

VACAVILLE INSIDER**Home****Race walking blossoms into romance**

Nick Christie was ready to leave the friend zone with Robyn Stevens in 2019 when he invited the 2001 Vacaville High School graduate to the California Super Bloom. There was one slight problem, however. Stevens was more attracted to the endless fields of wildflowers than to a man nine years her junior.

Stevens was content with their connection being race walking. The two became acquainted by occasionally training together, and Christie's Super Bloom invitation came after they crossed paths at the USA Track & Field 20-kilometer Race Walk Championships in Southern California.

Age is no longer an issue for Stevens because she and Christie are now an inseparable couple. They will leave for Tokyo on July 28 as the only American race walkers to qualify for the Olympics. It took more than their respective victories June 26 at the U.S. Olympic Trials in Oregon to make it.

Their tickets to Japan were determined by the world rankings with each needing to be in the top 60 to qualify. Stevens was ranked 54th entering the U.S. Olympic Trials, so there was little chance that she would miss out regardless of how she finished. Christie was ranked 61st, so he was hanging on by a thread.

Christie did the math and figured he would need to finish with a time south of 1 hour and 25 minutes to climb into the top 60. He crossed the finish line in 1:30:48 with Stevens on his heels as she began her final 1-kilometer lap. A photo of Stevens hitting the banner at the finish line shows the shock on her face because she felt as if she had stolen Christie's thrill of victory.

"I slapped his butt and someone told me, 'How sweet of you to push Nick through the finish,'" Stevens said. "That was his finish line. I was thinking about him and trying not to cry. I knew he had to go under 1:25. He was smiling, but I could see in his eyes that he wasn't confident. I knew my parents couldn't go (to Tokyo) and if Nick didn't make it, I would have had to go alone."

Fortunately, a race walker in the men's top 60 was withdrawn by his country. Christie received the good news after the rankings were updated July 5, which was the last day for countries to submit their team rosters for Tokyo. Although the withdrawal was expected, Christie came within a few short hours of being left out.

All their trials and triumphs as race walkers will make for great stories that Stevens and Christie will share one day with their children. Starting a family is on their agenda along with returning to the Olympics in 2024. Competing in Paris would be special because they are both sponsored by a French sporting goods company, Decathlon. Christie was a guest at the opening of Decathlon's Emeryville store in 2019. They have even discussed what it will take to qualify for the 2028 Olympics in Los Angeles. Stevens thinks of all those possibilities and remembers how close she came to letting Christie get away.

"I enjoyed his company, but I wasn't thinking romantically because of his age. I always went for older guys," said Stevens, who was 36 at the time. "I told him I thought the Super Bloom would be cool to see and that it would be cool to have someone to see it with. I just thought he wanted to hang out."

Christie saw much more than flowers when he was invited by Stevens to Las Vegas because a friend of hers was performing in what she called a burlesque show. When her topless friend took the stage, Stevens could not imagine what Christie had to be thinking. The blush in his cheeks was her first clue.

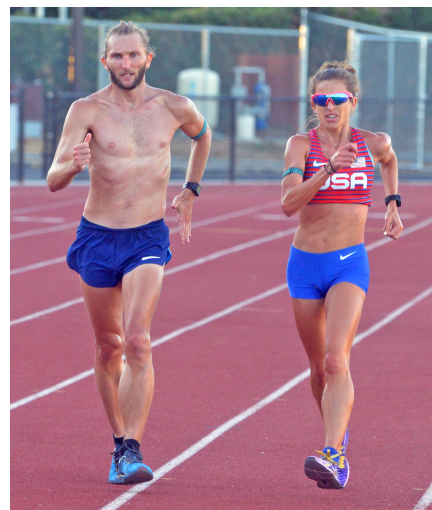
"I was thinking a cabaret or something like that, maybe just a little risqué," recalled Christie, who had to hustle after the last-minute invitation to make the five-hour drive from San Diego in time for the show. "That was a little surprising. I didn't think it was going to be like that. I didn't know what I agreed to."

Stevens did not give much thought to how Christie would react to nudity because "this is Vegas. It wasn't dirty at all. I really didn't think about this being out of his comfort zone. He's pretty chill, but when she came out he was all pink in the face. He was great. He went with the flow."

The best was yet to come. Stevens also invited Christie to go to a goat yoga class the following day. The class was in an outdoor pen and the students went through the various yoga moves as baby goats climbed all over them. And the instructor just happened to be Stevens' exposed friend, the dancer.

"By the end of the weekend, I knew I was interested in him," Stevens admitted. "Who doesn't bond over goats ... cute baby goats? I was actually wondering if he was thinking, 'I don't know about this Robyn.'"

He certainly knows enough by now.



Nick Christie and Robyn Stevens prepare for the Olympics by training on Vacaville High's track.

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