Bernard Lagat

by Sieg Lindstrom

He is 38 now, but if Bernard Lagat has lost some speed on his fastball, the falloff is hard to detect. He set an American Record in the 2-Mile this winter (8:09.49), won the World Indoor 3K title last year and missed a 5000 medal in London by a fraction of a second. As you may discern from his comments here, Lagat is a goal-oriented athlete who is still at no loss for goals.

That doesn’t mean the former Kenyan—who became a U.S. citizen in ‘04 and first earned medals for the red-and-blue-and-in taking a 1500/5000 double at the ‘07 World Championships in Osaka—is a track & field one-track mind.

Lagat, as we’ve seen from the near omnipresence of his young son Miika and daughter Gigi whenever dad takes a victory lap, is a family man. He even finds time for other sports. Which sports may surprise you. When we checked in with Lagat, he had spent 2 hours the previous afternoon playing street hockey with Miika. Hockey? In Tucson? He reminds us that his wife, Gladys, was born in Canada.

When the Lagats attended a recent NHL game pitting the Phoenix Coyotes against the Vancouver Canucks, Bernard was the lone supporter for the home team. “Miika and Mommy were for the Canucks because Gladys is a Vancouver native,” he laughs. “I was the only Coyote.”

Lagat is also a golfer. He sat down for this chat with T&FN after an afternoon on the links.

T&FN: So you’ve been golfing today?

Lagat: Yeah, I went with a friend who’s also a physical therapist that normally I see when I have problems so he’s really a good buddy of mine. Our kids play together all the time on the weekends, sleepovers.

So we decided, “Hey, let’s go golf before Coach Li puts me in another training regimen again,” which I think is going to get harder because we are now trying to get ready for the World Championships. So this was my last day, actually, of freedom before I am back on hard training again.

T&FN: You’ve certainly been running for a long time. Can you say the same about golf?

Lagat: I’ve been doing it for a while. Sometimes when James [Templeton, his agent] comes from Australia I always make a point of taking him on one of the golf courses here in town. Tucson is good, they have really good golf courses and I’ve come to like golf in itself. I think it’s a fun game. It teaches you how to be patient and it’s a different dynamic completely from running.

I guess that’s the part I don’t get in running. I kind of want that part of being able to relax and work on strategies a little bit, and kind of work on your patience even when you’re doing bad with all those shots. You still have to keep yourself calm.

We always joke that the first 9 holes are kind of warmup and the last 9 are going to be good. And you know what? We’re almost always right.

T&FN: Hey, you could have been racing in the snow in Poland yesterday instead. After getting a taste of the half-marathon and freezing weather in New York the other week, would you ever consider running cross country?

Lagat: No, I would skip cross country entirely. The thing is it might have favored me if it was 4K. Remember they used to have 4K at World Cross?

I went to Kenya one time—I was still a Kenyan—and said I’ll give this a try. I think it was 2003 and I tried to run cross country up there. But of course I left Tucson and went to Kenya, thought I was ready, but those boys had been training in N’gong and Ien at altitude and they punished me toward the last K.

I realized, “This is not easy,” and if I was to go up and try the 12K I would get a serious beating.

I prefer doing my indoor 3K and 5K when it’s warm. That’s my league.

T&FN: Virtually every distance runner seems to give the marathon a try. Is that the direction you started heading by running the New York City Half-Marathon this winter?

Lagat: I’m always looking for a challenge so I told James, “I wouldn’t mind running this race.” If Coach Li tells me, “Yes, you can do it,” why not do it? So Coach Li said, “OK, let’s train for it.”

But it was something that was fun. It made me realize, “Wow! This is actually different territory.” You have to go in there knowing how to run it, how to train for it.

You have to go in very prepared, so for me I ran 9 miles and after that my body started kind of telling me, “Hey, this is a little too tough now. Take me slowly.” But it is fun; I wouldn’t mind doing it again.

But at this point I feel that track & field is still going to be my thing. For a long time. If I was to do this once in a while, no problem, but I would not go up into the marathon because that’s a different territory entirely.

My priorities are to run World Championships and do well in Diamond Leagues, the Prefontaine Classic and so many meets where I’ve been doing well over the years.

I feel like I can still run fast in the 5K.

T&FN: What is it that makes you a track guy as opposed to one of these all-around distance runners?

Lagat: I guess it’s about how you’re built and how you can handle a big task like that. A guy like Mo Farah can do it easily but for me if I did half-marathons most of the time I think I’ll get good at it.

There is no question about that I will know how to train for it, how for prepare it psychologically and be ready whenever I step into it.

So if I were to do more and more of that, then I’d get comfortable in the half-marathon. I might finish once in a while, no problem, going to be my thing. For a while I might even get in there knowing how to train for it.

I don’t even think I’d get it. That kind of guy, he can do it. That’s my league.

Lagat In A Nutshell

• Personal: Bernard (“Kip”) Lagat was born December 12, 1974, in Kapseret, Kenya; 5’8½/134 (1.75/61); represented Kenya through ‘04
• Schools: Kapseret HS (Kapsa-bet); 95; Washington State ‘99; now represents Nike
• PRs: 800—1:46.00 (’03); 1500—3:26.34 (2, 3 W) (’01); (2:39.30 AR)’05; mile—3:47.28 (8, 18 W) (’01); 3000—7:29.00 (AR) (10); 5000—13:52.80 AR (’11)
• Major Meets: 1500M—6)NCCAA ’97; 7)NCAA ’98; 1)NCAAi, 4)NCAA ’99; 3)GO ’00; 2)WCi ’01; 1)World Cup ‘02; 2)WCI ‘03; 2)OGi ’04; 1)USi ’06; 3)US; 1)WCI ’07; 1)JOT; 5fi)
• GO ’08; 5)NCl ’09; 2)US ’11.
• 3000—2)NCi ’98; 1)NCl ’98; 6) WCI ’01; 1)WCIi ’04; 1)USi; 1)WCI ‘10; l)USi ’11; 1USi; WCl ’12.
• 5000—1)NCAAi ’99; 1)USi ’06; 1)US, 1)WCI ’07; 1)JOT; 9)OGi ’08; 2)WCi ’09; 1)US ’10; 1)US, 2) WCi ’11; 2)OT; 4)OGi ’12
• World/US Rankings (U.S.
starting in ‘05):
1500M/4—’99; 3) 000; 2 001; 2 ’02; 4 03; 1 04; 2) ‘05; 3)1 06; 2) 07; x18; 7) 08; 7)09; x4 10; x11; x3 12
• 5000—1)OT 05; 5)1 06; 4)1 07; x1 08; 2) 09; 6)1 10; 3) 11; 5)1 12

T&FN INTERVIEW
run 5K like I do.

**T&FN:** Like you continue to do. You just set an American Indoor Record in the 2-Mile, and you missed a 5K medal at the Olympics by just 0.63.

I think you might have medaled, as you did a year earlier in Daegu, but Isiah Koech clipped your leg from behind with 100 to go and you lost some momentum. If you’d come close to your last 100 split from Daegu—12.9 versus 13.8 in London—you could have medaled. What do you think?

**Lagat:** Even before I got tripped I knew I had made a mistake. Even approaching the bell lap I knew that I had made a mistake I needed to correct right away. That is not me, the way I normally approach the bell. I did it wrong.

Instead of being close to Mo Farah and don’t give them a spot at all, don’t allow these other guys to come into the front and kind of take my spot where I wanted to be...

Of course, I don’t have a spot there, but the spot I wanted to be in, whereby I’ll be on the right-hand side of Mo Farah, stride by stride but not egging him on so he could start going hard at the beginning. I missed out on that.

That was the strategy we had talked about, we planned it, I dreamt about it; I even could visualize me being in a good position. But I did not follow my strategy.

So, what happened as we approached 150 to go was I tried to swing wide because I could sense danger. Mo Farah was hugging the curve really well; he didn’t have to run any extra distance.

The Ethiopian had moved almost inside him and [Kenyan Thomas] Longosiwa was charging straight, and the Moroccan was already ahead of me. So I thought to myself, “Let me correct this real quick.”

As a matter of trying to correct this, this guy from Kenya clipped my foot while I was working so hard to swing wide and go in as soon as I finished swinging wide so I could chase them down. I got clipped and all that went away.

I was trying to kick so hard and see if I could get maybe one person or even two. I got past the Moroccan but by the time we got to the line it was too late.

That’s what cost me: I messed up my strategy. Everyone tells me, “You’re a master tactician,” but I did not run like one there. The tripping happened because I was trying to rectify a problem that I had already made.

If I hadn’t tripped, there’s a possibility I could have come 3rd.

**T&FN:** While you may not have been a master tactician that day, your unflinching analysis now says you are a consummate pro.

If you had won in London would you...
have considered retiring?

Lagat: Oh, that would have given me more
fire, man. Ha-ha! I would have been like, “Let’s
go!” If I had won it, I think I would have
taken another 6 years before even thinking
of retirement.

That’s not to say… I did not medal but that
doesn’t mean I did not get fire. So what next?
This year we have a World Championships.
Another four years?

I tell myself I’m still training really well. I
just did 62:00 in the half-marathon. This year
I’m hoping I can run a good 5000 meters. Hey,
I just did a 2-Mile in 8:09. I don’t seem like I’m
slowing down.

As a matter of fact, there are good motivating
things in my life now. I’m as motivated as
ever before, training with the young guys
here in Tucson—Stephen Sambu [and fellow
30-something Abdí Abdirahman]—and we are
still running fast.

T&FN: What do you think your young
training partners, Stephen Sambu and Lawi Lalang, when you
workout with him, think about an “old man” like you still pounding
them in training?

Lagat: With our Kenyan ways—
that’s how I grew up too—you
almost don’t feel like you’re
respecting the older guy but you are
actually respecting him more than just
looking at him like “my training partner.”

I sense more respect than, “Hey, Kip, what’s up buddy? Let’s go
train.” You can tell even
training with the guys. If an older person was
training with me, I would be the same way: respect
first and then listen to
what he says.

That’s what I feel. The
guys do respect me a lot
and I do respect them.
We have our culture and
customs: respect a guy
older than you but at
the same time have fun
whenever you can; train
hard and have fun. They
love it.

T&FN: You obviously
still enjoy the training.

Lagat: Yes. As a matter
of fact, when we did the
training to accommodate
for the half-marathon,
man, I’ve never done
so many miles—hard,
fast miles. Normally, my
mileage is short but all
quality, fast, but now I
was able to almost double the
miles and still do that
quality. I’m enjoying it so much.

[For the half-marathon] I trained
Monday to Saturday, raced Sunday,
and on Monday I was back again
feeling strong, fresh and ready to go.

Then I have goals, of course. When
I set my goals, every morning I feel
I need to get going, I don’t have
time to slack.

Increasing the mileage was the big
factor that made me run 62:00. I’m going
to keep the distance up like I
did because it’s really fun to train like
that. I thought it was going to wear
me down because I would feel tired
every morning but no, that wasn’t
the case. I’m going to maintain this mileage
because it felt so easy—16-milers, 14; I did 14
and 15 miles so many times and at the end of
it just looked at the clock. Today’s faster than
last week, faster than I’ve ever done before,
even when I was in my 20s.

I get motivated every morning when I
think of the good feeling I get after running
the 15-milers and wanting to go do that again.

The only thing that I still don’t like is doing so
many repeats of long stuff on the track. I prefer
doing it on the roads. That was something we
kind of introduced for the first time this winter,
doing mile repeats on the track wearing flats.
Even though I like the long stuff, that is stuff
I don’t like at all.

There’s a big difference between going onto
the road, wearing flats and running as fast
as you can on blacktop. I like that; I can do
5-mile tempos easily, but 4 laps on the track,
then rest 3 minutes, do another 4 laps, that is
a painful thing.

**Function Follows Form**

While the Alberto Salazar camp has recently
raised awareness of the importance of sound
running mechanics for distance runners, Bernard
Lagat, as Salazar acknowledges, has pursued the
biomechanics holy grail throughout his pro career.

Lagat says the pursuit has prolonged his career:
“that is always a work in progress because the
thing is you can easily lose form. Even when you
are the guy who runs and people say, ‘Man, you
run effortlessly. Your stride, your arms, the way
you bring your legs up is amazing.’

“That is stuff we work on. I could credit one
person with that, it’s my coach. He used to bring
this video of me running on a treadmill and tell
me, ‘You’re doing it all wrong, man. This is a few
seconds that you can take off your time. If you were
to perfect this technique you would be very good.’

“So I worked on it and, ‘No, no, no, no. Come
on, Kip, remember, work on it. Quick strides, faster,
but because he wants me to do well.

“I wasn’t the guy who knew how to run really
good like that. Coach Li was the one, back in
Pullman.

“This was 1999, I think. Once we got into 2000,
’01, ’02, it was about the mechanics because I was
going to get into big races, big championships, and
sometimes it’s how you run that’s going to get you
a better spot.

“I used to limp, rocking sideways, sideways, but
that was taken away by Coach Li. He said, ‘No, I
don’t like that.’

“It was uncomfortable at first [to work on
correcting form]. When you’re rocking like that
you don’t feel like you’re rocking at all: ‘Coach,
what do I need to change? I feel comfortable; I
feel good.’ But when you look at the video, you’re
like, ‘Oh, that’s not good,’ and then you have to
change something.

“At the same time, you realize that this person
is not telling me this because he wants me to run
pretty, but because he wants me to do well.

“I always credit my mechanics also in the speed
with which I can go at the end. You keep the
form and the speed together and you are going to beat
everybody. That’s why Coach Li always tells me,
‘You have to maintain that, don’t lose that.’

“It’s easy to lose. You get older and people tend
to lose it but I’ve been trying all the time to work
on it. All the time.”

**Father & son victory-lapped together at Millrose**