



## The Running Life

An interview with

**YiOu (E-O) Wang by Jonathan Hayden**

Jonathan Hayden: We are here with YiOu Wang, a local runner from Mill Valley, California and a rising star in the region.

As a fairly new runner, starting in college, she recently has been racing and often winning the Pacific USTAF women's cross-country events in the San Francisco area. This year so far she's:

Won the Phil Widner Open (women's division), in Santa Rosa,

Placed second in the women's event at the Golden Gate Park Open, San Francisco,

Won the Garmin Park XC Womens event, in Hayward

and had another impressive win at the Presidio XC event in San Francisco.

YiOu Wang runs with the Tamalpa Runners and lives with her husband in from Mill Valley.



Hayden: Welcom YiOu! So, you've only been running and racing for a few years? Is that correct?

YiOu Wang: It seems like a long time to me, I've been Racing for 4-5 years.

Hayden: But not in high school or college?

Wang: I was never part of a competitive racing or running team in high school or college. I would say that that I got really serious after college in 2007.

Hayden: Were you involved in other sports in high school or college?

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Wang: In college, no. In high school I swam for one season and played tennis for a season, but that was when I was a freshman. After that year I really got caught up in classes and didn't have time.

Hayden: What motivated you to get started to begin with?

Wang: I got interested after I moved to Boston to go to college. I was an undergrad at MIT. During my freshman year I went out with my friends to the Boston Marathon. I heard it's always a big party there and I'd never seen a marathon before or watched one or knew anyone personally who had run one.

We were about 3/4 of a mile from the finish, for hours watching these people run by. I just really got inspired by how determined they were so close to the finish line, and how they looked like they were all clearly suffering. I just said (to myself) I really want to do this someday, I really want to run Boston.

Hayden: Once you were motivated, how did you start? What was the first thing you did to start running?

Wang: I told a couple of my friends in my dorm who had run cross country and were part-time members of the MIT cross country team that I wanted to run Boston. They thought I was insane. I don't think any of them considered running a marathon. Then I went on line at Runner's World.com and I read a couple of articles about how to start running if you've never run before. So I gathered all the background information and put together a plan.

I didn't go out and buy the most expensive running gear. I started with a pair of old sneakers I used playing tennis in high school and just laced up my shoes and went for a run to see what it was like. I can really remember my first couple of runs. The dorm I lived in was right near the Charles River and Memorial Drive. There's a bridge called the Harvard bridge that crosses the Charles River. It's not too long, maybe a quarter of a mile. I just remember saying, "I'm just going to try run to the other side of the bridge." I can remember not being able to run to the other side of Harvard bridge! I started really slowly trying to go a little bit further each day. At first it was really hard. I had a hard time working up to 2 and 3 miles. Then I started looking into marathon training plans and thinking "oh my god, how am I ever going to run 10 when if I can barely make 3 miles!"

When I started running in April after the Boston Marathon, I found out you had to run a qualifying time before you can run Boston. So I realized I needed to find another marathon to run. I ended up running the Cape Cod Marathon that October. Somehow I managed to work myself up to running a marathon by October of that year.

After Cape Cod, I had a couple of training partners, a couple of guys from the dorms who also wanted to run Boston, but I didn't run with them too often. I qualified for Boston and ran the Boston Marathon (the following spring). After Boston, I just really got into long distance running.

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Hayden: Did you change your shoes before you started running longer distances and prior to Cape Cod?

Wang: I did eventually change my shoes. I went to this shoe store, Marathon Sports and brought my old shoes with me. I told them I knew nothing about running shoes, can you help me? They looked at my old shoes and couldn't believe I could run with these old things on. They fitted me a real nice pair of Asics. I ended up wearing that same model for 4 years. I really liked them.

Hayden: Why did you move to the West Coast, specifically to Mill Valley in Northern California?

Wang: I just got married in July and my husband, Sean, is from Mill Valley. We met in Boston 2 years ago. I was doing some graduate work and he was working at MIT as a lab assistant. He was also a distance runner, running all the PA-USATF races too. He ran cross country in high school and at Cornell for one semester but his engineering schedule made it too difficult to stay on the team. We met at a coffee shop in Cambridge while we were both training for the Boston Marathon. Our first date together was the next morning; we went for a 6 mile run. And the day after that we ran our 18 mile long run together. Two days later we went to track practice with a local running club and we've been running together ever since.

The whole time we were in Boston, he was raving about how amazing the running was in California. And I was thinking that Boston was the perfect city to run in, because everyone's into it and the Boston Marathon is here. He said you have no idea what good running is. So, in the final year before he graduated from Cornell and I finished at MIT, we'd come back to California to visit periodically and told me he would take me on local trail runs in Mill Valley. So we got off the plane, ate some breakfast and he said we have to go for a run. He had me run the Double Dipsea with him. It was really hard but I definitely fell in love with trail running. After we both finished with school, we were both sick of the East Coast Winter. For example, we'd be out running and our socks would ice up and we'd nearly get frost bitten. So we decided to move to Marin County, Ca.

Hayden: What about lifestyle? Is there much of a contrast between Boston and Northern California?

Wang: I think people here are a lot nicer. In Boston, there is a kind of an aloofness to everyone. And it's not that people here are intrinsically nicer than on the East Coast but I think people here are a lot more open. When we are out at a cafe or running, people are not hesitant to say hi. On a run in Boston, people never would wave or say hi to anyone. In fact, one time in Boston I was going on a run around the river and I was passing this guy. I waved and said hello and he stopped and said "are you from California?" I said, "No, I have visited a few times, but I now live in Cambridge." He said, "You're the first person who has ever said hi to me since I moved here". He went on about how he is from California and was afraid everyone in Boston would be just completely aloof all the time. I think people in California are definitely laid back. The general attitude seems to be that they are happy and don't complain. People in Boston love to complain.

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Hayden: Now that you are here and married, working, and running, are you able to balance all of that? And have a social life too?

Wang: It's definitely hard. The good part is that we are both running and training for the same races. It's easy for us to spend time with each other, because we can just go for a run. We give up a little of that social life that people our age are supposed to have. We pretty much never go out for drinks other than with other runners because we have to get up at 6 AM to go for a run. And so, sometimes I feel like we've lost some friends or acquaintances we'd like to know better, but we just don't have time to hang out with them because we are running, racing, or working.

Hayden: Who is the motivator when it comes to training, you or your husband?

Wang: I feel like I am definitely the unstoppable motivational force in my marriage when it comes to getting all the training in. I don't have a problem getting myself to wake up at 5 AM in the morning, making coffee and getting out the door before 6 AM. Sean will definitely sleep in to 8:45 AM if I let him.

Hayden: Nationally, a lot of women have discovered running over the last 20 years and are running marathons. As a young woman who has discovered running after college, why do you think more women are running these days?

Wang: I think a lot of women are running because it's a very rewarding way to spend your time. It really helps you with your self confidence. I think a lot of women have trouble with confidence, especially when they are in college or have just graduated. Running is something that you get out of it exactly what you put into it.

Hayden: From your own experience, has this has been the case?

Wang: Yeah, in a way it's empowering to know that you can finish a marathon. I think it goes along with women achieving more in education and in the workplace.

Hayden: What has been the biggest surprise in your running career so far?

Wang: Seeing that the human body seems, to me right now, almost limitless. I think that there has to be a threshold of fitness or speed or endurance. I always read about people running faster or farther than I can ever imagine myself improving in speed or endurance. For example, two weekends ago I went on a run with some really accomplished ultra runners and I guess I surprised myself by first, being able to stay with them for 4 1/2 hours and secondly, feeling like I could go out and do it again. It was the longest I had ever run. I'm continuously surprised by how much I can push myself and how much you can push your body. Conversely, it always surprising to me when I don't run for two weeks for whatever reason, and then how hard it is to come back. Your body really adapts to all the conditions it is facing.



Hayden: What are your short and long term goals in running?

Wang: In terms of this Fall, I am running the California International Marathon and I want to go for the Olympic Trials qualifying time of 2:46. My personal best right now is 2:54 on a pretty rolling hilly course. I think I can do it. That's my biggest goal in the next few months.

Looking ahead to next year, I want to get into longer trail races. I think my strength is really in cross-country and very hilly terrain. I will probably run all the trail championship races: the 15k, the half marathon and the marathon.

Hayden: Do you work with a trainer?

Wang: No I don't. I have briefly in the past and the only thing it got me was an injury. It was just an over use injury. I like to train based on how I feel. I think when I have someone giving me a plan and close supervision I feel a lot of pressure to run all the distances and splits that are set out for me. So I tend to injure myself.

If the right person comes along and we establish the right relationship that kind of works then maybe I would consider it. But, I kind of like going out and having a rough idea of what I want to do and going by feel. I do have my own schedule I have worked out. It helps me not to get burned out, because if I am tired, I don't feel like I am obligated to go on a 10 mile tempo run or something.

Hayden: Do you see yourself running in 10 years, 20 years?

Wang: Of course. Especially since we've gotten to know a lot of older masters and senior runners who are part of Tamalpa Running or other clubs in Marin. I've always seen them as an inspiration to keep running until your 60's, 70's or 80's.

In summary, YiOu Wang is a very dynamic and accomplished young woman who discovered inspiration for running after witnessing the famous Boston Marathon while in college at MIT. Running has become an integral part of her life and lifestyle. As her talent grows, it will be fun to watch her results over the next few years. I have no doubt she'll qualify for the Olympic marathon. After that, she may turn out to be one of the best women's trail and road racers in the region and maybe the country over the next few years. It seems likely that as her life expands with family or other interests, running will continue to be at the core of her world for a very long time.

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