

A good year for Nicole Hunt

By Pat Hansen for [The Montana Standard](http://TheMontanaStandard.com) mtstandard.com | Posted: Wednesday, December 29, 2010

DEER LODGE - It has been a fruitful year for internationally ranked runner Nicole Hunt of Deer Lodge. Consider the following: Hunt, 40, won the 2010 USA Track and Field Mountain Women's Masters' award in December. She set a new master's course record in 2010, and represented the U.S. at the World Mountain Running Championships in Slovenia in Central Europe in September.

Hunt's achievements culminate nearly a lifetime of running. As a youngster Hunt played soccer and loved to run along mountain roads. However, it wasn't until she walked onto the track team at the University of Montana-Missoula that her talent blossomed.

At that time she also met the men's team coach, Ray Hunt, who began coaching her after college in 1996, and ultimately became her husband. At the time, she was running track and marathon road races and qualified for the Olympic tryouts in 2004 and 2008. Hunt competed in the trials in 2004 coming in 18th, but didn't compete in 2008 because she was pregnant with their son, Eon.

Hunt started mountain running in 2006 because, "it was something different." To train, she runs an average of 60 miles a week along local trails with three or four masters (40 and over) male runners from Butte. She also lifts weights and, during winter, uses a treadmill.

STRENUOUS SPORT Mountain running, which includes 12 percent or steeper grades, is strenuous, but Hunt said she likes the trails and steep roads, the rocks and brush. A training session - of two to two and one-half hours - includes 30 to 60 minutes of hard, fast running. "It's painful, but afterwards I feel good," she said.

In 2006, Hunt was named the USA Track and Field Mountain Runner of the Year. That year, at the U.S. Championships on Mount Washington in New Hampshire, she ran the 7.6-mile course to the 6,288-foot summit in 1 hour, 12 minutes and 34 seconds to take second and qualify for the World Mountain Running Championships in Bursa, Turkey. Her ninth-place finish in that race led Team USA to a gold medal with a one-point victory over the Czech Republic and Italy. She said it was the first time a team, men or women, from the United States had won that title in an event usually dominated by European countries.

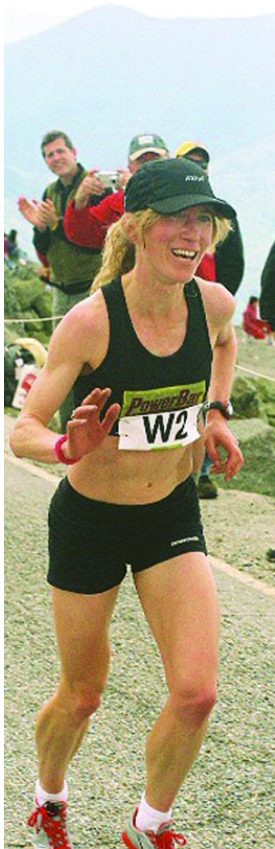
A devastating hamstring injury during a race in 2007 threatened to end Hunt's career and brought the young woman to the lowest point in her life, she said. She has battled the injury since, making frequent trips to Missoula for treatment. "I tried to train in 2009, but had too much pain and continued the treatments," she said. After a two-year hiatus to spend time with her baby and to heal, Hunt began training and competing in 2010. "When I began running without pain I started to refocus, to believe in myself and in my dreams again," she said.

The Bloomsday 12K in May in Spokane was Hunt's first masters' race - she won the overall masters with a time of 43 minutes, 45 seconds. In July, she won the masters and finished fourth overall at the USA Track and Field 15K Trail Championships in Spokane, completing the course in 1 hour, 2 minutes and 34 seconds. At the U.S. Mountain Running Championships on Mount Washington in New Hampshire in June she was ecstatic about her time saying, "I was almost as fast as in 2006 even though the conditions were worse. Getting my self-confidence back made making Team USA even sweeter." She ran the steep 7.6-mile course in 1 hour, 12 minutes and 59 seconds setting a new record for runners aged 40 and over, and winning third place overall. That race also determined the United States' four-woman team that competed in the World Mountain Running Championships in Kamnik, Slovenia, on Sept. 5. The \$3,100 prize Hunt won enabled Ray and Eon to accompany her on the trip.

TRAINING IN EUROPE For two weeks she trained in the beautiful Kamnik Alps along the border of Austria where the course offered spectacular views. "The last two miles of the race we ran through high mountain meadows where herds of cows grazed and we could hear their bells ringing," she said. "We saw native herdsman who live in huts on the Velika Planina among the clouds on top of the mountains." Team USA finished fourth and Hunt was the third American finishing in 18th place, she said. While in Europe she and her family also visited Poland, Austria, Hungary and Czechoslovakia.

Hunt's season ended recently after a 6K cross country race in Charlotte, N.C., where she finished third. "It's been a long season with 10 to 14 months of training," she said. "I'm taking a break to regenerate my mind and body. Next month or so I'll set goals for 2011. It will take me four or five weeks to get my fitness back, but if runners don't take a break they actually become slower."

Hunt loves running and hopes to do so for the rest of her life. She credits her husband, Ray, also a noted master's runner in Montana, friends, family and the P&M Running Club in Butte for encouraging her. "I'm in a happy place in my life," she said recently, while watching her son play.



Left: Nicole Hunt of Deer Lodge set a new record for runners 40 and over during the 2010 U.S. Mountain Running Championships on Mount Washington in New Hampshire in June.



Above: Team USA competed in the World Mountain Running Championship race in Slovenia in Central Europe in September. The members were, from left, Kristin Price, North Carolina; Brandy Erholtz, Colorado; Megan Lund, Colorado; and Nicole Hunt, Deer Lodge.