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SPORTS

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Olympian is an inspiration to all runners

The dream started at Bixler Lake Park in Kendallville, Ind., when Amy Yoder-Begley was 10. She went to the park nearly every day to walk her dog, a mutt named Spot. That's where she saw her future.

"All these people running, it looked fun," Yoder-Begley said.

It was 1988, an Olympic year.



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Yoder-Begley played every sport a 10-year-old girl could play — softball, basketball, soccer. She ran a 5-mile race on Mother's Day and won a ribbon.

"My parents didn't think I would run another race after that," Yoder-Begley said. "They were wrong."

By then, Yoder-Begley was dreaming big.

"I decided I wanted to be an Olympian," she said.

In August, Yoder-Begley competed in the 10,000 meters in at the Beijing Olympics, finishing 26th.

"It was good and bad," Yoder-Begley said. "It was a good experience, a bad race."

But it was a goal that was met, a dream achieved.

And she'd love to tell you all about it.

Yoder-Begley, who lives in Beaverton, Ore., with her husband, Andrew, and runs for Nike, will be in town this weekend for Saturday's Manatee River 5-mile run. She will appear at On a Shoestring in Bradenton from 5-7 p.m. Friday and at the race, which begins at 8:30 a.m. Saturday at Emerson Point Park on Snead Island.

The Yoder family will escape the Indiana winter for a few days this Christmas, taking up lodging in Tampa. Andrew Yoder-Begley looked for a race for his wife to run this weekend and came across the Manatee River Run, the Bradenton Runners Club's annual fundraiser for its scholarship program.

"I saw it was a fundraiser for scholarships; I thought it sounded good," Yoder-Begley said.

She'll sign autographs, share stories, dole out a few running tips.

"I'll do whatever I can to help out the race," Yoder-Begley said.

And she'll give the runners in the field a chance to say they ran a race with an Olympian.

That doesn't happen often.



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"No, it doesn't," said co-race director Doug Schiller. "It's quite an honor. Hopefully it brings more runners to the event, and also, having a celebrity like this helps promote running."

Yoder-Begley takes time from her training schedule to talk with middle and high school students and promote her sport. Running can open a world of possibilities, from getting a college education to competing in the Olympics.

Even older runners can learn from Yoder-Begley's story.

There's nothing like meeting a goal, no matter how big or small.

Yoder-Begley qualified for the state meet as a freshman in high school and finished last in the 3,200.

Her dad told her if she worked a little harder in the summer and tried a little harder the following season, she could do better than last.

She was the state 3,200 champ as a sophomore.

Yoder-Begley failed to make the Olympic team during her first two trips to the trials.

She was back last June needing to not only finish in the top-3 but to also reach the Olympic qualifying time. She accomplished both, finishing third and qualifying by 1.4 seconds.

Problem was, the track announcer said she didn't meet the qualifying time, and when she heard that, she collapsed on the track.

"I felt emotionally paralysed," Yoder-Begley said. "I didn't know how to feel. I knew I got third, but I heard I missed making the team."

Then Yoder-Begley received good news. She was indeed headed to Beijing.

"What a rush," she said.

Not only did she make her first Olympic team, she made her first national team.

"You have to start somewhere," she said.

Why not at the very top?

Yoder-Begley's Olympic experience was mixed. It was far from her best day on the track, but then, it was an Olympic track.

"It took me 20 years to accomplish my dream," she said. "I tell kids they can set goals and have dreams now, and it probably won't take them 20 years to accomplish them."

The best thing about dreams is you can have more than one.

Yoder-Begley, a 30-year-old Olympian, has another dream: the 2012 London Olympics.

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