

# MARATHON DISRUPTION SHOULDN'T OVERSHADOW MEB

By DON SIKORSKI  
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Move over Rosie Ruiz. You're no longer the most shameful footnote in marathon racing history. That dishonor now belongs to Cornelius Horan, a former Irish priest who, while wearing a green beret, red kilt, and knee-high socks, proceeded to cross the street and grab race leader Vanderlei de Lima of Brazil 32 kilometers into the 2004 Olympic Marathon and wrestle him to the sidelines. In 490 B.C., legend has it that a man named Pheidippides carried the news that the Greeks had defeated the Persians in the Battle of Marathon. On those very same streets, de Lima found himself leading the Olympic Marathon and clinging to a shrinking 20 second lead against the world's best marathoners. Next he found Horan, who came out of nowhere to shove the marathoner to the curb. De Lima's lead had grown to as much as 45 seconds before pre-race favorite Paul Tergat of Kenya, Italy's Stefano Baldini, and American Meb Keflezighi worked in unison to close the gap. Horan came from de Lima's left and pushed him all the way to the curb and into the crowd. With the help of onlookers, de Lima was able to get free and back into the race, but lost several seconds and subsequently his lead as well. De Lima valiantly hung on for 3<sup>rd</sup> and ended up with the bronze medal. A protest subsequently filed by the Brazilian track federation asking that de Lima be issued a duplicate gold medal was denied by the International Association of Athletics Federations. The International Olympic Committee did present de Lima with the Pierre de Coubertin medal in recognition of his "exceptional demonstration of fair play and Olympic values." The whole incident made the Paul Hann gymnastics judging controversy look mild by comparison.

Police quickly tackled and arrested Horan, who wore a piece of paper attached to his back with the message "The Grand Prix Priest Israel Fulfillment of Prophecy Says the Bible." etched on it. The Olympic disruption wasn't Horan's first such incident. In July 2003, while wearing a similar costume, Horan ran onto the race track during the British Grand Prix and spent nearly a half minute there while the race car drivers swerved to avoid him. I guess the act of tackling a 130 pound marathon runner during the Olympic Games is no big deal when you consider dodging race cars at 180 miles per hour a form of protest.

Any observations claiming that de Lima would have claimed the gold medal had it not been for the interruption are flawed. De Lima's major move to the front of the race was a designed tactic meant to alter the strategy of the lead group. He was running for position and should be commended for holding on for a top 3 finish. At least it wasn't a Tonya Harding whack in the knee. The real disservice was to Baldini and Keflezighi, who were running in the 2-3 positions at the time of interruption. Baldini surged ahead of Keflezighi with just under two miles remaining to earn the gold medal, while Keflezighi hung tough to finish a surprising second. His medal was the first by an American male in the marathon in 28 years, dating back to Frank Shorter's silver in the 1976 Games. The 33 year-old Baldini, who's running resume includes a European marathon championship and two world marathon silver medals, finished in 2 hours, 10 minutes and 54 seconds over the challenging course. Keflezighi, 29, the American record holder at 10,000 meters, posted a personal-best performance of 2:11.29 to finish 34 seconds off the pace. De Lima finished in 2:12.11.

Meb's fine performance took a back seat to the whole controversy. Mebrahtom Keflezighi had emigrated from the African nation of Eritrea with his family at the early age of 10. Now residing in California, Keflezighi became a United States citizen in 1998, a drastic change from his early days living in a small hut with no electricity. His running career moved to a new level during his collegiate years at UCLA, where Keflezighi earned NCAA titles at 5,000 and 10,000 meters in 1997. He showed tremendous promise at the 10K distance, earning three U.S. titles and finishing 12th in the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney. After winning the 10K Track Trials and finishing runner-up to Alan Culpepper in this year's marathon Trials race, Keflezighi decided to pass on the 10,000 in Athens to concentrate on the marathon. It proved to be a wise decision. Both he and Deena Kastor, who earned a bronze medal a week earlier in the Women's Marathon, live and train in Mammoth Lakes, CA. You can bet that location will soon join cities like Boulder and Eugene as running meccas. Keflezighi, like Kastor before him, ran a perfectly executed race and delivered a terrific performance that is a shot in the arm for American distance running. It's a shame that he will have to forever share the spotlight with Cornelius Horan and his kilt.

## Racing Roundup

While the performances of Kastor and Keflezighi should be applauded, the athlete most deserving of a gold medal that finally claimed one has to be Morocco's Hicham El Guerrouj. Actually he now has two. El Guerrouj became the first man in 80 years to win gold medals at both 1,500 and 5,000 meters in the same Olympic Games. The classic match-up that pitted El Guerrouj, the world record holder in the mile, against Kenenisa Bekele of Ethiopia, the 10,000 meter gold medalist, more than lived up to its billing. The race played right into the miler's hands after a pedestrian 74 second opening lap, and El Guerrouj got past Bekele down the final stretch to win in 13:14.39. It was redemption for El Guerrouj after two disappointing Olympic races; he tripped and fell in Atlanta in 1996 and finishing 2<sup>nd</sup> at 1,500 meters in 2000 in Sydney.....The Mohegan Striders Men's Open Racing Team claimed the U.S. National Team Championship at the 27<sup>th</sup> Annual New Haven 20K Road Race on Labor Day. Waterford's Chadwick Brown (20<sup>th</sup>, 1:05:48), New Hartford's Marc Robaczynski (29<sup>th</sup>, 1:06:28), Waterford's Stephen Herrera (50<sup>th</sup>, 1:09:37), Cromwell's Steve Swift (57<sup>th</sup>, 1:10:49), and Litchfield's Bob Davenport (144<sup>th</sup>, 1:18:08) were the scoring members for the Striders team, which is on pace to claim its 17<sup>th</sup> state championship in the past 20 seasons.

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