

Out of thin air

Great Ethiopian Run 10.2km, Addis Ababa. 28 November 2004

Where does running talent come from? It comes overwhelmingly from East Africa, out of the thin air of upland Kenya and Ethiopia. Kenya got in first, and established something of a hegemony, but it is the Ethiopian star which is now in the ascendant.

For decades after East Africa emerged as the hotbed of running talent, and well after such time as both Kenyans and Ethiopians had established themselves internationally (from Abebe Bikila and Kip Keino onwards), there was no local showcase for their abilities. Running was an export industry, and runners went overseas to perform. It has only been since 2001 that Ethiopia itself has had a stage on which to display prodigious home-grown talent.

That was when the Great Ethiopian Run started up, immediately attracting 10,000 entries. This year's fourth edition of the race had 20,000 official



entrants, but many thousands more jumped in among them after the start. All official entrants receive a T-shirt as their proof of entry, and the 100m-wide road cutting through the start area in Meskel Square quickly becomes filled with the year's chosen colour.

Meskel Square is the perfect setting for spectacle. The huge expanse of tarmac provides

passage for the runners, but there is also a vast expanse of gently arcing terraces on the south side, forming an amphitheatre overlooking the start area. The raking of the terraces defines a series of paths which runners use to warm up. On other days they provide a training venue in themselves as runners work their way to and fro to the top of the stepped area.

To the north side is a building constructed as a tribune. This acted as a reviewing stand for state dignitaries during the huge military parades held by the Mengistu regime during the 1970s and 1980s. For the purposes of the race it is an ideal starter's podium.

A red-jacketed marching band paraded around the square and drew up alongside the tribune as the first event got underway. Thirty crank-handled tricycles trundled to the far side of the square and back. Participants were mainly landmine victims. After years of separatist war Ethiopia is one of the most heavily mined countries in the world.

As the regulation blue trikes came over the finish line, another set of vehicles converged in the

square – shaded diplomatic cars bearing Prime Minister Meles Zenawi to the tribune. He took his place between IAAF President Lamine Diack and Ethiopia's greatest ever distance runner. Haile Gebrselassie has been instrumental in the success of the race, and won the very first edition.

The activity around the startline was making the mass runners restless. As the police cordon parted to allow them to approach the start, they ran pell-mell towards it. Elite runners filed out from the side in controlled panic, desperate to be away before the human wave washed over them. Within seconds there had been a false start involving thousands, as officials screamed into the public address system, urging restraint. Miraculously, the wave halted. Police then began the equally difficult task of getting runners back to the start line as the Prime Minister spoke ceremonial words. Haile Gebrselassie added his exhortation for runners to regroup behind the gantry, and they almost managed to do so by the time that the official start was signalled.

This time there was no stopping, as 20,000 runners





cleared the line in little over four minutes. The first kilometre of roadway, tapering out of sight up the hill, became a river of red T-shirts. The course is a lap of 3.4km followed by a lap of 6.8km. Race leaders, climbing up behind the Palace grounds after 2km, then sweep down the hill back into Meskel Square after less than 10 minutes. A long line of runners were strung out without anyone having broken away and with the pace too quick for very much bunching to occur. Leading runners lapped back markers momentarily, before diverting onto the larger lap after 4.3km.

At the western end of the course, just past 5km, runners turn sharply back on themselves. After another kilometre the leaders are again running alongside

slower runners still on their first lap.

The fast-moving favourites are on one side of the grassy road divider and the slower runners on the other, cheering out their encouragement. At 7km the front runners are again climbing the hill behind the Palace. In the thin air of Addis Ababa, 2600m above sea level, a hill like this is a severe test of condition, and Abebe Dinkassa threw down his challenge.

Dinkassa had run a 12km stage in an Ekiden relay in Japan only five days previously, but he rose above any fatigue to almost sprint away from the others. He gained 30m before anyone could react. As he crested the hill and passed the UN Headquarters in Africa at 8km, he had a lead of 50m. He later

complained of a knee injury which forced him to slow down over the last two kilometres

The course then flows gently downhill, turning onto Haile Gebrselassie Avenue just before 9km. The finishing straight starts here, over a kilometre distant from the line, and rises slightly before reaching Meskel Square. Dinkassa stormed into the Square hotly pursued by the almost unknown Zenbaba Yegezu. This race provides good opportunities for ambitious newcomers, as yet unencumbered by the fatigue of intercontinental travel, to challenge the established stars.

Genet Getaneh had also been in Japan for an Ekiden, but back in January 2004. She was on the fringes of the Ethiopian team, but overcame more

MEN:			
1	Abebe DINKESSA	ETH	29:57
2	Zenbaba YEGEZU	ETH	30:01
3	Maaregu ZEWDE	ETH	30:04
4	Gebo BURKA	ETH	30:09
5	Lishan YIGEZU	ETH	30:13
6	Alene EMERE	ETH	30:20
7	Solomon TSIGE	ETH	30:23
8	Solomon MOLLA	ETH	30:24
9	Roba GEBRE	ETH	30:26
10	Abate ATAFETEGNE	ETH	30:27
WOMEN:			
1	Genet GETANEH	ETH	34:18
2	Teyiba ERKESSO	ETH	34:30
3	Eyerusalem KUMA	ETH	34:33
4	Teke GELANEH	ETH	34:36
5	Amani GODANA	ETH	34:47
6	Adanech ZEKIROS	ETH	34:48
7	Emebet BETA	ETH	34:49
8	Aheza KIROS	ETH	34:56
9	Meron NEGASSA	ETH	35:05
10	Asnaketch MENGISTU	ETH	35:14

internationally known names to record "the greatest achievement of my career". One of those names, Teyba Erkesso, who finished second in the 2004 World Cross-Country, admitted "this is the most difficult race I have ever been in". The thin air of Addis Ababa is a fertile breeding ground for new running talent, and the Great Ethiopian Run provides means by which it can emerge.

Eyerusalem Kuma, third in the women's race and a seasoned campaigner in World Cross-Country and Athletics Championships commented "I prefer road running, and it is very nice and educational to have a race like this in our country".

It is also educational for the foreign runners who participate, and for the world as a whole. News from Ethiopia is usually of strife, but the struggle for athletic supremacy on the streets of Addis Ababa is an altogether different story.

Photos: Mark Shearman

