

The Empire Runner

THE MONTH THAT WAS...

Like February, March is an odd month in that indoors, outdoors, and XC all have a major presence. But World Cross Country is in March, and as there is no other event on the planet that compares to World XC, we will start there in the March edition of *The Month That Was!*

IAAF World Cross Country Championships:

This is the most competitive, most prestigious race on the planet. But don't take my word for it, listen to the great **Paul Tergat**, former Marathon World-Record holder: *"It's probably the toughest distance race in the world to win. World class runners from 1500m to the marathon contest it and instead of just three runners from each country, like in the Olympics or World Championships, in the senior men's race there are nine."* (Well, now there are 6 runners, but that point is still valid...) It may not get the same press as the Olympics, but in my mind it is, or at least should be, a bigger deal.

Last year, Kenya won all 8 gold medals (junior and senior, men and women, team and individual), and were of course looking for the repeat. But it's tough to match pure perfection, and the team looked quite different than a year ago.

All the reigning individual champions failed to make the team this year. Let that sink in for a minute. Four world champions all failed to qualify for Team Kenya. Yea, that means they are deeeeeeep. In fact, not only did **Joseph Ebuya** fail to make the senior team after dominating last year (as discussed in the last month that was), the World 10km and 15km Record-Holder in **Leonard Komon** was cut from the team for failing to report to the mandated Athletics Kenya training camp, so that he could train as he and his coach saw fit. (Yea, Athletics

Kenya is messed up, but that's an full article itself...) But still, Kenya destroyed in the men's race. But I'm getting ahead of myself here.

First up, the junior women's race. From the club's point of view, this likely was the most important race, as it was the international debut of club member **Julie Nacouzi**. Nacouzi qualified for Team USA in virtue of her 5th place finish at the USA Cross Country National Championships in February. She was one of four high school girls to make the team.



Everyone around here knows how good Nacouzi is. She's straight up won some local events, set many a course record, and placed third in the Footlocker National HS XC Champs. But World XC is a completely different level. After lap one of the three-loop, 6km course, Nacouzi was at 7:13. That's sub 5:50 miles, over a course with hills and logs and such. Yet she was a full 1:03 behind the lead pack of 8. 15:01 after 2 loops put her 2:22 behind the top two, and her finish of 22:46 put her 3: 53 behind the winner. This isn't to bash her, it is incredible for her to make it to such a high level and compete,

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but just to show how good the world's best, even in the junior ranks, can be. Still, an incredible race for Nacouzi, who helped Team USA to a 7th place finish with 145 points (4 runners of the 6 score). Ethiopia just edged Kenya, 17-19, with Japan taking bronze at 75. The junior men finished 1 place worse at 8th (153) with Kenya (20), Ethiopia (24), and Uganda (50) taking home the medals.

The Senior Men's race started off incredibly bunched, as the first 39 runners were all within 5 seconds at 2km (5:35-5:40), and 100th only 27 seconds back. By 2km things had started to break apart, with "only" 24 within 10 seconds of the leaders. USA Champion **Brent Vaughn** was 16 seconds back in 32nd, but all the international big dogs were still in contention up front. Things stayed pretty similar for the next few k, with an 11 people in the front pack at 6km and 10 in contention at 8km.

And then the hammer began to drop. Kenyan foursome of **Mathew Kisorio, Geoffrey Mutai, Vincent Chepkok, and Paul Tanui**, along with Ethiopian **Imana Merga** took off, gapping the chase pack by nearly 10 seconds over the next 2km loop. This list of names illustrates what I said earlier, about world XC being so freakin' deep.

Kisorio: Sub 13 5,000m man, 7:34 3,000m (about an 8:06 2mile), 27:15 10,000m, and 1:00:10 half-marathon. 5,000m silver medalist at '08 World Junior Champs.

Mutai: 27:27 10,000m, 59:30 half-marathon, and 2:04:55 marathon. 3rd '10 African Champs 10,000m, Kenyan XC Champ.

Chepkok: 7:31.41 3,000m and 12:51.45 5,000m. '07 World Junior XC Silver

Tanui: 13:14 and 27:17.

Merga: 7:51 3,000m, 27:15 10,000m, and 12:53.58 5,000m. Also inaugural Diamond League 5,000m Champ Noticeable too were many big-name runners who were being dropped, including **Moses Kipsiro** of Uganda (3:37/7:30/12:50/2 World XC medals/1 World 5,000m Bronze). The top American at this point was **Ben True**, over a minute and a half back.

While Kenya obviously had the team title in the bag, with all four scorers in the top five, the individual medals were anyone's to go at this point. Merga began to push the pace, but all were there with a kilometer to go. The pace continued to quicken, with the pace being too much for marathon specialist Mutai with 500m to go. Kisorio, Chepkok, Tanui, and Merga were all there with 400m left, 300m left, 200m left, but then Merga unleashed a final burst of speed to put him a full two seconds clear of Tanui. Chepkok was just 1 second back for bronze, and Kisorio was a well-beaten 4th.

Despite being dropped hard with half a km to go, Mutai still easily held on to 5th, giving Kenya a close-to-perfect 14 points. Ethiopia was a not-so-close second at 38, with Uganda next at 49. The United States, led by 36th place finisher and 3:59.99 miler (yup) Ben True, was a not-so-impressive 10th at 199, right behind Portugal. The USA's only other top-50 finisher was **Max King**, a 4-time Team USA World XC member.

The storyline heading into the **Senior Women's race** was World Champ versus World Champ. And by that I mean Kenyans **Vivian Cheruiyot** and **Linet Masai**.



Cheruiyot is the 5,000m World Champ, with **Masai** reigning Champ in the 10,000m. **Cheruiyot** has a world 5,000m silver as well, as well as a first, second, third, fourth, and fifth from the World XC junior races. **Masai** only had one World Junior XC appearance, but it was a gold, and she also had two silver and one bronze from previous World XC senior races. **Cheruiyot** has a PR's of 4:06, 8:28, 14:22, and 31:07, with **Masai** slower on the speed side with a 4:12, 8:38, 14:31, but an impressive 30:26 for the 10,000m.

Two other big headliners were **Meselech Melkamu** and **Wude Ayalew** of Ethiopia. **Melkamu** had 5 bronze medals from World XC, as well as a silver from both World Outdoors (10,000m) and World Indoors (3,000m), and boasted a sub-30 10,000m **Ayalew** had one bronze from the World 10,000m, a 30:11 PB in that event, and showed strength with her 1:07:58 half-marathon.

The great American hope was **Shalane Flanagan**, the subject of this month's *Spotlight on the Stars!*

Flanagan was a 15-time All American while at the University of North Carolina. Can I stop there? 15 times! Wow. Two of those came as NCAA XC titles (2002 and 2003), and one as an NCAA indoor 3,000m title (2003). After graduation in 2004, Flanagan placed 3rd at the USA Olympic Trials in the 5,000m, earning a chance to represent the USA in the Olympics, though she was only 11th in her heat.

Her first full year as a pro saw her winning the 2005 USA 5,000m title and (now defunct) short-course XC title. She ranked #1 in the USA at 5,000m and #3 at 3,000m. 2006 looked primed to be great for her, but injury stopped her for competing the entire year.



But bouncing back she showed that she was going to be a force to reckon with on the world stage, as she set an American Record in the indoor 3,000m (8:33.25) and outdoor 5,000m (14:44.80). She captured the USA indoor 3,000m title, and again took the USA 5,000m crown. That year she made the final at the World Championships, placing 8th in the 5,000m. This earned her not only the #1 US ranking at 5,000m, but also a #10 on the World list.

Yet she is most known for her 2008 performance at the Beijing Olympics, where she captured the 10,000m bronze medal in an American-Record performance of 30:22.22. Understandably ranked #3 in the world and #1 in the US, this was the year for Flanagan. Thus far.

While she had success in 2009 (indoor 5,000m AR and 14th at World 10,000m) and 2010 (USA Half and XC Champ), Flanagan was looking to do something big to prove that her Olympic Bronze was not merely a fluke.

Well, back to the race, she put herself into position to do that.

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Like the men's race, the women's started off pretty bunched, with 14 runners within 2 seconds at 4km. At 5km **Masai** began to heat things up, but there were still 8 in contention at the 6km mark. Her **Masai** and **Cheruiyot** began to pull away from the field, as expected before the race. The pack began to thin, as **Flanagan** was three seconds back and seemingly fading fast in 7th. **Melkamu** was the only runner to hang, but she was quickly disconnected from the World Champs and running in no-woman's land.

But the chasers weren't done yet, and Flanagan found herself at the front of the chase pack with about a 1.5km to go, and started gaining ground on Melkamu. Flanagan broke away from her pack and passed Melkamu as they jumped a log barrier. Now in third, the question was how much farther up could she move.

While she was able to close on a fading Masai, Flanagan ended up 3rd, 3 seconds off silver and 12 off champion Cheruiyot. This made Flanagan the first non-African to place top-10 since 2006, and the first to medal since **Deena Kastor's** silver in 2003.

In addition to Flanagan, team USA ran superb to take bronze a second year in a row. The rest of the American scorers all finished next to each other in places 17, 18, and 19. They were **Molly Huddle**, the current American Record-Holder at 5,000m and Olympic Marathoners **Magdalena Lewy-Boulet** and **Blake Russell**. Kenya took the win with 15 points over Ethiopia with 29. No other country besides these three had any runners in the top-10...

NCAA Indoor Nationals

The name **Jordan Hasay** has been known around the running circles for about 8 years now, as she first popped onto the scene as a prep phenom at a tiny Division V school in SoCal. She earned the distinction of being only the second girl to ever win 4 California XC title (the first being Montgomery's **Sara Bei**), and the rest of her HS accolades are far too long to list here. (Seriously, go to her Oregon bio, it's painfully long.) But being such a stud for so long, people always thought she would burn out, or never truly reach her potential, or never reach the same heights she did as a highschooler. No matter how you looked at it, the bar was set high. And, for a time, while she was doing well on the college scene, people were expecting more. Namely, an individual national title.



Going into the final leg of the distance medley relay, Oregon was in the front, but just barely. Hasay, the anchor leg, got the baton just .17 ahead of Villanova's **Sheila Reid**. The big story was, she lost. Reid edged Hasay, crossing the line just .38 ahead. Hasay split an impressive 4:30 for 1,600m, but it wasn't enough.

Well, that was day one. On day two, Hasay was back in action, this time in the mile. Following on the heels of teammate **Zoe Buckman** for the majority of the race, Hasay and **Kate Van Buskirk** of Duke took off with just one lap to go, making it a three-person race for the final 200m. For much of Hasay's career, while viewed as a strong runner, people thought

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she just didn't have that finishing speed. Well today, they were wrong.

Closing in 30.94 for the final circuit, Hasay blasted away from her two challengers, crossing the line a full 7-tenths of a second ahead of Buskirk. After losing close national title races the night before, the fall in cross country, and last outdoor season in the 1,500m, she finally got her title.

Less than two hours later, she got title #2. As the night before in the DMR, Reid was on Hasay's tail at the bell. But unlike the night before, Hasay was able to fight her off while they drifted into the outside lanes on the final straight. Reid finished in lane 4, Hasay in 3, but the only number Hasay cared about was 1. (For the W.) (Okay, maybe 2 for the double. Dang, I butchered that one...)

New York City Half Marathon

On the same day as World Cross was the NYC Half Marathon, which had some intriguing storylines. Arguably the most intriguing pre-race was that of American Record-Holder **Ryan Hall**, who has recently left his training group and is coaching himself. He hasn't had much success of late, and this was going to be a good test to see how his experiment is going. Though, to be fair, he is shooting for the marathon at Boston, so that isn't fully conducive to a fast half. Still, it was sure to be an interesting and over-analyzed performance.

Also in the field was the "old guard," so to speak, of American distance running. Specifically you had **Abdi Abdirahman**, a three-time US Olympian and 61:07 runner, as well as **Meb Keflezighi**, the 2004 Olympic Silver Medalist and 2009 NYCM Champ. The biggest international names had to be the 2010 NYC Marathon Champ **Gebre Gebremariam** of Ethiopia and the reigning Champion **Peter Kamais** of Kenya.

But, there were two big debut's that everyone was talking about: America's **Galen Rupp**, and Britain's **Mo Farah**. Farah, last year's European Champion at 5,000m and 10,000m, had just switched from a long-time adidas athlete to a deal with Nike, so as to be able to be coached by **Alberto Salazar** and train with Rupp in Oregon. Rupp is the second fastest American ever at 10,000m, made the Olympics while still in college, has multiple NCAA Championships to his name, etc. Both are studs, and both had never raced a half before. This was going to be interesting.

Well, the race was on at 4:30am or something crazy my time, and I was asleep. So I didn't watch it. But from reports, it sounds like it went out at relaxed pace (for these athletes at least), with over 20 runners in the lead pack after 5k (covered in just over 15 minutes). But then the pace began to quicken, and with a ~14:30 second 5k the leaders were down to about 10. Kamais, Gebremariam, Rupp, and Farah were all there, but Hall, Abdi, and Meb were starting to fade ever so slightly.

The pace then dropped to just over 14 minutes, with 9 in the pack. And then things started to take off. The runners started to throw in some surges, and quickly we were down to a pack of four: Gebremariam, **Tesfaye Girma**, Rupp, and Farah. Kamais, Irish all-star **Alistair Cragg** held on for a while, but were over 10 seconds back with the final kilometer to go.



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Gebremariam has been known for his finishing prowess in these long distances, and as he and Farah started to break away entering the final straight it looked like he may just have it. But Farah showed that his 5,000m speed was able to translate well to the half distance, as he blitzed away in the final hundred meters to win in 1:00:23, with Gebremariam two seconds back. Rupp followed just 5 seconds later at 1:00:30, good for the 5th fastest American ever. The final 5km for these top runners was under 14 minutes. Gross.

While some awesome half performances for sure, overseas there was another race of note in Portugal. There, Eritrea's **Zersenay Tadese** won by over two minutes in 58:30, good for the second fastest time ever run for the distance. The fastest time ever? 58:23, set one year and one day beforehand, by none other than Zersenay Tadese. Yea, he's a badass.