

Dakotah Lindwurm's Olympic journey from Minneapolis to Paris

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Olympic marathoner Dakotah Lindwurm and her coach Christopher Lundstrom reflect on her journey from the Olympic trials to the Paris 2024 Games and shares what it takes to cross the finish line as an elite athlete.

ALEX LASSITER: Hello, lovely people! It's Alex Lassiter with the Minnesota Daily, and you're listening to In The Know, a podcast dedicated to the University of Minnesota.

As some of you may remember, I hosted a podcast back in April about training for a marathon, and that went about as well as it could go for someone who hadn't trained for a marathon in years.

The sweat has spread, my breath is non-existent, my butt hurts for some reason, but I'm done.

If you listened to that episode, you may remember that Christopher Lundstrom, the professor of that class I ran with, was unavailable for an interview because he was in Paris. What you may not have known is that the runner he was training, Dakotah Lindwurm, not only qualified for the Olympic games, but ran in them and placed 12th overall. With the Twin Cities Marathon coming up at the start of October, I thought, if there's any time post-Olympics to revisit this topic, it's now.

DAKOTAH LINDWURM: It's always the same type of workout. So you can compare, lightly, apples to apples. Of course, when you're doing stuff that's over like a hillier course, it's harder to compare. We bumped up the mileage going into the Olympic trials up to 130 miles a week, and that seemed to work. So we kept that for the Paris training also.

LASSITER: Of course, Lindwurm didn't go to the Olympics straight away. I mean, she wasn't entered into a random drawing like the Hunger Games. Like every other athlete wanting to participate, Lindwurm had to earn her spot by running in the Olympic Qualifier Trials in Florida.

LINDWURM: For like two or three miles, I kind of knew I was in the position that I was going to make the team, but you can't ever celebrate too early. And I was not really allowing myself to think too deeply about what was happening.

But as soon as I crossed the finish line and it was very cemented that I would make the team and I was the third person to make it. I don't know, like there's not really words to describe what it's like when all your dreams come true. It was the best day of my life for sure.

LASSITER: Lundstrom is a three-time Olympic Trials qualifier himself, and said a lot of his own training experience helped him to coach Lindwurm both before the trials, and in preparation for the games.

CHRISTOPHER LUNDSTROM: I guess the other thing is just thinking about the frequency of the really long, hard workouts. I think there's a tendency to want to just pile on more and more. And somebody like Dakotah can really handle a lot of heavy training. But there is still a diminishing return and a point at which you're working just for the sake of working versus actually getting some positive adaptations from it.

So, yeah, I definitely learned a lot and I've always been somebody who observes what everybody else is doing and tries to learn from all the different ways that people train.

LASSITER: Since the games were in Paris this year, Lindwurm and Lundstrom had to hop across the pond. I'm sure many of us, myself included, thought there was all this fanfare surrounding the athletes coming out to the host city. Maybe a space shuttle gets rented for each country so they can land in style? I dunno. But I found out, the commute to Paris was a lot more simple than I could have imagined.

LINDWURM: I think a lot of people think that all Olympic athletes travel together and like there's this one plane that we're all on and that's not true. You kind of just fly out of wherever is convenient for you and they're very flexible on when you want to go out.

Obviously, people are competing at different times. I was one of the last events, but I was actually out there a few days before the opening ceremonies. So yeah, we flew out of Minneapolis. I chose to use all of my miles to upgrade to Delta One, just to have a more comfortable flying experience, especially because I was still in the thick of training.

And yeah, it was definitely difficult. I think it took me a good week to get on Paris time, but once I was on their time zone, I felt very ready and comfortable.

LUNDSTROM: Yeah, I went over later. I was only there for the last few days before the marathon. So it was a little, probably a little bit more of a whirlwind for me getting in and landing in Paris.

LASSITER: Now, I'd imagine many of us haven't actually competed in the Olympics before, so we can really only imagine what the atmosphere is actually like in the days leading up to your event. However, after landing in Paris for her very first Olympic games, Lindwurm got to experience it firsthand.

LINDWURM: It's so hard to describe because it's the thing I've worked for for so, so long and you have this, like, little belief that you can do something crazy like that and then it comes true and it almost feels like a fever dream. From the opening ceremonies, being on a boat with LeBron James chanting, "USA! USA!" with everybody in the rain. Like, that was a highlight for sure.

During the opening ceremonies, I actually talked to and got a picture with Anthony Edwards, the Timberwolves all-star. So that was really special. I've become a fan over the last couple of years. And this last season with him was so much fun that I really geeked out when I saw him.

And then being on the starting line and looking left and right and seeing the best marathoners in the entire world. And knowing that when I crossed the finish line, I'd forever write my name down as an Olympian was just, I mean, it's super special. It's unlike anything else that I could ever think of.

LASSITER: Once the opening ceremonies had concluded, Lindwurm stayed in an AirBnB, far away from the cardboard beds the other athletes slept on. Though in case you were wondering, she did sleep on them for one night and told me they weren't actually that bad.

Aside from talking to her teammates, she kept herself in a bubble to help her sleeping, eating and training schedules stay consistent and healthy. As the day of the race approached, nerves were running wild. Both Lindwurm and Lundstrom were beside themselves with anticipation.

LUNDSTROM: I would say, for me, the really nerve wracking part and all of that is a couple, two, three weeks beforehand when you're just hoping all the training and the preparation has been correct and that you're not overdoing it, you're doing enough and all of that. But from the point of the gun going off, I was just trying to really enjoy being there.

LINDWURM: I think like the moments before was probably like the calmest I had been. That whole morning felt really, really calm for me. The day before, like the 48 hours leading up to it, I felt like I was a nervous wreck. So I was a little bit worried that I was using all my adrenaline, but I woke up and I was like, "Well, time to go to work, time to do the thing that I've been dreaming of doing for the last six months."

It was different than any other race because obviously just being the Olympics had set up slightly different. And it was a lot of like, hurry up and wait, hurry up and wait. They brought you to like a tent where you stood and waited for like five minutes and then they'd rush you off to a different room and then you had to stand there and wait.

So it kind of just felt like, "Oh, I just want to get started." Like, let's get this going so that I can get to the finish line as fast as possible.

The first three miles were incredibly chaotic. Easily the most chaotic racing I've ever been a part of because it's quite narrow and there's so many people all together at that time. So I was just trying to stay on my feet for like the first three miles and focus on taking the shortest path, but also not getting tripped up.

And then after that it was really just trying to, I try to go blank in my head is what I say, or like, just go brain dead for as long as possible. So you're not really thinking about the pain or thinking about how much you have ahead of you. It really wasn't until I got out to Versailles that I was like, "Oh! Oh my gosh. I'm nearly, I'm halfway done. I am feeling really good."

LUNDSTROM: I had a chance to be about near the halfway mark where Dakotah had caught back up to the lead group and then in fact went up into the lead. So to be able to see that firsthand, right near the palace of Versailles, as far as Olympic experiences go, it was pretty iconic and amazing.

LINDWURM: Yeah, when I originally crossed the finish line, I didn't know what place I was in for sure. It wasn't until I got to media that I was told I was in 12th and I was pretty much immediately disappointed, um, because I knew, I could see 10th and I was like, "Oh, that would have—10th would have been really, really epic." But I was just trying to keep a positive attitude. And I mean, 12th is something I can still really be proud of.

And I'm super happy with my race, but just as an elite athlete, I'm always going to want a little bit more. But it was pretty emotional. Like the moment crossing the finish line, because I knew that like forever, I could call myself an Olympian and I had a race that I knew I could be proud of. I'd be remiss to not mention I got engaged immediately after the race. So that's definitely a highlight.

LASSITER: And once Lindwurm crossed that finish line, that was it. A few short hours later, and the closing ceremony was wrapping up. Lindwurm and Lundstrom went home. How do you even celebrate something as monumental as finishing an Olympic marathon?

LINDWURM: The first thing that I did, we landed and we were Ubering back to our home. And while we were Ubering home, we also Uber Eats'd Chipotle. We had been missing Chipotle very dearly.

LUNDSTROM: You know, I went from Paris to London, met my family in London for a little vacation afterwards. So I'm going to tell you what I did when I got to London, which was walk into an air conditioned AirBnB. There was no air conditioning anywhere I was staying in Paris and it was very hot. So I just sat down and enjoyed that nice cool air.

LASSITER: Even though she's fresh off the 2024 Olympic Games, Lindwurm said she's going to run again in 2028, and even as far out as 2032. She wants to keep going until her body physically won't let her any more. And who could blame her? Even just getting to live out her Olympic experience vicariously through our interview gave me a glimpse into what it must be like to be a professional athlete.

The hours and hours poured into training, the mental preparation, meeting people you never thought you'd get to meet and walking up to that starting line like it's just another day at the office. It's truly an experience like no other. And the best part? I got all that without having to

actually train for the marathon myself.

This episode was written by Alex Lassiter and produced by Kaylie Sirovy. As always, we appreciate you listening in and feel free to send a message to our email inbox at podcasting@mndaily.com with any questions, comments, concerns or ideas for episodes you'd like to see us produce this season. I'm Alex, and this has been In The Know. Take care, y'all.