

Joan Benoit Samuelson's Gold Mettle

Changing gears, giving back, and getting dirty



Joan Benoit Samuelson has the mien of a seasoned competitor. Her muscles, lean and sinewy, are tanned and covered with not a little dirt from a day spent working in the garden. There is a rhythm and grace to the way she moves from one plant to the next in her cutting beds. On this day, Samuelson, 51, is frustrated. Because she stayed too long volunteering at the Freeport Community Plant-a-Row Garden, a project that provides fresh produce for local food banks and soup kitchens, she will be late for her next several appointments. Briefly ignoring her schedule on an early summer day, Samuelson takes a minute to remove a scattering of recalcitrant weeds sprouting among the brilliant blooms.

She is a person who operates in a state of unrelenting activity. To characterize Samuelson's life as busy causes those closest to her to nod knowingly with a resignation born of experience. She is famous for her crushing schedule traveling around the world as an athlete, Nike spokesperson, motivational speaker, and author. Like a hummingbird, she hovers over each task for exactly the time it takes to complete it, and then moves quickly on to the next, often without preamble or warning. Those who can't keep up—and

PROFILE Joan Benoit Samuelson
by Candace Karu
Photography Darren Setlow

they are legion—must wait for the next opportunity to catch the Samuelson wave.

Born and raised in Cape Elizabeth, Samuelson entered and won her first road race at age 16. Her abundant talent quickly propelled her onto the world stage, where she was soon recognized as one of the most gifted runners of her generation. Before graduating from Bowdoin College in 1979, Samuelson not only won the prestigious Boston Marathon, but she broke the course record—a feat she would repeat in 1983. The following year, at 27 years old, she ran a grueling, tactical race against the fastest women in the world to win the inaugural women's Olympic marathon. Millions cheered as Maine's first Olympic gold medalist took a victory lap around the Los Angeles Coliseum, white painter's hat in one hand and American flag in the other.

Given her unbounded energy and capacity for hard work, it is not surprising that Samuelson has maintained a world-class athletic career for almost thirty years. But to define her only by her achievements as a runner would be to miss much of what is most compelling about her complex and surprisingly balanced life. She is an attentive friend, a generous volunteer, a hiker, a licensed Maine Guide, and a skilled baker. Samuelson and her husband, Scott, have been married for twenty-three years. Their daughter, Abby, is a junior at Bates College, and their son, Anders, will attend Bowdoin in the fall. All four Samuelsons share a keen intelligence, a love of athletics and the outdoors, and a slightly skewed sense of humor.

Preparing for life after competitive running, eleven years ago Samuelson found a way to give back to the sport and the town that gave her so much. She created the TD Banknorth Beach to Beacon 10K, a 6.2-mile road race that has grown to more than 5,000 participants and 10,000 spectators. The scenic course starts at the entrance to Crescent Beach in Cape Elizabeth and finishes in the shadow of the Portland Head Light. Samuelson says it was her way to “bring runners to some of my favorite training grounds, so they can enjoy the same beautiful environment, sense of community, and rich history that has played such an important role in my life.”

Because Samuelson enjoys rock-star status in the running

Samuelson's garden is her summer passion (opposite). She never makes her annual Patriots' Day pilgrimage to the Boston Marathon without first getting her peas in the ground.

Her equipment requirements as a runner and a gardener are minimal. The two most important in Samuelson's arsenal are a good pair of running shoes (right, top) and a Trake, her favorite and ever-present garden tool (right, bottom).





Because Samuelson enjoys rock-star status in the running community, elite athletes from around the world are eager to run “Joanie’s Race.”



The TD Banknorth Beach to Beacon 10K has gained worldwide renown since its inaugural run in 1998. People come from around the globe to participate in “Joanie’s Race”. This year more than \$60,000 will be awarded to the top finishers, including wheelchair athletes. More than 550 youngsters are expected to participate in the children’s Fun Run.

community, elite athletes from around the world are eager to run “Joanie’s Race.” They are lured to Maine not only by the significant prize money and stunning scenery but also by Cape Elizabeth’s unique hospitality. Invited runners stay with host families, some returning to the same families year after year. For a few days in August, there is a holiday atmosphere in town: the local grocer stocks up on the white cornmeal favored by the Kenyan runners, mile-marker road signs are posted by the police department, and water stations are assembled along the course.

Most important, each year the race raises money for a different Maine-based children’s charity. The Boys & Girls Clubs, Camp Sunshine, Seeds of Peace, and many others have received proceeds from the race. In the past ten years, more than \$350,000 has been distributed to selected charities.

Samuelson refers to her second passion as “playing in the dirt.” A certified Master Gardner, she is renowned for her award-winning celery, whose crisp, salty taste she credits to the eelgrass seaweed mulch she uses in her organic gardens. As she tends to the various plots around her yard, which overlooks Maquoit

Race photos by Peter Scarpaci/Black Cow Photo

TD Banknorth Beach to Beacon 10K: beach2beacon.org, 800-480-6940

PROFILE Samuelson

Bay, she admits that she can let go of her frantic pace when gardening. “You can’t imagine how cool it is to watch things come up from the ground,” she explains. “It’s mindless work, but when you’re as stressed as I am, it’s just so therapeutic.” From her garden, she supplies flowers for school functions, makes enough of her signature pesto to last through the winter, and has plenty of produce left over to share with friends.

Samuelson ran what she insists was her last competitive marathon this past April at the 2008 U.S. Olympic Marathon Trials in Boston. “I’d love to run a marathon with Abby someday, or maybe run with one of my friends,” she says. “But I just don’t want to train like that again.” Like many women in mid-life, Samuelson is finding the time and opportunity to reinvent her life. In the waning light of her garden, Samuelson turns and says, “I’m just going to follow my heart and live my dreams.” **MH+D**



web-exclusive content at
mainehomedesign.com



Old running shoes find new life
in the garden.