

Mary Wineberg is driving in circles around the University of Cincinnati. Each lap is perhaps a quarter mile—a distance with which she’s thoroughly familiar—and she circles again and again looking for a spot. This morning the Colerain Township resident and UC grad is determined of two things: First, she will find convenient parking and avoid a long walk across campus; second, she is going to train hard today, and run like the Olympic athlete she intends to be.

At full sprint, Wineberg has the grace of a gazelle. She’s 5-foot-10 with muscular legs that twitch and slice the air with every step on the track. She’s training for the Olympic trials this summer in Eugene, Oregon, where she hopes to qualify for both the 400-meter run and the 4x400-meter relay at the 2008 Olympics in Beijing. But right now, seated on a leather couch in the Richard E. Lindner Center, the long-limbed runner looks every bit like a model, with form-fitting black athletic gear, flawlessly painted nails, and a neat ponytail.

At 28, Wineberg is a self-described late bloomer. While she’s run competitively since high school and has trained post-collegiately for nearly six years, she’d never been a world-class runner. “I’m very uncoordinated,” she says. “My husband laughs at me when I shoot baskets, because if you saw me, you’d say, ‘I can’t believe she runs track.’”

Wineberg captured the international running world’s attention last September at one of the largest non-Olympic events in the world—the 2007 IAAF World Championships in Athletics in Osaka, Japan—as a 400-meter specialist with a lightning fast finish. She jokes that the media didn’t pay any attention to her because no one thought she’d make it past the first round. Not even her.

“Don’t expect to win,” she told herself. “This is your first outdoor world event. Just be satisfied with making it to the first round.” ▶▶

CHASING GOLD

Can a come-from-behind runner become an Olympian?

