

Former North Jersey track star qualifies for Olympic Trials

[Paul Schwartz](#) NorthJersey.com

Josette Norris crossed the finish line in Austin, Texas on Feb. 27 not knowing whether the best race of her short professional career would be enough to meet her goal.

The former Tenafly and Georgetown track and field star had just run the fastest 5,000 meter race of her life but wasn't sure it was under the 15:20 qualifying time for the Olympic Trials, scheduled for June 18-27 in Eugene, Oregon.

Her bold move to the front of the large and talented pack at the Texas Qualifier 5,000 had surprised even the commentators on the live stream. Norris had taken the lead over Olympic steeplechase gold medalist Emma Coburn, recent American record-holder Elle Purrier and former NCAA champion Weini Kelati with just over a mile to go.

"Things had started to slow down significantly and I had to make a decision to go after it because I thought it didn't go then, I wasn't going to get the qualifying time," said Norris. Her surge broke open the tight pack of nine front runners and she led for more than 1,000 meters before Purrier, as expected, kicked with 600 meters to go.

Kelati passed Norris too, and as Norris crossed the finish line she saw 15:19 on the unofficial clock.

"I was so nervous and thought maybe it was 15:20, but there was no results board so my agent (Ray Flynn) and I had to go on his phone and check."

A nerve-wracking three or four minutes later came the result: 15:19.31 and with it the next step in her burgeoning career.

How it started

Norris signed her first professional contract with Reebok in September 2019 and began running for the Reebok Boston Track Club under the direction of former Syracuse head coach Chris Fox.

After running only a couple of indoor 3,000-meter races in 2020 for her new club, the second a personal best 8:58.23, one of the top 15 times in the country last year, the COVID-

19 pandemic shut down competition, but not her progress.

"The hardest thing to get used to was being confident when you're working out with new teammates," said Norris, who trains with her team at Charlottesville, Virginia. "You almost feel like you're a freshman in college again."

But Norris adjusted quickly with back-to-back impressive performances in a victory at the Virginia Beach Invitational mile on Feb. 1 and a second place finish at the Camel City Invitational mile in Winston-Salem, N.C. on Feb. 20, both in nearly identical times of 4:31.39 and 4:31.48, respectively, well below her previous best in the event.

"It was definitely was great championship style racing practice (at Camel City) and was worth a lot more than the time on the clock," Norris said. "I feel the same way about the race in Austin."

Unexpected wind and humidity (the temperature was 60 degrees the day before and 79 the day of the race with winds jumping from two miles an hour to 14 at race time) ruined the chance for a fast race.

"The plan was supposed to be different, but when the weather changed, I had to adjust," said Norris, who started in the back of the pack but had pulled herself into contention midway in the race. "I'm proud of the moves I've made. It was a really big moment for me."

With a major goal behind her, Norris is taking a week's down time before waiting to see what races she can get after her big performance.

"I would hope that when people see this result they will give me a chance to be in a race, I would not have been in, otherwise," said Norris, who hopes to run a fast 1,500 meter race in search of the 4:06 Olympic Trials qualifying standard in that event.

She's also elated that the Austin race was livestreamed for free and that friends and family throughout the country were able to share in her success.

"There were 11,000 people watching on the stream during our race," said Norris. "I'm happy so many people got to watch me qualify for the Olympic Trials. "It's a really big moment for me."

Where it was; where it's going

Norris finally broke through in her final college season in 2019 after showing flashes of her high school All-American and New Jersey state record form throughout an injury plagued college career.

She ran fourth at the NCAA East meet in the 5,000 and quickly followed it up with an All-American fourth place event at the NCAA finals in Austin, Texas and a 12th place finish at the USA Track and Field Championships in Des Moines, Iowa.

And Norris has made another major commitment, one she calls the best thing that happened to her in 2020. In October the 25-year-old got engaged to fellow New Jerseyan and 2016 Olympian Robby Andrews, a two-time NCAA champion, who also represented the U.S. in the 2017 World Championships.

The pandemic that postponed the 2020 Olympics will also lead to the couple pushing their wedding date to the Fall of 2022 as Andrews is also hoping to complete a comeback from a series of injuries at Tokyo this fall and at the World Championships, rescheduled to July 2022 in Eugene, Oregon.

"We need to plan a lot of stuff out, but we've got some major running to do first," said Norris said.

