

Ethiopia's Bekelech Gudeta to Debut at Scotiabank Toronto Waterfront Marathon

By Paul Gains

A first-time marathon requires a great leap of faith as any distance runner can attest. And so it is that Ethiopian distance star Bekelech Gudeta, who will turn 22 nine days before the race, enters the unknown at the Scotiabank Toronto Waterfront Marathon tackling one of the strongest women's fields assembled on Canadian soil.

Though she has no experience at the classic marathon distance she has performed admirably these past two years in the half marathon, running under 1:08 on three occasions, most recently on September 15th. That time of 1:07:21 earned her 6th place in the Copenhagen Half Marathon, which, like Toronto, is an IAAF Gold Label race. A year ago, she recorded her personal best 1:07:03 on the same course.

Proudly representing her nation at the 2018 IAAF World Half Marathon Championships in Valencia she finished an impressive 8th helping Ethiopia win the team gold medal. Now the challenge is to make a successful transition to the full marathon distance which has proven difficult for many in the past.

"I am really happy to start the marathon," she reveals. "I have run some half marathons and I think I can run a (good) marathon as a half marathon is a quicker pace than the marathon. I started preparation for the Toronto Waterfront Marathon from June. My target is to run a fast time in Toronto."

The women's course record in Toronto is 2:22:29 and was set a year ago by Mimi Belete the Ethiopian who now runs for Bahrain. This doesn't seem to faze Gudeta.

"My coach is Dawit Hiluf and he is telling me that I can run sub 2:22 in my first marathon," she says. "He is telling me the athletes with 1:07 in the half marathon have run 2:19 to 2:21 in the marathon and he is telling me it is possible to run fast in the first marathon. He is telling me that the Toronto marathon has a fast course. We expect to see me on the Toronto marathon podium with a fast time."

What gives her more confidence is that she has increased her training volume significantly this year but did not reduce it for her Copenhagen appearance. Training through Copenhagen and still coming away with a time just 18 seconds slower than her best must have been satisfying to her and her coach.

"I was checking (fitness) not preparing specifically for the half marathon, just doing my marathon training," she declares. "My training showed I was better prepared than last year. My strength, speed, endurance, all are improved from last year."

"Last year I was doing 100km per week now it's 160 – 170km. So, I was expecting to run 1:05 (in Copenhagen) but this year there was too much wind. We ran against the wind. Especially when I dropped from the leading group it was difficult. But I am happy as I ran sub 68 for my third time."

Gudeta is a member of a training group put together by Volare Sports, a Netherlands based sports management company. It includes Hiwot Gebrekidan (2nd in Ottawa in both 2017 and 2018) Betelhem Moges (2nd in Ottawa 2019) and Abeba Gebremeskel (2nd place Seville

marathon 2019). Like other runners she lives in the Ararat area of Addis, Ethiopia's capital and shares a ride to training sites outside the city.

"Our training is in different places around Addis most of time we train in Sululta, Sendafa, Kaliti, Entoto, Sebeta and around Ararat inside Addis," she continues.

"We have a Volare team bus and we meet 3-4 times per week training program with a team. Monday, Wednesday, Friday and sometimes Sunday we train together with the team and Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday we have easy training separately. When we are not with the team I train around Ararat."

Bekelech has not always lived in Addis. She was born in Shona just 50 kilometres outside the capital. After being introduced to running at school and having some success one of her brothers encouraged her to move to Addis and become a serious runner. She credits him with her success.

In Toronto she will face her experienced compatriots Dibaba Kuma, Eshetu Biruktayit and Hiwot Gebrekidan as well as Kenya's Magdalyne Masai and Ruth Chebitok.

"I heard about the field from my coach," she reveals. "I know these ladies are very strong in the marathon."

Coach Dawit used to coach Biruktayit Eshetu and has, therefore, apprised Bekelech with his knowledge of how she runs. Naturally, Bekelech has the utmost respect for the three-time Houston winner.

"She is a very strong and very experienced athlete," she adds. "I have good information about the ladies and as I will come with my training partner Hiwot Gebrekidan we will help each other to run a good time and to be on the podium. This is our target"

While the Toronto Waterfront Marathon signifies a dramatic change in direction for Bekelech Gudeta she sees it as a step towards meeting her ultimate goals.

"My goal is be a world class athlete like (Kenya's four-time New York Marathon champion) Mary Keitany and Tirunesh Dibaba (three-time Olympic champion from Ethiopia)," she declares. "I have represented my country during the World Half Marathon Championship last year in Valencia and I was 8th place. I want to represent Ethiopia again in the 2020 Tokyo Olympics or in other Olympics. It is my dream as a runner."