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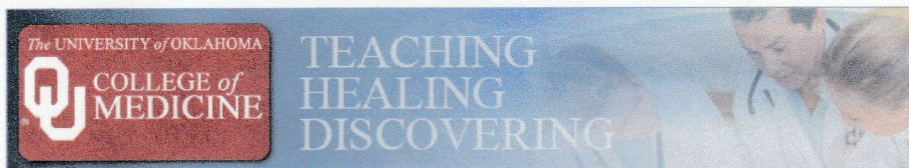
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Long-Distance Vision: Camille Herron is Driven to Excel in Marathons and in Research

By April Wilkerson
Writer, OU College of Medicine

A career in biomedical research requires attention to detail, extensive preparation and determination to stick with a long-term project.

The same can be said of running a marathon.



Mary Beth Humphrey, M.D., Ph.D., back, discusses bone images with Camille Herron, who works in her lab, bringing a specialized skill in bone histomorphometry.

The two endeavors are a perfect fit for a person like Camille Herron. By day, she is a skilled laboratory technician whose deft hand-eye coordination, scientific knowledge and work ethic drive research projects forward. Outside of work, she is an elite marathoner who trains by running up to 120 miles per week, has won 14 marathons and studies the minutiae of nutrition, hydration and anatomy to propel her body faster and farther.

For Herron, who works in the Department of Medicine at the OU College of Medicine, that means she is right where she wants to be.

“To me, running is like brushing my teeth – it’s just something I do every day,” Herron said. “If you do something over and over and over, that’s how you thrive as a runner, and that’s how you thrive in the lab too. I’m a big goal setter – I do that with my running, but also in the lab.”

Herron works in the research lab of Mary Beth Humphrey, M.D., Ph.D., associate professor in the Department of Medicine and chief of the Section of Rheumatology, Immunology and Allergy. The focus of Humphrey’s research is osteoimmunology – understanding how the bone and the immune system work together. Herron brings a skill set that is uncommon in the research realm -- her specialty is bone histomorphometry, or making measurements of the bones. The process requires dexterity and resolve, which Herron brings in abundance.

“She’s so driven, both at work and outside of work,” Humphrey said. “She’s single-minded about getting things done, and she does them to an expert level. Not many people are trained in high-quality bone work, so it’s been fantastic for my lab. We’ve been able to resurrect some projects that I had to put on the back burner without having somebody with her skill set. She’s really detail-oriented, which I think comes from her ability to manage

her dietary intakes to allow her to run frequent marathons. She attacks her work in the lab with the same ferocity that she does her marathoning.”

In the world of distance running, Herron, 32, is among the best. Her most recent win was especially meaningful – she was the top female finisher at the Oklahoma City Memorial Marathon in April, a race she also won in 2012. Her goal is to win a marathon in every state, something no female has ever accomplished.



Camille Herron, women's winner of the recent Oklahoma City Memorial Marathon, is pictured with her trophy and medal from the race. She is shown with Mary Beth Humphrey, M.D., Ph.D., for whom she works in the College of Medicine.

Herron's love of running began early; by the time she graduated from Westmoore High School in 2000, she was a three-time state champion and six-time All-Stater. She accepted both academic and athletic scholarships to the University of Tulsa, but during the last few years of high school and first year of college, she suffered seven stress fractures. Instead of letting it get her down, she only became more interested in the physiology behind the injuries. She became an exercise sports science major and conducted research with her adviser, a bone and muscle physiology investigator.

In the meantime, she met the man who would become her husband, Conor Holt, an elite marathoner in his own right. He began supporting his wife's running career, and they discovered she had what it took to be among the best. Their journey then took them to Oregon State University, where Herron began working on her master's degree and realized that she had a particular aptitude for bone imaging.

“It all started with me being curious about myself and trying to keep myself healthy,” she said. “It was like we were doing a research study on what I learned with myself. My graduate school thesis was on enhancing bone recovery with whole-body vibration training.”

In 2008, Herron qualified for the Olympic Trials, and she and her husband moved to Indiana, where he accepted a coaching job at Purdue University. Herron worked part-time in a bone research lab, further honing her skills. In 2009, she had a breakthrough marathon performance, which brought her an agent and major sponsors. She decided to quit her job and run full-time. The next four years were packed with accomplishments. She made the PanAmerican Team in 2011, raced in 14 states and three countries, winning several more marathons, and she qualified for the 2012 Olympic Trials. During that race, she also achieved her personal record in the marathon: 2 hours, 37 minutes and 14 seconds.

The winds of change would soon create another move for Herron, however. She and her husband accepted an opportunity to move back to their home state when he was offered the head cross country and track coaching job at Oklahoma City University. Although she relished running full-time, Herron also had been feeling the urge to resume working in the lab so she could engage her hands and her mind. Again, things fell into place.

Her sister, Jane Yaciuk, Ph.D., is an immunologist working as a post-doctoral fellow in the lab of William Hildebrand, Ph.D., Department of Microbiology and Immunology. She began talking to Herron about Humphrey's research, and Herron's interest was piqued. In January 2014, she was hired to work full-time in Humphrey's lab.

The return to working full-time has helped her running career, Herron said. She's a person who craves structure and routine, and her life demands nothing less. Each morning before work, she runs 80-90 minutes. Four or five days a week, she runs again in the evening for another 50 minutes. She saves her hardest workouts for the weekends so she has time to recover before the work week starts over.

“Working full-time has been beneficial because it ensures I'm good with my time management and I'm getting to bed at a decent time,” she said. “And it's nice to be back in the lab. I'm a cerebral person, and I felt like my mind missed the stimulation.”

In what little free time she has left, Herron maintains a popular website and blog (camilleherron.com), where she interacts with runners from around the world on the ways they can run better and faster. She and her husband also share the hobbies of piano playing and brewing beer. another endeavor that is both a science and an art.

As a runner who loves long distances, Herron proves that, with persistence and training, milestones can be achieved. The goals of a research lab are not too different. Herron is contributing to a body of knowledge that may one day increase the effectiveness of treating conditions like osteoporosis and rheumatoid arthritis. The focus of Humphrey's research is on osteoclasts, which are the bone-resorbing cells required to help "chew" away old bone to make way for new, stronger bone. In several disorders, osteoclast activity is abnormal. If researchers can understand the different ways osteoclasts are regulated, they could potentially shut them down in disease states.

"It's exciting; I think a lot about the possibilities of what we can do," Herron said. "Every day I feel excited to be here because I can't wait to see what we figure out today."

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