

AT THE RACES: THE NEW HAVEN SAVINGS BANK 20K

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Special to the Bulletin

The 26th Annual New Haven Savings Bank Road Race has earned the prestige of hosting both the Men's and the Women's National 20K Championship for the 2nd straight year. The New Haven race, along with cooler temperatures, school buses, and the anticipation of pro football, has become a Labor Day tradition. Race Director John Bysiewicz, himself a former national class distance runner, has developed the New Haven Road Race event into one of the country's best, with over 4,500 participants and twice as many spectators, bolstered by a sense of civic pride and city support. Many of the country's top distance runners arrived in the New Haven for the weekend festivities and a chance to earn some solid prize money racing against the country's best. Here's a play-by-play look at the action that took place:

5:00am – The alarm clock rings and my body moves in a semi-state of disbelief. Here was my chance to catch up on a few more hours of well-deserved rest and suddenly the dream was over. I had committed to commuting with friends who planned on racing in New Haven, so shutting off the alarm and staying in bed wasn't an option. Time for a big pot of coffee.

7:30am – The downtown green is alive with nervous runners, curious spectators, police, race volunteers, and Yale students moving back to the dorms. As a light rain starts to fall, I spot Race Director Bysiewicz moving briskly towards the crowded registration tents. I quickly verify space on the press truck but know better than to annoy John with my idle chatter when he's attempting to juggle dozens of responsibilities at once.

8:25am – The press truck is overcrowded with reporters, photographers, and USATF officials. After all, there's a lot at stake for the country's top distance runners, so someone needs to make sure that everything is legit out there on the streets of New Haven. The rain continues, although nowhere as bad as the previous year. We should ask John for a covered press vehicle next year.

8:30am – 4,575 runners hit the streets for three events: the featured 20 kilometer (12.4 mile) championship race, the accompanying 5K, and the children's fun run. Oregon's Chad Johnson aggressively leads the group of elite American men through an opening mile of 4:40, 10 seconds quicker than a year ago. An official remarks than Johnson, part of the Nike Oregon project spearheaded by former world class marathoner Alberto Salazar, is sending a message to the rest of the field. 2 miles later, Johnson would begin to show the negative effects of his reported 160-170 mile training weeks and the message is that his legs are tired; today will not be his day.

8:45am – West Hartford's Ahmed Haji, a 16 year-old senior at Conard High School, hit the finish line tape of the 5K in 15:19, well ahead of his nearest competitor. Haji's win is no surprise, considering he is the defending New Haven 5K champion, the defending Connecticut state cross-country champion, and was 8th in the nation in last year's Footlocker Nationals. Haji and Griswold's Gavin Coombs should be two of the top high school runners in the country this fall. 3 minutes later, Kristine Ross of Massachusetts gets past Preston's Kris-Anne Kane in the final 100 meters to claim top female honors in 18:16.

8:53am – Todd Reeser, the 2000 New Haven champ, joins pre-race favorite Meb Keflezighi and defending champion Dan Browne at the front of the lead group. Miles 2 through 5 are brisk but steady, with the lead group of 3 hitting mile splits of 4:43, 4:46, 4:39, and 4:44. A chase pack of 12 runners trail by 10 seconds. Oregon's Marla Runyan and Colorado's Colleen De Reuck battle stride for stride, hitting 5 miles in an ambitious 26:18. It starts raining a bit harder and I begin to curse the fact that my notes are getting wet and my rain jacket is in Norwich.

8:59am – The leaders are whittled down to 2, as Keflezighi and Browne put some distance on the chase group and hit the halfway mark in 29:21. Both runners recently competed at the World Track and Field Championships in Paris, racing 10,000 meters on Wednesday, just 5 days prior to New Haven. Those races, along with overseas travel, were expected to take their toll, but so far, both runners, especially Meb, are showing no signs of fatigue.

9:03am – Keflezighi puts the hammer down and suddenly he is alone in front, reeling off another 4:40 mile to hit 7 in 33:01. Brian Sell, a relative unknown here but with a 1:03:57 half marathon to his credit, moves into 3rd and looks strong doing so. His coach, Kevin Hanson of the Hanson Olympic Development Project, is clearly pleased seeing his young athlete hang tough. Hanson, well aware that coaching assistance from an official race vehicle would disqualify Sell, does his best to contain his enthusiasm.

9:12am – The women's race begins to develop, as De Reuck builds an 8 second lead on Runyan, hitting 8 miles in 42:10. Browne, the two time defending champion who will look to race well at this fall's Chicago Marathon, begins to show the effects of his World Championships and loses contact with Keflezighi. Hanson reels off the names of the runners in the chase pack. The guy knows his stuff, and obviously has better eyesight than the rest of us.

9:25am – It's all Keflezighi, as he looks effortless heading through the East Rock section of town. Like clockwork: 4:46, 4:49, 4:52, 4:44, 4:43. The guy is legit and Paris aside, shows very little signs of fatigue. The chase group, lead by Sell, 2000 Olympic Marathoner Rod Dehaven, Manchester course record holder Phillomon Hanneck, and newcomer Ryan Kirkpatrick, do their best to make the race honest, but clearly, Meb is the man of the hour.

9:28am – The press truck screeches to the halt just before the finish and we scramble onto the street. Keflezighi, a 28 -year old Californian originally from the country of Eritrea, hits the tape in 58:57 for the win and a supposed U.S. Record, 16 seconds better than Paul Cummings' 1987 mark. Greg Meyer's New Haven record of 58:27 in 1982 was later found to be 86.3 meters short and Bill Reifsnnyder's 1985 effort of 58:39 was 16 meters short. A bumper for Meyer and Reifsnnyder (especially after running nearly 12.4 miles at that level of effort) but good for Meb. Keflezighi walks across the New Haven green about as realized as a man with his briefcase who has just finished a day of work at the office. He is now \$6,000 richer.

9:29am – The contenders, lead by Sell's breakthrough 2nd place finish, begin rolling in. Sell's terrific effort was no surprise to Hanson, who later confessed "I told him if he didn't finish in the top 7 today that he would be walking home". Since the Hanson Project is located in Rochester Hills, Michigan, its no wonder Sell ran the strongest race of his career. Talk about pressure; that's a pretty long walk.

9:34am – No sign of Oregon's Chad Johnson, who must have paid the price for his aggressive start and dropped. But Chad Johnson of Lisbon, CT digs down on the home stretch to finish in 1:05:20, the 2nd state finisher (behind former Lyman Memorial standout Eric Blake) and the first Chad Johnson to finish.

9:35am – De Reuck hammers down the final stretch on Whitney Avenue with all she has left, clinging to a 4 second advantage over a charging Marla Runyan. The race is far from over, however, as the 34 year-old Runyan, a legally blind former 5K/10K track specialist who only recently made the transition to road racing, uses her superior leg speed to gun down De Reuck with a lean at the tape in 1:05:52, bettering Trina Painter's American record by over a minute. Runyan will be subjected to some criticism for her decision to skip the World Championships, citing fatigue. Based on her New Haven effort, the fatigue problem is long gone.

10:35am – Walking back to the car on York Street, we see thousand of union demonstrators marching at us. Not an issue until our return trip back to the green for the post-race festivities, as the protest blocks the very same street where the race had begun just two hours earlier. Knowing that food and the Red Hook beer truck await us on the other side of the protest, we push forward through the angry crowd very aggressively.

11:00am – Thousand of weary runners attempt to shake off the effort of tired legs with post race food and beers on the New Haven green. The Reverend Jesse Jackson is led away in handcuffs just down the street. Keflezighi and Runyan each collect their paychecks for well-earned efforts. The rain holds off, and some locals are looking to cash in on the complimentary beer. Nothing doing, as the race volunteers have witnessed this scam before.

Looking around, it's easy to see what makes the New Haven Road Race a special event. The City of New Haven has embraced and supported the event, the best runners in the country want to race here, and the organization and volunteers are first class all the way. Connecticut is fortunate to host a United States championship race, and for these runners and spectators, there's no better place to be on Labor Day morning than in Hew Haven.

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