

Three-time Olympian, Dathan Ritzenhein

returns to his Rockford roots, trains for 2016 Olympic Games.

Story By Tom Rademacher

To the running world and beyond, he's the three-time Olympian with a slew of athletic accomplishments and a long-term professional contract that showcases him in an international spotlight.

But to those with whom he grew up, he's still just as much the kid from Rockford with the wind in his hair, as comfortable playing out front with a dog named "Munster" as he is hob-nobbing with running royalty.

That's Dathan Ritzenhein, who describes himself as "your average hard-working guy from the Midwest with normal roots." He smiles and runs his hand over a head of close-cropped hair: "Just a normal person."

Ritzenhein last made headlines this past April, when he finished seventh as the first American to cross the finish line in what

arguably is the most famous road race in the world – The Boston Marathon. He'll be in the limelight once more come February 2016, when he'll compete in an attempt to become one of a handful of endurance athletes to ever make a fourth Olympic marathon team.

"Very few people have ever done that," he says, "so it would be a big benchmark for me."

Ritzenhein will focus on trying to qualify in the marathon, and to make the U.S. team, he'll need to finish third or better. If he does, he'll represent the Stars and Stripes at the 2016 Summer Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

Though he's in tip-top shape, he's not a shoe-in for the spot. "With all the injuries I've had, combined with my age, I'm trying to train smarter," says the 32-year-old.

A 2001 graduate of Rockford High School, "Ritz" was a four-time all-state



Dathan Ritzenhein was the first American to cross the finish line in the Boston Marathon in April 2015. He finished 7th overall.

performer and All-OK Red Conference and all-region his junior and senior seasons.

He finished eighth at the FootLocker National Championships as a sophomore before becoming the first prep athlete to win back-to-back national titles as a junior and senior.

Following his senior cross-country season, he finished second at the 2001 U.S. Cross-Country Championships, earning him a trip to the World Championships, where he finished third, becoming the first American junior to medal in the race in 20 years.

He moved the summer after high school to Boulder, CO to enroll at the University of Colorado, where he ran for the Buffaloes and earned a degree in history.

He carved out an illustrious college career, winning the 2003 NCAA Cross-Country Championship. He was a four-time Big 12 Conference Champion and a four-time All-American.

Though not medaling, Ritzenhein was a member of the U.S. Olympic Team in 2004, 2008 and 2012.

For all his worldly accomplishments to date, Ritzenhein wasn't a product of high-level running camps as a kid. Instead, he remembers getting into running after his parents divorced when he was 10, and his father Jerry started in on a "health kick"

that included triathlons, marathons and half-marathons.

"I just absorbed into the culture, and started running," he remembers.

As an 8th-grader, Ritzenhein recalls that he made "a huge jump," clocking 10:24 for the 2-mile, an outstanding time for a middle-schooler; indeed, a respectable time for a varsity runner.

For part of his prep career, Ritzenhein ran in a shadow cast by older teammate Jason Hartmann, who graduated from Rockford in 1999, and continues today as a premier coach and long-distance runner from his home in Saginaw.

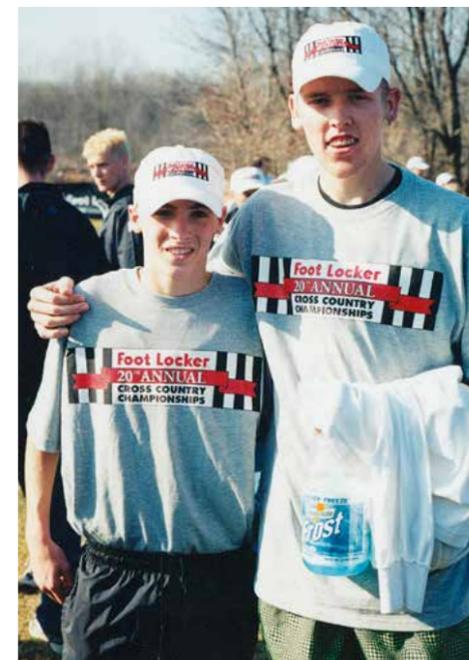
Ritzenhein and Hartmann remain close friends today, as well as with another internationally renowned runner in Greg Meyer, a Grand Rapids West Catholic and University of Michigan standout who won

The first prep athlete to win back-to-back national titles as a junior and senior.

the Boston Marathon in 1983 and also lives in the Rockford area.

Throughout his career, Ritzenhein has always had a deep and abiding love and respect for his hometown.

Until the age of about 7, he and his parents and older sister Brienne lived in a yellow house on North Main Street, near a railroad bed that would later become the Fred Meijer White Pine Trail. From



Dathan and Jason Hartmann after qualifying for their first cross country nationals in high school.



Dathan with his wife, Kalin, and children, Jude and Addison. The Ritzenheins moved back to Rockford last summer.

there, he and his sister would walk to Parkside Elementary, where he took a special shine to virtually everyone from his kindergarten instructor to the principal.

The family moved to Shaner Avenue between 12- and 13-Mile Roads, where dad Jerry built the foursome a home. In his spare time, Jerry volunteered on the building and grounds committee for Our Lady of Consolation Catholic Church.

"Dad worked in construction, and was always bringing home backhoes and stuff, and I remember playing around in the churchyard while he worked the grounds."

Ritzenhein also has "vivid memories" of traipsing through downtown Rockford with his Dalmatian "Boo-Boo" when the city still hosted the tannery and its telltale odor – as well as a novelty store called

The Copper Pig. And he's always been a big fan of Rocky's Ice Cream Parlor.

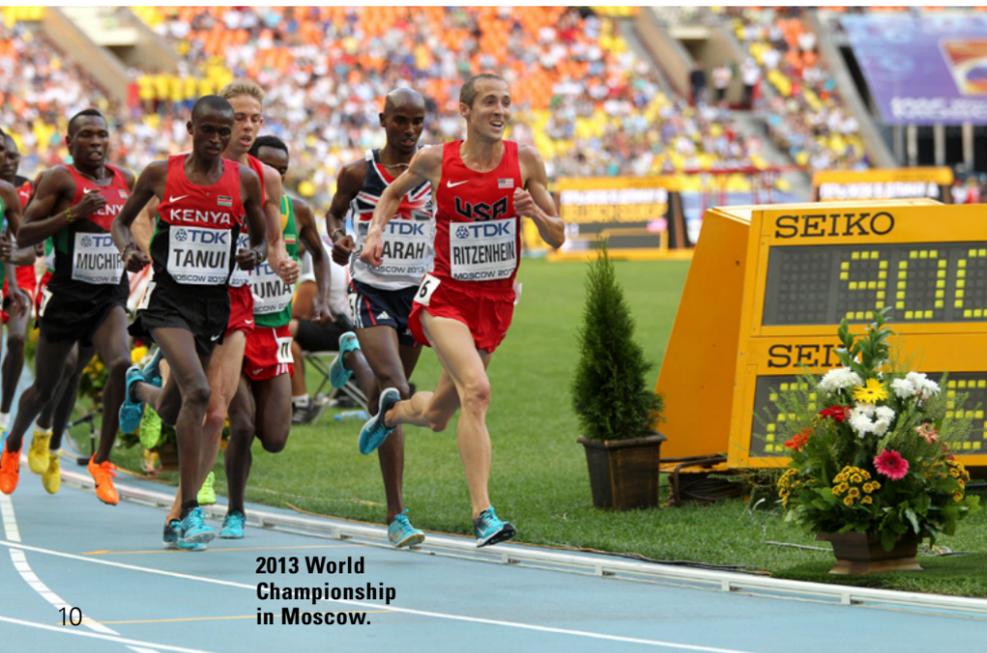
In summer, Ritz and his family enjoyed Michigan vacations to attractions like Mackinac Island, the Manitou Islands and a family cabin in the Upper Peninsula.

To say that Ritz married his long-time sweetheart would be an understatement. He and Kalin Toedebusch were boyfriend-girlfriend in the 6th grade, though he remembers that "she dumped me at the end-of-the-year skating party."

The spark remained, though, and following their teen years, they reunited, when Kalin transferred from Villanova University to CO, earning a degree in sociology.

The couple married in 2006, and have two little ones – Addison, 7, and Jude, 4.

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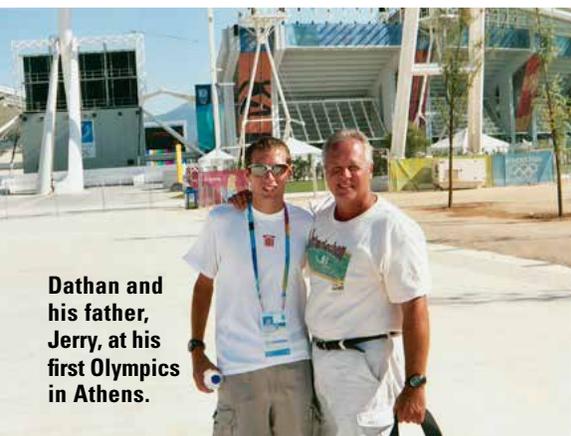
2013 World Championship in Moscow.



Cross country in his senior year of high school.



His senior year, Dathan celebrates his 2nd Cross Country National title.



Dathan and his father, Jerry, at his first Olympics in Athens.

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They live in a home the couple had built last summer near 5 Mile Road and Pettis Avenue – an Americana farmhouse with four bedrooms on an acre of land still awaiting final landscaping.

Kalin works as a stay-at-home mom, while Dathan is employed as a professional athlete, which he's been since 2004.

His responsibilities are governed by a "very complex" 13-page contract and overseen by a professional sports agent. He receives substantial support from Nike, as well as other companies he endorses in exchange for financial support.

He won't divulge his annual salary, but allows that it's substantially more than if he were to have followed his college major and become, for instance, a history teacher.

His contract includes incentives for finishing well in races, and those amounts are on top of what the race pays. Win the Boston Marathon, for instance, and it's worth \$150,000, not including those incentives.

Because explaining the fine points of his relationship with sponsors usually begets question and after question, Ritzenhein says that if he's indulging in casual conversation with someone for the first time, it's a lot easier, when asked what he does for a living, to answer "I'm in sports marketing."

His training regimen keeps him as busy as anyone else with a full-time job, often requiring him to perform double or even triple workouts daily, and then stretching and resting to avoid injury. He typically runs 100 miles a week, down from earlier years when he averaged 125.

For athletes seeking advice on how to excel, Ritzenhein is quick to promote cross-training rather than sports-specific

training. "I did too much running," he says. "It served me well, but from a general athletic standpoint, it's good to do other things as well."

Though he feels that he "missed out on some things" during high school due to his focus on running, he feels "blessed to have the opportunities that running gave me, because it put me on a path to a career that I love and enjoy."

After living the early part of his adult life out West – and traveling Europe and



Dathan competes in the NCAA cross country nationals during his freshmen year at the University of Colorado. He won the NCAA championship in 2003.

Asia extensively – Ritz is grateful to once again live in Rockford, which he describes as "a perfect size city where there's no rat race, people have morals, and the pace is slow but everybody seems to be hard-working."

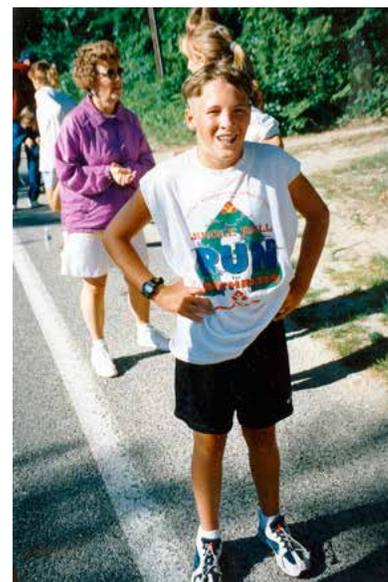
"We've had a longing to come home," he says. "Every time we'd be somewhere else and back here to visit, we knew we wanted to come back."

"We're finally home."

Puttin' On The Ritz

1. He's a Capricorn, which is to say that he's "hard-working and determined," but with little patience for those with leisurely personalities, as Capricorns are "always working to accomplish a new goal."
2. Favorite food includes a big restaurant burger, preferably with mushrooms, Swiss cheese and onions.
3. Personal stats: He stands 5-8, weighs 125, and boasts just 5 percent body fat.
4. Superstitions? "When I was a lot younger, I wouldn't cut my fingernails the week of a race."
5. Pet peeve: "I try not to let things bother me. But I'd have to say people who are late."
6. Best marathon: The 2012 Chicago Marathon, where he posted a personal best of 2 hours, 7 minutes, 47 seconds; good for ninth place.

7. Injuries? Yup, more than his share, including surgery for an Achilles injury that prevented him from qualifying for the marathon for the 2012 London Olympics. But he rallied to make the team by qualifying in the 10K run.
8. He shares his Dec. 30 birthday with Tiger Woods, Rudyard Kipling, LeBron James, Sandy Koufax and Bo Diddley.
9. Favorite places to work out – on trails near his home, and the track at North Rockford Middle School.
10. How he felt after running this year's Boston? "The first day afterward, I was great. But coming off the plane in GR the next morning, I had to walk down the stairs backward."



At one of his first road races in the sixth grade.