

MILLROSE GAMES LIVE ON ANOTHER YEAR

By DON SIKORSKI
Special to the Bulletin

Track and Field fans weren't even convinced that there was even going to be a Millrose Games this year. The loss of a primary title sponsor left Millrose officials scrambling for the required funds to make the Indoor meet a success. In the 11th hour, USA Track & Field stepped in to provide assistance, and the 98th running of the event would go on as planned. Those within traveling range of New York's Madison Square Garden, an announced crowd of 13,519 strong, were once again treated to some historic moments in Track and Field.

One person who was quite thankful that the Millrose meet lived to see another year was Kenya's Bernard Lagat. While all eyes were on American phenom Alan Webb, it was two-time Olympic medalist Lagat that provided the highlight, dipping just under the prestigious Millrose Games' Wannamaker Mile record of 3:53.00 that had stood for 24 long years. Also of note was the fact that Lagat and Webb had toed the starting line as competitors before, dating back to the first heat of the 2004 Olympic 1,500 meter race. While Webb looked completely out of synch in that race (running a poor tactical race, failing to qualify, and even accidentally stepping on Lagat's heel and knocking off his shoe in the process), Lagat comfortably advanced to the final and eventually earned a silver medal behind Morocco's Hicham El Guerrouj. There would be no such drama between the two at Millrose. With his Kenyan pacemaker cruising comfortably through the 400 meter mark in a brisk 55.8 seconds, Lagat moved away from the chase pack, led by Webb, early in the race. Lagat hit the halfway mark just under 1:55 and with the rabbit gone at just under 5 laps to go on the banked, 150 meter oval, Lagat clocked 57.8 for the next 400, setting him up with a realistic shot at the record books. On the final lap, the Garden crowd rose to their feet and turned up the volume as is Millrose tradition, helping Lagat to the tape in a meet time of 3:52.87, bettering Irish legend Eamonn Cogan's 1981 mark. Lagat's winning time also broke Nouredine Morceli's 13 year-old Madison Square Garden facility record of 3:52.99. It was Lagat's third career Wanamaker title and enough to earn the award for the meet's most outstanding performer. Despite the aggressive early pace, Webb hung on valiantly to finish a strong 3rd in 4:00.91 behind Lagat's countryman Laban Rotish, who bettered Lagat a week ago in the 1,500 meter race at the Boston Indoor Games. A Webb victory would have certainly fired up the Millrose faithful; no American had won the Wannamaker Mile since Steve Scott's victory in 1984.

The Millrose Games were again able to attract top talent in the sprints and field events as well. In the shot put, the world's top ranked athletes in the event battled head-to-head, with 2004 indoor silver medalist Reese Hoffa emerging victorious with a personal best throw of over 70 feet. Atlanta Olympics gold medalist Allen Johnson claimed his fourth Millrose Games win in the 60 meter hurdles in 7.53 seconds. France's Linda Ferga-Khodadin won a very close women's race in 8.01 seconds. In other distance races, Canada's Carmen Douma-Hussar won the Fred Lebow women's mile in 4:32.47. Berhanu Alemu won the men's 800 over pre-race favorite David Krummenacker (1:53.51).

A number of athletes that traditionally have performed their best at Millrose again seemed to be on top of their games. Defending Millrose champion Derek Miles cleared 18 feet, 8.25 inches in the men's pole vault to again earn top honors. Stacy Dragila claimed a seventh Millrose title by clearing 14' 8.25" in the women's event. Hazel Clark took home a third consecutive Millrose title in the women's 800 meter race, clocking 2:06.00 to hold off Alice Schmidt (2nd in 2:06.40). Besides top level world class talent, much of the appeal of the Millrose Games has always been the high school and collegiate competitions. In the traditional high school mile, Chris Barnicle (Newton MA North High School) won in a relatively pedestrian 4:17.01. Footlocker Cross-Country champion Aislinn Ryan earned the victory in the girl's race in 4:52.29.

All in all, the Millrose Games was again considered to be a success in the world of professional track and field. The atmosphere at Madison Square Garden for the Games is unrivaled in the sport, and there remains enough spectator interest to quantify a 2006 event should Millrose settle their financial concerns. Track and Field fans are hopeful that will be the case.

This Month in History

February 6th, 1981 - A crowd of 18,201 track and field faithful filled New York's Madison Square Garden for the 74th Annual Millrose Games. The prestigious Wanamaker Mile was again the meet's highlight, as Ireland's Eamonn Coghlan, affectionately known as the "Chairman of the Boards" for his ability to dominate on the wooden, banked Garden track, won the event for the fourth time, clocking in at a meet record 3:53.0, just off his own world indoor record of 3:52.6. Cogan held off a strong effort from early race leader Ray Flynn, whose runner up time of 3:53.8 remains the fastest non-winning time in the history of the Wanamaker Mile. In an event that is no longer contested at Millrose, Suleiman Nymabui won the men's 5,000 meter (34+ lap) race in 13:20.3, besting future marathon world record holder Alberto Salazar (2nd in 13:23.1), who had led for most of the race. American Don Paige also set a world record in the men's 1,000 yard race, winning in 2:04.9, while Plainfield (NJ) High School senior John Marshall finished 2nd overall in the Invitational 800 in 1:50.7 to set a National High School indoor record.

(Millrose Games statistics provided by Walt Murphy's News and Results Service, Copyright 2005-used with permission).

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