

Ethiopia Sends World Class Women to Toronto, by Paul Gains

Belaynesh Oljira brings an enviable reputation to the Scotiabank Toronto Waterfront Marathon October 20th which includes two 2013 IAAF World Championships bronze medals at 10,000m and in cross country.

The Ethiopian star, who also represented Ethiopia at the 2012 London Olympics, has run 2:21:53 (Frankfurt 2018) for the marathon staking her claim as one of the heavy favourites to win this IAAF Gold Label race.

Oljira will be joined in Canada's largest city by a member of her training group, Bruktayit Degefa Eshetu, who is also a world class marathoner. In January of this year Degefa ran a personal best of 2:23:28 to earn herself a hat trick of Houston Marathon victories. A year ago, Degefa beat Oljira in Houston by a mere six seconds.

Despite sharing a coach and training group their contact has been minimal and it will be every woman for herself when they line up in Toronto.

"I train with the Demadonna Athletics Promotion team," Oljira says, "which includes also Biruktayit Degefa. We don't train together, except when there is group training, we meet with others.

"We are not friends. I joined the team recently I didn't socialize with most of them but once I met her at the Houston Marathon she seems sociable and I hope we will be friends in the future."

Their casual relationship is not unusual. With training groups numbering as many as a hundred the athletes will meet their coach - in this case Gemedu Dedefo - two or three times a week at some of the popular training sites such as Sendafa, a thirty-minute drive outside Addis. Athletes might ride share. Training sessions begin just as the sun is rising so it is not unusual that runners might get out of bed at 4am to be picked up.

After a brief warmup the training session starts and from then on, it's all business. If the athletes are going to socialize it is likely to be in Addis away from training. Another barrier in their relationship is the fact Degefa is also married to an American-based Ethiopian named Abinet Adraro and spends much time in the U.S. This past spring, she prepared for the Boston Marathon for several months there. She was eighth in Boston.

Degefa met her husband at the 2015 Houston Marathon. He was volunteering to serve meals at an Ethiopian community dinner that weekend and he tried to serve her. Their encounter turned into a long-distance relationship followed by marriage. They have since moved their American home to Albuquerque where the altitude is beneficial for her training. Adraro who ran the 2019 Houston Half Marathon in 62:09 served as his wife's pacemaker when she won the 2018 Houston Marathon.

"I met my husband in Houston, most of the time we spend together he comes to Ethiopia and I also go to Albuquerque in many times of the year," she explains.

"Training with the group can benefit you with different things like you share experience, you find new friends, you have fun with them especially when you train with them you don't think of your tiring moments of training."

Among their training group are a strong contingent of world-class women including Tirfi Tsegaye (2:19:41 personal best, who ran an impressive 2:22:44 at 2010 Toronto Waterfront), Aberu Kebede (2016 Berlin winner in 2:20:45) and two-time Toronto champion, Shure Demise.

“Yes, Shure has told me about the Toronto marathon, about its course and weather, and all the good people there,” Degefa admits. “My expectation in Toronto is to win with a good time.”

Not surprisingly Oljira is also targeting victory in Toronto.

“My main goal as for any athlete is to run a good time and to win the race,” she declares.

The pair come from vastly different backgrounds. Oljira grew up in Wellega district about 315km west of Addis. She started out running cross country and track with immediate success. Indeed, her first overseas venture was a cross country race in France where the first-place prize was a car. She won.

“I started running in school and once I was the school champion,” she recalls. “After that the people in my village called me “Derartu Tulu” (after the 1992 Olympic 10,000m champion).

“I told my uncle, who lived in Addis Ababa, and he encouraged me to start training hard. He told me that I will be successful in my future life and I can gain some value out of athletics. So, I started to train with some athletes but their training was very tough and I couldn’t overcome these challenges. I told myself I had to face it so here I am today.”

Degefa, who grew up in Mojo about 70km southeast of Addis, meanwhile went straight into the longer distances racing her first marathon in 2009 at the age of 18. Enthusiasm and perhaps the lure of financial rewards took over and in 2014 she raced six marathons winning three of them. But when she joined Italian manager Gianni Demadonna at the end of 2017 her competitive schedule was reduced in favour of quality,

This past spring Degefa trained in the US for several months. And, since Oljira had been injured over the winter, their schedules didn’t match until recently.

This year’s Scotiabank Toronto Waterfront Marathon promises to be an intriguing battle between these two Ethiopian champions. They are tremendous adversaries and perhaps the occasion will see them become true friends.

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For further information and entry to the 30th Edition Scotiabank Toronto Waterfront Marathon, see www.STWM.ca