

# 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-white-and-blue 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? I realize you ran it in college.

**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 Iten at altitude and they punished me toward the last K.

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

I prefer doing my indoor 3K and 5K where 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 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 because then I will know how to train for it, how to prepare for 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 the same way I've been comfortable when I stepped up to the 5000 meters, but there's something about track. I feel like it comes natural and it's kind of easy.

Even if I were to run the half-marathon, I might finish 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, running good times, but I don't think I would make a big impact so people would be like, "Wow! This guy is unbelievable."

I don't even think I'd get to the level of the best. Those are the guys that are built for it. That kind of guy, he can run 5K, but he's not going to



KIRBY LEE/IMAGE OF SPORT

**"Everyone tells me,  
‘You’re a master  
tactician,’ but I did not  
run like one there”  
—the Olympic 5K**

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 3<sup>rd</sup>.

**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

## Lagat — continued

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

### 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, lift them up.' He worked on it for years.

"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."

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 Abdi 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 elder 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.



KIRBY LEE/IMAGE OF SPORT

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. □