

# AMERICAN ROAD RACE COMPETITION IS ALIVE AND WELL

By DON SIKORSKI  
*Special to the Bulletin*

American distance running is beginning to find its second wind, hoping to return to the glory days of the running boom during the early 1980's. Although third world countries like Kenya and Ethiopia have moved to the forefront of the distance running world, Americans are starting to be competitive again. Last fall, 18 year-old Alan Webb got everyone's attention by running the fastest mile ever by a high schooler, clocking 3:53.43 to erase Jim Ryan's 36 year-old mark. This year, as the spring racing season begins to heat up, other Americans are continuing to make their presence felt on the national scene.

Early April saw Central Park in New York City playing host to the Men's U.S. National 8K Championships for the first time with terrific results. Although the pre-race hype may have been a bit undermined by two major marathons (London and Boston) scheduled to take place a mere week later, the talent and the race itself was nothing short of outstanding. Tim Broe, arguably America's best chance for a distance running medal in the 2004 Olympic Games, held off Nike's Dan Browne in the final 800 meters by three seconds to win the race in 22:26. Because of Central Park's deceptively difficult course, no one challenged Alberto Salazar's 1981 U.S. 8K road mark of 22:04, despite a \$25,000 bonus up for grabs. By coincidence, Salazar now coaches the Nike team, lead by Browne (2<sup>nd</sup>) and Abdi Abdirahman (4<sup>th</sup>, 22:42). Nike placed runners in the 2-4-7-8-10 positions to capture the team title. But Broe's effort was the fifth fastest 8K ever by an American, with only Salazar, Thom Hunt, and Bruce Bickford running faster. As a side note to the future of American distance running, the average age of the top ten finishers: just 25 years old. Todd Williams, now 33 and still a top American runner, was the first submaster (30+) at 11<sup>th</sup> overall (23:05). And just the fact that talk existed of a potential challenge to Salazar's mark from over 20 years ago shows promise for the future.

Across the coast the very next day at the prestigious Carlsbad 5000 in California, American Deena Drossin, who last fall had made a very successful marathon debut in New York (running 2:26:58 to earn top U.S. honors), ran away from a talented field of Olympians to break the female 5K road 5K world record, hitting the finish line in 14:54. The previous record belonged to Britain's Paula Radcliffe (14:57 in 2001), who will be making her marathon debut in London this weekend. Drossin, 29, has displayed incredible range, now owning a world's best at 5K, a silver medal in the World XC championships, and the 4<sup>th</sup> fastest American marathon time in history. Her Carlsbad effort earned her \$20,000 in cash; \$5K for the win, \$5K for the American record, and \$10K for the world record. With the effort that it takes to train and race at that level, she deserved every penny and then some.

On the men's side, the top American male honors went to Meb Keflezighi, who posted an impressive 4<sup>th</sup> place finish in 13:34. Although Keflezighi entered the race facing a lot of media pressure for skipping the Central Park race, he responded with a quality effort, falling just 10 seconds short of Marc Davis' American standard of 13:24. Kenya's Sammy Kipketer ran 13:17 to win the race for the third consecutive year. Kipketer, only 20 years old, owns the world 5K record mark of 13:00 set two years ago at Carlsbad.

These recent performances by U.S. distance runner's show promise for a return to days of nearly 20 years ago. Clearly, there exists a strong contingent of young, talented distance runners chasing the ghosts of Shorter, Rodgers, and Prefontaine and working towards American distance running prominence.

## Racing Roundup

- Todd Bennett of Uncasville is off to a strong start in 2002, winning the Canterbury 10K on April 6<sup>th</sup> in 35:06. Norwich's Melissa Perkins-Banas added Canterbury to her growing list of race wins, running 37:58 for the challenging 10K course, good enough for 4<sup>th</sup> place overall. There were 99 finishers.
- In a final tune-up before Monday's Boston Marathon, Uncasville's Chadwick Brown won the Connecticut College 5K in 16:01. Brown was a minute up on Bob Stack of Gales Ferry (2<sup>nd</sup> in 17:01), who claimed the Master's (40+) title. 13 year-old Sarah Fritz of Ledyard claimed top female honors in 20:40.
- A few local runners who are racing very well on the collegiate scene include former Stonington High School standout Tyler McCabe of Providence College, who posted impressive times of 8:14.99 for 3,000 meters and 14:42.70 for 5,000 meters during this past Indoor season. Griswold's Megan Coombs finished 5<sup>th</sup> overall in 16:36.84 at the 5,000-meter race at the Raleigh, NC Relays in March and had qualified for the NCAA Final at 3,000 meters indoors. Norwich's Chris Andrew, a former state cross-country champion while at NFA, has also been running very well at Yale University in his sophomore season.

## This month in history

April 19th, 1967 – Kathrine Switzer makes running history when she becomes the first female to officially compete in the Boston Marathon. Accompanied by her boyfriend Tom Miller, a track and field hammer-thrower, Switzer had just passed four miles when Race Official Jock Semple attempts to pull Switzer and her race number out of the field. With the scene captured by reporters and photographers, Miller body-blocks Semple to the ground and Switzer continues running, finishing the marathon in just over 4 hours and 20 minutes. Nearly one hour earlier, Bobbi Gibb is the first female to reach the finish line, running 3:27:17 unofficially. Dave McKenzie of New Zealand wins the race overall in a course record time of 2:15:45, while Mystic's John J. Kelly, who had won at Boston ten years prior, finishes a very respectable 12<sup>th</sup> overall in 2:25:25. Amby Burfoot, a former student of Kelly's at Fitch High School and now a junior at Wesleyan University, is paced by his mentor Kelley in the early going and places 17<sup>th</sup> overall in 2:28:05 despite struggling with stomach problems. Burfoot would return to win at Boston a year later.

**Don Sikorski writes a twice-monthly running column for the Norwich Bulletin. His "Coach's Corner" column can be accessed at [www.moheganstriders.org](http://www.moheganstriders.org). He can also be reached by e-mail at [kdcsikorski@netzero.net](mailto:kdcsikorski@netzero.net).**