

Khalid Khannouchi

by Sieg Lindstrom

It would be hard to imagine a more fulfilling season for a marathoner than the one U.S. Athlete Of The Year Khalid Khannouchi had in '02. In two outings, the 30-year-old émigré from Morocco went from being a "mere" World Record holder to an all-time great in the event. And to notching the best finish any marathoner has ever had in AOY scoring, even getting more No. 1 votes than winner Hicham El Guerrouj.

At the London Marathon Khannouchi—who is coached by his wife Sandra—shredded a preordained Gebrselassie-v-Tergat plotline with a brilliant drive over the final 2M to win by 10 seconds in 2:05:38, becoming the first male marathoner since Derek Clayton in '69 to break his own World Record.

Then he won Chicago for a fourth time, against a loaded field. Once again savvily poised for attacking from behind as the leaders split sub-62:30 at halfway, Khannouchi charged from 100y behind Japan's Toshinari Takaoka with 3M left to the lead just before 25M.

With his low-driving, quick-turn-over stride into a gusting headwind, Khannouchi displayed mastery over the marathon's much-feared final miles in the first race ever where five men broke 2:07, headed by his 2:05:56.

Khannouchi, who not all that long ago worked as a dishwasher in Brooklyn to support his running dream, spoke to T&FN from circumstances a world away—by mobile phone from the IAF's annual World Athletics Gala at exclusive Sporting Club of Monaco:

T&FN: Congratulations on a fantastic year. Have you had a chance to reflect on it yet?

Khannouchi: It's been an amazing year, you know, for one reason: back in 2000 and 2001 I was struggling with injuries and I thought about retiring. But if you look at 2002, it's just been terrific. I give credit to the people who were around me and who made me not to lose hope and faith, and I'm glad that I did it. Two important wins, 2-hours, 5-minutes—it doesn't happen.

T&FN: Your wife was obviously there to support you. She even writes up your workouts. Who else?

Khannouchi: My wife, my important physios and the people who give me massage and stretching. They've all been around. They didn't have time [in their own busy days] and they'd come over to my place just to make

things easier for me. I really appreciate that.

T&FN: You didn't just make it back to good health. You won two extremely competitive marathons in a World Record and the fourth-fastest time ever. How did you prepare for that?

Khannouchi: I went back to my base training. I did a lot of weights this year and it's been

of training, and I knew that if I had a good day I'd be able to run even faster.

But most important was to win, and I focused on that. I did the right things in the race to make sure that I'd get a win, so it was pretty exciting to go back to the city where my marathon career took off and repeat it once again.



Tergat (l) and Gebrselassie (r) brought huge track and cross country credentials to London, but it was pure marathoner Khannouchi who came away with a new WR.

working. It makes me mentally stronger, and even physically, with the stretching and exercises I feel much better. I was able to avoid those little injuries that were nagging me the whole past two years.

T&FN: You have said that your motivation in London was to prove yourself, the marathon World Record holder, when everybody else was talking about the Gebrselassie-Tergat matchup. What did you hope to achieve in Chicago?

Khannouchi: I'd had an already great season winning the London Marathon with a World Best, so I didn't have anything to lose. I just stayed focused, maintained the same way

Four times: it doesn't happen all the time.

T&FN: In both races, you employed patience. Did you plan in Chicago to duplicate the strategy that worked in London?

Khannouchi: The strategy was to watch the big names. Paul [Tergat] was there, [Abdelkader] El Mouaziz was there also, and they all had the intention to go after my World Record so I knew it was going to be a fast race.

Indeed, it was a fast race and I think with better weather we would have been able to run around 2:05:20, 2:05:30, but as I said, I watched the guys and did the right things. I knew that I have a good kick. I always run very strong the

last 3-4M and I always keep it that way and make sure that I can do the same and tackle the last 2 or 3M.

T&FN: How did you develop what has become your trademark finishing drive?

Khannouchi: I got that in training. In my marathon training since 1997, I've been working most importantly on my long runs. The way that I finish them is just like I finish in a race, and it became something normal to me lately.

I'm glad that I have that weapon to win major races because you always know that it's going to be tough competition and very close like it was in London—10 seconds between me and Paul. You know it's going to go down to the last mile or two, so it really helps to know that you're going to finish them fast. And I think I got that in training.

T&FN: Close races while running at sub-2:06 pace might test the nerves a bit. When did you feel you had the races won?

Khannouchi: In London I basically started feeling confident after the 23M mark. But you can't celebrate until you cross the finish line; that's the rules of the marathon. It's not like a race you can control; you can hit the wall at any moment, so I always put that in mind that I don't like to celebrate until I cross the finish line.

For Chicago, by 24M I knew the race is mine. I was getting closer and closer to the Japanese runner who was leading and I got away from my main competitors so I was confident about my chances.

T&FN: Looking ahead, what do you want to achieve in the next two seasons?

Khannouchi: I won two of the most major and the most competitive marathons in London and Chicago, and I think what I need now is the Olympics and I hope that I can have that chance.

To be healthy, that's the most important thing that I'm looking forward to.

T&FN: And you've already signed to run Lon-



Khannouchi's powerful-finish 2:05:56 win in Chicago made him the first man ever to break the imposing 2:06 barrier twice in the same year.

don again this spring?

Khannouchi: I'm going to try to defend my title in London, and from there we'll see what happens next.

T&FN: What do you like to do for fun, when you're not training?

Khannouchi: I enjoy watching TV—all kinds of sports on TV. I read a little bit, not a lot, because I'm always exhausted. And I enjoy practicing other sports—basketball, swimming, other sports that I enjoy doing when I'm not running.

I go to the gym and I spend a little bit of time just hanging there, playing other sports. It's not for any reason, but I enjoy it. I like basketball and it's pretty nice to go and have a great time by yourself when there is no pressure and no worries.

T&FN: Has being probably the most prominent American Muslim athlete been difficult in the aftermath of September 11?

Khannouchi: It's been difficult for everybody, the whole country, the economy. Personally, I feel bad about it because that's not what Islam preaches. It was a sad tragedy to see.

I was back home in Morocco and I was in tears like the rest of my family were. We just feel really bad about it. I think it's looking much better now and we hope for a bright future. And a peaceful life—that's what I love.

T&FN: I understand you've just finished a

attention—but I think that's more for the marathon event itself, you know. I don't know if they consider us athletes or not. But I was a little disappointed about it.

T&FN: As it turns out, for a second year in a row Hicham El Guerrouj is AOY, formerly a Moroccan countryman of yours.

Khannouchi: He's sitting at my table so we got to talk. It's good to remember all the memories that we had in Morocco when we were training together.

T&FN: Did El Guerrouj talk to you about his plans to add the 5000 to his repertoire in '03?

Khannouchi: He's trying to do both. He said that he's pretty focused on the 1500m and that what will happen in the 5000 will be a bonus, so we'll see.

T&FN: And you will you stick to the marathon?

Khannouchi: That's what I will do. I don't like to take chances, I don't like to be greedy and think about any other events. I think if I can handle the marathon I will be a happy man.

T&FN: What is appealing about the marathon to the fastest-ever marathoner?

Khannouchi: Running the marathon is a big challenge. I'm glad that I was part of two of the most exciting races in the history of the marathon, which were London and Chicago this year. We proved to people that the marathon race is about excitement and drama. We got to that point, and I'm glad that I was part of that. □

vacation in Morocco?

Khannouchi: I went for a week and I got to see all my members of family and I had a great time. I'll be back home soon to resume my training. I was doing some running but not really training.

T&FN: You've come directly from your vacation, then, to the Gala. Are you enjoying it?

Khannouchi: I'm having fun. It was great to meet a lot of great people, great athletes who contribute a lot to our sport, and I got a chance to talk to old friends. I saw El Guerrouj, I saw Morceli, and I haven't been talking to them for a long time. It was pretty nice to have a chat with a lot of athletes and take pictures.

I was a little disappointed; I was hoping that I could be one of the top 3 [in IAAF Athlete Of The Year voting], but I wasn't. I was a little disappointed and embarrassed that I didn't get publicity or

"You can't celebrate until you cross the finish line; that's the rules of the marathon"