Emilie Mondor was a Canadian distance runner who lost her life in 2006 at the age of 25. She was the first Canadian woman to run 5k under 15 minutes at the 2003 World Championships in Athletics. At the 2004 Athens Olympics, Emilie became known internationally when she finished 17th in the 5000m. This article remembers her as a champion of Canadian women’s running.

Who was Emilie Mondor? Remembering an Olympian and champion of Canadian women’s running. By Bridget Mallon

Canada lost one of its most accomplished distance runners when Emilie Mondor died in 2006 at the age of 25. The first Canadian woman to run 5k under 15 minutes at the 2003 World Championships in Athletics, Emilie became known internationally at the 2004 Athens Olympics when she finished 17th in the 5000m.
Alongside the loss, many want to remember Emilie’s spirit, generosity and contributions to running.

After Athens, a rare medical condition led to five stress fractures, sidelining Emilie’s career for two years. An experimental drug helped her return to high intensity training, and in 2006, Emilie launched an incredible comeback.

With a time of 32:26, she claimed first place among women in both the Vancouver Sun Run and Ottawa Race Weekend 10k races and set her sights on competing for Canada in the marathon in 2008 Olympics in Beijing.

“Training at a world level from such a young age, there’s a lot of expectation on you. It takes a lot of patience and determination to make a comeback,” says Mike Lonergan, who coached her when she studied biology at Simon Fraser University. A two-time Olympian herself in the 800m, Townsend remembers Mondor as “one of the most focused, driven athletes I’ve ever worked with.”

Whenever we had a camp or a clinic, Emilie loved to be part of it…she always made participants feel really good about themselves,” says Brit Townsend, head coach of track and field and cross-country at Simon Fraser University. A two-time Olympian herself in the 800m, Townsend remembers Mondor as “one of the most focused, driven athletes I’ve ever worked with.”

Emilie sought out Ken Parker to coach her for her marathon debut. Parker - founder and renowned head coach of the Ottawa Athletics Club Racing Team - has coached women and promoted women’s running for decades. He created the Runner’s Web - the overall winners,” he says. “We were blown away. After seeing her results and adaptation to longer training runs, I knew that if she didn’t break the Canadian women’s marathon record, it would be my fault, not hers.”

Based on her potential, New York City race organizers invited Mondor to race that year as an elite in its illustrious marathon – despite the fact that she had never raced distances longer than 10k.

“We used to do a training loop with lots of hills in Rockcliffe Park for the women’s group I coached,” reminisces Parker. “I found a fast (2:20) male marathoner to lead Emilie through the first 1-mile loop. After the first one, he was spent. She’d do five more. Then she would run backwards, down the hill and cheer on the other women. Emilie had a lot of confidence in her abilities, as you need to at that level, but none of the elite attitude you see sometimes.”

Mondor died just hours after completing the longest run of her life. On September 9, 2006, with Parker cycling beside her, she ran 29 kilometres in two hours and four minutes during a training session. “She was just really pleased that she could run for two hours and feel so good. I was pleasantly surprised because she was adapting to the longer runs much faster than I thought she was going to.”

After discussing some training plans at Parker’s home, Mondor set out to drive to Mascouche, Quebec, just north of Montreal to go to a high school reunion and visit her family.

Mondor lost control of her car after passing two others. Ejected from her vehicle and then airlifted to hospital in Ottawa, she passed away without regaining consciousness.

Parker, still deeply affected by her passing, decided to rename the 5k race in her honour. The Sports 4 Emilie’s Run attracts more sub-20 minute female runners than any other event in Canada. Every year Emilie’s parents come to the race, serving in an honourary capacity at the start and finish lines.

Her hometown of Mascouche, Quebec hosts the Classique Emilie Mondor in October, and SFU hosts the Emilie Mondor Invitational Track Meet each spring. “She influenced so many people – and continues to today,” says Mike Lonergan. “Not many athletes, even Olympians, have as many events named in their honour.”

The Sports 4 Emilie’s Run 5k and new half marathon take place in Ottawa on June 21, 2014. somersault.ca