
WHY SHE RUNS

Rachel Notley's other passion



Alberta Official Opposition leader and Edmonton-Strathcona MLA Rachel Notley, Edmonton, 2019.

By DAVE ROBERTSON

IT'S A HALF HOUR BEFORE DAWN WHEN RACHEL Notley emerges from her hotel elevator, and I barely recognize her. She's wearing her running clothes and a battered pair of Asics Gel running shoes. Despite having arrived in Calgary late the night before, she has a schedule to keep and she's eager to head out.

I'm here to talk to Notley about running, and we're conducting the interview, literally, on the run. I'm a little worried. I want to hit all my questions, so I've written notes in Sharpie on the back of my left hand. I want to make sure I catch her answers accurately, so I'm clutching an audio recorder in my right. More than anything, I'm nervous about keeping up with her.

As Canadian politicians go, Rachel Notley is pretty damned fast. It's three days before the 2019 Melissa's Road Race in Banff, and she's registered to compete in the half-marathon. The average woman in her age group will finish the 21-kilometre event in about two hours and 20 minutes. Her goal is to run Melissa's in under two.

It's all a question of pace, the time it takes the runner to cover a kilometre. Before the interview, a member of her staff discreetly calls to ask me about mine. On a short run, downhill, with a tailwind, I average a 6:15, but Notley's race results show she's capable of something closer to a 5:45. This is why I'm nervous.

“[As premier,] I started running more,” she says. “I didn’t think that would happen.” It was a critical way to relieve stress.

AS WE CHAT IN THE DESERTED LOBBY, I'm relieved to hear that Notley is on her taper, the point in her training where she's dialing back her pace and distance to rest up for Melissa's. We're also waiting for Calgary MLA Joe Ceci, her regular running partner, whom Notley teases relentlessly for being “slow.” There's a chance I'll survive this encounter after all.

When Ceci arrives, we step outside into a perfect runner's morning—a cool fall day with a pretty sunrise casting an orange light on the downtown office buildings that surround us.

While Notley sets her running watch, Ceci proposes an hour-long route following the pathway on the south bank of the Bow River. Coincidentally, it takes us through his riding, Calgary-Buffalo, and as we run, we're greeted by respectful nods from fellow runners and startled double takes from everyone else.

The banter between Notley and Ceci starts soon after we set out from Eau Claire. As Notley is describing her time as premier, when her security detail would plan her running routes, Ceci breaks in to tell me, “Rachel regularly broke her EPU”—the Executive Protection Unit responsible for protecting the premier and members of cabinet.

“I did not regularly break my EPU,” she scolds Ceci in a familiar, jokey way. He chides her with his trademark smile: “It happened a lot.” She pauses and then concedes, “It is true that once or twice I broke them.” She says it with a hint of pride.

By the numbers, Rachel Notley is a serious runner. She's hands-on, following a training program from a couple of courses she's taken at her local Running Room (they also help her find replacements for her beloved but now discontinued Asics) and competes in several races every year. At Ceci's prompting, she started tracking her mileage and set a goal to run 2,000 kilometres in a year. That's slightly less than 40 kilometres a week. She runs regardless of whether she's travelling or the Legislature is sitting. She runs in winter, even during her ski vacations. Notley reveals that her husband, Lou Arab, started running recently. She admits,

“I've hectored him into it.”

But Notley is also a social runner, and she recruits friends, colleagues and family to train and race with her. “It's hard to be disciplined enough to get out the door when you're on your own,” she says. “When I make plans, it's way easier to follow through.”

NOTLEY HASN'T ALWAYS BEEN THIS WAY, and she shares a frank appraisal of her life before running. She started smoking in her teens, and by her twenties, she says, “I had KFC on speed dial. And they would just come to my house with dinner... I was not a healthy person.” Then she noticed runners. “I always looked at runners [and thought] ‘Gosh, those people are so cool, like, I just have so much respect for how healthy and refreshed and happy they all seem. And I wish that could be me—but that's not who I am.’ And then I decided. ‘Well, I could be.’”

Running went hand in hand with her struggle to quit smoking. “I (still) consider myself a recovered smoker,” she says. “I used to smoke a pack a day. And when I quit, it took at least five or six tries.” She followed a familiar cycle—every time she quit, she'd start running again, and every time she'd have a relapse, she'd stop running, telling herself, “Well, you're smoking again, you big loser; so much for being healthy.” When I ask about why she was so tough on herself, she catches my eye and like any good politician quickly reframes the discussion. “You need to be helpfully skeptical of yourself at all times, you know?” She pauses thoughtfully, “In a [way that says] ‘I am confident enough to consider maybe this could be done better, or differently.’”

Notley was 32 when she finally quit, and running became the reward for staying off cigarettes. “Endorphins,” she says. “I replaced nicotine with endorphins.” When her attempts at transformation finally stuck, it took her husband by surprise. Mimicking Lou's reaction, she says, “What happened to the woman I fell in love with? Stay on the couch with me. What are you doing?!”

WE'RE CROSSING THE BRIDGE TO ST. PATRICK'S Island, when Notley asks Ceci if he wants to walk. It's not a jibe—she's providing a bit of gentle coaching, reminding him that his training plan involves 10-minute intervals of running followed by a minute of walking. While we walk, I ask her about how running fit with her time as premier. She starts by telling a story about a mop.

“Three or four days after the [2015] election, I finally got to take off a bit of time, and my house was a disaster. All I wanted to do was clean up, because it's... about having some control left in your life... I didn't have a proper mop, and I couldn't just hop in my car and run down to a hardware store and buy a mop... So I started calling my friends... ‘Oh, my God, I just need a mop.’ Two or three different mops were delivered, but they're not the kind that I wanted. I almost broke into tears, because I'd just lost all control.”

Control is elusive when you're a politician, and Notley saw it disappear quickly after she was first elected MLA for

Edmonton-Strathcona in 2008. “I was one of two people in caucus and I had 13 critic areas. And so I'm just like, yeah, sorry, this part of my life is over.” She was running fewer than three times a week and racing in the occasional Banff-Jasper Relay.

But winning the premier's office in 2015 presented an unexpected opportunity. “When we got government, suddenly I had all these people around me who would run on my schedule. I discovered that the only time in my life where I had any control at all was before my workday started. So I started running more... I didn't think that would happen.” As Alberta struggled with deepening recession and conflicts with other provinces, running became a critical way to relieve stress.

“And keep the weight down, too,” adds Ceci. Notley agrees emphatically.

THE THEN-PREMIER SOON RESUMED training for half-marathons with the support of friends and colleagues such as Ceci, then-minister of finance, and Cheryl Oates, her director of communications. Says Notley, “(Oates was) super, super, super fit. She wasn't a runner, but then we started travelling all over the place, and she became a runner.”

And then, of course, there was her security detail. Soon after Notley became premier, the EPU started escorting her while she ran. Joe jumps in again with “Broke' em!” but Notley admits it's a joke. Her escorts were professionals, fit and strong, and it only got more challenging when the Sheriffs Branch started filling vacancies with young recruits who also were runners. Some were much faster than Notley. “I've actually had my best running times with EPU,” she says.

It was a game changer for Notley, but she wasn't the only one whose limits were being pushed. “There was a... conversation we'd have when they'd pick me up [in the morning]. A couple of them would look at me hopefully and ask ‘Is Joe coming?’ I'd be, like, ‘Yes, today's your lucky day.’”

We're on our return trip, running west past the Harvie Passage on the south side of the Bow. I'm thankful that Notley's picked a gentle Zone 1 pace, which my training plan describes as feeling “easy and controlled, can talk in full sentences.”

We pause for a brief walk as Notley shares another story about EPU. On hot summer days, Notley and Ceci started taking mid-run plunges into the Bow River. Pointing to the bank, she says, “In the summer when it's hot... we'll stop here and go for a swim. And then keep [running].” Her detail wasn't impressed by the antics of the then-premier and finance minister. “Honestly, they did not love it,” she laughs. “But eventually they succumbed and they took pictures.” They asked her to tell their boss that she'd ordered them to stand down.

AS WE NEAR THE SIMMONS BUILDING, I glance at my hand for another question. It's about the optics of other sporty politicians. Ceci jumps in with a story about inviting federal finance minister Bill Morneau out for an early

morning run in Edmonton, only to discover that Morneau had arranged a photo op. “Of course, I'd just rolled out of bed, and Bill looked like a polished gazelle...”

Certainly, Notley's social media feed mentions her running and, at times, her staff have suggested promoting it with voters, but she isn't completely comfortable doing so. “Not everybody is privileged enough to be able to work this in or healthy enough to be able to do it,” she says. “Maybe it's a little obnoxious to brag about [it].”

When we get back to Eau Claire, both Notley and Ceci are sweating but they're relaxed and energetic and making plans for Melissa's. Race day will be cold, and they're discussing what layers they're taking when I say goodbye.

The following week, I notice something about my running. Unconsciously, I've been working up my pace to try and match Notley's, and I'm pretty happy when I run a 5:43 at a Saturday morning 5K. Still, I'm exhausted when I finish and I know I can't sustain it through a half-marathon.

Curious, I look online at the results from the Melissa's Road Race. I'm pleased to see Ceci has successfully completed his first half-marathon, but Notley runs a 2:09:02. It's respectable, but she's missed her two-hour goal. I wonder what happened, so I decide to follow up at a budget town hall she's attending in Calgary. I text her staff, and while they're encouraging, they warn me she's “not excited about her Melissa's time” and won't talk about it.

Arriving, I immediately run into Ceci, and he's an open book. We talk about his finish and then he shares Notley's story. She was running with a friend who started feeling ill, and after walking her to an aid station, she went on to try and finish the race in her goal time. Her pace, with unplanned walking, was still a 6:07.

As we talk, the room fills with NDP supporters. There's a buzz in the air, a little like the start line at a race. Soon, Notley heads for the stage and the audience greets her with enthusiastic applause. She focuses on delivering a passionate, well-paced speech about budget cuts and spends over an hour listening to concerns from audience members.

I catch her eye as she heads for the door but she smiles and keeps going. Instead, I talk with Shannon Phillips, MLA for Lethbridge-West. Also a runner, she says Notley “will run with anyone. She's not that person that needs to be first or anything.” A moment later, she contradicts herself, “Rachel's super competitive... She'll go and compete with that bodyguard guy.”

Later that fall, Notley is in Victoria, racing at the Goodlife Fitness Marathon. It's her last race of the year and a chance to redeem herself. On the day, I follow her progress on the race tracker and she runs it in 1:57:55, averaging a pace of 5:36 over the entire 21 kilometres.

When I ask about it, Notley replies in a text message, saying she's proud of the accomplishment but already thinking ahead to her next goal—running the half in under 1:55. ■

Dave Robertson is a Calgary-based trail runner and writer who covers civic affairs, the urban lifestyle and outdoor adventure.