

Charles Hicks
breaks the tape to
win gold in Dublin

POSTER CHARLES HICKS BOY

Newly-crowned European under-23 cross country champion Charles Hicks tells **Katy Barden** how he is aiming to emulate the athletics greats whose images hung on the walls of his school gym and filled him with sporting inspiration



Charles Hicks is academically and athletically talented, so it's surprising to hear him describe his "lack of tactical efficacy". It's an interesting

and purely subjective assessment of his racing ability – a claim which would almost certainly be challenged by his fellow competitors – because, so far, he appears to be making exactly the right moves when it matters.

The 20-year-old Stanford University student, crowned European under-23 cross country champion last month, finished fourth in November's NCAA Cross Country Championships, the best placing by a British male athlete in that event since Gavin Thompson in 2003. It was a hugely impressive performance which backed up his second place in the Division 1 West Regionals and victory in the PAC-12 Championships earlier in the season.

Collectively, the results provide further evidence that Hicks' ability extends beyond the track, after his incredible 27:47.63 10,000m in last summer's NCAA Championships moved him to second on the under-23 UK all-time list behind Dave Bedford and into the consciousness of British athletics fans.

"The NCAA cross country was absolutely insane," says Hicks, who was born in the UK to American parents and moved to the US when he was 12. "Not just the scale of the meet, but also the venue. I've been racing on that course ever since I moved from London because it was my state meet course in Florida [where Hicks went to high school], so going back to the place where I was able to really get into running and realise it was something I wanted to do for the rest of my life, that was always going to be a really significant and emotional experience for me. To have it play out the way it did was beyond my wildest dreams.

"I always just try and go and compete. The way I love to run is racing at the front, trying not to ▷

overextend myself, but using the mileage and the long workouts we've built to see how long I can endure being at the front of the race. So, when it comes to tactics and thinking before the race there's not too much decision-making for me. I'm just happy to see how long I can be up there.

"I actually think it's more a lack of tactical efficacy on my part. I prefer not to think about it. It's one of the purest types of running just to go for it. I just feel grateful that I've been able to put in the training and have the health to get to this point where I can run the way I want to."

Hicks speaks eloquently. His American accent is strong, but his values and his manner, while refined at the renowned Bolles School in Florida – an institution known for training world-class swimmers and a multitude of Olympians – are demonstrative of his early education at Thomas's Battersea in London, a school recently made famous by the royals and attended by Prince George and Princess Charlotte.

His formative years, he says, played an important role in making him the athlete he is today, as did the role models that adorned the walls of his school gymnasium.

"When I was younger and when I started my journey with athletics – I can really picture it right now – I was in my gymnasium at Thomas's Battersea and we had these posters all around it of

GB athletes who had won medals at the Olympics. To me, that's where the whole dream started and that's where I want it to end up, to make that my story and to come full circle.

"We had this mandatory race at Thomas's Battersea," he continues. "I owe this whole thing to that because I probably wouldn't have done it otherwise. I was forced out there and it was a really gratifying experience. I was better at that sport without training relative to the other sports I was playing at the time, so I was like, 'maybe I should try this'."

"When we moved to the States, I wanted to give it a real shot and it paid off, but there's no way I'd have tried it if I hadn't been dragged out there so many times. I'm thankful for it now."

Hicks has no shortage of athletes to look up to. He references Mo Farah, in addition to Olympic triathlon silver medallist Alex Yee whom he met when they competed at the 2019 European Cross Country Championships. In fact, Hicks notes that Yee's achievements, along with those of Olympic 1500m champion Jakob Ingebrigtsen and Olympic 1500m finalist Cole Hocker, are particularly inspiring.

"I think that type, where it's young guys showing that there's no reason to wait and that you can get to that level right now, I think that's helped break down a lot of barriers in distance running where you're waiting for your prime to get to the highest level," says Hicks. "Those guys have shown up and shown that there's no reason to wait, you should chase it right now, and hopefully I can contribute to that. They're a huge inspiration for me."

The last 12 months have proven that anything is possible.

Hicks is in the fortunate position of being able to focus on school – where he's studying Symbolic Systems, a blend of computer science, psychology, philosophy, and linguistics – and running, without significant sacrifice on either side. Not only that, but he's thriving in an environment where he can learn as much as possible in both education and sport.

"I think it's a combination of two extremes," he says, with specific reference to running. "I love to learn and take in new pieces of information but I'm also incredibly stubborn, so if I think I've found something that works, I tend to stick with it."

"I'm surrounded by so many athletes that I respect and incredible coaches at Stanford. I had an amazing team in high school, but now having 20 guys out there who can mix it up on any given day and guys who are so motivated at the highest level is insane. I try to surround myself with people who are going to help me get to my goals and there's no shortage of that on the team. That's been hugely helpful."

BELOW: Hicks on his way to fourth place in the NCAA Cross Country Championships

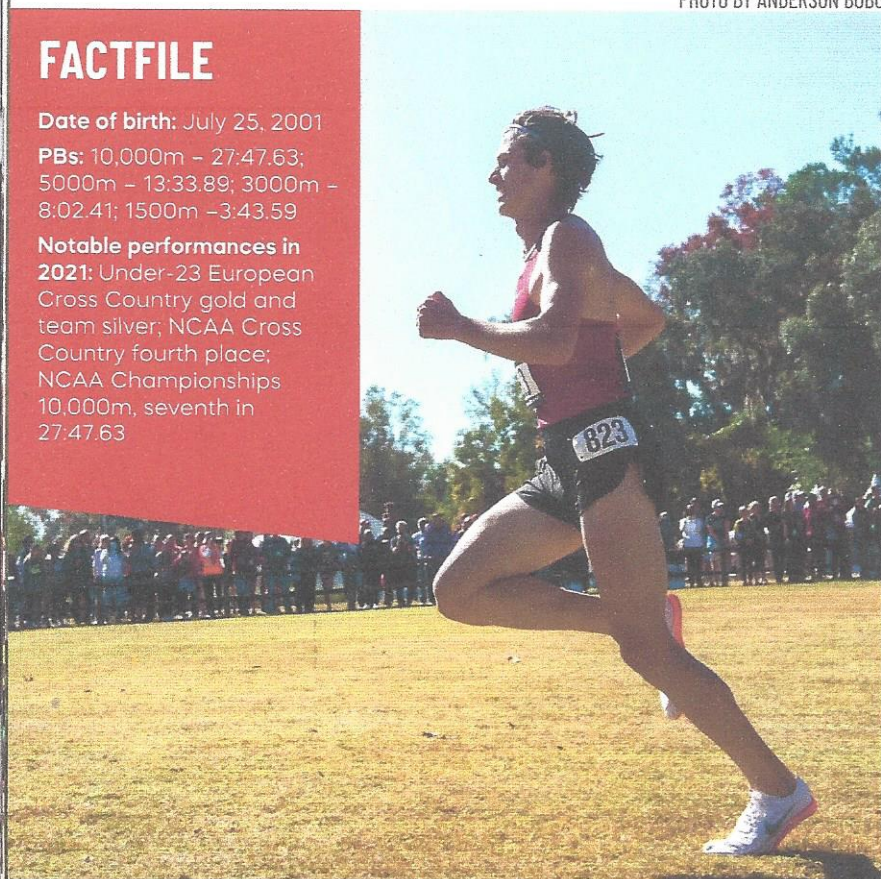
PHOTO BY ANDERSON BOBO

FACTFILE

Date of birth: July 25, 2001

PBs: 10,000m – 27:47.63;
5000m – 13:33.89; 3000m –
8:02.41; 1500m – 3:43.59

Notable performances in 2021: Under-23 European Cross Country gold and team silver; NCAA Cross Country fourth place; NCAA Championships 10,000m, seventh in 27:47.63



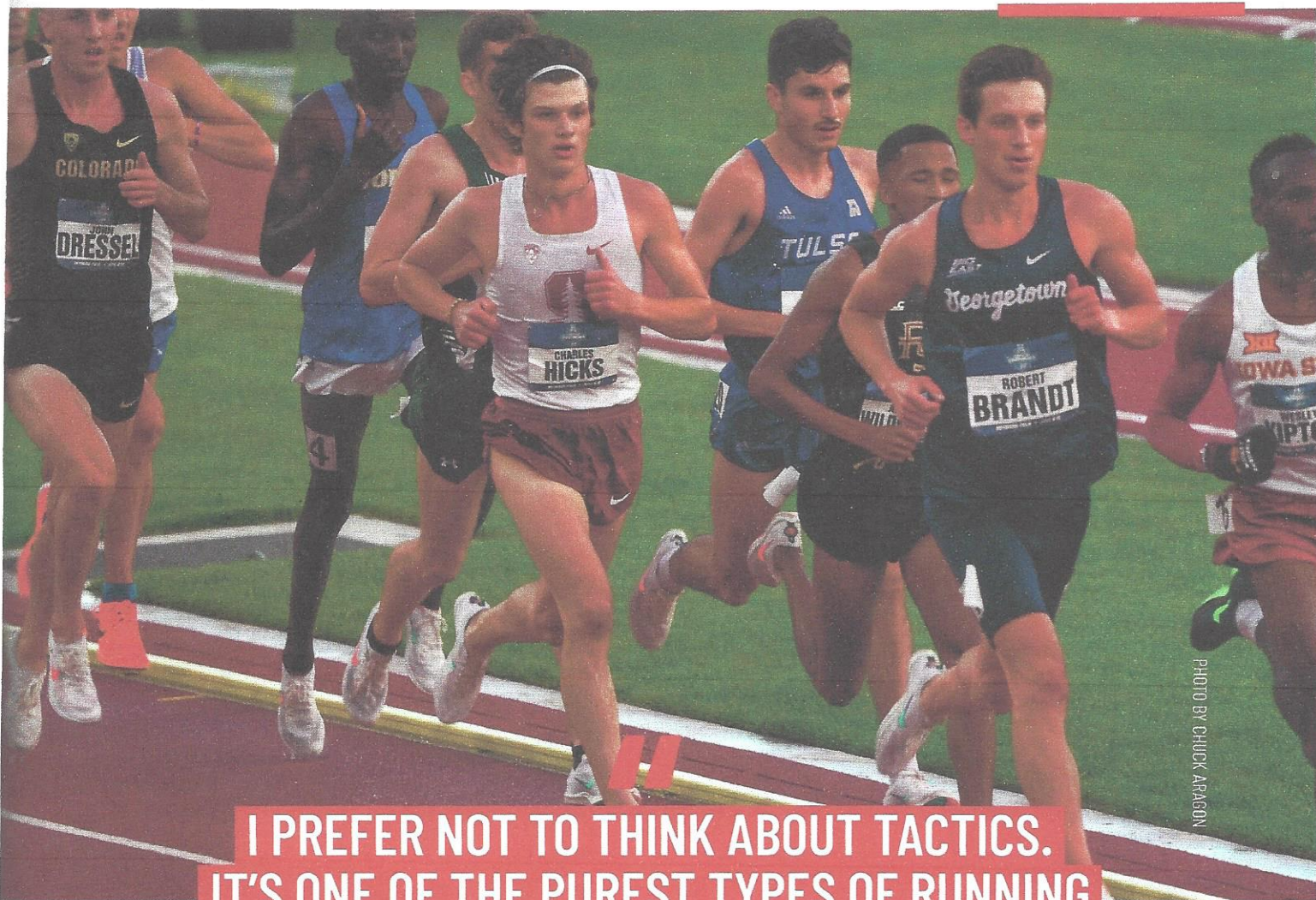


PHOTO BY CHUCK ARAGON

**I PREFER NOT TO THINK ABOUT TACTICS.
IT'S ONE OF THE PUREST TYPES OF RUNNING
JUST TO GO FOR IT**

"Going into the college scene I've had to hit the reset button on a lot of things that I thought were one way but were maybe the other. For example, in school I thought that training hard every day was the way to get faster and that if you're not throwing up after a workout it's unsuccessful, but my coach [Coach Santos] has been working really hard with me and that's been super helpful in me staying healthy and not burning out.

"My coach and I have been very patient. When I came in, I was doing 65-70 miles/week, then we moved up to 70-75 miles/week in my freshman year indoor season. During Covid there wasn't as much racing or a reason to be reserving any energy, so then we worked to 80-85 miles/week and held that all year, then this past summer after the trials I went up to 90-95 miles and I've been holding that since. We do three weeks up, one week down, and it feels super-fluid and easy. We've been super-patient and methodical about it and there's a ton of room to grow."

What instigated major change, including his goals for 2022, was his sub-28 minute 10,000m at the NCAAs.

"It was completely insane," he says. "I was looking at the Olympic standard of 27:28.00 and when I was running 28:20s that just seemed completely preposterous, I thought I'd just have to wait a couple of years, but I feel like I've grown a significant amount since outdoor season. The fact that there's another indoor season then outdoor that I can train through and build on, it feels like dropping 20ish seconds is definitely possible.

"With that being said, I'm keeping my head, but I'd love to go after the Worlds standard outdoors on the track. I'd love to go after an NCAA title. After coming fourth, there's no real reason I shouldn't be looking at that anymore, it's time to grow up you know, so those are two of my main goals.

"One that's further down the road – and one of the reasons I came to Stanford – was to win a team championships in cross, so I really want to get the guys together and see what we can do next year."

To make it on to a poster on the wall of Thomas's Battersea gymnasium as an Olympian, the place where his dream began, would of course be the ultimate goal. "That would be truly full circle," Hicks concludes. "To make that my story would be amazing." **AW**

ABOVE: Hicks clocked 27:47.63 for 10,000m