

Ryan Shay – Central Lake 1997



Ryan Shay might have come from the tiny Class D school of Central Lake, but that didn't stop him in his quest to be the best. Coached by his father, Joe Shay, when he made himself a high school cross country legend, Shay went on to a great collegiate career at Notre Dame and later became one of America's top marathoners before his career ended in stunning tragedy.

His career, in yearly highlights:

1993: After the third meet of his 9th -grade year, he went undefeated in high school cross country. He became the first 9th -grade boy to win a Class D cross country title, taking the win in 17:48, albeit slower than the winner of the Class D team race (held separately in those days).

1994: In his first state track meet, the frosh was runner-up in the D 1600 (4:25.87) and 3200 (9:41.69). As a sophomore that fall, he took the Class D XC title in 16:34.

1995: He won his first D title on the track with his 1600 of 4:28.73. He also captured the 800 (2:00.88) and 3200 (9:44.76). On a snow-covered course that fall, he won his third-straight Class D title in 16:01.

1996: In track, he repeated his state wins at 1600 (4:22.00) and 3200 (9:47.98), skipping the 800 this time. That fall, in the first year the state finals were run at Michigan International Speedway, Shay ran faster through the snow flurries than even the big school athletes, taking a historic fourth win in 15:30, with a winning margin of over a minute.

1997: He closed out his high school career, taking the Class D 1600 in 4:17.13, and the 3200 in a meet record 9:25.68. In all, he won 11 state titles for Central Lake. As a Notre Dame frosh, he placed 68th in the NCAA cross country championships (30:58).

1998: In the spring he led the U.S. U20 team at the World XC champs, finishing 20th. His next NCAA cross country championships was less than spectacular; he finished 229th (34:16).

1999: Won the Big East Indoor 3000. Shay placed 7th in the NCAA 10,000 in 29:55.78. In the fall he won the Big East XC title, then made All-America in cross country, placing 12th at nationals (30:46).

2000: After an early-season PR of 28:50.73, he won Big East titles at 5000 and 10,000 and placed 7th in the NCAA again, this time in 30:54.65. He was 10th in the USATF 10,000 (28:51.74).

2001: Won the Big East Indoor 5000 (14:10.00), then was 9th in the NCAA Indoor (14:02.35). Captured the NCAA 10,000 title in 29:05.44, the first Notre Dame athlete to win an NCAA track title in 45 years. Also was 6th in the NCAA 5000 (13:52.45). Finished 6th in the NCAA cross country champs in 29:23 for 10K.

2002: Won the Big East Indoor 3000 (8:09.42) then placed 18th at the NCAA Indoor. Ran his 5000 PR of 13:35.08 in the early season at Mt. SAC. Runner-up in the NCAA track championships at 29:02.92, then placed 7th in the USATF race in 28:40.66. Ran his first marathon at Chicago, placing 15th in 2:14:30.

2003: The winner of the 2003 USA Running Circuit, he captured U.S. titles in the marathon (2:14:29) and half marathon (1:04:13), as well as placing 3rd in both the USATF 5K (14:06) and 25K (1:17:44). Competed in the World Championships marathon in Paris, but was unable to finish.

2004: Repeated as winner of the USA Running Circuit, with wins in the national championship half marathon (1:05:04) and 20K (59:53), 2nds in the 25K (1:17:12) and 5K (14:02) and a 3rd in the 10M (47:11). Finished 22nd in the Olympic Trials Marathon. Ran his PR marathon in New York City (2:14:08). Placed 10th in the Olympic Trials 10,000 (28:49.95).

2005: Finished 2nd in the USA Running Circuit standings, winning the USATF half-marathon title. Finished 15th in the World Half Marathon Champs (PR 1:03:13). PRed at 15K in Jacksonville (43:52). Placed 11th in the Boston Marathon (2:18:17) and 18th in New York (2:17:14).

2006: Placed 3rd in the USA 5K road champs in 13:58.2. Finished 3rd in the Twin Cities Marathon (2:14:58).

2007: Placed 14th at the USATF XC champs, then competed at the World XC in Kenya. PRed at 10K in 28:03.44 at Stanford in April, then ran 8th in the USATF 10,000 on the track in 28:54.34.

Shay's career came to a horrifying conclusion at the New York City Marathon on November 3, 2007. In a race that doubled as the U.S. Olympic Trials, Shay collapsed near the 5.5M mark and was pronounced dead shortly afterward, the victim of a cardiac arrhythmia, the result of a pre-existing enlarged heart. It happened on the same day as the MHSAA cross country finals at MIS; the shock as the news spread sapped the joy from that event.

Anytime someone dies too young, it leaves so many others grappling with grief. Ryan had been recently married to Alicia Craig, herself a notable runner. She has been open about her difficult journey since, as has the Shay family. His father, Joe, passed away in March 2024.

Ryan Shay is remembered through the Ryan Shay Mile in Charlevoix, as well as a memorial bench in New York's Central Park. But perhaps the best way to remember him is to run where he did. He told *Michigan Runner*, "One of my favorite places to run is in the Jordan Valley of Northern Michigan. The run is on very soft dirt trails or dirt roads along the fast-moving Jordan River. The color of the leaves in the fall are gorgeous and there is various wildlife to observe while hammering along the trails. But, best of all, it's just a few miles from my home."