

Sport Athletics



Armed struggle: Potter has shown new belief to book her place at the Olympics

Potter trusts in magical mix of power and perseverance

Paul Forsyth

Beth Potter can still hear the words of the stadium announcer at the Stanford Invitational in California as she wound herself up for the last four laps of her 10,000 metres. "They're right on the button for the Olympic qualifying time," he said, prompting all manner of thoughts to rush through her head.

Quite apart from the years of sacrifice and the dark moments when she nearly quit athletics, she thought about her job as a physics teacher in London, as well as the pupils who had sent her off with best wishes and a box of chocolates. Potter isn't easily distracted in the big races, but this was different.

"I was so set on getting the time, and I didn't really know what pace we were running at," she recalls. "When they said we were on for 32.15, I thought 'I just have to do this'. I kept saying to myself, 'I can't justify this time off work if I don't do it. I can't go back and tell all the kids who wished me good luck that I've not done it'. I had to do it. I just had to."

Potter did it alright, posting a personal best of 32min 03.45sec, which meant that she needed only to finish among the top two British runners at Highgate seven weeks later to secure a place at the Games in Rio this summer. A fortnight ago, she did just that, crossing the line in 32:05:37, behind only Linet Masai, of Kenya, and Jess Andrews, the race's surprise English winner.

That made Potter

Likely lads: Potter has joined trio of marathon Scots



the British champion as Andrews was ineligible for the gold medal. It earned her a GB vest ahead of Kate Avery, who had pipped her in a sprint for fourth at Glasgow 2014, and Jo Pavey, whose target was to qualify for a fifth consecutive Olympic Games. The exhausted Glaswegian was too emotional to celebrate. "I had the same thing at Stanford. I wasn't happy at the end. I was just crying. Tears of joy obviously. Disbelief."

The satisfaction would come later. Last week, Potter took her year-13s for their last physics lesson at Orleans Park School in Twickenham. "It was really sweet," she says. "As I walked into the room, they unrolled an Olympic flag and had Chariots of Fire playing. A firecracker went off as well. I got the fright of my life, but it was really something to remember. They even filmed it for me."

Potter, who moved to London so that she could undertake a postgraduate teacher-training degree at St Mary's University, has come a long way since the days when she was growing up in Bearsden, running for Victoria Park Glasgow — where her father, Alex, still competes — and swimming at Bearsden and Milngavie Swimming Club, which also counts Katie Archibald, the Scottish cyclist, among its former members.

As others fret over their Olympic prospects, Potter is free to begin her preparations. She is only the fourth track-and-field Scot — after the marathon runners Callum Hawkins, Tsegai Tewelde and Derek Hawkins — to have booked a place on the flight to Rio. "It's hasn't sunk in yet," she says. "I



Setting the standard: Potter ran a personal best in the 10,000 metres at the Commonwealth Games at Hampden

don't even know if it will until I'm there. I keep trying to play it down, but everyone makes a big deal of it. I just feel overwhelmed by it all.

"My coach always thought I could do it. When I ran the qualifying time, it was a long wait for the trial. It was quite nerve-racking because I was the only one who had run the time this year and I felt like I was the target for others to beat. I was feeling really apprehensive because I knew there was so much hanging on it. I'm just glad I don't have to go through that again."

Potter, now 24, has learned to handle stress, which has often threatened to get the better of her. On several occasions, she has nearly given up the sport, demoralised by injury, illness — including tonsillitis two winters back.

For two years, she has benefited from weekly sessions with a sports psychologist, so much so that she now counts perseverance among her most valuable traits. "It's the only thing I've ever

changed in my training, but it's made the world of difference.

"My outlook is much more positive now. I keep believing in myself if I am ill or injured or things just aren't going to plan. It took me a long time to be able to do that. There have been so many times after bad races or bad months of training where I've just

'I keep trying to play it down but everyone makes a big deal of it'

wanted to chuck it. I'm glad that I didn't."

It is no coincidence that Potter's biggest inspiration is her fellow Scot and training partner, Steph Twell. "When you think of all the setbacks she has had, with her ankle break, and how she has managed to get back on the world stage, it is really inspirational. She was probably the turning point in my

season. In February, when I wasn't quite hitting it in training, she ran an awesome race at the grand prix. I remember going to training the next day, and it was like a switch being flicked. I was really inspired by her run, and things took off for me."

Neither did altitude training with the British team in Flagstaff, Arizona, do her any harm. There is a photograph of Potter, perched on a ledge high above the Grand Canyon, alongside fellow Scots Eilish McColgan and Andrew Butchart, who have also been making a charge at the team for Rio.

They want what Potter already has, namely an opportunity make a name for herself on the biggest stage of all. "I think I'm in shape to run 31-something. Whether it's 31:45 or maybe even quicker than that, I don't know. But I always seem to up my game it when it comes to a championship. I don't want to just go there and run. I want to go there and run well."