

## T&FN INTERVIEW

# Meb Keflezighi

by Sieg Lindstrom

Who would have imagined Meb Keflezighi's '14 season a decade ago? That's how long it has been since Keflezighi scored Olympic silver, the first U.S. men's Olympic marathon medal in 28 years.

Even Meb (he's one of the sport's only-one-name-needed guys), now 39, admits that from that exultant Athens vantage point he'd never have thought about breaking a 31-year spell of no Yanks atop the podium at Boston 10 years in the future.

Nor that he might follow up with a 4<sup>th</sup>-place run at New York ahead of the reigning Olympic champion and the Big Apple's course record holder 5 years after his own historic '09 NYC victory.

In the '80s, Keflezighi's father, Russom, fled war-ravaged Eritrea, walking 100 miles to the Sudan border in order to rescue his wife and 10 children from desperation and start a new American life in San Diego.

The lesson for 3-time NCAA champion Meb, who obtained U.S. citizenship in '98, the year he graduated from UCLA, was never waste your talent or an opportunity.

Fourteen years after making his first Olympic team, 13 after setting his 10,000 AR, and 371 days

fourth Olympic appearance in Rio a distinct possibility even as he edges toward his post-competition career through his role as Vice President Of Running at The Competitor Group, Meb spoke with T&FN a week after NYC.

He was multi-tasking in a sense—hooked up to a NormaTec recovery device, determined not to miss a step in maximizing his remaining opportunities.

**T&FN:** Congratulations on a stellar year in the marathon. How is the 39-year-old body feeling a week after New York?

**Meb:** The body's actually feeling pretty good compared to other races in the past. I think 2003 was my best recovery ever and this is close to that, which is great news because in 2003 in Chicago I just went for a time, more like a tempo run and to run the sub-2:12 A-standard; I ran 2:10:03.

This time around, similar to that I could have done more that day but I've been having blister issues since 2007. This time no issues with that and I've run twice already. I've been doing quite a bit of elliptical but usually I can't even run for 2-3 weeks.

This was, if not the best, one of the best recoveries coming out for a few reasons.

One was that endurance-wise my stamina was good. Two, I ran 2:13 versus 2:09 or something where you have to make moves, and I didn't get depleted that much because of the [cool] weather conditions. That was a little more friendly for the body, I guess. But the wind, that was rough.

**T&FN:** You must be more than pleased with the season?

**Meb:** I am definitely pleased. I always tell people that are close to me any time you finish top 10 at a major marathon it's a huge accomplishment just because we all train hard. I'm not the only one that's training hard or is trying to make good moves or wants to win.

So to have won Boston on the most important day, Patriot's Day,

### Meb In A (Large) Nutshell

•**Personal:** Mebrahtom Keflezighi was born May 5, 1975, in Asmara, Eritrea; 5-6½/128 (169/58)

•**PRs:** 1500—3:42.29 ('98); Mile—4:02.79 ('99); 3000—7:48.81 ('03); 5000—13:11.77 ('00); 10,000—27:13.98 ('01) (3, 5 A); Half-Mar—61:00 ('09) (4, 5 A); Mar—2:09:08 ('12) (5, x A) (2:08:37 aided course '14—4, 10 A)

•**Schools:** San Diego HS '94; UCLA '98; now represents Skechers

•**Coaches:** Ed Ramos (San Diego); Bob Larsen & Eric Peterson (UCLA); Larsen (pro)

•**Major Meets:**

5000—5)NC '95; 9)NC '96; 1)NC '97; 3)NCi, 4)NC '98; 2)US '02

10,000—1)NC '97; 4)NC, 4)US '98; 4)US; 1)OT, 12 OG '00; 2)US, 23)WC '01; 1)US '02; 2)US, 16)WC '03; 1)OT '04; 2)US, dnf)WC '05; 2)US '06; 13)OT '08; 6)US '09 Mar—9)NYC '02; 7)Chi '03; 2)OT, 2)OG, 2)NYC '04; 3)NYC '05; 21)NYC '06; dnf)Lond, 8)OT '07; 9)Lond, 1)NYC '09; 5)Bost, 6)NYC '10; 6)NYC '11; 1)OT, 4)OG '12; 23)NYC '13; 1)Bost, 4)NYC '14

•**U.S. Road Titles:** 8K '03-'04; 7M '02, '09; 15K '01-'04, '06-'07; 20K '03; Half-M: '09, '14; Mar '09, '12

•**World/U.S. Rankings:**

5000—x/7 '98; x/3 '00; x/3 '01; x/1 '02; x/2 '03  
10,000—x/5 '98; x/5 '99; x/1 '00; x/2 '01; 9/1 '02; x/2 '03; x/1 '04; x/1 '05; x/6 '06; x/5 '07; x/10 '09  
Mar—x/4 '02; x/1 '03; 4/1 '04; x/1 '05; x/4 '06; x/1 '09; x/2 '10; x/2 '11; x/1 '12; ?/? '14

after a terrorist bomb killed 3 and injured 264 at the 117<sup>th</sup> Boston Marathon, Keflezighi won the 118<sup>th</sup> for America.

Married since '04 and a father of three, with a



On running in Rio at age 41:  
“That would be huge.  
That would be something,  
wouldn't it?”



VICTOR SAILER/PHOTO RUN

after what happened last year, that in itself was huge, but even before that just to win the Half-Marathon national title at 38 was a good race in itself.

I would have been completely satisfied with that season at the end of the year but when I'm healthy I like to compete the best that I can.

I always say running to win doesn't mean getting 1<sup>st</sup> place but getting the best out of yourself. Going into Boston I was shaken up a little bit by the New York City Half-Marathon [10<sup>th</sup> in 62:53] for a few days.

The big vision was Boston and that was not a good performance but I came out healthy and built on the training with a big prize in Boston, the win.

Boston was a great race for me. It was probably the only marathon where I ran my own race. In the others I had to cover moves or you're trying to group with people, but in that race I felt in control and did what I wanted to do.

In the end I didn't make it easy but I ran a smart and tough and gutsy race.

**T&FN:** *The greatest race of your career or does the marathon silver in Athens compare?*

**Meb:** It is my most memorable race ever. There is no other way to cap that one, and it's because I have a silver medal and because I won New York.

But you have to understand also that I was just happy to be a league champion when I started running. Then I wanted to be a State champion and that was my dream to accomplish, and then I wanted to be NCAA champion.

Every goal that I set at each point in time I have accomplished: to break the American Record in the 10K or make my first Olympic team, the Trials in Sacramento in 2000.

You don't know what the future holds but for the present time I try to live in the moment and I was satisfied by those. As a human being you set goals and I try to push my body to the limit. To be able to win Boston, you can't ask for any better.

It just was an amazing race and what happened I had

been visualizing for over 365 days; just what can I do positively. But if that's going to come altogether? There's no time out or chance to re-strategize. Once the gun goes off you've got to race smart.

**T&FN:** *You and Josephat Boit opened a gap at 8 miles and then in the 16<sup>th</sup> you had the solo lead. Did you plan that?*

**Meb:** Definitely the strategy was not that.

## Consistently Improving

In his 20(!) post-high school seasons, Meb Keflezighi has had one coach, Bob Larsen, the UCLA head who recruited him in '94. Larsen has said more than once that he coached athletes whose early career workouts eclipsed Meb's. Needless to say, none of them matched Meb for longevity.

We asked Meb how he has improved so consistently and stayed competitive for two decades:

"I was not the most talented guy but talent can take you so far. I've always believed that nobody should outwork me; I'm going to do everything that I can. I stayed away from alcohol, I stayed away from women or whatever you want to call it.

"I was pretty focused on what I wanted to accomplish. It was nice to have coach Larsen as a mentor and people guiding us to do the right things, including my parents.

"For me it was get the best out of yourself each time and every time. But at the same time I don't get pissed if I don't win. Internally I'm thinking and writing down what I can do to improve: 'In training, OK, I made this mistake...'

"Especially in the marathon, on race day I write down what I learned and what were the good things, positive and negative. I usually look at those every time before I go for a marathon. Not the last couple or 3 years, but before that I was, 'Don't make a move too early,' or 'be patient,' or 'don't throw away your gloves, keep your beanie.' Notes in my training log that I kept for a long time."

The strategy was just to hold on for dear life most likely because there were a lot of great guys with fast times [including '13's Nos. 1 and 2 Rankers Lelisa Desisa and Dennis Kimetto]. The goal was to win, finish on the podium or run a personal best. Those were A, B, C, if I could pull it off.

How to do that? I had to decide when the gun went off and study my competitors. But I knew I had to be in the front and mix it up; it could not be a come-from-behind kind of thing. I got into the front because I don't like how narrow Boston is; I don't like to get stuck behind somebody and I wanted to make sure it was not fast because of the downhill.

People respect what I have done and they were OK with me leading it. Then about 5 miles into it they tried to slow it down more and I said, "No, I'm going to keep pushing."

Next thing I know it's me and Josephat Boit

## Meb — continued

in the lead, and next thing I'm in the zone trying to win and, as I say, Boston Strong, Meb Strong.

Basically I was so much in the zone I didn't even see my halfway split. [laughs] They say love is blind, but being in the zone is blind.

**T&FN:** When you won the silver in Athens did you have any thought you might be winning a major like that a decade later?

**Meb:** No. Honestly, the reason I won Boston is a combination of experience, running greater than myself and emotion. Athens was my fourth marathon. No, I didn't think I'd be doing it 10 years later but I was ready go to Beijing and thought maybe I could improve on the silver and get a gold.

Sammy Wanjiru ran phenomenally. I don't think there's any way I could have won that race; there's no way. But, watching that race [on TV], I told my wife I could have got silver, for sure a bronze medal. But in the U.S. you have to make top 3 and unfortunately I didn't make the top 3 [hampered by a stress fracture].

In 2009 I decided to beat every Olympian that I can, a gold mission, and that the New York City Marathon was going to be my Olympics. That's what I told my brother and wife. That's what I shot for and I beat the 4-time Boston champion Robert Cheruiyot, and 3<sup>rd</sup> place was Jaouad Gharib, who took the silver medal in Beijing.

So for me it was very gratifying to know that when I said to my wife and brother that New York was going to be my Olympics, and that I said to my wife I could have gotten a medal, I reproved that.

That was what 2009 was for and obviously I made another Olympic team in 2012 but, no, when I finished Athens I didn't see past Beijing. I knew I could win New York or Boston, maybe 2005, 2006 or 2007, but 10 years later? I'm not a person who has that kind of vision, unfortunately. [laughs]

Hard work always pays off. You might not be a champion that day or the next day or next year but that's what the driving force is. Obviously at any level I was competing, whether it was the high school level or collegiate or professional, we're all talented at that point. It's

### Boston: USA! USA!

*Boston '14, Meb Keflezighi says, was his most memorable race ever, a widely shared sentiment. His thoughts on the almost surreal last 10 miles:*

"At 16 is where I ran a 4:30 mile to get away from Josephat Boit. At 18, 18½, 19, people are chanting 'USA, USA!' and I couldn't help but bust a chant, 'USA, USA!'—join the crowd. But at the same time I'm thinking, Focus on the race. But I was not scared to chant 'USA, USA!,' giving a fist-bump.

"There's a picture, somebody caught it. I don't think the TV camera caught it. You're doing a greater effort than yourself: 'How can I make a tribute to those that passed away and the millions

just who can do the workouts consistently and persevere.

I know when I was at UCLA people always thought I was in the training room all the time. Not because I was injured but for prevention. Sometimes we used to sneak in on the weekends for ice baths. Not because I loved it; because the football players would be in there and I was trying to get an ice bath or an ultrasound in. Why not?

There were people who said, "OK, I did my long run, I'm gone." Some of my teammates were that way; not everyone went for the training room.

I was always pretty serious about my academics. It was a relief for me to graduate from UCLA with my diploma, and after that I gave a full run to prioritize running more than I ever did because I was always worried about making sure that I'd graduate. I didn't want to be seen as another athlete that never graduated.

Once I graduated I was willing to do everything toward running: ice baths, core, weights and all the stuff that goes with it. And obviously we saw results with that.

**T&FN:** Many people predicted success for you in the marathon and they were right. But what did you think after that first race in '02, 2:12:35 for 9<sup>th</sup> at New York?

**Meb:** I remember telling coach Larsen, "This is my first and last; I never want to do it again." It was painful, it was miserable.

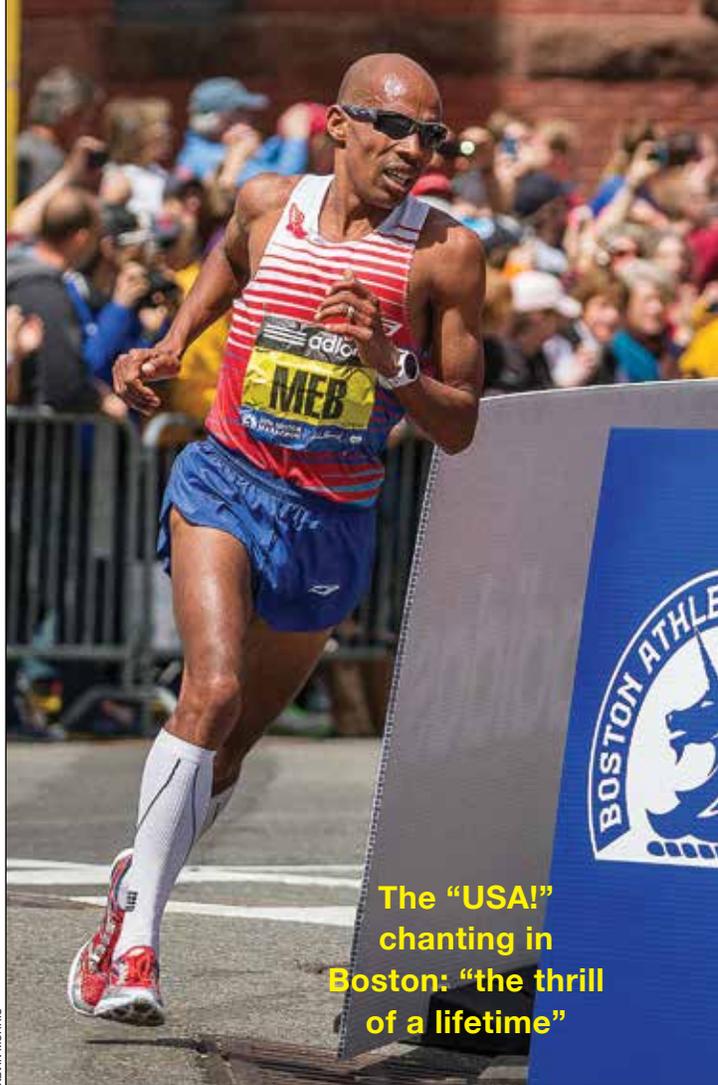
It was 38 degrees, training was good. I remember telling Deena Kastor—she had done one marathon before—"I'm going 15 miles, 5:00 pace in training. How am I supposed to keep going for 26?" But I was training at altitude.

Going to New York I went for the win like Alberto Salazar did, and on First Avenue,

that were affected [by the bombing]."

"I wrote the names of the victims that had passed away on my bib and obviously God gave me the grace to be able to derive energy from them and from the crowd. In a sense, I was not the fittest that I've ever been but just obsess and go for it: Make them earn it; if they're going to catch me make them earn it.

"Obviously it got close at the end but I feel blessed to have had the opportunity to lead the 36,000 people that wanted to own Boylston Street and turn what was a catastrophic moment, a disastrous moment for us on April 15, and change it to something positive and chanting 'USA, USA!' people on their feet chanting and clapping. That was the thrill of a lifetime."



The "USA!" chanting in Boston: "the thrill of a lifetime"

18–19 miles, I started feeling warm. I threw my beanie and gloves away and at New York you're always in the shade anyway. I put some cold water that was sitting there for a few hours on my head and that kind of shocked the engine. I got it down to 4 people with 5 miles to go. I thought, "Worse case scenario I've got 4<sup>th</sup> place."

I felt so good that I thought I could win it. I got 9<sup>th</sup> and those guys put over 4:00 on me in the last 4 or 5 miles. Basically I hit the wall hard and instead of doing a nice cadence, I was slapping the ground. I had too light shoes—basically 10K shoes, more like what you would wear on the track for flats—and hit the wall hard.

Afterwards, my Mom was there—my Dad was trying to give me a massage—and she said, "The 5K, 10K is OK but no more marathons."

I was in pain. I remember David Monti, the elite coordinator, asked me, "How was my experience?"

I said, "David, give me a day because right now what I want to say is not very good."

**T&FN:** The aftermath has been more than "very good." In '16, you'll turn 41. It would be pretty cool to see you on the Olympic team in Rio.

**Meb:** That would be huge. That would be something, wouldn't it? □