

Abbey Cooper Solos to Olympic Standard in 5,000m Prelim

JUNE 19, 2021 • NEWS, 2021, TRACKTOWN20



Photo by Matt Parker

By Caela Fenton

Until 45 minutes before her race, Abbey Cooper wasn’t even thinking about trying to go for the Olympic standard. But, as she was preparing for what was hopefully to be her first of two 5,000 meter races in the coming days, her coach, Chris Layne, came over to her with some game-changing news.

Cooper explained in her post-race interview: “He came over to us and said, ‘Hey, it’s going to be 97 degrees on Monday for the final. You don’t have the standard, there isn’t enough time to chase it, if it’s slow, I want you to consider going for it.’ And I was so frazzled and just kind of thought it through and I was praying, up to the start line—so not the most ideal amount of time to think about it.”

Cooper and her coach, understandably, had assumed that given how fast the field is running, that it would be almost impossible to think that the women’s 5,000m final would be slower than the required Olympic standard. The original plan had been to survive and advance in the qualifying heat, and then go out with the field to standard in the final. But, one can’t predict the weather, especially in Eugene.

Apparently the 29-year-old New Balance athlete didn’t need much time to rethink her race strategy. Cooper absolutely ran away from the field from 1200 meters on, soloing her way to that much needed sub 15:10 Olympic standard with only the crowd to push her. She finished with a time of 15:07.80.

Cooper, a Christian, describes her decision to go it alone at the 1200 meter mark as stepping out in faith: “The best times in my life have been the times I’ve stepped out in faith and God has just met me every time.”

This is the fastest Cooper has run since 2015, despite a decorated running resumé that includes seven individual NCAA titles while at Dartmouth, narrowly missing making Team USA in 2012, and then snagging a spot in 2016. She gained notoriety at the Rio Olympics, when she and fellow competitor Nikki Hamblin fell in the 5,000m qualifying heat. The two athletes helped each other to finish the race and were later awarded the Rio 2016 Fair Play Award for their display of sportsmanship and Olympic spirit. Cooper was injured in the fall, and was unable to compete in the final.



Photo by Matt Parker

When asked whether getting back to the Olympics after the fall and subsequent injury in 2016 was part of what motivated her performance tonight, Cooper got candid, saying: “From the bottom of my heart, though I have goals of going back to the Olympics I hope multiple times and having a totally different experience, that [her Olympics in 2016] was a supernatural experience with everything that happened there. I feel really called and desire to be back on that stage in a different capacity. But I don’t feel resentful of what happened there. I just want to have another experience to add to it.”

She describes the years after the Rio Olympics as “harder than I ever could have imagined....I kept going because this is a calling for me. I love this sport, but the joy of it is robbed sometimes when you’re in a cyclical pattern of injury.”

Cooper has enjoyed more consistency this past year than she has in her professional career, in part thanks to some tweaks in training that she and her coach, Chris Layne, have made. This includes sacrificing some mileage volume and swapping in cross-training for the sake of consistency in training. She thinks that three visits to altitude this year,

an intensified focus on recovery, and training with new training partner, Sammy George (who also raced the 5,000m), have also helped elevate her performance. With this fitness in the bank, even a minor hamstring string tweak 12 days ago didn’t phase her too much.

Up next for Cooper is some serious recovery so that she can be ready for Monday’s final. This includes getting her feet up, an ice bath and using her Normatec boots. But more than anything, she thinks that her elation at today’s result will help ensure a speedy recovery because, as she puts it, “a cheerful heart is good medicine!”

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