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Leslie Byrne, left, smiles during the video conference between Olney, England, and Liberal on Feb. 21, 2012, at the parish church in Olney, with her daughter, Devon, who earlier in the day won the Pancake Race with a blistering time of 58.5 seconds. Ironically, Leslie had performed a pregnancy test on the morning of the last Pancake Race she ran — and won — in 1993, only to discover she was pregnant with Devon. Leslie had three wins in Olney and two International titles by beating the women of Liberal, and now Devon, at 20, has two wins and two International titles, as well as the world record, going into Tuesday's race. L&T file photo/Larry Phillips

By LARRY PHILLIPS

• Leader & Times

On the morning of Shrove Tuesday, some of the women of Liberal and Olney, England, will be

sharing a ritual. They will be pulling on tights or leggings, wrapping their hair tightly with a scarf and donning their lucky apron, and as they leave their homes, grabbing that necessary skillet.

It's a ritual that dates back to the 15th Century in Olney, and back to 1950 in Liberal. Their careful preparations will enable them to participate in the 65th running of the International Pancake Day Race between these two cities.

The great news is The Weather Channel forecasts for March 4 show decent conditions for both cities.

The bad news for all the lady racers – on both sides of the pond – is Olney's Devon Byrne will be back for her third race. She will be defending not only her Olney title and the international title, but also her world record time of 56 seconds flat at last year's Olney race.



It's seems as if Devon was, quite literally, destined to race on Pancake Day. Her mother, Lesley, had won in 1988 and 1989, as well as taking the international title those two years having bested the Liberal winners' times.

Lesley said she had moved to Olney in the summer when she was 25 and because of her competitive nature, decided to run the Pancake Day Race the following spring.

"It was in the school holiday," Lesley said recently. "I was quite fit as a PE teacher, and I am

quite competitive as a person, so I decided to go for it.”

Winning two years in a row, she said, did make a difference in her life in Olney.

“People still remember me for winning it,” Lesley said. “I see people who I haven’t seen for 10 years or more, and they still mention the pancake race. It makes me feel a celebrity.

“I have some newspaper cuttings from the Oman newspaper,” she continued. “I was interviewed by a Russia radio station with an interpreter, and I was on the back page of the Times or Independent newspaper, which was unbelievable.

“I think they must have been short on news that day,” she said, with a chuckle.

Then in 1993, Lesley had made up her mind to race once more, but she had been feeling somewhat ill, so the very morning of the race, she conducted a home pregnancy test, which turned out to be positive.

“That’s when I found out I was pregnant with Devon,” Lesley said. “I went ahead and ran the race and won.”

Though she won her third Olney leg, the Liberal winner beat her time, and she didn’t capture the triple crown – three Olney wins and three international titles. That was something Devon didn’t find out until a few years ago.

Growing up, Devon said she knew about her mother’s wins when Devon was old enough to race in the children’s races, but when she was 8 or 9 and ready to race with the other girls, a family holiday intervened.

"I didn't get to as the year I was able to, we went on a family skiing holiday, and I remember saying that I didn't want to go skiing but wanted to run the pancake race instead," Devon recalled.

Racing in the adult women's race never left her mind, and mother was urging her to race, as well.

"Yes, I had been telling her about it and saying she should do it as she had a good chance to win, and as a student, there were good prizes if she won," Lesley said. "Other people in and around Olney who know her and know she is a good runner had been saying for a few years, 'Is Devon old enough to run yet?'"

Finally, Devon was ready.

"I planned on racing as soon as I was eligible," she said. "So yes, as soon as I turned 18."

Her mother even tried showing her the street layout – down High Street, a left on the winding Church Street and up to the finish line.

"I took her on the route but she felt a bit embarrassed being seen running it, so at first she insisted we just go for a walk over the route," Lesley explained. "I gave her some tips regarding holding the pan and pancake whilst running."

Devon was 18 when February of 2012 rolled around, and she smoked her competition in Olney with the second fastest time ever recorded over the 415-yard course – 58.5 seconds. Only two other women, both from Liberal, had ran that exact time. And the world record, again owned by Liberal, belonged to Liberal High School and Wichita State University track star Tasha Gallegos in a time of 57.5.

Needless to say, Devon won the international title as well that first year.

Her mother was impressed with the time and believed Devon had a shot at the world record the following year.

“I knew she could, as she hadn't taken it very seriously the first time,” Lesley said. “The first time, she was still at school.”

Devon had been training since she was about 14 at the Milton Keynes Athletic Club about 10 miles south of Olney because of her interests in track and field.



Her fast time in 2012 opened Devon's eyes to the significance of winning the International Pancake Day Race.

“I didn't realize it was such a big deal,” Devon said later that day, after her first win. “I didn't train specifically for the race, but I'm sure the athletics training I do helped.”

Winning that 2012 race also caught her friends at the athletic club off guard.

“I felt slightly more pressure when competing in 2013 as the defending champion,” Devon said. “My friends from Milton Keynes treated me no differently. If anything, they found it rather amusing at first, as I hadn't told them I was going to compete, and then it was in the paper.”

Devon was also more prepared in the 2013 race and felt she could run it faster than her 2012 time – maybe even break the world record.

“Yes I thought it was within reach,” she said.

Bingo.

Devon crossed the line in 2013 in the new world record time of 56 seconds flat. Besting Gallego's time by 1.5 seconds.

It was hard for Devon to put her new record into words.

“It was a very strange feeling, but I felt very proud,” she said.

Mother was very impressed.

“Its amazing,” Lesley said. “She is a much faster athlete than I ever was.”

Devon has since been training and competing at Loughborough University – about 50 miles north of Olney – where she is specializing in the pentathlon. The pentathlon is the indoor equivalent of the heptathlon. It includes the 60-meter hurdles, then high jump, the shot put, the long jump and then wraps up with an 800-meter run – all on the same day.

And Devon is proving to be an up-and-coming, world-class track star.

On Jan 5, she won the Great Britain national championship in the under 23 age group. Twenty days later, she was chosen to represent Great Britain and Northern Ireland and competed in a major international track meet in Sheffield against women from Spain and France.

"I finished fifth in Under 23," Devon said. "It was a great experience, and I hope to be selected for Great Britain again at bigger championships in the future for heptathlon."

Mother believes her daughter might just better her own pancake race record again on Shrove Tuesday – the last time Devon will be able to run the race if she wins the Olney Leg (By international rules, women can only win three times).

"She is very, very dedicated and trains for her athletics – in general, not just the pancake race – six days a week," Lesley said. "Where as her university friends will go out night-clubbing and drinking, Devon will only go out about once every two or three months and doesn't really drink alcohol."

And how does Devon feel about trying to break her own record?

"Fingers crossed this year that I can improve it a little more," Devon said.

Of course, weather always plays a part in the Pancake Day Race in both towns. Snow and ice, rain and fog and even wind can affect the outcome. One can also never eliminate the chances of tripping and falling.

In other words, that's why they run the race.

Now that Devon has reached the ripe old age of 20, she sees the International Pancake Day Race a little differently than she did two years ago.

“It is a great tradition in our family and town, and I hope it continues for many years to come,” she said. “It’s been a real pleasure being able to run.”



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