**Sports: RUNNER**

SUGGESTED HED: After battle, taking on world

SUGGESTED DECK: Former prep star overcomes eating disorder to compete for world marathon title

By Philip Hersh

Staff reporter

The omelet Tera Moody ordered earlier this summer in a Chicago restaurant had mushrooms, tomatoes, spinach, onions — all in a skillet with the surface area of a bowling ball.

It was a meal fit for the elite marathoner Moody has become after years battling an eating disorder that nearly ended her running career.

“My advice to young women is to focus on yourself and don't compare yourself to other people,” said Moody, 28, whose remarkable comeback has led her to Sunday's World Championships marathon in Berlin. “That's what got me in trouble, seeing people who were really skinny running well, not knowing then that it might help you run well for a year but it wouldn't last.”

Others' opinions about her shape can no longer cause her the discomfort that led to an eating disorder so severe the 5-foot-8-inch Moody said she dropped from 128 to 96 pounds in her first semester at the University of Colorado a decade ago.

“We became extremely worried when we saw her in November at the NCAA [Cross County] Championships,” said her mother, Cleta.

Her parents recommended she have the problem evaluated when she returned home to St. Charles that Christmas. In a denial typical of anorexics, Moody refused, saying she was fine.

“I don't lie to my parents, and I lied about this,” Moody said.

Elite college runners generally are encouraged to be lean. To Moody, that suggestion was a catalyst toward anorexia.

“I'm a Type A personality, so I took that as to stop eating,” she said.

Moody was skipping breakfast, eating an energy bar for lunch, then having what she called a normal dinner. All the while, she was trying to run, live with a chronic sleep disorder, deal with the anxiety of going from St. Charles High School to college and the self-imposed pressure to do well academically.

Moody learned in March of her freshman year that her body fat was 6 percent, well under the level considered anorexic for a woman her age. She also learned how many people anorexia kills.

“It scared the heck out of me,” she said.

Then she finally got help.

“Eating disorders are a big issue in women's collegiate track and cross-country,” said David Harmer, Moody's boyfriend and the assistant track and cross-country coach at the University of Colorado-Colorado Springs.

“You can't necessarily blame the coaches for it. You do all the things you should, be proactive, and it still happens.”

Moody agrees. “When someone has an eating disorder, they become manipulative,” she said. “It is not the fault of the parents or the coach.”

Asked to speak about Moody for this story, Mark Wetmore, the head coach at Colorado, said, “I will respectfully decline to comment.”

Karen Harvey, an All-America distance runner for Michigan in the early '90s who is now head cross-country coach at Florida State, says many coaches have begun to tackle disordered eating issues among their runners. But, Harvey said, the runners often receive conflicting signals by looking around the locker room.

“Female runners may be more susceptible to eating issues [because] they see others on their team or out there in the running community who may be getting the typical short-term benefit from massive weight loss, and they now think that is the way to go to run fast.

“Sometimes a whole team starts to run at an unhealthy weight and to excessively restrict their diet, [so] this disease can spread.”

By the time Moody finished her freshman year, therapy had helped her conquer the eating disorder. But the passion for running that helped make her a two-time Illinois prep champion at 1,600 meters began dissipating, even though she won the Big 12 title in the 10,000 meters as a freshman and ran on Colorado's NCAA champion cross-country team as a sophomore in 2000.