



Above: Jefferson Hospital Philadelphia Distance Run Women's winner, Lineth Chepkurui. Right: Men's winner, Wilson Kiprotich.

Area & Elite Athletes Compete in the **Philadelphia Distance Run**

by David Block

The 29th running of the Jefferson Hospital Philadelphia Distance Run, (13.1 miles) this past September 17, featured some reputable runners.

First place finisher Wilson Kiprotich of Kenya, one hour one minute and five seconds (1:01:05), was hoping to win more than just the first place prize money of \$8,000.00.

The media paid careful attention to the twenty-six year-old Kiprotich because he was the only entrant who had ever run 13.1 miles under an hour. In 2005, he won the Stamilano Half Marathon, 59 minutes 25 seconds. If he or any runner were to win the 2006 Philadelphia Distance Run faster than 58:55, they would have received an additional \$10,000.00 for setting a new world-record.

Kiprotich's finishing time caused him to miss out on winning the world record bonus, plus the American Record bonus of \$5,000.00. He needed to break 60:55 for that. He also missed out on the course record bonus of \$5,000.00 because he failed to break 60:27. Instead he had to settle for just the first place prize money of \$8,000.00.

He won by two seconds, edging out Abdi Abdirahman. "Nobody pushed the pace," said Kiprotich. Kiprotich ran alongside Abdirahman. After Kiprotich saw the 11-mile split, 51:06, he felt frustrated because the pace was too slow. He tried to speed up, but he developed a blister on his right foot.

Abdirahman was confident that he could win the race, but he made one mistake. Throughout the race, the runners followed a guiding police car, which veered to the side shortly before the finishing straightaway. Abdirahman followed the car instead of continuing straight along the course. That enabled Kiprotich to break away. Kiprotich, was oblivious to Abdirahman's mistake. "When I race, I just look ahead. I didn't notice." The disappointed Abdirahman said, "I lost a few seconds, worse I lost momentum."

After the race, Kiprotich said that he had beaten the jet lag. He flew from Kenya to Philadelphia four days before the race, so his key goal was to rest, not site-see. Although he liked Philadelphia, he didn't get a chance to absorb the City of Brotherly Love. "I just came here to win," said Kiprotich in broken English. Yet, he enjoyed hearing the sixteen local bands that performed along the racecourse.

The Somalia born Abdirahman, now a U.S. citizen and Arizona resident, was not disappointed with his finishing time or that he failed to break any records. "My goal was to run a good race, and I did." Abdirahman runs about one hundred miles a week in high altitude. "The altitude and the heat don't bother me because I'm used to it," said Abdirahman, a two-time U.S. 10,000 meter champion.

In the women's field, eighteen year-old Kenyan Lineth Chepkurui won with a 1:10:09 clocking, edging out fellow countrywoman, Edna Kiplagat by three seconds, 1:10:12. Even though Kiplagat is eight years older than Chepkurui, that did not intimidate the latter. "I train hard, I don't pay attention to age," said Chepkurui who currently trains several months a year in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, while spending the rest of the year in Kenya. "I miss my family," said Chepkurui. "It's not so bad, because I call home a lot." She added that the day before the Philadelphia Distance Run she was on the phone with her mother for about an hour. When asked to describe her training regiment in Chapel Hill, all the young Kenyan could say was that she runs many, many miles a week, sometimes twenty miles at a time.

Some of the area participants are not in the same league as the Kenyans, yet they too train seriously. Twenty-four-year-old Bryan Skelly, was the second Philadelphia resident to finish the Philadelphia Distance Run, and he placed 32nd overall, with a 1:07:34 clocking. "I liked hearing all the bands on the course," said Skelly who is currently the assistant cross country and track coach for the men's and women's teams at LaSalle University. "The music helped relax me so I was able to run through some challenging sections of the course." Skelly was pleased with his performance. "I never ran thirteen miles this fast before." He attributed his improvement to increasing his weekly mileage. "Now I'm running between 110 to 115 miles a week. Every year since high school, I'd increase my mileage by ten each year." He runs in the morning and at night, so it won't interfere with his coaching responsibilities.

Unlike Skelly who has run countless miles, the Philadelphia Distance Run was the first time that Melissa Tabas ever ran 13.1 miles. She finished first in her age group category (17 and under) with a 1:48:31 finish. "The most I ever ran was eleven miles," said Tabas, girls captain of Harriton High School's cross-country team. "A few days before the race, I registered because I wanted to see if I could finish the course. I wasn't expecting to win in my age group."

In training for cross-country, Tabas often runs eight miles or further. "Running far at a steady pace, makes it easier to race 5ks," the usual distance for high school cross country races. One adjustment Tabas made at the Philadelphia Distance Run was forcing herself to start out slower than usual. She said, "In cross-country races, everyone needs to start out fast so that they can get the lead on the narrow trails. Long road races are another matter, in that it is a common mistake to start out too quickly."

She took her time along part of the course just like Ardmore resident, Gene Mitchell, thirty-eight, who finished the Philadelphia Distance Run, 33rd overall, 1:07:51. "About fifteen years ago, I used to run thirteen miles in about 1:06," said Mitchell. "I used the (Philadelphia) Distance Run to prepare for the Chicago Marathon (26.2 miles)." Mitchell knew that the temperature might be high during the Philadelphia Distance Run. "I wasn't going to go all out and get sick," said Mitchell. "My plan was to run a steady pace the whole way through."

This past summer during the heat wave, Mitchell spent a lot of time down the shore where he ran six days a week. He usually runs eighty miles a week. "When it gets too hot, I train near my beach house in New Jersey because the weather is about fifteen degrees cooler than here." Mitchell owns several running stores and a construction company. Because running is so important to him, he makes sure that work never interferes with his training regimen.

Aside from local and elite participants, there were inspirational entrants. Thirty-year-old finisher Brandon Leslie who clocked 1:06:45 for 25th place is a full-blooded Navajo. He grew up on the Church Rock Reservation near Gallup, New Mexico. "When I run in Gallup, the altitude is 6,500 feet, and that doesn't bother me," said Leslie. A lot of reporters regard Leslie as an inspiration because he encourages other Native Americans to compete. When Leslie ran for Adams College, he earned eight All-America certificates as well as the 2000 Division II NCAA title at 10,000 meters. He recently set a huge 10k (6.2 miles) personal best of 28:10.59 when he finished 6th at the Payton Jordan Cardinal Invitational in Palo Alto, California.

Finally, Upper Darby High School junior, Kaitlyn Willard was the sole wheelchair entrant for a second straight year. "This year I was more relaxed than last because I knew the course a lot better," said Willard who clocked 1:22:12. Being the sole wheelchair entrant is nothing new for Willard who competed on Upper Darby High School's track team last year in

the 200, 400 and 800. It didn't matter to her that no one else needed to use wheelchairs. She is trying to create a path for other high school students in wheelchairs to compete in track alongside their fully able bodied teammates.

Finally, thirty-eight year-old Andy Holder Skippack, PA clocked 2:02:07. Last year Holder was diagnosed with Type 1 juvenile diabetes, while taking a physical to buy additional life insurance. "I didn't know that I had it," said Holder. "I wasn't even feeling sick." The news changed Holder's training regiment. Before, he was a body builder, but then he became a tri-athlete. "I wanted to inspire other people with diabetes to work out."

Holder who trains fifteen o twenty-five hours a week, treated the Philadelphia Distance Run as a training run. During the race, he had to test his blood sugar. "Exercise lowers your blood sugar, so whenever I'm biking or running I have to test it. This adds an extra layer of complexity that athletes don't have to handle."



David is passionate about educating the public and raising awareness about the challenges, abilities and accomplishments of blind and other disabled athletes. He promotes this in part by teaching Goalball, the international team sport for blind athletes, to sighted people. He is an inspiration to disabled youth in sharing ways he and others have overcome adversity. He has produced several documentaries, which illuminate the talents, strengths, and challenges of the blind athlete, the injured hero, and the forgotten veteran. Contact David at David@phillyfitmagazine.com