

## 16. Catching up with Haile Gebrselassie

(23-April) ~ Living legends are supposed to be cocky, aren't they? Distant and arrogant, they're usually content sitting atop the pedestal that their admirers, chroniclers, and even they themselves put themselves on.

By all accounts, Haile Gebrselassie, by now universally accepted as the finest distance runner the world has ever known, is certainly a living legend, but one that certainly challenges –indeed, rips to shreds– that negative characterization of mythical hero as self-absorbed snob. That's evident with his ever-present signature ear-to-ear grin, that ever-gracious smile that even Hollywood's finest would be hard-pressed to duplicate.

Hoarded by reporters, as he was before, during and after he added yet another world title to his collection in Birmingham, he sits attentive and patient, taking questions and eagerly replying. Not in the least bit perturbed, he recounts stories of his upbringing, tales that he has been asked to relate again and again since his legend began a decade ago. He's been a track icon so long, that in a sense it's difficult to believe that he just turned 30 last week (18-April).

His is the consummate tale of attaining the pinnacle of success from humble beginnings, every publicist's dream, every manager's fantasy, every sport's main attraction, every fan's hero.

It may be cliché in the world of distance running by now, but still, who can resist stories with beginnings such as his, where his initial training sessions were not training sessions at all, but early morning runs to school as a youngster hoping he wouldn't be punished for being tardy?

"Oh yes, I was late sometimes," he recalls. "But it was not because I am lazy, it was because of how far away I lived. It was ten kilometers between home and school." Especially difficult was when he had morning sessions that began promptly at eight. "You had to be there before eight to sing the national anthem. You had to be there sometime at 7:30, so I usually left by 6:30. But you know, the way to school was not flat. There was a river, a gorge, up and down. Especially when it was the rainy season, it was difficult."

Add to the mix that his boyhood village, Assela, about 200 kilometers from the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa, sits at 3,000 feet above sea level, suited perfectly for distance training, and you can almost believe that his strict teachers' insistence on punctuality truly had the youth's best intentions in mind.

A legacy of those runs to school is the way he holds his right arm while racing, perhaps the only abstraction from his smooth flowing style. "Because I ran that way to school," he said, explaining that sometimes up to ten books would be curled under his arm. "My right hand, even now my hand is that way."

His boyhood hero was Miruts Yifter, and a lack of electricity didn't keep the young Geb from following the Ethiopian's double distance win at the Moscow Olympics on the radio.

“I didn’t understand why I was so impressed with what he did,” he recalls. “Most of my family didn’t care about what he did. But there was a song about Yifter, and I wanted to be like him.”

He describes his first international running experience, the 1991 World Junior Cross Country Championships in Antwerp, as “not very good, but interesting.” He admits now that competing in Belgium was not his primary goal that year. “I tried to qualify for the world cross country race just to see the ocean, and to fly,” he said, adding, “I didn’t expect to fly for six hours.” He finished eighth in that race, but his fondest memory of his first airplane ride was the look on the flight attendant’s face after he asked how he could open a window. “It was funny, but, hey, I didn’t know.”

The following year, he improved to second in the junior world cross race, and in September, gave the world the first glimpse of his blinding kick when he ran down Kenyan Josephat Machuka to win the world junior 10,000m title in Seoul. Machuka, who was disqualified after he threw a punch at Geb’s back when he passed, would be the first of a long line of runners to be frustrated by the Ethiopian’s fierce finish. Less than 24 hours later, his kick would vanquish another Kenyan, Ismael Kirui, in the 5000m. A year later, he would win his first of four consecutive world titles in the 10,000m, and the distance running world would never again be the same. In 1994, he set the first of 17 world records on the track. In 1996, he struck Olympic gold in Atlanta. In 1999, he played the lead in “Endurance,” a documentary film chronicling his life up to his Atlanta triumph. His phenomenal range, from 3:31.76 in the 1500m to 2:06:35 in the marathon, is unlikely to be surpassed anytime soon.

At home, his popularity cannot be overstated. His homecoming from Sydney, after winning his second Olympic 10,000m title, was the largest public event in Addis Ababa since the funeral of Emperor Haile Selassie. During the procession from the airport to the city’s center, a million people lined the streets. Roads and public places were named after him. Everywhere he goes, he draws a crowd, and graciousness always supercedes any selfishness. He gladly takes time to speak with fans and admirers, and never turns down the pleas and greetings of children.

In recent years, questions by reporters eventually veer towards his rumored political ambitions, inquiries he deftly deflects with the skill of a, well, politician.

“I’m still young,” he announces. “I need some time to be a good politician. Age gives you more, when you become older, you become more educated.” How old is old enough? “When I become forty, or something like that,” he replies, adding, “It’s not because I like politics, but it’s because I want to do something.”

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development machine. His various business enterprises, ranging from construction to food service to a cinema, now employ 225 people full-time. And the numbers continue to rise.

“The business is doing very good,” he proudly admits. “We started five years ago and it’s getting bigger.” But he shies away from the day-to-day affairs, which are run primarily by his wife and brother. “Those businesses are because of my running, that’s why I have to stay focused on my running. I don’t let them bring questions to me.” Again, a wide grin takes over when he describes the extent of his involvement. “Sometimes I have to stop by the office to sign some papers.” And nothing is further from his mind when he’s training and racing. “If I would think like a businessman [when running], I would not be in good shape.”

If he wasn’t a runner, he ponders, he’d probably be a carpenter. “You’d be surprised sometimes at what I can do. When I was a kid I could make a lot of things. Chairs, tables. Now, it’s just a hobby.” While not a big fan of other sports, he admits to a weakness for boxing. “But not to play,” he adds, “Only to watch.”

His daily training routine begins early, usually by 5:30 in the morning, lasting upwards of five hours. After breakfast, some rest, lunch and some business-related chores, he begins his second session at about four, and wraps it up by six. He covers 90 to 130 miles per week, depending on what he’s training for.

“My training is still very good,” he said. “All the speed, everything is still there. I can do in training now what I did five or six years ago.”

He’s much more conscious of injury, and even the slightest sign of trouble will force him out of a competition or training session. “If I’m not perfect, if my training’s not good enough for that competition, I don’t compete. I’m very careful with my training. You see, to compete, it’s not that difficult. To prepare for that competition is the hardest part. If I have some problem, I have to deal with that problem.”

It was a slower-than-anticipated comeback from injury that cost him an unprecedented fifth straight 10,000m world title in Edmonton in 2001, providing all the motivation he needs to continue for a few more years. Another marathon attempt to follow up on his debut 2:06:35 effort is not on his immediate race agenda.

“This year I will of course concentrate on the track,” he says, discounting rumors that he’ll give the marathon another try. “I will see after the world championships how many weeks I have to prepare for a marathon. I have no plan now. Next, the most important will be Olympic Games.”

But he insists that he’ll definitely give the marathon another try.

“It was a bad time,” he said of his London race, the 12<sup>th</sup> fastest performance ever over the distance. “That’s why I have to try one more time. I think about doing the best time in the marathon. I will do good marathon. That is one of my motivations.”

Financial gain no longer seems to be a primary motivator.

“This time it’s not only for the money,” he says, allowing a brief glimpse to his more serious side. “Because of the money that I got, I could do a lot things. The money is not only for Haile Gebreselassie.”

No, not a typical remark one would expect of a prospective politician, suggesting that “Endurance” begs for a sequel, one whose final chapter has yet to be written.