



**CARRIE TOLLEFSON WINS THE 3,000-METER  
RUN AT THE 2006 USA INDOOR CHAMPIONSHIPS**

*Photo credit: Kirby Lee, Image of Sport*

# CARRIE TOLLEFSON

## *A True Minnesotan*

**“THE HIGHLIGHT OF MY CAREER IS THAT IT ALL** began here in Minnesota,” states a modest Carrie Tollefson, a stellar middle-distance runner and 2004 Olympian.

Born in 1977, the youngest of three daughters of John, a lawyer, and Ginger, a hairdresser, from Dawson, Minnesota, Carrie participated in many activities in the small (population 1,500) western town near the South Dakota border. Surrounded by vast farmland in Lac qui Parle County, Carrie played trumpet in band and violin in orchestra, sang in a choir—she cherishes a two-week summer Christian choir tour—and participated in basketball and running sports. “Family fitness was important to our family. Our father was a football player in college, and sports were a part of our lives,” reports Carrie.

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In her first cross country meet as a seventh grader running on the varsity team of Dawson-Boyd High School (Boyd, a town with a population of 175 people, and Dawson had a consolidated school district), Carrie surprisingly found herself running on her older sister’s shoulder. Kammie, a gifted senior athlete who was later named a finalist for best girls’ basketball player in Minnesota, insisted her younger sister move ahead and catch the leading runners. While uncertain about pacing at such a tender age, Carrie did pass her sister and finished third in the race! “I owe a lot to her,” says Carrie. “She and Stacey [her other older sister] led the way for me.” For

the rest of her high school running career, it was other runners who were trying to catch Carrie.

Carrie placed ninth in the state cross country meet in 1989 at the University of Minnesota golf course as a twelve-year-old. She then established a national high school record as she rattled off five consecutive state cross country championships on three different courses at both the A and AA classes as Dawson-Boyd/Lac qui Parle's enrollment fluctuated enough to shift the school into different divisions. The 1991 championship was won at the Arrowhead Resort golf course in Alexandria, and the 1992 crown was achieved at St. Olaf College in Northfield due to snowstorms that hit the metropolitan area so severely that meet officials were forced to hurriedly make a change of venue.

The 1994 title at the Class AA level was the most memorable for Carrie. She and Kara Wheeler of Duluth East, another future Olympian, had pulled ahead of the competition to a sizable lead. Carrie surged ahead near the end of the race to edge Wheeler by a second in a state record-setting performance of 14 minutes 9.2 seconds (14:09.2) in the girls' 4,000-meter run. "We talked during the race," recalls Carrie. "We had the same things in common. We were rivals but friends also. It was huge for me to finish my high school career on top—a nice way to go out. People really seemed to respect Kara and me and the performance we had. We both teared up as we received a standing ovation at the awards ceremony."

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Carrie graduated from high school in the spring of 1995 with eight track state championships in the 1,600- and 3,200-meter runs in addition to the five cross country titles. She was the most heavily recruited female distance runner in the country. Carrie left her native state for the next few years to attend college at Villanova University. The appeal of the Philadelphia-area college was its academics, size, and athletics. "Villanova had won the last six cross country championships, was the home to many Olympians, and had a reputation for developing runners," asserts Carrie. "It was a twenty-six-hour drive, but it was a small college [undergraduate enrollment is 6,500], and it felt like an extended family. I loved it!"

Immediate success was in store for the star runner. Carrie placed seventh in the NCAA Cross Country Championships at Ames, Iowa, as a true freshman, but

the team's winning streak had been snapped by Providence College. In 1996 Carmen Douma of Canada joined the Villanova team. "I looked up to Carrie and hoped to do some of the things she had accomplished in her first year," remembers Douma. "She had a fun rapport—



**CARRIE TOLLEFSON WON THE 1997 NCAA DIVISION I CROSS COUNTRY CHAMPIONSHIP IN GREENVILLE, SOUTH CAROLINA**

*Photo courtesy of Villanova University Athletics Communications*

can get along with anyone. Everything gives her joy." The team finished as runner-up to Stanford with Carrie moving up two places.

The 1997 season proved to be very rewarding personally for Carrie. The team failed to qualify for the NCAA Cross Country Championships in Greenville, South Carolina, but Carrie and Douma did qualify as individuals. Carrie won the championship by an impressive ten-second margin with a time of 16:29 on the 5-kilometer course. Making the event all the merrier were Carrie's South Carolina grandmother and her great aunts, cheering her on with their distinctive southern drawl! Friend and teammate Douma placed sixth. It was a very joy-filled day for the woman from Dawson.

Carrie's final cross country season in 1998 was memorable for its team achievement: Villanova returned to its path of championships. Carrie had battled heel injuries previous to the season and underwent surgery that caused her to miss the 1998 spring track season, but she recovered enough to lead the team with an eleventh-place finish and restore Villanova to its victorious ways.

The 1999 track season was one of triumph, with an indoor 3,000-meter NCAA championship and two outdoor championships—including a three-second win over Kara Wheeler, now running for the University of Colorado—in the 3,000-meter run (the other title was in the 5,000-meter run). She was the first woman to win both events the same year in NCAA track history.

With one year of eligibility still remaining in track, Carrie competed in 2000

and claimed a final national championship. Gina Procaccio, previously an assistant and now the head coach of Villanova's women's cross country and track programs, praises Carrie for her leadership and mental toughness. "The thing I remember about Carrie is that she was a tremendous leader and motivator for her teammates. She was also a gifted athlete who was a fierce competitor and mentally tough." To illustrate her point, Procaccio points to the indoor track championships in 2000. "Carrie got second in the five-thousand-meter run [15:51.39] and was beat up physically and down in spirit, but she came back in the three-thousand-meter run [9:13.68] and hammered away and won the race. You could never count her out!"

Graduating with a communications degree, Carrie was recognized as an elite runner on the national level in multiple events. The shoe company Adidas expressed interest in sponsoring Carrie and she signed a small contract and represented the company for a decade. It was also an Olympics Trials year and Carrie and Kara Wheeler (later taking her married name Goucher) had qualified as the only collegians in the 5,000-meter run. Another familiar face joined them—Coach Procaccio. The pair of Minnesota natives both qualified for the final at the stadium in Sacramento with Wheeler taking eighth (15:34.47) and easily outdistancing Carrie in fifteenth (16:02.28). Wheeler, a longtime rival and friend says of Carrie: "She is the definition of Minnesota Nice." A year later Carrie did return to Minnesota, a move that proved positive in multiple ways.

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In 2003 she married architect Charlie Peterson, a man from Appleton, Minnesota, she met in 1993 and then got reacquainted with by chance on a run on the Stone Arch Bridge in 2000. She continued to train and compete and did a variety of jobs while also trying to take advantage of her education. "I had many part-time jobs: an after-school program, baby-sitting, and I always had a foot in the broadcast industry. I usually ran two times a day four to five days per week. I did strength workouts, did weightlifting two to three times per week, yoga, and ran seventy miles per



**CARRIE TOLLEFSON OUTDUELING JEN TOOMEY FOR VICTORY IN THE 1500-METER RUN AT THE 2004 OLYMPIC TRIALS**

*Photo credit: Kirby Lee, Image of Sport*

week, which is considered high for a fifteen-hundred- or five-thousand-meter runner." Carrie had high expectations for the 2004 Olympic Trials. She entered with the seventh-fastest time (15:04) in the history of the 5,000-meter run. She was confident and primed to make a return trip to Sacramento and then participate in the Olympics in Athens, Greece.

And then the unthinkable happened. "Everyone in my running career was at Sacramento to watch. I got sixth. I was devastated." A final opportunity to make the Olympic team in the 1,500-meter run awaited. Villanova teammate Douma—like Coach Procaccio—had witnessed such a scenario in college when Carrie had run two events. "Carrie had lost a tough race. She had the mindset that the race had been the day before, leave it behind—that's mentally tough. And then she won the next race." The memory of that win proved prophetic.

Carrie took an early lead in the 1,500-meter final and held it for nearly the entire race in torrid ninety-six-degree heat. When Jen Toomey edged ahead briefly on the final curve, Carrie fended off the challenge and won in 4:08.32. "I was a long-shot to make the team in the 1,500-meter run. I learned a life lesson about perseverance and defied all odds." Carrie Tollefson would be going to Athens—suffering from a stress fracture in her pubic bone—in a different event than she had expected.

Naturally, Carrie has her favorite Olympic memories. "Welcome Back," greeted



**CARRIE TOLLEFSON NOW SERVES AS A RUNNING ANALYST FOR REGIONAL AND NATIONAL NETWORKS**

*Photo credit: Kirby Lee, Image of Sport*

Olympians at Athens [the original site of the Olympics] and walking into the arena. There was an amazing love shown to the United States. My parents, Charlie, both of my sisters, and their husbands were all there." Another person there was Carmen Douma, representing Canada in the 1,500-meter run.

Carrie placed sixth (4:06.46) in one of three preliminary heats at Athens's Spiros Louis Stadium (named after the first marathon winner

of the modern Olympics), advancing to the next round. Running in the same semifinal heat as Carmen, Carrie finished a respectable ninth (4:08.55) despite the pain and other ailments she endured, but she failed to qualify for the finals. She was happy to watch her friend and former teammate take ninth in the finals.

Continuing to train and stay involved in broadcasting through a variety of gigs, Carrie once again made an effort to qualify for the Olympics in 2008. A case of pneumonia shortly before the trials stymied the quest, and she finished sixteenth in the 1,500-meter run.

Carrie now lives in St. Paul with Charlie, daughter Ruby (born in 2010), and son Everett (born in 2013). The busy mother has switched sponsorship allegiance and is now the Global Reebok Run Ambassador. She also works as a motivational speaker, runs



**RUBY, EVERETT, CHARLIE PETERSON, AND CARRIE TOLLEFSON**

*Photo credit: Carlos Bravo Photography*

a training camp at St. Catherine University, hosts a weekly running and fitness show online called C Tolle Run, and serves as an analyst for local (including the Twin Cities Marathon), regional, and national networks. "I am still involved in the running world but do not devote so much time to it."

Carrie summarizes her life and running career this way: "I am very thankful to call myself a true Minnesotan."

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