

GOING THE DISTANCE

How An Elite Runner With Vasculitis Made it to the U.S. Olympics Trials



By **Brandon Hudgins**
and John Fries

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GOING THE DISTANCE

A preview of a forthcoming book by

BRANDON HUDGINS

and **JOHN FRIES**

Cover photo by Ed Becker
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“If you embrace the challenge and dream as a risk, then you are giving into failure as an option. I have always felt that labeling something a risk is dis-empowering. The challenge should empower you, not be looked at as a threat--doing so engages the wrong pathways in your brain. This is something you have to do to succeed, not something you are hoping . . . will work. Empower yourself by believing in your plan and your talents, and you will be able to take the necessary steps to succeed.”

—Brandon Hudgins, June 2017

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ABOUT BRANDON HUDGINS

A native of Boone, North Carolina, Brandon has been active as a long-distance runner since he began competing in the sport during high school. After being diagnosed with vasculitis, he continued to run, and in the past several years has achieved elite status in the sport.

On August 7, 2015, Brandon became the 449th American to run a mile in less than 4-minutes, when he completed the Sir Walter Raleigh Miler in 3:59.67.

Going the Distance will be available for purchase at Brandon’s website. Please visit to learn more about Brandon and check out his inspirational and motivational products for runners.

<https://www.brandonhudgins.com>

VASCULITIS FOUNDATION: “TEAM BRANDON”

The Vasculitis Foundation established Team Brandon in March 2016 to support Brandon as he trained for the 2016 Summer Olympics. Although he didn’t make the Olympic Team, Brandon’s amazing spirit and positive outlook on life inspired more than 300 team members to participate in weekly exercise challenges to become more active and healthy. Members also participated in awareness challenges issued by Brandon.

In 2017, VF Team Brandon continues to help even more patients living with vasculitis and their family members achieve their own personal best. Brandon’s personal experience as a patient and his educational background (BA in Physical Education Fitness and Wellness and an MS in Exercise Science: Strength and Conditioning from Winthrop University) gives him a unique perspective and understanding on motivating patients living with chronic illnesses.

He continues to promote health and wellness as part of his Ambassador role with the Vasculitis Foundation.

To learn more about Brandon’s role with VF and join Team Brandon, visit:

http://www.vasculitisfoundation.org/victory-over-vasculitis_2/

ABOUT JOHN FRIES

John is a writer, graphic designer, digital media producer, and principal at Fries Communications, a marketing, communications and media consultancy and creative studio. He is honored to work with the Vasculitis Foundation and Team Brandon.

John’s website is at www.johnfries.com



reached the point where my job had interfered for long enough, and There was no question that had to choose the pursuit of my dream over the comfort of a paycheck.

Today, I completely understand my former employer's position. I really do. I was contracted to work, and they needed me for those dates. And during the past few years I missed several meets because I needed to stay and work.

But this wasn't the same at all. Those weren't qualifying meets for the Olympic Trials.

So our arrangement had finally expired and I had to take back control of my life and empower myself. Over those few days of contemplation, I realized that I hadn't really been all-in on my dream. I was using too many things as crutches and, as a result, had remained unempowered. By finally making the decision to quit my job and walking into my boss's office and doing it, I was kicking the inner bitch out of my head and empowering myself again.

This wasn't a risk. To many on the outside it looked like I was jumping head first off a cliff into murky water, but to me I was sliding into a nice warm jacuzzi. I do hate that it came down to me providing only five days notice before leaving, but that was the circumstance. There were some fun times and I made some dear friends (and enemies) while working there, and for the most part of those three years, my bosses and coworkers had been incredibly understanding and flexible with my racing schedule. But it all ran its course and it was time for me to be "BHudg" full time. No more dressing up, putting on a tie and a smile and faking my way through an eight-hour shift. I now had the power to chase my dream uninhibited.

Boy, did it pay off. I don't think it's a coincidence that my best performance of the year came just one week after quitting that job. At that meet, I was light on my feet and light in spirit. I was finally happy to be chasing my dream. It also made my decision look less "risky" to those around me. It proved to them that what I knew inside was real. I was meant to do this and I could do this.

There was just one remaining chain to cut. My new plan was to race the rest of the summer with this newfound fitness, earn enough money to live through the off season and, of course, sign that contract that I so desperately wanted.

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RISK

Use of that word as it's applied to life absolutely aggravates me. I feel like it is so often used because many people don't understand the steps others have to take to achieve something out of the ordinary. If you've done your homework and are ready to be committed to seeing a goal through to the end, then it is by no means a risk. It's not dangerous; it's adventurous and freeing. What's risky is being stuck in a life or job that isn't fulfilling. That's what leads to dangerous behavior and thoughts. I know for me, personally, my darkest and most dangerous moments came when I was stuck in places that I hated: stuck with people I hated, stuck in a job I hated and had no direction in life. This was dangerous to both my mental and physical health. What's even worse, I didn't know how destructive these patterns were until I had pulled myself out of this cycle (with help from my real friends) and was able to see my goals clearly.

Now that you are empowered and ready to chase your dream, you have to take that big step. Let go of the things that are holding you back and take the leap. To many on the outside, this will look like a risk, but--again--I hate that word. Risk sounds like you aren't prepared. The word risk means there is an exposure to danger or harm. In our case, the danger or harm is failure. But when you are prepared, it's not a risk, it's your best chance for success.

If you embrace the challenge and dream as a risk, then you are giving into failure as an option. I have always felt that labeling something a risk is dis-empowering. The challenge should empower you, not be looked at as a threat--doing so engages the wrong pathways in your brain. This is something you have to do to succeed, not something you are hoping (you know how I feel about that word) will work. Empower yourself by believing in your plan and your talents, and you will be able to take the necessary steps to succeed.

THE RISKS I'VE TAKEN

I've taken many big "risks" in my lifetime, but none bigger than quitting my day job as a guest services representative at a resort one month before the Olympic Trials in 2016. At the time I was working at the resort for nearly three years (my last day would be just a few days shy of the three-year mark). This job had provided me with a livable income, health insurance and a chance to live where I enjoy training. But the job, like many others I've held over the last six years, have come at a cost. Working and juggling the training and travel schedule of a professional track and field athlete is nearly impossible. For those 3 years my daily schedule would often look like this:

8:30 a.m.	Wake Up
9:30 a.m.	Personal Training session
11:00 a.m.	My own training (running, lifting weights, etc.)
1:30 p.m.-2:00 p.m.	Cram food in my mouth
2:00 p.m.-2:30 p.m.	Power nap
3:00 p.m. - 11:00 p.m.	Guest services work
11:30 p.m.	Second run
12:30 a.m.	Bedtime

Doing this four to five days a week for several years will wear you thin. I had no time for myself, my relationship with my girlfriend or to devote to my passions or hobbies. It was all work, no play and very little enjoyment. Although I was able to grow and develop as a runner during this time period, I also developed a lot of problems. My anxiety was a constant battle, my depression would go through deep swings and my running became too stressful because I looked at it as my only escape from a job I didn't enjoy.

Eventually, my relationship with my girlfriend became a text message relationship, which isn't healthy. All these things began to pile up one after the other. In the beginning I had a lot of it under control, but little-by-little, more things in my life began to unravel. This was ironic because during this time I managed to have several big breakthroughs in my running career, but was at an all time low with some of my personal goals. I had been succeeding on the track, but failing in life with very little time to enjoy myself.

This burned me at my core. Part of who I am as a person means following a goal to its completion and successful outcome, but this was starting to become a nightmare for me. I wasn't having as much fun as I should have been. I had

no time for myself. I had no time to grow as a person. And I wasn't able to give the time to my new work with the Vasculitis Foundation which was bringing me tremendous joy.

I knew deep down that I needed a change, but I was a slave to a paycheck and the stability that it provided. I needed money to chase my dream, since I had no shoe sponsorship to finance my running. I needed health insurance in case the unthinkable were to happen. And, I had to pay my bills, which running alone wasn't doing. So I felt stuck.

During this time I had some great accomplishments but also some terrible ones. Every time I stood at the starting line of a race, I dreamed of that race being the one that would finally allow me the opportunity to be a full time athlete. But guess what? That race never happened.

To be sure, there were some high points. I broke four minutes in my mile, got loads of press and my story began making the rounds at every major shoe company. But it wasn't enough. To this day I still don't know what the people in the running world want. I'm not asking for something that my peers don't have.

But all that pressure did slowly build up in me. The 15- or 19-year-old Brandon would have welcomed the challenge and used it as fuel, but not the 26-to-29-year-old Brandon. He couldn't handle the burden. It became a bad source of stress, and I tried every conceivable way to funnel that energy into positive thoughts, but it never sustained.

When you stand on the starting line of a race, it's almost like a fighter standing in the center of the ring. You have to have the confidence that the work you've put in will allow you to win the fight. I was fighting too many inner battles to be prepared to stand on the starting line with the sole goal of winning.

So often during those years I embraced the inner bitch and found myself taking the easy way out. I gave myself excuse after excuse, but it always came back to the fact that I was working too much, too stressed out, had too many factors working against me, and not enough time to be a real athlete. I tried to not let those creep in--and a few times in there I was able to defeat that inner bitch--but more and more that inner bitch was winning and I didn't like it.

Even if it didn't show on the outside or come up in conversations, I was often jealous and angry at opportunities, like endorsements, that my competitors had been given. It's no secret that this kind of emotional response is neither healthy nor conducive to success. But my way of thinking was this: After all the years I'd spent training and all the sacrifices I'd made, I had earned the right to be a full-time professional athlete and to enjoy all the benefits afforded by that status. But, man, I could just not get lucky enough. And in time, all that jealousy and anger led to bitterness. I was only in my late 20s, but I was becoming a bitter and resentful old man.

Things finally reached a breaking point in May 2016.

QUITTING MY JOB TO PURSUE MY DREAMS

Nearly every day for three years, I had the dream of going in to work and quitting my job. Well, guess what? I finally did.

Talk about taking a chance. At that point, my hand was finally forced. Or, just maybe, I was attempting to write this book from behind that green desk at work instead of the comfort of my home. In any event, when my work schedule was posted for June of that year, one thing stood out like a sore big toe: I didn't get the days off that I needed so that I could race and, hopefully, qualify for the Olympic Trials.

This placed me at a crossroads. In reality this situation should have come up much earlier, but because I had been embracing the "risk" of quitting, my inner bitch allowed me to experience comfort. Comfort is nice. Even depression, sadness, stress, and excuses can eventually become comfortable. And that's exactly where I found myself. And I had to decide, at that specific point in time, whether to stay at my job and have my lifelong goal of running in the Olympic Trials come down to one opportunity to qualify, or quit my job and have the extra time to participate in the three trials I might need.

One thing I have to explain here is the complexity of the qualifying process for the Olympic Trials. The rules are created by our governing body, United States of America Track and Field (USATF), and all athletes need to abide by them. In 2016 the rules stated that a runner must run 1,500 meters in 3:38 or faster to

be guaranteed a spot on the starting line. Now, if 30 declared athletes didn't run under 3:38, the organizers would follow a descending-order list based on time, until they reached 30 athletes.

The window for qualifying was extremely short, literally just one week before the start of the Trials. And to make it even more complicated, athletes didn't have to declare in the 1500-meter run until almost halfway through the ten-day Olympic Trials event. This allowed some athletes to keep their name on the list and run their primary event first. If they bombed out, they could run the 1500-meters as a backup.

On June 4th, one week after quitting my guest services job, I ran 3:38.20 at the Furman Elite 1500-meter race in Greenville, SC. At that point I was somewhere around 15th overall on that descending order list. Which was both good and bad. With three weeks left to qualify, 15 more athletes would have to jump me--but without an official qualifying time, I was nervous with each and every meet that was contested until the window closed.

I wanted to not pay attention to the other races because they were out of my hands, but I don't operate like that. And I needed to know. So I found myself sitting up late stalking race results and live feeds to watch meets that were on the west coast, just to see if anyone would hop me. The first weekend went by with a breeze. Torrential downpours prevented fast times at a meet in Portland, OR, where some of the best runners in the nation were chasing times. Then, with just two weeks to go, some people got hungry and greedy and were often stuck chasing times and had to make concessions in training to be ready to race again just a few days later.

All of this played into my hands as we entered the final days before the trials. I ran one more race in the middle of June to try and lower my mark and guarantee myself a spot in the trials, but I made some mistakes early in that race, then tried too hard to make up ground and found myself out of fight and energy during the final 400 meters of the race. This led to what I believe was one of my worst performances of 2016 with a time of 3:40.1 at the Princeton Last Chance Qualifier.

That was a testament to how far my training and fitness had come in one year. Had I run that race and time a year earlier, it would've been my personal record time by 2 seconds--but now it was considered a failure. That's what's so remarkable about lowering your personal record

time; it opens your mind to new possibilities and new normals. Times above 3:40 were now considered bad performances and I loved it.

ENTERING THE QUALIFYING TRIALS FOR THE U.S. OLYMPIC TEAM

Anyway, after suffering through the final two weeks of watching people chase times, I entered the qualifying trials for a possible spot on the U. S. Olympics Team with the 18th-ranked time during the qualifying window, and was guaranteed a spot on the starting line. I finally realized the first step in my dream of qualifying for the Olympic Trials.

Now, back to quitting my job. As you can now see, the process of qualifying for the Olympic Trials can be a bit tedious, and I knew that I might need more than one opportunity to get my qualifying mark. I watched as some runners' opportunities were ruined by rain and other weather-related issues during the month of June, and had I not quit, I would have been in that same boat myself. Races and conditions can be unpredictable, and any of my opportunities could have been ruined by any number of unplanned incidents--a fall, weather, bad pacing, a stomach bug, travel complications, or some other personal disaster. You name it, I've seen it.

So with that thought in my head, my work schedule in my hand and only one opportunity to race, I was at the crossroads I had dreamed about for three years. On one hand I was jumping for joy. I was exhilarated to finally have the reason (or excuse) I needed to quit my job. On the other hand, though, I also experienced a strong degree of insecurity. Quitting my job meant I would be totally, completely, unequivocally, 100 percent on my own. There would be no more biweekly pay checks or health insurance coverage associated with a job. It would now be up to me to race and hustle to make ends meet.

Of course I also knew that all I needed was one big performance to give me that elusive running contract I so desired. As you might imagine, my emotions were all over the place for about three days as I tried hard not to make a rash decision. I thought about it, talked with my parents, girlfriend, and best friend, and thought about it some more. After several days of deliberation, we all came to the same conclusion: it had