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Runner sets record, asks for test

(AP) — Paula Radcliffe had the pedigree, the past performances and a track tailor-made to showcase what she does better than any woman in the world: run mile after mile after mile with the precision of a metronome.

So nobody should have been surprised when the 28-year-old British runner was the first woman across the line Sunday at the Chicago Marathon. Or that she covered the distance in a world-best 2 hours, 17 minutes and 18 seconds — lopping nearly a minute and a half off the old mark.

At the world championships in Edmonton last year, Radcliffe sat in the stands during the 5,000-meter heats holding up a hand-lettered sign. It read "EPO Cheats Out" and it was intended for Russian Olga Yegorova, who had tested positive for EPO but was allowed to compete on a technicality.

David Moorcroft, an outstanding distance runner who was head of the British federation at the time, warned Radcliffe she'd "spend the rest of her life looking over her shoulder," wondering whether somebody had spiked a post-race drink, a snack, even her toothpaste.

Radcliffe has produced the goods. What has changed, however, is the size of the stage she commands.

Radcliffe was practically born to run. Her great aunt won an Olympic silver medal as a swimmer for Britain in 1920 and her father was a respectable amateur marathoner in his spare time.

When Paula was 11, he moved the family to Bedford in the English midlands and she found in the fields surrounding town that running could be both her love and her livelihood.

Even less surprising, though, was what Radcliffe did afterward. She insisted on taking a drug test.

"I just wanted to make sure that was done," said Radcliffe, the two-time world cross-country and half-marathon champion, "so there could be no questions and no issues about this one."

That reveals as much about her sport as Radcliffe's place in it.

Nobody who competes in track and field is above suspicion of using performance-enhancing drugs. Same with cycling and all the other endurance sports — and for that matter, baseball, football, soccer, hockey, golf and even chess.

What makes Radcliffe stand out, beyond her success these past two seasons, is that she welcomes the scrutiny, even insists on it.

Remember how Sammy Sosa chafed at the offer of a surprise test to back his claims about being steroid-free? Well, Radcliffe refuses to let any opportunity slip away without doing just that. As she's climbed steadily toward the top, Radcliffe has raised the stakes in her crusade against the performance-enhancing drug EPO.

She wears a red ribbon on her singlet to show support for compulsory blood testing, a more effective method than urine tests, and she's authorized release of her own blood tests from just about every race she's run in.

"I just wanted to make sure (the test) was done so there could be no question and no issues about this one."

— Paula Radcliffe
Winner of the Chicago Marathon

Radcliffe explained in an interview soon after why that wasn't too steep a price to pay.

"Too many people think we're all at it," she said. "It's like the Tour de France. Because no cyclists stood out against the cheats, they all got tarred with the same brush, those who wouldn't touch a drug condemned along with those who are full of the stuff."

"And I don't want that," she concluded, "to happen in my sport."

Like Lance Armstrong, she knew what to expect after setting herself up as a beacon for drug-free performance in a sport shrouded by it. She's been asked to prove her innocence over and over and so far,

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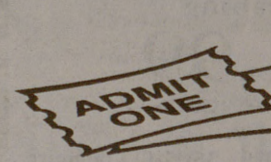
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