

Bernard Lagat

Next year, although he has not given up hope for its happening sooner, Bernard Lagat will be eligible to run for the U.S. Joining Alan Webb in the red-white-and-blue, the two-time Olympic medalist for Kenya should instantly make his new nation a player in the 1500.

Lagat—who gained U.S. citizenship in '04 after living stateside since his recruitment to Washington State for the '97 track season—takes a back seat only to Hicham El Guerrouj as a miler over the last half-dozen years.

While that's a little like being No. 2 to Einstein in physics class, Lagat's not eaten up by envy. He finds the Moroccan great "to be a really fun guy to

by Siegfried Lindstrom

3:00 a.m. very much.

As a matter of fact, I used to think I'd be so tired during the days because of that, but you know, I think I'm getting used to it. After I wake up in the morning, even though I slept just a few hours I'm really fine still.

T&FN: What do you plan for 2006?

Lagat: I hope I will participate in the World Cup, but if not, I'm having positive thinking toward the season. I can only concentrate on running fast. I wanted to do that last year, and I think I got overtrained and just missed a little bit of sharpness.

But now I'm training smart—doing things that I skipped last year and cutting down on things that I overdid. I just want to win Golden Leagues, which I didn't win last year.

T&FN: Were your 12:59 5K win in Berlin and the World Athletics Final 3K win signals that you plan to move up?

Lagat: Absolutely not. Really what I did last year was I was training like a long-long distance runner rather than a 1500m runner. So basically my endurance was the best I've ever had. Then I lacked the speed and sharpness necessary for a 1500m runner.

So having that when I was in the 5000 at the final Grand Prix, I was just cruising along. It was really beautiful the way I was feeling, because of the endurance.

But that didn't mean I was trying to get away from the 1500.

Not at all. 1500 is my event. It's the event that I always try to train well for and compete at the highest level in.

T&FN: Was that endurance emphasis last year by design or just the way it worked out?

Lagat: I was planning to do more endurance but then I think I kind of overlooked the other side, the speed factor.

[Coach James Li and I] thought we were doing everything right. I was feeling great in workouts, but feeling great and looking fast in workouts sometimes doesn't mean it's going to be the same way in competition. You're feeling great the first 800m, and that is the endurance, and then you're still feeling good, but you know what? You're not going to kick.

But those are also things you can change. You cannot try to get endurance right away, but you can get speed right away. So when I realized that

in the middle of the season, we changed a few things, we went a lot on the speed workouts with my coach. I picked up my speed and I was able to win in Rieti. So things kind of came together toward the end.

T&FN: Coach Li once told me that you only train 6 days a week. Is that still the case?

Lagat: I still do that. I rest one day. That's Sunday; I haven't changed anything with that.

I'm a low-volume but high-intensity workout kind of person. It's always quality. Our philosophy is that we go low on volume but every little distance we do has to be quality. If we are going for 8M, we are going to go a fast 8M. I believe in quality as opposed to doing above 90M [a week].

And coach Li and I believe in rest. When we are not training we have to rest. We stay at home; we are not going out and doing crazy things.

T&FN: You mentioned 90M/week. Have you ever done that kind of volume?

Lagat: Actually I did it last year. But then all of those miles were quality training. We were doing 14M at a go—something that I have never, ever done before.

I was training with Abdi [Abdirahman at altitude] in Flagstaff. Coach Li was not there and was giving me workouts over the phone, and I was overdoing my training. Of course, it was good for Abdi because he's a marathon guy and 10,000m runner.

T&FN: Before you came to Washington State you trained in Kenya with your brother William Cheseret, a marathoner. Did you know then that you were a miler?

Lagat: I didn't know until I finished high school. When I finished high school, I was training with my brother, and one time I said, "OK, let me enter a 1500," and I ran 3:46. That was 1995 so that was really good for me.

No Early Retirement For Lagat

Many Kenyan-born milers have come and gone in a flash—a season or two and out. We asked Lagat to explain his longevity?

Lagat: I think it comes down to passion for something. There are some people who are very talented, but they don't think, "This is my thing."

For me it's been a family sport. Even when I was a little boy, I was seeing running in my family. I was seeing my older sisters, Mary and Angelina, and my brother William running. And I thought this means family and it is something that I love doing.

I wanted to be the best in this. A lot of Kenyans are talented, but it's how you carry your talent, how you actually prepare that talent. I've been able to do that because I really love it. It is a passion. I want to train really hard in order for me to get to where I'll be happy to be.

One of the things I would be very happy to be is an Olympic gold medalist. And you know I have been an Olympic medalist. I'm not done yet until I get the very best out of my running.

hang out with." On the oval Lagat simply wants to kick El G's and everybody else's butt.

Lagat's wife Gladys gave birth to their first child, a boy, in January. T&FN checked in with Lagat in March as he adjusted to parenthood during a winter in which the Kenyan federation exercised its right to bar him from defending his 3000 title at the World Indoor.

T&FN: Are you getting much sleep with a new baby in the house?

Lagat: Basically we organize our day on Miika's schedule. Most of the time we try to sleep when he sleeps. We take turns. My wife takes her turn and then I take some turns.

But he sleeps during the day and at night he decides to play a little bit, and sometimes cries—in the middle of the night. He likes around

“My running mechanics were so bad... Now when I go back and look over my tapes, I’m like, “No wonder I was losing.”



My [then] coach, Coach Nganga Ngata, who is the greatest coach that I’ve ever met in Kenya, was the one who told me, “I don’t want you to specialize. I want you to run 800 all the way to cross country.”

I thought, “How am I going to adjust myself here?” But he knew that in order for me to be the best in one thing, he wanted first of all to see if I’m good at anything.

T&FN: *Did you think you would someday rank No. 1 in the world? You won an NCAA Indoor mile title, but you never finished higher than 4th in the outdoor 1500. Why?*

Lagat: I didn’t know how to run. I remember in Bloomington, Indiana, I was leading with another Kenyan athlete, and Seneca Lassiter was just within striking distance.

I just went all out like a pace-maker and Seneca was just relaxing, and—you know what?—Seneca was the smartest; he knew how to run it, so he just blew by us with 300m to go. And he was so easy while I was just struggling; and I finished No. 4.

T&FN: *So it took you a while to learn tactics?*

Lagat: Yes and, in fact, my running mechanics were so bad; I was really limping so bad. Now when I go back and look over my tapes, I’m like, “No wonder I was losing.”

When we were running I was not even staying out of trouble, just being outside. I’d be way in the middle [of the pack] or sometimes getting blocked in, and when I’d get out I’d get hit by the tall guys.

It was a learning process, and at the same time after that, I realized confidence is needed. Because every time I was warming up with these guys—Seneca and Kevin Sullivan—I was thinking, “There is no way I can win; these guys are tough.” That’s when coach Li said, “You’ve got to have confidence.”

By the way, when we went to the NCAA Indoor in ‘99 I had a lot of confidence, and since then have been running with confidence. And running away from trouble, running safe. That’s really helped me.

T&FN: *Did you see running 3:30 in Europe that summer of ‘99 as a breakthrough?*

Lagat: Actually, I went to Europe and I ran one race in ‘98. I ran 3:34, and when I came back I knew how tough it is to run 3:34. I knew that in order for me to be a person who can really run in the future, all I need to do is change everything entirely: the way that I think about running, the way that I approach my training. Skipping training is

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no longer a factor; being confident and running strong is what I need.

I was 5th in Stuttgart when I ran 3:34, but let me tell you, it was the most painful run I have done.

T&FN: Still to this day?

Lagat: Oh, yes, still actually one of the toughest. My chest was burning; I could not see. Oh, my goodness.

But when I came back I told myself, "I did this, and you know what? I can do even better."

T&FN: What has set you apart and put you on the Olympic medal podium twice?

Lagat: You have to be patient. All of us have to have patience in working so hard towards our goals. I think that is the thing that has actually set me aside. I have always said I want to be the best I can be, and I want to train as hard as I can.

I've been very disciplined in how I do things. There are a lot of things that I never do. I have never been out there going crazy on Friday nights, for example. On Saturday I'm going to be out there training, and I want to be feeling fresh and good.

And then, of course, having goals. My first goal when I was in Kenya was to go to the Olympics. Even when I was a student, back in '96, I went to the Olympic Trials and I finished, I think, 7th. But in the preliminaries, I came 2nd and ran 3:37.

So when I came to the U.S. I was thinking, "I'm going to go to the Olympics." That set me aside because I knew exactly that that is my destiny. In order to go to the Olympics, I needed to be tough, I needed to train differently, I needed to approach the competition differently.

That was my reason for going to Europe in '98 and '99: to gain experience. And the experience that I gained running at the NCAA level, that alone was important.

I told my brother [Robert Cheseret], "That NCAA experience is very good for you. Take full advantage of it; it is the best and it's very rewarding." Because you learn techniques, you learn even how to be mentally tough when it comes to competition.

T&FN: How do you reflect on your two Olympic medal races?

Lagat: In 2000 all season I had lost races to only two guys. I had lost to El Guerrouj and Noah Ngeny. I was barely beating the other guys. I was always coming 3rd. Without El Guerrouj, I was coming 2nd; without Noah I was coming

2nd. So No. 4 and No. 5 were very close to me. So going to the Olympics I had already given myself a position. I thought, "If I was to go to the podium in 3rd place, just losing to the two guys, I would be very, very happy." And I thought it was not a given because it was the Olympics, and these guys I was always beating by less than a second, these were the guys I was worried about.

In the race, I was so happy by the time we came to the straightaway; I knew I was coming 3rd and, ooh, I started celebrating. It was the best moment of my life. I was so happy with that.

I was having a lot of fun, traveling with my fiancée and my coach in Australia before, and even during, the Games. I was

a young guy enjoying the Olympics.

There was a big difference between that Olympics and 2004. This Olympics was the one that I wanted to win. And I realized that in order to win this one, I needed to be serious. I did not even sight-see. I don't even know the downtown; I don't know anything about Athens. All I did was just train and focus on my race. The two weeks over there I concentrated on nothing else.

T&FN: There was a point in the last homestretch where I thought you were going to win.

Lagat: I recall mentioning to myself, "Go Kip, go Kip, you can do it." I was actually living the moment of Zürich in that straightaway because I was thinking, "Oh, my God this is another Zürich!"

T&FN: You had won a race with El Guerrouj in it for the first time two weeks before in Zürich.

Lagat: In Zürich I was not expecting to beat El Guerrouj, and I did it in 3:27. So I was thinking, "My God, it is happening the same way again." You are living that moment again.

I gave it all, all out. But then again, I always tell people El Guerrouj had 5% more and he just put it out and he just went for it. But he didn't win easily. I ran hard and he beat me when I know I ran hard. I had to shake his hand because he ran a great race.

T&FN: How long did it take you to be able to see it that way?

Lagat: Actually I was really happy from that moment on. When you run without any reservations and you just give everything to the race and you have nothing left, and whatever result comes out, you are very happy. That exactly happened with me after the race.

I was very happy for El Guerrouj and I'm still happy for him. He waited for four years in order to get gold, and he got gold that day, and he was running against me and I was not going to give him a chance. I was trying not to give him any chance, but he dug deeper and he got it. I respect him for that because it's hard always to win a race when you have 20m [left] and someone else is ahead of you.

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— Lagat In A Nutshell —

Personal: BERNARD La-GAT was born in born Kapsabet, Kenya, 12/12/74. 5-8³/₄/134 (1.75/61); naturalized as U.S. citizen May '04

•PRs: 1:46.00; 3:26.34 (2, 3 W) (holds AR at 3:29.30); 3:47.28 (8, 18 W); 7:34.96; 12:59.29

•Schools: Kaptel HS (Kapsabet) '95; Washington State '99

•Major Meets (1500/M unless noted): 4)NCAA '97; 2)NCAA I 3K, 8)NCAA, 16)NCAA 5K '98; 1)NCAA I, 1)NCAA I 3K, 4)NCAA, 1)NCAA 5K '99; 3)OG '00; 6)WCI 3K, 2)WC '01; 1)World Cup '02; 2)WCI '03; 1)WCI 3K, 2)OG '04.

•World Rankings: '99—4; '00—3; '01—2; '02—2; '03—4; '04—1; '05—2 (59 points for No. 9 ever)

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T&FN: Because of your citizenship change you didn't get to run the World Championships race last year. What did you think of Alan Webb's move with 700m to go?

Lagat: People kind of criticized Alan for running that way, but to me I think that is running with guts. First of all, you have to be tough to do what he did. You have to believe in your training and the strength that you have to do that. He did that: he believed in himself and he

about if he was to wait until the Olympics, 2008, to start something like that? It's too late. Do it now, and he did it in Helsinki.

It didn't work for some reason, but you know what? It's going to work next time because he knows exactly how it feels to go up there and run so hard. He will know how to adjust his training, when to attack, when to run hard, when to go slow, and to study everything around the competition, including everybody in the competition.

T&FN: You're quite the international guy. Kenyan born, U.S. citizen. Chinese coach...

Lagat: Canadian wife.

T&FN: Isn't your wife a physical therapist?

Lagat: She's an athletic trainer and she's also a registered dietician. Really, I'm the luckiest man. I get all the benefits.

T&FN: Does she plan your diet for you?

Lagat: She's been really instrumental in everything. She's very cautious in what we eat. She emphasizes eating healthy food. I've seen a lot of athletes, they go for supplements: "I'm lacking something; I don't know what it is so I have to be on these tablets or vitamins."

My wife is against all that. So she told me never even try to do this because if you eat well-balanced meals everything that you need is actually in food. You don't have to supplement it. If you have to supplement it, that means you don't get it. So let's plan our meals. We cook our meals, and even if we go out we are getting the right kind of food.

T&FN: Do you eat ugali [Kenyan corn meal]?

Lagat: Oh, yeah. Having my sister and my brother here, I make ugali and I tell them, "OK, come on," and they come and eat ugali. Or sometimes we eat chapati, the flat bread—it looks like a tortilla—and ugali and nice vegetables. It's like home.

T&FN: Is your brother Robert headed for an international running career?

Lagat: Yes. I believe he's going to be good.

T&FN: Do you two train

together?

Lagat: We train together most of the time. And with Coach Li's athletes too. We train with all of them. Now we have a Chinese National team here.

T&FN: Are they giving you tips about Beijing?

Lagat: Exactly. □



Overall, Lagat is just 2–24 against El Guerrouj, but he beat the WR holder in this big '04 Zürich 1500.

believed in the training.

I thought that was the smartest move he made. A lot of people can't understand unless you are a runner. Sometimes you need to do something that you have not even done before.

T&FN: Might it help him in the long run?

Lagat: That will pay off in the future. How

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