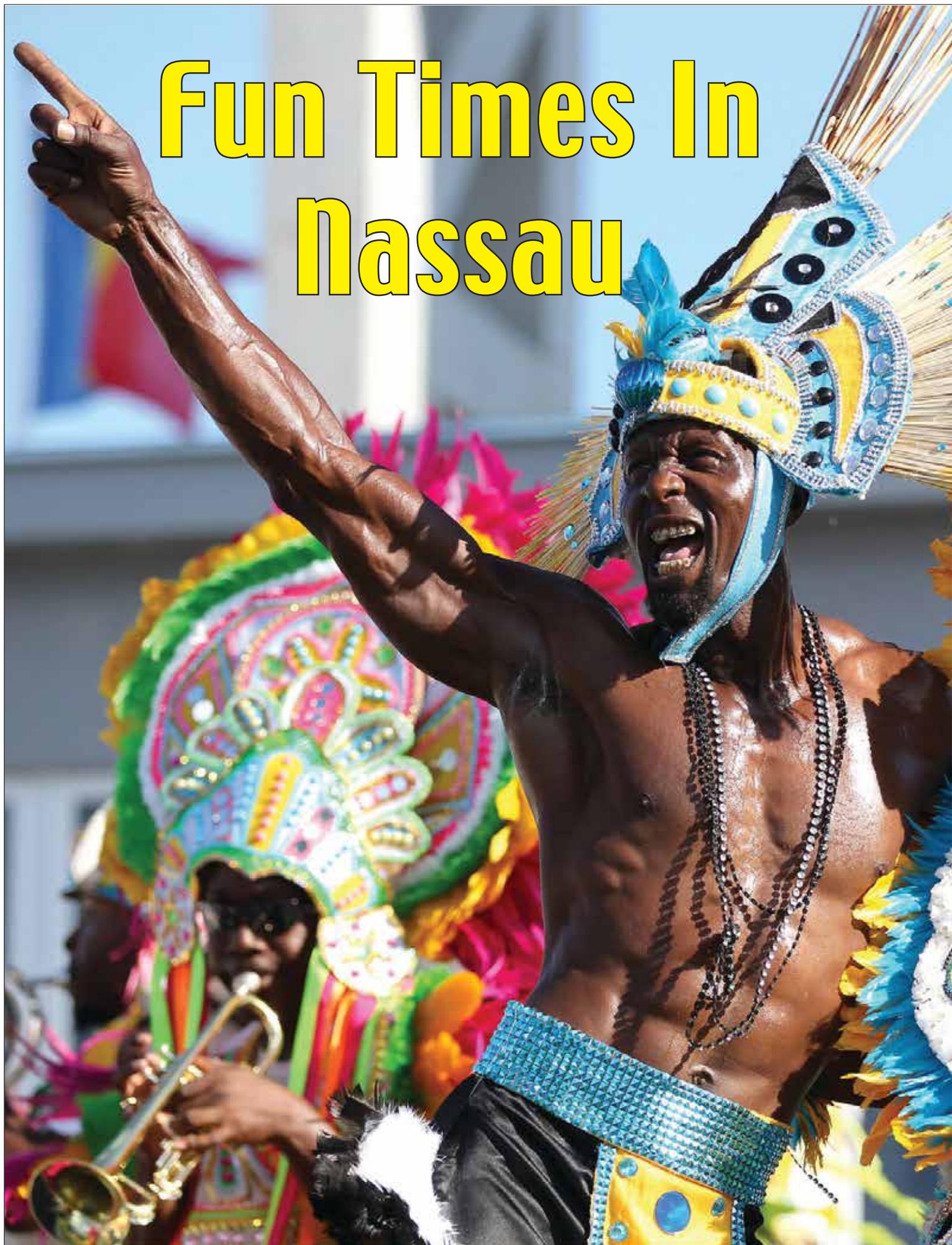


Fun Times In Nassau





ANDREW McGLANAHAN/PHOTO RUN

It was party central in the stands in the Bahamas, but all was serious on the track as the first World Relays meet was highlighted by multiple World Records

by Sieg Lindstrom

What if they gave a track meet and everyone in town came? Or at least knew and cared? What, holy-moley, if a sellout broke out?

Sounds like the Pre Classic, you might say. Or the Penn Relays, or the London Olympics.

It sounds too—"sound," uproarious, jubilant, brassy and infectiously rhythmic, being entirely relevant—like the first IAAF World Relays, which stepped out with inventive spirit in Nassau, the third weekend in May.

Three World Records—by Jamaica in the men's 4 x 200 and a pair by Kenyan squads in the 4 x 1500s—brightened the meet's two days at Thomas A. Robinson Stadium, but not entirely unexpectedly since the sport of baton passing outside the traditional 4x1/4x4 realms has historically been practiced assiduously only in the USA.

Logic more or less orchestrated the records aspect. Did it not seem likely 4 fellows from Eldoret or the Nandi Hills could average sub-3:39 with a baton—when 9 Kenyans dipped below 3:33.3 last year?

Might 4 Jamaicans with a PR average of 19.88 have had a better's bead on the Santa Monica TC's 20-year-old 4x2 mark?

Seemed reasonable—as was the prospect that watching them try would be a ready-made hook for the new show.

The real brilliance apart from that reflected from the white sand beaches and azure seas encircling the island of New Providence was the IAAF's decision to site the meet in the Bahamas, which residents commonly, and without crossing hyperbole's borders, call Paradise.

Why was that such a plum conception? Because Bahamians revel in relays. They have ever since their "Golden Girls" 4x1 group rose up in the '90s.

That's when a silver medal at the Atlanta Olympics led to gold at the '99 World Championships, and finally to the top of the Olympic podium in Sydney when Sevatheda Fynes, Chandra Sturupp, Pauline Davis and Debbie Ferguson McKenzie made baton pride a near-religion for their 350,000 compatriots.

At those '00 Games the Bahamas men's 4x4 raced to bronze, as well, and then won the next year's World Champs with a young quartermiler named Chris Brown on anchor.

Four-lap units from the chain of islands just east of Florida conveyed batons to World or Olympic silver in '05, '07 and '08 (with Brown anchoring each time) before unseating the U.S. with a 2:56.72 gold rush in London (Brown leading off).

Yes, Bahamian baton pride runs deep and

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blue, and the people own it. The evidence was everywhere. Riding a bus to Nassau's famed Arawak Cay restaurant row the evening before the meet, this visitor and the commuters on board listened to a local radio journalist breathlessly pursuing passersby for their predictions on the meet.

Hawker's woo the tourists fast and, well, insistently along the 2-block stretch of "Fish Fry" restaurants and bars at Arawak Cay.

We chose a restaurant called Candies as the venue for our evening meal when its owner threw into his patter a claim that former IAAF Council member Alpheus Finlayson is his cousin. Turned out to be true, although Candies' free teaser of conch fritters and a shot-size Bahama Mama did no harm to sealing the deal.

Later in the meal Candies' owner whisked by the table to report he had just met Leo Manzano as the London 1500 silver medalist strolled past, also in restaurant-selection mode.

Cabbing back to the hotel another night, with a Bob Marley mix CD setting the tone, our driver proudly told us that Olympic 200 champ Pauline Davis was a high school classmate—and '92 Olympic triple jump bronze medalist Frank Rutherford graduated a couple years ahead of him.

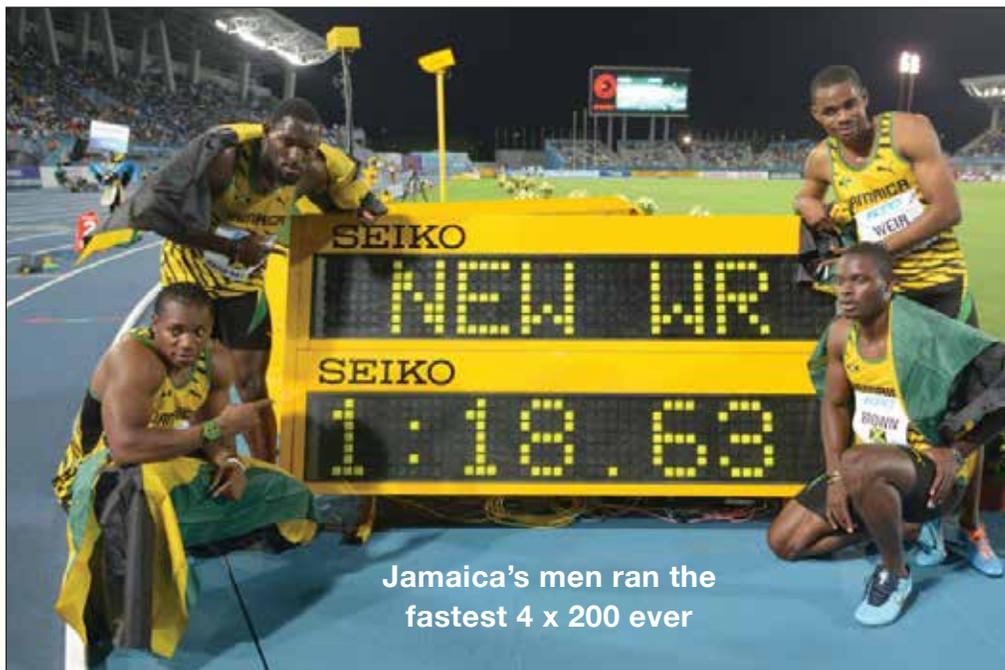
Track and its stars mean something in Nassau.

"For the sport to prosper we've got to take it to places where there is a real tradition for

something," said IAAF Vice President Seb Coe after the meet wowed the crowd, locals and visitors alike.

"It doesn't really matter whether it's in the middle of Cheboksary, Russia, and 200,000

ters and plantain flew out of the concessions booths behind the stadium, which was newly built for the event as a gift from China to the Bahamas, in the end zone a 50-piece junkanoo band (brass, percussion and swaying dancers



Jamaica's men ran the fastest 4 x 200 ever

people come out for the race walks or in Japan where the religion is the women's marathon.

"If you've got bedrock interest then just go with the grain. This has been a really good evolutionary step."

The meet let the world in on a Stateside secret—relays can be grand entertainment—as it advanced the international sport along the road of modern sports entertainment.

As jerk chicken, red snapper, conch frit-

ters and plantain flew out of the concessions booths behind the stadium, which was newly built for the event as a gift from China to the Bahamas, in the end zone a 50-piece junkanoo band (brass, percussion and swaying dancers

in bright crepe-paper and cardboard costumes) set the rhythm for the longer relays. Before each race teams emerged from behind a curtain for introductions before dispersing to their start marks. At the end of races as relayists rushed across the finish line, synchronized flash pots popped in the infield as punctuation.

The pace was brisk (3½-hour sessions each of the two days), the crowd ate it up, and even the "medal ceremonies" were hustled along.

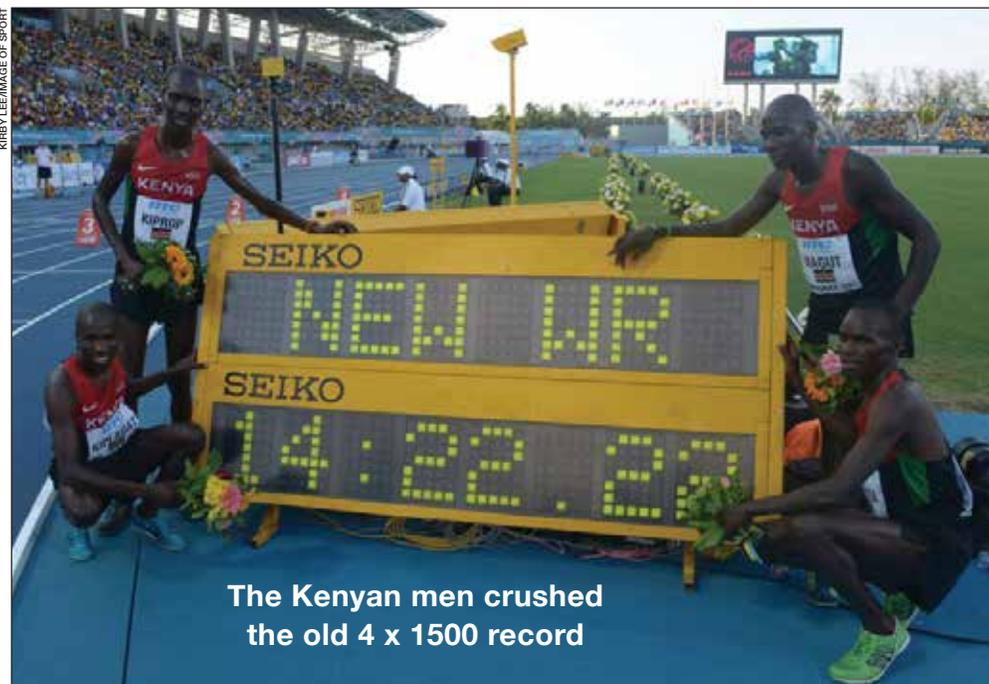
No medals, in fact, were awarded, but teams setting World Records received giant \$50K checks. These augmented the \$50K/\$30K/\$20K podium prize payments (placings down to 8th [\$4000] drew pay).

Races were scored through 8th and at weekend's end, Team USA flew home with the Golden Baton, a team trophy awarded for amassing 60 points to Jamaica's 41 and Kenya's 35. Twenty-nine nations scored.

The Record Races

Bang-bang! The final hour of Evening 1 featured a pair of WRs. First up was the women's 4x15. Just 4 teams were entered, making for an obvious lack of depth that future editions hopefully will avoid.

Anticipation was high, nonetheless. With the Kenyan women's quartet of Mercy Cheron, Faith Kipyegon, Irene Jelagat and Hellen Obiri having lowered Tennessee's



The Kenyan men crushed the old 4 x 1500 record

5-year-old standard to 17:05.72 at some 7000-foot of altitude in Nairobi a month before, a World Record here was a near foregone conclusion as the long baton event went international.

Cherono (4:07.4) struck early on the first leg and launched the red-green-and-black runaway—Kipyegon 4:08.5, Jelagat 4:10.8 and Kenyan 3000 NR holder Obiri 4:06.9 for a shellacking of the old mark: 16:33.58.

U.S. fortunes ran awry at the first exchange when second leg Katie Mackey ran into Australian leadoff Zoe Buckman after taking the baton from Heather Kampf. Mackey tripped and fell.

She rallied back, though, and Team USA (Kampf, Mackey, Kate Grace and Brenda Martinez), too, took a dip under the old WR—16:55.33 to bronze-medal Australia's 17:08.65.

Perhaps figuring one likely WR deserved another, the schedulers had slotted the men's 4x2 next on the program.

Even without Usain Bolt—still working cautiously toward fitness after some niggles in the “off year” before his pursuit of further glory in Beijing next year and Rio in '16—Santa Monica Track Club's 20-year-old 4 x 200 standard, 1:18:68, appeared in danger from Yohan Blake & Company.

The Jamaicans had the memo and the stick firmly in hand. In the all-the-way-in-lanes



The sound level defied belief in the men's 4x4

KIRBY LEE/IMAGE OF SPORT

2-lapper, Nickel Ashmeade and Warren Weir carried the stick to halfway in 39.0, a full 1.4 up on surprising St. Kitts and Nevis (out in lane 8 and with second-leg Lestrod Roland showboating with a baton flourish on the home straight).

Jermaine Brown brought the stick to '11 world 100 champion Blake, who blitzed it home

ceded by less prerace hype than the women's.

Maybe that's why Collins Cheboi, Silas Kiplagat, James Magut and Asbel Kiprop went after it so hard. Their 14:22.22 cut 14.01 from the old standard, also laid down by a Kenyan squad in '09. Cheboi sauntered out, relatively

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with a 19.4 carry. Their final time of 1:18.63 cut 0.05 from the Carl Lewis-anchored SMTc mark set at the '94 Mt. SAC Relays.

The 4x2 standard's falling leaves Lewis with just one last toehold in the recordbook, SMTc's 3:10.75 sprint medley from '85. Look for that event to perhaps make an appearance in a future edition of this meet.

Said Blake, “It's my first World Record over the 4x2, first of this kind. It feels really great; it was a wonderful team effort. Give God thanks, give the coaching staff thanks. My therapist, of course. They have been really good to us.

“We just go out there and execute and just do it safe, and get around the baton safe. If we get the baton it's history.”

St. Kitts, blind in lane 8 and without über-vet Kim Collins, took silver in 1:20.51. France, with Christoph Lemaitre in a leadoff role, grabbed bronze in 1:20.66.

And the U.S.? Sigh. Another international baton goof (see sidebar).

For the next rewrite of the record book, fans had to wait 23 hours. Credit the Kenyan men's 4x15 unit. Their WR shot, inexplicably, was pre-

It's About That U.S. Stickwork

Relays and relay carnivals are as American as the 4th of July and walks on the moon. Penn, the first such meet, set up shop in 1895. It was thus fitting that Team USA claimed the first Golden Baton—and set 3 American Records—in Nassau.

The women nearly ran the table, taking every relay but the 4x15, and the 4x8 crew even scored a scrappy underdog win. Chanelle Price, Geena Lara, Ajee' Wilson and Brenda Martinez front-ran the whole way to their AR, an 8:01.58–8:04.28 schooling of favored Kenya.

The American men's 4x4 unit essayed the hardest-fought victory of the meet.

But another US tradition was on display

also: flubbed sprint relay exchanges. Just like 5 national men's 4x1 squads in the last 10 World Championships, just like the Olympic squads of '88 and '08 (and '60), the US men's teams couldn't get the baton around properly—in either the 4x2 or the 4x1 heats.

Before the meet, Ato Boldon advised all the 2-lap teams, “Don't leave early. In the 4x1 they're coming in a lot faster. At the end of a 4x2 leg the fastest guys are spent.”

However, awaiting the second exchange in the final as Curtis Mitchell sprinted in ready for a left-hand-to-left-hand(!) pass, Ameer Webb left early and then almost dead-stopped before the pile up of errors led to a near-pile up of sprinters and a pass far outside the zone.

In the 4x1 heats, as Trell Kimmons reached

the second change, Mookie Salaam left too soon, slowed abruptly and finally took the pass in 4th and DQ territory.

The teams reportedly had gathered in Nassau early to practice. What was wrong with the system US coach Dennis Mitchell assembled? Better yet, what system did the Jamaican men use?

“To be honest, we haven't done any practice really,” said Yohan Blake when asked. “We came from different camps and we just came out here, thought about how we pass the baton in the 4x1 and improvised. That's what we do.

“We're street-smart, we use it on the track as well, and we just use speed for the next part of it.”

World Relays — continued

speaking, in 3:38.6, as U.S. up-and-comer Patrick Casey (3:38.2) stayed with him.

The East Africans' first exchange went to Silas Kiplagat, however, and the '12 No. 1 Ranker at 1500 (rated in the top 3 globally each of the last 4 years) blew the race open. Kiplagat's 3:32.5 leg saw American David Torrence chasing with a gutsy 3:36.6 all-alone leg of his own.

Through leg 3 James Magut (3:38.0) added little to the margin ahead of Will Leer (3:39.3)—not that it was needed for the win, or even the record really.

Magut handed the baton to world champion Asbel Kiprop with about 8 seconds in the bank versus the old WR. Kiprop could have run 3:46 and snipped the standard. Instead he attacked with full force, tearing off a solo 3:33.1 en route to the recordbook.

Behind Kiprop, Team USA lowered a 35-year-old AR by some 6 seconds to 14:40.80. Anchor runner Manzano (3:46.7) held off a late

challenge from hard-charging Ethiopia.

Good stuff. However, racing, not records, is the lifeblood of relay carnivals, and Nassau was no exception. The spectators roared lustily, clapped their hands and even blew vuvuzelas



The U.S. won the Golden Baton award.

for every contest.

For the men's 4x4 clash the cacophony rang deafeningly throughout. With a 43.8 second leg, the home team's Demetrius Pinder rushed the Bahamas back into the middle of a USA-Trinidad war up front.

Ageless Brown (OK, he is actually 35) then reeled off a 44.3 to hand off 2 meters ahead of Trinidad's Machel Cedenio (44.4) with multi-talented U.S. triple jump star Christian Taylor (44.6) another meter behind.

That left one-lap master LaShawn Merritt with some catchup to play on anchor. Unperturbed, he slung past Trinidad's Jarrin Solomon in the second bend and overhauled Bahamian anchor Michael Mathieu 40 meters from the line.

Thus the U.S. prevailed, and Bahamian hearts sank, but not to rock bottom so thrilling was the race: USA 2:57.25, Bahamas 2:57.59, Trinidad 2:58.34.

After the ear-splitting pandemonium of his stretch race with Mathieu had subsided, Merritt observed, "I'm not typically the one who talks about a fast track, because I believe if you run fast, then the track is fast. But that was a fast track. It had good grip, tight turns and we wanted to come out here and get the W and that's what we did."

So, too, did the IAAF with this meet. Apparently, it's a "W" that will get a repeat.

There are still some technical details to be worked out, but it appears almost certain that the meet will return to Nassau in the first week of May next year.

With plenty of room for further invention and innovation, the meet has, those who attended all seemed to feel, a bright future ahead of it. □

— World Relays Medalists —

Nassau, Bahamas, May 24-25

4 x 100: 1. Jamaica 37.77 (Carter, Ashmeade, Forte, Blake); 2. Trinidad 38.04; 3. Great Britain 38.19. Heats 1-1. Great Britain 37.93 (WL). II-1. Jamaica 37.71 (WL). III-dq—United States.

4 x 200: 1. Jamaica 1:18.63 WR (old WR 1:18.68 Santa Monica TC '94) (Ashmeade, Weir, Brown 19.6, Blake 19.4); 2. St. Kitts 1:20.51 NR; 3. France 1:20.66 NR;... dq—United States. Heats: I-1. Jamaica 1:20.15 NR (WL).

4 x 400: 1. United States 2:57.25 (WL, AL) (Verburg 44.7, McQuay 44.2, Taylor 44.6, Merritt 43.8); 2. Bahamas 2:57.59 (Williams 44.9, Pinder 43.8, Brown 44.3, Mathieu 44.6); 3. Trinidad 2:58.34 NR (Gordon 44.4, Quow 44.5, Cedenio 44.4, Solomon 45.0);

4 x 800: 1. Kenya 7:08.40 (Cheruiyot 1:46.0, Kirongo 1:45.7, Kinyor 1:47.9, Kipketer 1:48.8); 2. Poland 7:08.69 NR (Konieczny 1:48.9, Krawczyk 1:49.1, Lewandowski 1:45.9, Kszczot 1:44.8); 3. United States 7:09.06 (AL) (Rutt 1:48.6, Andrews 1:47.2, Johnson 1:48.1, Solomon 1:45.2).

4 x 1500: 1. Kenya 14:22.22 WR (old WR 14:36.23 Kenya '09) (Cheboi 3:38.6, Kiplagat 3:32.5, Magut 3:38.8, Kiprop 3:32.3); 2. United States 14:40.80 AR (old AR 14:46.3 National Team '79) (5 W) (Casey 3:38.2, Torrence 3:36.6, Leer 3:39.3, Manzano 3:46.7); 3. Ethiopia 14:41.22 NR (6W) (Gebremedhin 3:39.9, Fida 3:37.5, Alemayehu 3:46.5, Wote 3:37.3).

Women:

4 x 100: 1. United States 41.88 (WL, AL) (Bartoletta, Anderson, Tarmoh, Lawson); 2. Jamaica 42.28; 3. Trinidad 42.66.

4 x 200: 1. United States 1:29.45 (WL, AL) (5W, 4A) (Solomon, Meadows, Knight 22.0, Duncan 22.0); 2. Great Britain 1:29.61 NR (6W); 3. Jamaica 1:30.04 NR.

4 x 400: 1. United States 3:21.73 (WL, AL) (Trotter 50.8, Richards-Ross 50.3, Hastings 50.0, Atkins 50.6); 2. Jamaica 3:23.26 (Spencer 51.1, Williams-Mills 49.8, Le-Roy 51.2, Jackson 51.2); 3. Nigeria 3:23.41 (Abugan 52.1, R. George 49.6, Omotoso 50.9, P. George 50.8).

4 x 800: 1. United States 8:01.58 AR (old AR 8:04.31 USA Red Penn '13) (WL) (Price 2:01.0, Lara 2:02.8, Wilson 1:59.1, Martinez 1:58.7); 2. Kenya 8:04.28 NR (Kimaswai 2:03.8, Chesebe 2:01.7, Jepkosgei 1:59.6, Sum 1:59.2); 3. Russia 8:08.19.

4 x 1500: 1. Kenya 16:33.58 WR (old WR 17:05.72 Kenya '14) (Cherono 4:07.5, Kipyegon 4:08.5, Jelagat 4:10.5, Obiri 4:07.1); 2. United States 16:55.33 AR (old AR 17:08.34 Tennessee '09) (Kampf 4:09.2, Mackey 4:19.4, Grace 4:16.3 [fell], Martinez 4:10.4); 3. Australia 17:08.65 NR.

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