

KHANNOUCHI / LONDON 2002 THE GREATEST EVER?

By DON SIKORSKI
Special to the Bulletin

Ten years ago, a young Moroccan citizen named Khalid Khannouchi was working as a dish washer in New York and dreaming of becoming a long distance running star like two of his heroes, Kenyan world cross-country champion Paul Tergat and Ethiopian world record holder and gold medallist Haile Gebrselassie. Nearly 10 years later, Khannouchi, now an American citizen for almost two years, ran away from his idols during the late miles of the 2002 London Marathon to hit the tape in an amazing time of 2:05:38, lowering his own marathon world record by 4 seconds in the process.

Khannouchi paced one of the most talented marathon fields ever assembled in what is probably considered by experts to be the greatest marathon ever run to date. Although his 2:05:42 clocking at the Chicago Marathon in 1999 was the current world record, Khannouchi was not the center of media attention at London. Nor was he even considered to be one of the favorites. That spotlight of honor shone on other big name athletes assembled in London, most notably Gebrselassie. Talks of shattering a world record, even the possibility of an unthinkable 2:04 marathon effort, were frequent, but it wasn't Khannouchi's name that was mentioned. It was Gebrselassie, whose only other marathon appearance was a 2:48 run as a 15 year old, that was the subject of all the hype and who pressed the pace with rabbits in tow right from the starting gun. But he was unable to match Khannouchi in the final miles, dropping off just after 24 miles and hanging on to finish 3rd in 2:06:35. Tergat, who had finished as the runner-up in both of his prior marathon attempts (London and Chicago 2001), would also be no match for the American when the chips were down and would wind up 2nd again, 11 seconds back of Khannouchi. Defending champion Abdelkader El Mouaziz would finish a strong 4th in 2:06:50. In the women's race, Britain's Paula Radcliffe was also making her marathon debut at London and was clearly focused on erasing Catherine Ndereba's world record mark of 2:18:47 set last fall at the Chicago Marathon. Radcliffe, a tenacious cross-country competitor, would run brilliantly from start to finish but miss the world mark by a mere 9 seconds with her 2:18:56 finish. Radcliffe did, however, establish a number of records along the way, including a London course record, a European marathon best, and the world's best time in a "women's only" marathon race (London conducts separate races for men and women). Like Ndereba's Chicago performance, Radcliffe also blazed the second half of the course faster than the first, clocking a negative split of 67:51 for the final 13.1 miles.

While Radcliffe's win was expected, the surprise of the day was clearly Khannouchi. America's best chance to earn an Olympic medal in distance running toed the line at London less than certain of his fitness level. Riddled with a number of injuries during the past two years and racing sporadically in his London buildup, Khannouchi hung tough with the lead group and seemed content to go for the win rather than the glory of the record, even checking over his shoulder during the final mile to insure that he would not have unwanted company. His record time equated to an amazing pace of 4:47 per mile for 26.2 miles, or the equivalent of running 105 laps on a track at sub-72 seconds per lap. Khannouchi has clearly established himself as the best marathon runner ever despite the lack of an Olympic medal. He will no doubt be the favorite in 2004. And in terms of a marathons' number of participants (over 33,000), talented field of world class athletes, and fastest finishing times (with six runners under the 2:08 mark), the 2002 London Marathon will probably be considered the best marathon ever conducted.

Racing Roundup

- After 34 seasons of coaching cross-country at St. Bernard High School, Douglas Sharples has officially informed the school that he is retiring. Sharples, a member of the Connecticut High School Coaches Association Hall of Fame, has compiled over 400 wins in his coaching career, including a total of 34 men's and women's state cross-country championships and 10 state track championships. His St. Bernard teams won State Open cross-country titles in 1968, 1969, and 1981 and has twice earned All-America status (1981 and 1983). He has produced a total of 37 all-state athletes, including 14 individual state champions. Sharples was also named National Cross-Country Coach of the Year in 1987. His contributions to St. Bernard High School and to the sport of cross-country will certainly be missed.
- Uncasville's Chadwick Brown was the 3rd Connecticut finisher in this year's Boston Marathon on April 15th. Brown, 26, who had run 2:42 at Boston last year, finished 140th overall in 2:37:55 to lead all area runners.
- The Mohegan Striders Chad Johnson has clearly established himself as the runner to beat in Connecticut in this year's USATF-CT State Championship circuit. Johnson has cruised to comfortable victories in the season's first two races, winning the Terryville 5K on April 28th (running 15:52 for a 25-second win on a grueling course in a downpour) and the Quassy Loop 12K in Woodbury (running 38:24 for nearly a 2 minute win) a week later. Waterford's Steve Herrera, also competing for the Striders, posted runner-up finishes in both races and shows not ill effects from the stress fracture he suffered last fall. The next championship race is Norwich's Rose City Challenge (10 miles) on Sunday, June 9th.
- The University of Connecticut Men's Track team dominated the Big East Championships at their home venue on the weekend of May 4th and 5th. UConn, who scored in all 15 events, posted an impressive 192-point total, well ahead of runner-up rival Georgetown (106). Connecticut's strong performance included a controversial finish in the 1500 meter run, as the Huskies' Dan Wilson was edged at the tape by Villanova's Tom Parlapiano, who had closed the gap on Wilson during the final meters. As Wilson raised his arm in triumph towards the hometown crowd, Parlapiano slipped by the 4-time All-American for the tie, as both runners were timed in 3:45.41. Parlapiano was declared the winner in a photo finish. Tyler McCabe of Providence College, a former Stonington High School standout, was 12th overall in the 5,000 in 14:52. BIG EAST TRIVIA QUESTION: Who hold the Big East record for 10,000-meters?
- Norwich's Kevin Crowley will be receiving the Kapteina Service Award at the Norwich Sports Hall of Fame Banquet on Sunday, May 19th at the Ramada Inn. The award recognized individuals that have donated significant volunteer time and services for sporting and recreation events in Norwich. You won't find an individual more enthusiastic than Kevin Crowley in this department. The Norwich Youth Track Program and the youth races at local road race events are some of the season's most popular events thanks to Crowley, with a number of these young runners going on to excel at the high school and collegiate level. Tickets for the banquet are \$25. The banquet begins at 5:00pm; contact Hall of Fame President Don Rivest at 889-6666 or Tom Pirie at 887-7586 for tickets or more information.

This month in history

May 1983 - TRIVIA ANSWER: Two-time Boston Marathon winner and former British Olympian Geoff Smith holds the Big East meet record in the 10,000 meter run. Smith ran 28:41.3 while competing for Providence College in 1983. Later that fall, he would make his marathon debut in New York City, finishing 2nd to New Zealand's Rod Dixon in 2:09:08 in what is considered to be one of road racing's most memorable duels of all-time.

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