nearest competitor. To the spectators that line the road to watch the race's final stretch down Pearl Street, it would appear that distance running and winning races comes rather easily for Stephen Herrera. If they only knew the truth.

Although he's always been a competitor, Herrera wasn't always winning races. The 35 year-old Waterford resident was good enough to earn all-conference honors in cross-country at Ledyard High, but his credentials fell short of many teammates and competitors he now outruns today. After continuing his running career at Southern Connecticut State University, Herrera searched to find something to fuel his competitive fires over the next few years. "After college, I tried bicycle racing," explained Herrera. "I found that I preferred mountain bike racing to the roads, but there were so many more running and road racing events locally." That, and the high cost of equipment expenses that accompany bike racing, led Herrera back to running. "Old habits die hard, I guess", said Herrera of his return to running. "It was natural fit for me."

All competitive runners consider racing a marathon at one point in their careers, and Herrera was no different. Getting accidentally lost on a college training run with a teammate (thus turning a 12 mile run into more like 23), got Herrera thinking that running a marathon might not be so difficult after all. He entered the 2000 East Lyme Marathon having had enough success in road races to be considered one of the favorites. But a lack of preparation proved to be his undoing in his debut 26.2 mile effort. "My long run was only 16 miles," explained Herrera of his marathon training for East Lyme, "and that doesn't get you ready for what happens at the 2 hour mark". Herrera crashed and burned, struggling to the finish line in a still respectable 2:52:42 for 3<sup>rd</sup> place. But he offers no excuses for his performance. "It was lack of preparation, plain and simple. It would be like someone trying to race a mile without ever stepping on a track." But once the sting of that race subsided, Herrera gave the marathon another shot, this time at the Mystic Places Marathon two years later. With three solid runs of over 20 miles and plenty of quality work under his belt, Herrera took advantage of near-perfect conditions and hung on the finish in an impressive 2:29:56 for 6<sup>th</sup> place overall and top American honors. "Around 20 miles or so, I knew I was in for some hurting'," reflected Herrera on that day in Niantic. "I was just trying to hold on and was thinking around 2:32". Herrera has not race another marathon since, and won't unless he believes he is at 100% physically. And that hasn't always been the case.

After running his first marathon, Herrera suffered a stress fracture in his foot. He returned to racing form only to suffer a broken left foot during the 2001 New Haven 20K National Championship race. Herrera ran well but was forced to walk the final quarter mile and was done for the remainder of the season. He returned again only to break his right foot in the final 300 meters of a 5K race in May 2003 (still managing to run 15:20 in the process). Fully healed by the following summer, Herrera rolled his ankle on a trail run in January 2005 and again struggled to get back to consistent training. Surgery to put a pin in the foot, which is still there, proved successful, and by late last summer, Herrera was back in racing shape and getting stronger each week. His 24<sup>th</sup> place finish at the prestigious Mayor's Cup Cross-Country race in Boston's Franklin Park highlighted a successful return to racing for Herrera.

Herrera trains daily after a days worked as a Graphic Designer at Sign-A-Rama in New London. After a solid winter of base mileage, a typical week might find Herrera logging 60-70 miles and incorporating two high quality workouts per week, either run the track or the roads. Herrera also races 30-35 times per year or more, especially if he can stay healthy and his worked schedule allows it, although he has tried to give up racing on back-to-back days. "I'm kinda crazy, Herrera confessed, "but I guess it won't shock the body if you're ready for it". Self-coached since college, Herrera trains alone. Of course, even if other's schedules were compatible, few runners are at the fitness level to keep up with Herrera in training. He also prefers cross-country racing to the roads. "They (cross-country races) are just so much fun," said Herrera. "I think they're a little more honest and a little less trash talky". Whether it is the roads or the trails, Herrera is usually the favorite, especially in Southeastern Connecticut. "My goal is usually or be in good enough shape to win locally," explained Herrera. "I know you can't win all of the time, and I enjoy a good, competitive race. But I like to get myself ready to always have a shot to win". In addition to pounding the pavement or the trails, Herrera also plays a fair share of volleyball and spends plenty of time in gym. He is diligent in his work ethic, with a quality stretching and post-run routine that allows for the proper recovery before tackling the next workout.

Despite the numerous injury setbacks and all of the hard work that he pours into his training, Herrera enjoy running and racing and has no plans to retire anytime soon. "I enjoy it," he explained of the sport. "I knew back in high school. And there is the enjoyment in just doing the hard work. Going out and doing a workout, knowing that I could have tanked it but I didn't....there's some satisfaction in that. I also enjoy racing for the team (the Mohegan Striders). I run a lot of races that I might normally not if it weren't for the team competition. It's easier to race hard when others are depending on your effort. And I guess I wouldn't race if it wasn't still fun." If he can keep his feet healthy in 2006, most runners in New England will have a difficult time keeping up with Stephen Herrera.

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