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## Qualifier Steps Out of the Office and Onto the Track

By CECIL HARRIS

By day, Lesley Higgins works as a compliance director on Gov. David Paterson's staff in New York City, making sure laws are followed and paperwork is filed.

But Thursday night, the 28-year-old Higgins will be in the starting blocks in Eugene, Ore., competing for a spot on the 2008 Olympic team in the steeplechase — a 3,000-meter speed and endurance event that requires runners to clear 30-inch-high hurdles and a water pit.

Higgins finished her preliminary heat in 10 minutes 2.9 seconds Monday night at the United States Olympic track and field trials to qualify for the final. The top three finishers who have achieved the Olympic "A" standard time of 9:46 qualify for the Beijing Games.

Higgins realizes she is a long shot to make the team. She has surprised herself that she has come this far, considering she is competing against athletes who train full time in the steeplechase, an arduous event she abandoned for five years after graduating from the [University of Colorado](#).

She qualified for the trials by running a personal-best 9:58.6 on June 7 in Michigan, beating her collegiate time of 10:13. Now in the best shape of her life, her affection for what she calls her "novelty event" has grown.

"What made me want to do the steeplechase is what makes people want to watch it — you're waiting to see if people will fall," Higgins said.

Higgins does not consider it a disadvantage to be a professional and an athlete instead of a professional athlete. "My job is good for my head," she said. "I don't want to be thinking about running and training all the time."

Although she was a Big 12 Conference champion in the steeplechase, Higgins, a Centennial, Colo., native, essentially retired from competitive running after she earned a master's degree in criminal justice from Colorado and moved to New York.

Higgins, a former all-American, heeded the advice of her father, who told her, "Try to run five miles a day and don't get fat."

Running for fun as a member of the New York Athletic Club was enough for Higgins until last summer, when she finished the steeplechase in a meet at Princeton just 15 seconds shy of the Olympic trials qualifying time — close enough to make her begin training seriously. She is

coached, mostly via calls and e-mail messages, by the Oregon-based Brad Hudson.

She works her training around her job, doing early-bird runs in Central Park and scheduling her running-and-hurdling workouts at dusk on the track at [Columbia University](#).

“I work 40 to 50 hours a week, but I’m able to manipulate my hours,” Higgins said. “I run at 7 a.m., get to the office at 10 a.m., do another run at 6:30 or 7 and then go home and work from my computer. My co-workers don’t give me a hard time when I have to go to a track meet. They’ve been very supportive.”

Gov. Paterson said through a spokesman: “As a runner myself and a sports fan, I was thrilled to learn that a member of my staff is competing in the U.S. Olympic trials. My family and I wish her the best of luck.”

Paterson is a member of the Achilles Track Club, a group that encourages disabled runners to participate in long-distance races alongside the able-bodied. He completed the 1999 [New York City Marathon](#) in 6 hours 6 minutes.

Higgins, however, cannot imagine herself making an Olympic team until 2012, when she has had a full six years of solid training.

“The water pit is the part of the race that I think about,” she said. “The way the Kenyans do the water jump is fun to watch. Their form is horrible, but they just fly over the pit. So I try to imagine myself imitating the Kenyans while I’m running.”

Thursday night, her rivals will include Jennifer Barringer, who ran the fastest time in the preliminaries (9:48.50), and Lisa Galaviz, who set the American record (9:28.75) on July 28, 2007.

“At the very least, I want to run a personal best,” said Higgins, who has already made her summer memorable.

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