

Get on Your feet

Olympic hopeful Michelle LaFleur shares her experience as a distance runner and shows you how to put one foot in front of the other.

Story and Photography > Michael Jordan

It's 7:45 in the morning on the coldest day of the year. As the sun begins to paint the Savannah salt marsh a deep orange glow, most people are warming up their cars for the daily rush hour battle. But not Michelle LaFleur. Clad only in a sweatshirt, shorts, gloves, and running shoes, this pint-sized road warrior is hitting the trail.



At 5'3" and 112 pounds, Michelle's slight form belies her Olympian potential. Inside her heart—and lungs—burns a fire that has pushed her to become a five-time-national collegiate champion in the 3,000-meter race, a professional runner (sponsored by Saucony and Power-Bar) and a contender in the U.S. Olympic marathon trials. Her daily morning workouts last no fewer than two hours, adding up to an average of 90 miles a week.

And at age 31, Michelle's never been in better shape. "Running is a very healthy sport," Michelle explains. "It increases your blood flow, increases endorphins, helps relieve stress, controls weight. But the main thing is, it's very individual. That's why I love running. It's not like other sports where you rely on your teammates or other people. It's just YOU, it's just you."

Photos courtesy of Michelle LaFleur

one step at a Time

Michelle declares that you don't have to run marathons to find pleasure in running. The best plan, she says, is to start out small. "Just like anything else, start with the basics. Get out there and walk. And then, if you want to start running, just run within your walk. Maybe run for a minute and walk for a minute."

Play it Safe

"Running is a contact sport," cautions Michelle. "Your feet are making contact with the ground, and you can really hurt yourself." If you're not careful, Michelle warns, "you won't be running more than two weeks."

Make no mistake about it: your old sneakers just won't do. It's crucial to start out with the right gear. "First, get yourself a really good supportive shoe," she says. "Go to a running-specific store where they can assess your foot." Plan to spend between \$50 and \$100 on the right footwear. It may seem like a lot of money, but making this investment at the outset can save you a bundle of pain and suffering down the trail. And it might just keep you moving.

Watch Your Form

Already running but need a little help with technique? Michelle has seen it all. "One harmful misconception is that a good runner must have long legs and a long stride," she explains. "In fact, if you're running anything longer than a couple of loops around the track, you want a shorter, quicker turnover. A long stride keeps your feet in the air longer, giving gravity the opportunity to increase the harmful impact on your joints, which can really add up over distance. That's why some of the best distance runners are short, and longer-legged runners need to adapt their stride."

Michelle also stresses the importance of abdominal breathing: "Practice taking breaths that push your belly out, rather than shallow chest breathing." This is a great way to maximize oxygen intake and reduce shoulder tension, which can tire you out. Another trick to keeping your

form in check: "Relax your hands. A coach taught me to let my thumbs bounce gently on my hands as I run, keeping my arms and shoulders relaxed so I can use my energy where it's needed."

Keep it Interesting

Even die-hard fitness runners may find themselves at a plateau from time to time. Follow Michelle's lead, and get competitive. Try signing up for an amateur road race. "There's a positive atmosphere, because you see all different types of people running.... Young, old, big and small, elite and not-elite! I think that if you wanted to train and hop into those races, that would be a wonderful experience," she adds. Many races offer 5K (just over 3 miles) and 10K (slightly more than 6 miles) run/walks for those who just want to enjoy the experience. And watching other competitive runners can inspire you to train even harder.

Don't Make Excuses

Finally, if you're thinking your busy daily routine doesn't allow enough time to get in the running groove, consider this: Michelle holds down a full-time job at a wellness center where she coaches water aerobics and works with stroke survivors, amputees and other challenged athletes to achieve their personal fitness goals. She handles all that AND coaches speed and agility training for eighteen local soccer teams in addition to her daily two-hour run. So what are you waiting for?

Follow Michelle's path to the Olympics at usatf.org. The Olympic marathon trials are April 3rd in St. Louis, MO.



pace yourself

Start training now for a citizens' race in your area...

Gate River Run

Jacksonville, FL
March 13, 2004
5K and 15K
gate-riverrun.com

Cooper River Bridge Run

Charleston, SC
April 3, 2004
7K Walk, 10K Run
bridgerun.com

Peachtree Road Race

Atlanta, GA
July 4, 2004
10K
atlantatrackclub.org/at02001.htm

For an extensive calendar of races throughout the South, go to: running.net/calendar