

GEB AND WEBB POST RECORD SETTING PERFORMANCES

By DON SIKORSKI
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Haile Gebrselassie doesn't race on American soil very often. But when he does, he has made it count. Last weekend, Gebrselassie raced in New York for the very first time in his storied distance running career. The 34 year-old Ethiopian outran a world class field at the New York City Half Marathon to claim victory in 59:24, stealing the thunder from U.S. hopeful Abdi Abdirahman, who would clock a personal best of 1:00:29 to earn runner-up honors. The convincing win by Gebrselassie kept his perfect record alive; Geb remains undefeated at the half marathon distance in eight starts.

Skeptics who felt that Gebrselassie's best days were behind him have been silenced. The personable Gebrselassie is arguably history's greatest distance runner, having set 22 world records and earning 8 World and Olympic medals. In just his fourth U.S. race appearance (his first was at the 1992 World Cross Country Junior Championships in Boston's Franklin Park; it was the first time Gebrselassie had ever seen snow), "Geb" toured Central Park quickly and efficiently to earn the win, running the second-fastest half marathon ever in the United States (behind his 58:55 world record at the 2006 Rock 'n' Roll Half Marathon in Tempe, Arizona).

The race played out quick from the start, as the leaders sped through Central Park on even opening splits of 14:11 at 5K and 28:22 at 10K. By that point, the front group had been chipped away to only three; Gebrselassie, Abdirahman, and Kenya's Robert Cheruiyot, the two-time defending Boston Marathon champion and World Marathon leader. The Somalia-born Abdirahman would execute a bold move to the front just after the 8 mile mark, a move that would drop Cheruiyot for good but ultimately be his undoing against the experienced Ethiopian. The brisk pace favored a runner of Gebrselassie's caliber, as the two-time Olympic 10,000 meter champion was simply too quick over the final miles. Still, Abdirahman's strong performance demonstrated that he has proven himself worthy of racing against world class competition, and his effort earned the praises of Gebrselassie and the American fans. It was the second fastest half marathon ever run by an American behind Ryan Hall's recent effort in Houston. Colorado's Alan Culpepper was 6th overall in 1:03:34 as the second American finisher.

The women's race re-created a close finish for the second consecutive year, with Kenya's Hilda Kibet earning the biggest victory of her career by fending off fellow Kenyan and 2006 champion Catherine Ndereba. Early on, a group of six runners, led by Ndereba and Kibet, cruised through Central Park with no clear cut favorite visible. The mild-mannered Ndereba would soon be the aggressor, picking up the pace near the 15K mark and eliminating all but Kibet and New Zealand's Nina Rillstone in the process. But down the final stretch, Kibet had enough left in the tank to earn a 1 second victory over Ndereba (1:10:32) with Rillstone just another two ticks back. Zoila Gomez led all U.S. females with an 8th place finish in 1:13:49.

Central Park, with its gradual rolling hills, is a more challenging venue to race on than many think, and summer weather in Manhattan is certainly not conducive to fast racing, especially at longer distances. Abdirahman will next prepare for the World Championships at the 10 kilometer distance before returning to Central Park for the U.S. Olympic Marathon Trials race in November. As for Gebrselassie, the New York race represented a tune-up in preparation of his title defense at the Berlin Marathon in September. He is also looking ahead to next summer's Olympic Games and plans to race the marathon distance in Beijing. Race officials were hopeful of a future return to New York for Geb, as he hinted towards a potential appearance at the New York Marathon in 2009.

Webb earns American record

Gebrselassie wasn't the only runner setting records. On July 22nd, Virginia's Alan Webb broke the long-standing American record in the mile run in Brasschaat, Belgium, running 3 minutes, 46.91 seconds to better Steve Scott's 1982 mark of 3:47.69. Webb's impressive effort makes him the eighth-fastest miler in history. Morocco's Hicham El Guerrouj is the current world record holder (3:43.13).

The low key Brasschaat race was set up as a possible record attempt for Webb, who has been running extremely well as of late; he won the 1,500 meter race at the U.S. Outdoor Championships in June, and his 3:30.54 clocking in a 1,500 meter race in France in early July is the fastest time in the world this year to date. Pacesetters led Webb through the first 3 laps (1200 meters) before Webb took command, running 57 seconds over the final lap to claim the record. He continues to gain confidence heading into the World Championships in Osaka, Japan.

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