

The Forever Finish Line

WORDS BY HEATHER MAYER IRVINE
IMAGES BY PHOTORUN & KATE DODDS

It takes a strong-willed, opinionated person to be a successful coach. A coach has to know what's best—and remind his athlete of that when the inevitable doubts arise. A coach has to know the ins and outs of his athlete—her idiosyncrasies, superstitions, motivations.

And it takes a trusting, hardworking person to be a successful athlete. An athlete has to follow instructions but not be afraid to ask questions. An athlete has to put her whole self in the care of another.

When a successful athlete meets a successful coach, the bond can be unbreakable. Especially when it's forged in marriage.

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In 2010 Esther Erb and Cole Atkins joined ZAP Fitness, a training center in North Carolina geared toward post-collegiate runners. Cole had a few months' head start on Esther in North Carolina, and he hosted—perhaps poetically—Esther's first run at the center.

After a year of living in close quarters and training in the mountains, Esther and Cole started dating.

"We spent a lot of one-on-one time together, more than most young couples have the chance to do," Esther says.

Cole chimes in: "We spent a lot of time together really early in the relationship. That tends to be what people do when they're retired, after they've been together for 40 or 50 years. We got a bit of retirement in early. But it was a good foundation for getting to know each other really well."

In 2013, Esther left ZAP Fitness to coach at Rider University in New Jersey. She joined the New York Athletic Club. The pair dated long distance for two years before they married in 2015.

"It was important to make sure our relationship wasn't just out of convenience and the luxury of spending all day long together, which was the foundation of our relationship," Esther says, explaining one of her reasons for leaving ZAP Fitness. "Going to New Jersey and having that long distance helped make sure this is what we wanted to do forever."

In 2016, Esther lived with Cole during his last year at the training center. Today, they live in South Carolina, as husband and wife, coach and athlete.

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Funnily enough, Esther, 33, and Cole, 33, did not become runners until they were old. Well, old by lifelong runner standards.

Esther grew up singing and playing the cello.



Esther finishes the 2015 World Marathon Championships.

And she knew two things: She was a talented runner—thanks to the results of a Mile time trial in gym class—and that she wanted to go abroad during high school for a music program.

And because of the former, she knew a third thing: that if she started running in high school she wouldn't be able to pull herself away to go to Germany.

She joined the track team her senior year of high school after she returned from Europe. But even when Esther showed up to the Case Western Reserve campus as a freshman in college, she didn't have plans to run.

"I was checking out the rec center and the cross-country coach was looking out the window and saw me come in," Esther says. "She found me and asked me to join the team. She said I looked like a runner."

Esther, who was studying music, added a cognitive science major to give her 12 seasons of eligibility.

"So no, she wasn't always a runner," Cole says. "Neither was Cole," his wife jokingly retorts.

Cole played soccer. Today he's a soccer coach and the director of a youth soccer league.

"That's the connection between us," Cole says of his and his wife's late-to-life foray into running.

When Cole's final season of college soccer ended, he approached the track coach at High

Point University. He wanted to "run with the guys" as he prepared for a spring triathlon. After a few workouts, the coach asked Cole if he wanted to run a race.

"With who?" Cole recalls asking.

"The team."

Cole ran and won his first three college races: the indoor 5K and two one Miles.

Cole enrolled in his university's master's program to give him another year of eligibility with the track team.

"This was a big shift in my life," he says. "Soccer was all I'd ever done."

But this proved to be helpful when Cole entered the competitive running scene at ZAP Fitness. He'd only been running hard for just 18 months, compared to his teammates who'd been running since they were 12. He was fresh and relatively injury-free.

"It never occurred to me how lucky he was to be injury-free for his first four years of running," Esther says.

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Apart from those early-in-the-relationship runs at ZAP Fitness, the pair didn't train much together. Cole's easy pace was too fast for Esther, and Esther's fast pace was too easy for Cole. But after Cole was sidelined with an injury—he qualified for the 2016 Olympic Marathon Trials but was too hurt to run—he needed to ramp back up slowly.

"That was the perfect time for us to run together a lot more," Esther says.

In other words: "I was at the bottom in regard to being in shape," Cole says.

The pair trained together in the latter half of 2016, Esther for the New York City Marathon, Cole to find the fitness he lost.

But something bigger was brewing during this training time together. Esther was coaching a handful of athletes from all over the world. And they were getting faster. Her husband saw it firsthand.

"I always had an opinion about Cole's training and what he should be doing and what he shouldn't be doing," she says. "And eventually, he was like, 'Fine. You're criticizing me if I do something I'm not supposed to and telling me to do something I'm supposed to, you might as well coach me.' But maybe he has a different side of the story."

"I agree with most of what she said," Cole says. "But not the first part. I didn't feel overly criticized."

Esther coached her husband to run a 2:35:15 marathon—coincidentally her PR—in the fall of



Husband and wife, athlete and coach. Esther and Cole's dynamic sets them apart from other spousal pairs.

2017, a little more than a year after he'd been sidelined. It was a training run and a "happy accident" that Cole ran his wife's PR, he says. The challenge in that run, Esther says, was on Cole's recovering legs. But his effort was not maximal, which was a good sign of things to come.

"He was like okay, nobody else can coach me right now. There's nobody I trust more," Esther recalls. "Cole's the type of person who, when he decides somebody is his coach, he isn't going to question them."

So husband and wife became coach and athlete, with wife coaching husband—a dynamic that set them apart from other spousal pairs.

Keeping their new arrangement under wraps, Cole and Esther set their sights on the 2020 Olympic Marathon Trials.

Cole ran 2:20 at the Twin Cities Marathon in October 2018. Four months later, under the watch of his wife, he ran 2:18 at the Houston Marathon.

"He was in," Esther says.

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Esther has been officially coaching her husband for almost two years. And because the team achieved its goal of Cole qualifying for the 2020 Olympic Marathon Trials under Esther's tutelage, Cole says it's easy to call their professional partnership a positive one.

But Esther and Cole have one rule when it comes to her coaching him: "If anything becomes toxic, it ends the coaching relationship," she says.

The pair collaborates on Cole's workouts; Esther is the puppet master—the success of her 40 clients speaks for itself, Cole says—but it's not a dictatorship; she listens to her husband but knows when to push and when to pull back.

"With any coach, the athlete has to feel like the coach cares about his well-being, and if the athlete thinks the coach doesn't care, he won't respond," Cole says. "Because Esther is my wife, there was never really a question about whether she cared."

The openness of the Atkinses' coach-athlete relationship is not unlike that of the relationship Esther has with her coach, Steve Magness.

"Esther was moving to a point in her career where she needed more guidance than someone dictating exactly everything she needed to do," Magness, who has coached Esther for almost three years, says. "It's more of a partnership with open dialogue."

Coaching, especially coaching a spouse, Magness says, has given Esther a unique perspective when it comes to working with him.

"[Coaching Cole] has forced Esther to keep perspective," Magness says.

He points to a specific example of having difficult conversations with Esther both before and after she started working with Cole.

"Skipping a race or backing off in training, those were very demanding conversations," he says.

But now, Magness says, Esther has those conversations with her athlete and because of that, is able to better separate the emotion from what she wants versus what's best for her health and performance.

"She's become really good at dropping egos and just figuring out the best decisions," Magness says. "That's really difficult in athletics because it's such a selfish endeavor. It's refreshing to work with someone who can do that. It makes my life a lot easier."

Being married to your coach has its perks. While a coach in a traditional relationship may know the details of her athlete's day—schedule, physical and emotional well-being—there is a lot she can't see.

Cole's job on the soccer field has him standing and logging more miles than he may realize, Esther explains. Because she knows the details of her husband's job, she can adjust a workout according to the hours he spent on his feet. Or, Cole might come back from a run disappointed with his performance, but his coach can provide context.

"Maybe I ran in the same conditions an hour later and can tell Cole that it was super humid, and maybe it didn't seem that hot to him, but if he was 10 seconds per mile slower, that's okay," Esther says.

And when you're married to your coach, she can tell you to go to bed.

But there are certainly downsides, the pair says.

"There are times where, in the same conversation, I'll say, 'This is your wife speaking' and in another, 'This is your coach speaking,'" Esther says. "Sometimes he hears what I'm saying as loving and caring and thinks it's his wife, and I have to clarify it's his coach and I'm not just saying this because I love you."

"I definitely think she's just saying it sometimes," Cole chimes in.

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Esther doesn't think much about her unique situation, the one in which wife coaches husband. Cole is just another one of her male clients. But Cole coaches girls soccer, and that, he says, makes his unique situation stand out even more.

"I think about my role in that regard a lot because on the flip side, I have a female who

"Being married to your coach has its perks."

coaches me. But Esther is not my coach because she's a female. She's my coach because she's competent," Cole says.

In soccer, Cole says, like many team sports, you usually see men coaching women. And that needs to change, he says.

"From a soccer perspective, we want to hire more female coaches, but not many approach us," he says, noting that women need to see other women in those coaching positions so they know it's a viable option.

Esther was coached by a woman in college, and she attributes that mentorship, in part, to her confidence in becoming a coach.

"[My coach] helped me see that [coaching] was a potential future for myself," Esther says.

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The Atkinses aren't totally sure what's up next for them, after the Olympic Marathon Trials next February. Both are running, by the way, and both are part of the Tracksmith Olympic Trials Qualifier program.

Yes, while coaching some 40 athletes, Esther ran the qualifying standard in January 2018 at the Osaka Women's Marathon in Japan. She finished 11th in the 2016 Trials and hopes to crack the top 10 in 2020, under the guidance of Magness.

"I'm most excited about her being healthy and seeing what her body can do," Magness says. "She's going to have all the tools in her toolbox to utilize in running healthy. When she's in that spot she can set those high goals, like running in the top 10 at the Trials."

Esther is coming back from an injury, something that's new for her, but old hat now for her husband. She says seeing Cole come back again and again has given her both motivation and hope for herself.

"I want her to run another personal best in the marathon," Cole says. "But I'm sure she'd say, 'If someone said I'll never PR again, I had a good career.'"

But Esther talks about her goals for Cole. She wants to see him set personal bests in distances other than the marathon, specifically the 10K. "I think that's his missing link," the coach says. **M**