

NEWS

An Eating Disorder Once Kept This Bay Area Athlete From Competing. Now She's Racing for Gold in the Olympics



By [Rachael Myrow](#) Jul 27

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California. She's representing the U.S. at the Tokyo Olympics after taking a 12-year break from professional **race walking**.

As a child, Stevens loved soccer and dance. She was in middle school when her PE teacher invited her to get into track and field. She decided on race walking after watching an elite meet at Stanford University.

Stevens said she was entranced, "Seeing all their legs in a row, as they went by in a group, reminded me of a chorus line."

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Much as her mom begged her to focus on one athletic pursuit, given the cost of uniforms and the effort to shuttle her around, Stevens struggled to give up dance. That is, until she realized that race walking was similar to dancing — athletes have to keep one foot on the ground at all times and they move so fast, their hips look a lot like dancing. Stevens thought she could have track and field, as well as dance, by sticking with race walking.

"One of my coaches, she used to tell me to get back into rhythm, 'Merengue! Merengue!' every time I went by," said Stevens. "[Race walking] just reminds me of modern dance mixed with stage performance."

It certainly looks that way when Stevens does it. Here are comedians Keegan-Michael Key and Kevin Hart in a segment of "**What the Fit**" from the LOL Network, watching her blow past them in a gym.

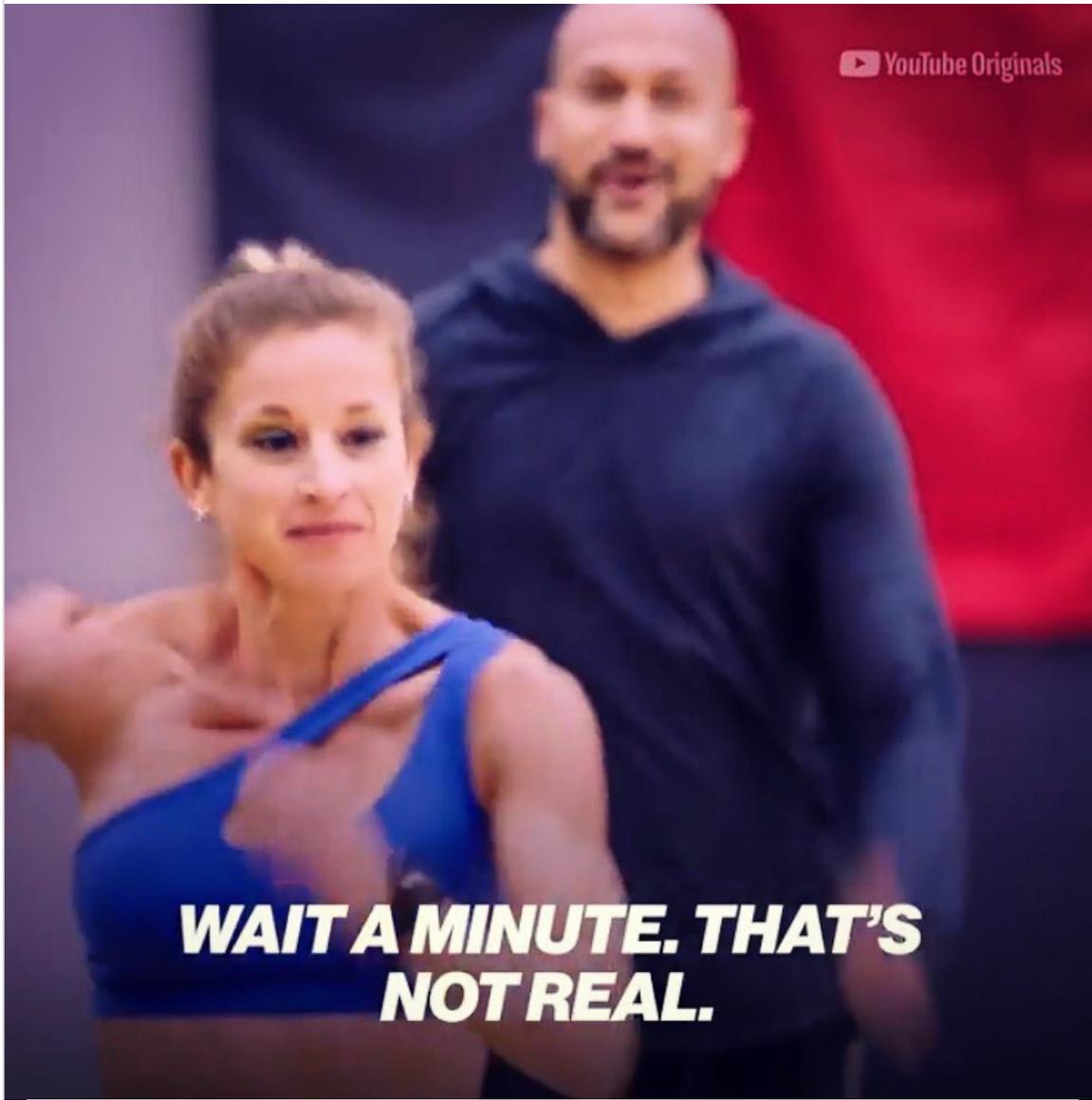
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Today, Stevens is a member of the 2020 U.S. Olympic Team in track and field, competing **in the 20-kilometer race walk**. But while she's is going for gold in Japan, there was a good decade when this moment didn't seem likely at all.

That's because Stevens developed an eating disorder in high school that made her step away from the sport in college. Stevens said a lot was happening at that time, including the late onset of puberty, as a result of her training.

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"I didn't think about performance or anything. All I thought about is that I didn't like what I saw in the mirror," she said.

Stevens was eventually diagnosed with the **female athlete triad**, a term for those who struggle with an eating disorder, osteoporosis and amenorrhea, the absence of menstruation.

'I didn't think about performance or anything. All I thought about is that I didn't like what I saw in the mirror.'

—Robyn Stevens

She spent her first two college years at the University of Wisconsin-Parkside, where she battled with the feeling that she wasn't performing up to her potential. Then she transferred to San Jose State University and joined the Spartans' women's cross-country team.

In 2003, she quit race walking professionally to put distance between her and the toxic cycle of training, diet and struggling with her appearance. Stevens graduated San Jose State with an arts degree in 2007 and worked in a series of office jobs.

Stevens says her recovery began with the decision to remove herself from her sport.

For starters, she was able to eat like a non-athlete.

"I will always have to manage it, and be conscious that it's something that can be slipped into easily," she said.

That said, she took her golden retriever out for runs, and stayed in touch with friends and coaches from the race walking universe. A former teammate from San Jose State invited her to join the **Wolfpack Running Club** in 2014.

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"It was something fun to do. And then my youth coach Claudia [Wilde] invited me to pace her at a 15-meter race. And that's when I got invited from that to do the 20K in Carmichael, and that's where I accidentally qualified for the 2016 U.S. Olympic trials."

That's right. She "accidentally qualified" at her first 20K since 2003.

"I knew right then I had some decisions to make, cause it could be risky for my health. So I needed to assess if this is something I really wanted to pursue again," she said.

Another coach, Susan Armenta, helped Stevens learn how to eat in a healthy fashion as an athlete.

But it wasn't until Stevens participated in the 2015 Pan American Race Walking Cup in Chile that she felt sure the time had come to step back in to race walking professionally.

"You know, putting on that uniform brought back all this nostalgic feeling," Stevens said. "Also, and not incidentally, it's where I met Nick for the first time."

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Nick Christie, first place, crosses the finish line in the Men's 20-km Race Walk Final as Robyn Stevens, first place, continues to compete in the Women's 20-km Race Walk Final on day nine of the 2020 U.S. Olympic Track & Field Team Trials at Hayward Field on June 26, 2021 in Eugene, Oregon. (Photo by Steph Chambers/Getty Images)

Stevens is referring to fellow professional race walker Nick Christie, who is now her boyfriend, training buddy and her personal chef — he cooks for them, which helps her avoid fixating on food.

They're both representing the U.S. in Japan this summer.

"This is the healthiest I've ever been in my life," said Stevens. "I needed to step out before I could step back in. And just really heal and unite with a friendship with myself again, and value myself, my body and appreciate what it can do."

Stevens can expect to keep race walking well into her 40s. There might even be another Olympics — or two — in her future. Whether she wins a medal in Sapporo, Japan, where race walking events are taking place, she made it to the starting line on Aug. 6, and for Stevens, that's pretty

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