

RECENT WORLD BESTS MAY STAMP GEBRSELISSIE AS BEST EVER

By DON SIKORSKI
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Haile Gebrselassie of Ethiopia already owns two Olympic gold medals. He has won eight World Championship titles and at one time possessed an incredible 54 race winning streak. Now a recent rare appearance on American soil adds to his latest claim to fame, when earlier this month, the 32 year-old Gebrselassie bettered the world half marathon record by 21 seconds in running the second half of the Rock 'N' Roll Arizona Marathon.

The Arizona race was set up for Gebrselassie to take a shot at the record, and he didn't disappoint. Greeted by cool and crisp conditions ideal for racing, Gebrselassie and four pacesetters started the race from the halfway mark of the marathon course. Despite early splits that were slower than the world record pace, the record attempt began to shape up around the 10K mark when Gebrselassie stepped on the gas, leaving his pacers behind and setting off on his own. Gebrselassie looked under control the rest of the way, averaging a jaw dropping pace of just under 4 minutes and 30 seconds per mile to hit the finish line tape in 58 minutes, 55 seconds, breaking the previous best mark of 59:16 set in Rotterdam this past September by 18-year-old Samuel Wanjiru of Kenya. Gebrselassie also claimed two world best in one run by virtue of his 20 kilometer (12.4 mile) time of 55:48. That split bettered the former world record of 56:18 held by the 2005 New York City Marathon champion and world marathon record holder Paul Tergat of Kenya, set back in April 1998. Of Gebrselassie's amazing total of twenty world records, the 20K and Half Marathon records are his only world bests set on American soil.

Plenty of other Ethiopian athletes also performed well in Arizona over the full 26.2 mile distance, claiming the top four places overall and finishing first and second in the women's race. Shimelis Mola battled fellow countryman and defending champion Terefae Yee to win in 2:13.08 with Yee a mere 5 seconds back. Shitaye Gemechu, who has now won all three Rock 'N' Roll Arizona Marathons, was the top female finisher in 2:31.46. Over 34,000 runners participated in the marathon and other running events.

Gebrselassie has clear been the most dominant runner of the last quarter century. He claimed Olympic gold medals at 10,000 meters in both 1996 and 2000 and finished 5th at the 2004 Athens Games despite nursing a constant hamstring injury. His transition from the track to the marathon distance has also been successful. Gebrselassie ran a brisk 2:06:35 to finish 3rd in his 26.2 mile debut at the 2002 London Marathon. His most recent effort came last October when he won the prestigious Rotterdam Marathon in 2:06.20. He plans to return to race the London Marathon this April 23rd (and a highly anticipated showdown with his longtime rival Paul Tergat) with his long-term sights on racing the marathon distance at the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing.

With the absence of pacemakers and a competitive field, look for Gebrselassie and others to be racing more for place than time in London, so another world record may be less likely. But Haile Gebrselassie is arguably the greatest distance runner of all time and is one of the true class acts in the sport today.

U.S. Hopefuls

Gebrselassie wasn't the only runner tearing things up in America over the half marathon distance. Brian Sell of Rochester Hills, Michigan earned his second U.S. title of his racing career at the USA Men's Half Marathon Championships in Houston, Texas on January 15th. Nicodemus Malakwen of Kenya claimed the overall win in a course record 1:02:07 at the Houston Half Marathon, with Sell earning runner-up honors in a personal best time of 1:02:39. Sell moved ahead of his American competitors Brandon Leslie of New Mexico and Jason Hartmann of Colorado just after the eight mile mark, with Hartmann finishing second American in 1:03:07 and Oregon's Max King close behind (4th overall in 1:03:10) in his debut effort at the half marathon distance.

Sell, a member of the Hansons-Brooks Distance Project team, continues to excel on a national stage. He recently finished a very impressive 9th place overall at the World Marathon Championships in Helsinki last August in 2:13:27, the fastest-ever performance by an American runner in a world championship.

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