

May 2017 *Wingfoot* Spotlight: Want to Travel Like a Pro? 10 Athletes Share Their Secrets

By Barbara Huebner

“To awaken quite alone in a strange town is one of the pleasantest sensations in the world,” wrote explorer Freyda Stark, who died in 1993 at the age of 100.

Unless you have a race that day and suddenly panic that you forgot to pack something, a situation that threatens to take a few years off your life in a hurry.

Amy Hastings Cragg has been there. In 2008, fresh out of Arizona State, Cragg arrived in San Diego for her first cross country race as a professional athlete stressed out about getting to the starting line without making any rookie mistakes.

So of course when she opened her bag at the hotel, she found two left spikes.



After some frantic phone calls, Cragg headed out to a running store on the morning of the race to grab the one pair of new spikes she could find. Then, she realized at the last minute that she hadn't thought of how she would get from the hotel to the course.

“I was so nervous about messing up that I was messing up everything along the way,” said Cragg.

Not quite everything: After an anxious taxi ride, Cragg made Team USA for the 2008 IAAF World Cross Country Championships in that race, jump-starting a pro career that has taken her around the world and included two U.S. Olympic teams and the title of 2014 USA 10K Champion, which she earned in winning the AJC Peachtree Road Race.

Since those early days as a pro—which also included booking a flight for the wrong month—things have gone pretty smoothly.

“I got it out of my system in my first few races as a pro,” she said. “Now I have the hang of it.”

Cragg was among the 10 athletes, including three members of Atlanta Track Club Elite, who shared their packing adventures and tips with *Wingfoot*. They include:

Bernard Lagat, the two-time Olympic medalist and two-time World Champion who is set to compete in the AJC Peachtree Road Race and its USA 10K Championships on July 4;

Jared Ward, a three-time national champion who finished sixth in the Rio Olympic marathon for Team USA;

Emily Sisson, the 2016 USA 10K Champion who recently ran the fastest half-marathon debut in history by an American woman (1:08:21) as a runner-up in the NYC Half;

Christo Landry, whose six national titles include the USA 10K Championships he won at the AJC Peachtree Road Race in 2014;

Nuta Olaru, a 2004 Olympian for Romania and frequent AJC Peachtree Road Race competitor who became a U.S. citizen in 2011;

Jonathan Grey, the 2011 USATF Club Cross Country Champion;

Bridget Lyons, the 2010 SEC Champion at 10,000 meters and winner of the 2017 Atlanta Women's 5K;

Rob Mullett, who competed for Great Britain in the 3000-meter steeplechase at the Rio Olympics; and

Brandon Lasater, who in 2015 ran the first outdoor sub four-minute mile in Georgia Tech history, becoming the first native-born Georgian to break the four-minute barrier.

Their tips break down into five basic categories: getting organized, racing essentials, transit, children, and food.

Making a List, Checking it Twice

"I may not be the best person to get advice from," says Sisson, who was a two-time NCAA Champion for Providence College. "I was always borrowing foam rollers or cell phone chargers. I've forgotten so many things so many times that now I have a list on my phone."

Mullett, too, is a list-maker, and advises that runners put everything on their lists, no matter how obvious.

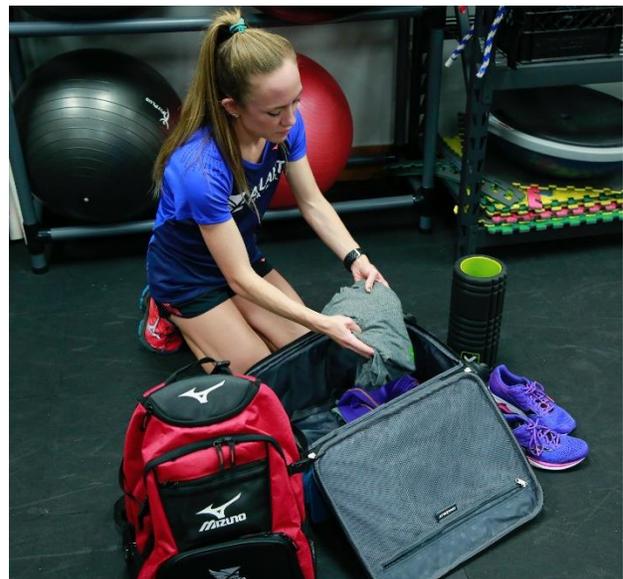
"You're the only one who sees it, so don't worry about looking stupid for writing down 'racing shoes,' says the new Atlanta Track Club Elite team member. "You might still forget when you're in a rush." (Lasater, also on the team, admits that in college he once looked in his spike bag halfway to the airport only to find some other random pair of shoes in it.)

Teammate Lyons makes a list the night before she leaves, especially to remind herself to bring her ID and "anything that was still plugged in overnight." Because none of us has ever left those things on the counter.

"I don't have a written list, but it's regimented," said Grey. "I will pack my core stuff the same way every single time."

And who knew that one secret to Lagat's success might be his electric shaver? "I like to keep my head clean-shaved at all times and I can't afford to leave my favorite shaver behind," he wrote in an email.

Pack light, or be over-prepared? Most of our athletes lean toward the former. Even for a two- or three-day trip, Lasater ("I figure I'm there to run") usually gets by with just a backpack with running clothes, sweatpants and an extra shirt. Or as Landry puts it: "If I get back and I wore everything I packed and I didn't need anything else, that's a perfect pack for me."



Sisson leans the other way, often over-packing but preferring that to arriving at a race and finding that she needs more layers. Cragg comes down squarely in the middle: "If you have a credit card and a phone, you're not going to be too far away from getting out of a bad situation."

Don't Forget What You Came For

If our panel is unanimous on one thing, it's this: Pack your race gear in your carry-on luggage.

Obviously, that includes shoes, shirt, and singlet. But what about a hat? Running bra? Sunglasses? Contact lenses? Gloves? Warmups? If they're essential to you, they're essential, period.

"I always go over in my head, 'What could I not race without?'" said Sisson.



For Landry, that includes his asthma medication and lip balm. "It's a life saver," he said of the lip balm, since he often races in climates much drier than his Charlotte, NC, training base. A side pocket of his running backpack always includes non-chafing gel, zip-locked bags of bandaids and blister pads, and "anything I once needed out on a run and didn't have."

Ward says that he largely has his travel backpack "locked and loaded" all the time, and makes sure not to overfill it. "I hate when it's bursting at the seams so that

every time you open it, three things fall out," he said. "If I have to bring a bigger checked bag, I always opt for that."

Even then, be sure that your carry-on doesn't end up in the cargo hold. The first time she competed in the AJC Peachtree Road Race, 15 years or so ago, Olaru had to unexpectedly check her carry-on at the gate because the bag was too large. It went missing, and Olaru arrived in the U.S. barely speaking English and with only the clothes she was wearing. Race officials scrambled to outfit her with both racing and street clothes.

"They provided me with a complete set of brand new equipment," wrote Olaru in an email, still grateful. "Now, if you are not an elite invited athlete, don't count on that ... you may not be that lucky!"

Or you could be Lagat and borrow spikes from Alan Webb when yours get lost on the way. But you aren't. And they didn't fit well, anyway.

Leaving On a Jet Plane

If you have a connecting flight, don't cut it too close. "If I get to book my own flight and there's a choice between a 30-minute layover and an hour and 20 minutes, I take the longer," said Mullett. "I want to be as stress-free as possible."

Almost everyone on the panel listed a travel-size foam roller and a refillable water bottle as among their essential items, and several recommended wearing compression socks.

Cragg likes to wear compression tights and a comfy top to fly, with a compact down jacket or vest that can serve as a pillow. As soon as the flight takes off, she takes off her shoes and puts on wool socks,

pulling sweatpants on over her tights, and if she plans to sleep takes out a special fuzzy eye mask she got from her husband, Irish Olympian Alistair Cragg.

“I’m very particular when it comes to my sleeping masks,” she said. “The ones the airlines give you don’t cut it.”

For Ward, the jacket is more likely to get wadded up and stuffed behind his lower back. “I don’t feel like I’m old,” said the 28-year-old, “but when I get on a plane I remember that I’m older than I used to be.” Noise-canceling headphones are his other must-have.

And watch where you’re going. Olaru, in Houston and confused by a change in time zones, once dashed to get on what she thought was her now-departing connecting flight only to realize when she saw mountains on the wrong side of the plane that she was headed to California instead of Colorado.

Taking the highway brings its own surprises. Mullett was once driving back to Indiana from a race in Canada, figuring that three-quarters of a tank of gas would be enough to get to Detroit, just across the border. It wasn’t—and his credit card wouldn’t work. He managed to scrape together \$4 or \$5 in Canadian coins to fill up.

So bring some cash. Oh, and consider notifying your bank that you’ll be traveling, especially if it’s internationally, so it doesn’t shut off your credit card.



The Kids are Alright

When he’s traveling with one or more of his three children—Paul, 4; Elly, 2; and 7-month-old Julia—Ward’s must-haves are a lot less expensive than those noise-canceling headphones.

“With kids, the secret is the Dollar Store,” he said. “How can I entertain them for every half-hour of the flight? I get a bunch of \$1 toys and wrap them like each one is a new present and take one out whenever I need it.” Which might mean the traveler across the aisle doesn’t need to borrow those noise-cancelling headphones midway through the journey.

Lagat makes sure that 11-old Miika and 8-old Gianna are well-fed and their electronics well-charged before leaving for the airport, and has learned over the years to confirm the number of beds in their hotel room.

“A good night’s sleep without having anyone kicking you in the ribs,” he said, “is a good thing.”

“Food, Glorious Food”

Mullett never travels without snacks and a water bottle. In the U.S. you can usually find what you want to eat, but internationally that’s not always the case—especially when you want familiar food before a race. He recommends loading up on sachets of peanut butter and jelly so that you’ll have some pre-race comfort food if all else fails.

Lyons, a vegan, has a bigger challenge. “I don’t want to count on there always being an option for me,” she said. Bringing along her pre-race breakfast of bread or a bagel with a banana and peanut butter is a priority. Like Mullett, she’s settled on sachets for the latter.

"I've had my peanut butter taken too many times," she said.

Grey says that for a marathon, he brings his gels and drink powder in his carry-on, always pulling them out at security and explaining why he has them if need be.

"I've never been stopped," he said. "Always be nice."

Which may be the most valuable travel advice of all.