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AMBERLY MELENDEZ: WALKING THE LONG ROAD



Amberly Melendez prepares for a workout on the Sammamish River Trail in Redmond, Washington.

Story and Photos by Riley Sine and Maggie Bright

Running down the Sammamish River Trail on a Sunday morning in the misty conditions that define mornings in Seattle is a surreal experience. Other runners materialize out of the mist like phantoms, only to vanish a few moments later as you pass each other.

Under these circumstances, you'd be forgiven for not giving much thought to a young woman on the trail wearing a white hat, matching bright white shoes and a dark blue long-sleeve shirt. From a distance, her stride would appear somewhat odd for a runner – you can't quite put your finger on it, but something is amiss. As you draw closer, you realize that she isn't running at all, but walking—at an alarmingly fast pace. Running by, you'd swear you catch a glimpse of a block "USA" emblazoned on her chest, but you aren't completely sure. As you continue on, she would most likely drop out of your mind entirely as the miles roll by. You wouldn't be the first to overlook Amberly Melendez, but the long road of her athletic career is populated by people who've made the same mistake.

The Early Miles

That road begins in the Rio Grande Valley, in a small, three-bedroom trailer house outside of Edinburg, Texas. There Melendez began life alongside her siblings, and her drive to exceed expectations appeared early on. Elementary schoolers were not allowed to compete in cross-country until third grade, but Melendez and her twin brother were asked by the coaches to come out to practice as second-graders to see if they could keep up. And keep up they did, earning spots on the team a year before they were supposed to.

"She always was a very ambitious little girl," says Sofia Melendez, her mother and without a doubt her most staunch supporter. "Whatever she sets her mind to, she likes to follow through with that."

The first of several crucial moments in the early days of Melendez's career would not come until two years later, however, when a racewalking club visited her elementary school.

Racewalking is something of an unorthodox sport, as one has to essentially cover the race distance as fast as possible without crossing the line into running. The

The regulations of the [International Association of Athletics Federations](#) state that racewalking differs from running in that one foot must always be in contact with the ground. Three violations of this rule, or the requirement that your lead leg must be straight from when it hits the ground to when your body passes over it, and you're disqualified.

The oddity of the sport perhaps explains why it wasn't visions of racewalking glory that first drew Melendez in.

“They said that they had done a whole bunch of trips to go compete, and one of them said they had gone to Disneyworld,” she says. “So, my eyes immediately shot open, I had never been to Disneyworld so I was like, ‘I need to go there.’”

Marching home with one of the applications, she announced to her mother that she wanted to go to Disneyworld, and so she needed to be taken to practice that afternoon.

Even early on, Melendez showed promise in the event, qualifying for the New Balance Indoor National Championship — a meet typically reserved for the best high school track & field athletes in the country — in the mile racewalk as a sixth-grader.

There would be a slight detour during middle school, as she quit racewalking for two years. Her coach at the time demanded that athletes focus exclusively on racewalking, but Melendez wanted to explore other sports.

“I did everything; I ran cross country, I played soccer, I played basketball, I played volleyball, and I did track, which I enjoyed so much,” she says.

Melendez wouldn't stay away for too long, however, returning to racewalking during her freshman year at Thomas Jefferson High School, which doesn't offer interscholastic sports. Racing with her club team served as an outlet for the competitive drive she could no longer use to represent her school, she says, as well as providing the potential of an athletic scholarship for college. And the excuse to travel certainly didn't hurt, either.

“Being [from] such a small part of the Valley, we never really left Texas. It wasn't until I joined racewalking that it allowed me to go to different states around the U.S. and I just loved it. I instantly loved traveling and I still do,” she says. “Racewalking was a way for me to be both competitive athletically and get to know more places, so it was a two in one for me.”

Eyes to the North

From Texas, the road heads north, winding through the Midwest to arrive in Milwaukee. In search of a college where she could continue her racewalking career, Melendez settled on Cardinal Stritch University, a small, private Catholic school which competes in the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics. The NAIA is the only intercollegiate athletic association to sponsor racewalking, as the discipline is not contested in the NCAA. Melendez says she wanted to get away from Texas a bit, and advice from her father also played a big role in her decision.

“When I was visiting colleges, he said ‘you know I want you to be happy, and I know money is a big part of this, but if you're not comfortable, I really don't want you to go somewhere where you're not. Make sure you're comfortable, and make sure it feels like [somewhere] you would want to be for a while,’” she says.

The Cardinal Stritch coach was not a racewalking specialist, however, and so she received some criticism for her decision. But Melendez was looking for a change, she says, as her racewalking had begun to plateau.

“I was like ‘you know, I think I need something different, I'm gonna go with the underdog,’” she says, “I had never been the top one anyways.”

The decision proved an extremely effective one, as her coach's training clicked quickly, and led to a third-place finish at the NAIA Indoor National Championships in the 3000m racewalk as a freshman.

That accomplishment in itself is more than many would dare to dream they could achieve, but the road was far from over for Melendez. In her mind, she still had miles to go.



“But I have promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep.” — Robert Frost

At a Crossroads

But an unexpected turn in the road would soon appear, as her coach left Cardinal Stritch after her freshman year, leaving Melendez with a complicated decision.

"If I wasn't an athlete," she says, "I would have stayed in Wisconsin. But the snow is really hard when you're trying to train outdoors, especially as an endurance athlete." The prospect of facing endless days of 90 minutes or more on a treadmill had also lost its appeal, and so her road now turned west, headed for Northwest University and the more moderate climate of Seattle.

Her coach at Cardinal Stritch knew Mark Mandi, the head coach of NU's cross-country and track & field teams, from their high-school days, and so he put the two in contact.

"I love exploring and trying new things," Melendez says, "so I was like 'might as well, this guy seems really nice, and he seems like a really good potential coach, so let's take a shot at it.'"

Mandi was hesitant at first, because he had never had a racewalker on his roster and had no previous experience coaching the event, but says he was determined to use the resources of Northwest to support her.

"We have a great team, but I was like 'on this kind of important front, if you're looking for [the coaching needed to get to the next level], I don't have it,'" Mandi says. "The biggest thing I wanted to do was to support her as best I could with the infrastructure we had in place, and to really give her a place where she felt like she had as much of the tools available to her [as possible] to be successful."

Pacific Northwest Calling

Arriving at Northwest in the fall of 2017, Melendez instantly made an impression on her new teammates. Sarah Estabrook, a recent graduate of Northwest and a three-time NAIA All-American, recalls being struck by Melendez's talent and work ethic.

“*She works incredibly hard and fearlessly goes after a dream not many people have,” Estabrook says. “It made me and a lot of our teammates better.”*

She made a similar impression on Dr. Kevin Leach, her academic advisor at Northwest and a man who spent seven years working with the juggernaut that is the University of Washington women's volleyball team.

"She's very smart, and very disciplined and just highly motivated to operate at that [high] level," says Leach, who also serves as Northwest's Faculty Academic Representative. "Frankly, she's thinking bigger than any other athlete that's come through here, that I'm aware of."

That work ethic and drive paid off almost instantly, as Melendez became a key member of the Northwest women's cross-country team, helping lead that squad to their first qualification for the NAIA Cross Country Championship meet since the early 2000s.

"If I'm being honest," Melendez says, "I've always loved running more than racewalking, I just happen to be better at racewalking."

She notes that running has also helped improve her racewalking, and says it was a tremendous joy to be part of helping a team succeed together.

Racing Forward

Once the cross-country season ended, Melendez returned her focus to racewalking, and proceeded to go on a tear. She improved on her freshman performance from the previous year to finish second at NAIA Indoors, giving eventual champion Anali Cisneros a run — err, walk — for her money in the process.

She would go on to finish in the same spot at NAIA Outdoors in May, this time in the 5,000m racewalk but again falling to Cisneros in a fiercely contested race. But her signature moment of 2018 came in April, at the USATF Team Racewalking Trials.

While the rest of her teammates were chasing NAIA qualifiers in their various track disciplines, Melendez stepped away from the track to battle it out with the best racewalkers in the US on the streets of Philadelphia. At stake were a few coveted spots on the US team to the IAAF World Team Racewalking Championships in China that May. In an "off year" without an Olympics or IAAF World Track & Field Championships, this was a race for the right to represent the United States on racewalking's biggest stage of 2018.

Melendez had been putting in a lot of training going into this race, but the solitary nature of her training had caused doubts to start to creep into her mind.

"When you're training by yourself and you don't have any other racewalkers, it's easy to think that you can get off track," she says.

A slight injury to her ankle in the week before the race did nothing to calm her nerves, but she resolved to press on, although she says that even the night before the race she was disagreeing with her coaches on what she thought she could do in the race.

As race day unfolded, however, expectations were repeatedly shattered. In a 20-kilometer race mostly comprised of professionals (side note: yes, there are professional racewalkers, and Melendez will likely soon be one of them), Melendez was holding her own, and she was reaching every mile and kilometer split faster than she or her coaches were expecting.

It wasn't until two kilometers to go, however, that she says she finally realized how well she was doing. She crossed the line in one hour, 41 minutes and 32 seconds, setting a massive personal record for the 20k distance and bringing tears of joy to her face. That personal best wouldn't be the only thing worth celebrating that day, however.

She had finished fifth, seeming to miss the Worlds team by one spot; but one of the competitors was from Puerto Rico, which the IAAF recognizes as an independent country.

"After I prayed with my coaches, they came up to me and said 'Oh and you made the world team,'" Melendez says. "So, of course more tears came, and I was just really, really grateful for the opportunity and completely blown away."

The race also marked the first time she crossed a finish line ahead of Cisneros, winning their head-to-head battle by over two minutes. That victory, combined with the fact that the only athletes ahead of Melendez on the podium were professionals, made for an iconic moment.

The moment was made sweeter by the fact that Melendez didn't feel pain in her ankle during the race, something she describes as nothing less than miraculous.

"By the grace of God I didn't feel any pain while I was racing," she says. "[the race] really put things into perspective, and I even told my coach afterwards, 'I think this is going to be one of those career-altering races where I look back and realize you're able to do much more than you give yourself credit for.'"

This combination of relentless drive and humble faith is something which many who've crossed paths with Melendez note, and it seems to be a key to her success.

"I love that her faith is integral to her life, and she's humble," says Jamie Froebe, one of the NU cross-country/track and field assistant coaches, who traveled with Melendez to Philadelphia. "She'll say that [she] works hard, and gives up a lot, but she doesn't hold it over anyone, and I really appreciate that about her."

This humility is evident despite the fact that Melendez is one of the few people who has every right to bask in their own accomplishments.

"She had made several US teams as a junior [the term for athletes under the age of 21]," Mandi says, "so she had USA gear and she had gear on from big invitationals that the best athletes on our team from different events were like, wow. [But] I think one of the cool things was she didn't brag about it, she came in with such great work ethic and passion for the sport."

On the World Stage

The road that began because she wanted to go to Disneyworld had now taken Melendez across the world, to compete against the best racewalkers on the planet.

She hadn't expected she would be there for that race, and recalls a meeting with Mandi to plan out the season where he'd said "We'll put it on there just for fun, see what happens."

She describes the trip to Beijing for the IAAF World Team Racewalking Championships as surreal, and although the race didn't go quite according to plans – she was felled by food poisoning, but gritted it out to finish the race – she soaked in every moment of the experience.

"Being in the presence of all the other professionals, at that level, I can't even describe how amazing it was," she says.

The fact that she finished the race under the circumstances she did speaks to what is perhaps Melendez's greatest strength; come hell or high water, she ranks among the most ferocious competitors track and field has ever seen. And while she and those in her camp were no doubt disappointed with how things played out, it seems an almost foregone conclusion that Beijing was not Melendez's last time racing on the sport's biggest stage.



Eyes to the future.

Miles to go...

The road to this point has not always been a smooth one – she finished seventh at the USATF Championship meet this last summer at Drake University, again plagued with a case of food poisoning – but with her collegiate career behind her, Melendez now turns to 2020 and the U.S. Olympic Trials in Eugene. She still needs to shave time off her PR to achieve what will likely be the Olympic Standard for Tokyo, but at just 21 years old, she has established herself as one of the top competitors in the US – and she's only getting better.

"I will not be surprised if she goes to the Olympics," says Froebe. "I've never met anyone with the kind of focus and discipline she has. She clearly has talent, but she also has the discipline."

Estabrook echoes that sentiment, knowing first-hand what it takes to reach the elite levels of track and field.

"She has the experience, talent, wisdom, work ethic and most importantly, the heart to get there. I can't wait to brag to anyone that will listen that Amberly the Olympian was my college teammate," she says.

Mandi similarly seems to believe there is something special about Melendez, despite being known as someone who is not prone to hyperbole or overselling expectations.

"I think it's such a big difference to see *her* racewalk, then to watch other people racewalk," he says. "When you watch *her* it's like 'wow, this is someone who's really special and really good at this'"

Leach gives a more tempered assessment, noting the unpredictable nature of high-performance athletics.

“*Anything can happen when you get to that [level],” he says. “But I would not be shocked. In other words, yeah I understand it’s a longshot, but longshots never happen unless you prepare for them to happen.”*

The road she's walked has been a long one, but with the 2020 Tokyo Olympics on the horizon, Amberly Melendez still has miles to go.



Tokyo on the horizon...