



### **Girmay Birhanu Favoured at Scotiabank Ottawa Marathon** by Paul Gains

Three decades ago, the East African domination of marathon running began with both quality and quantity of great runners increasing exponentially. It can also be said they have shifted the goal posts when it comes to frequency of racing the 'classic distance.'

When Ethiopia's Girmay Birhanu lines up for the 2015 Scotiabank Ottawa Marathon May 24th - an IAAF Silver Label once again - it will be his fourth marathon in seven months. The astonishing rate would buckle the knees of most westerners but Birhanu serves up quality performances every time he races.

With a personal best of 2:05:49 from the 2014 Dubai Marathon, where he placed 3rd, the now 28 year old has traveled the world seeking fast races and a pay cheque. Like many of his countrymen blessed with running talent, he intends to retire and start a business in a few years.

On April 5th of this year, Birhanu won the Daegu Marathon in Korea with a time of 2:07:26, almost a minute ahead of his nearest rival. Lest one think that seven weeks between marathons is insane, we are reminded that a year ago Yemane Tsegaye came to Ottawa having won Daegu, then proceeded to smash the course and Canadian All-Comers' record with a time of 2:06:54.

"Yes I have recovered well and now started normal training," Birhanu reports after being asked the obvious question. "Entoto, Sendafa, Sululta I like to train in all of those places. I am training with Gebretsadik Abraha (personal best of 2:06:21) and many other young athletes. My Coach is Baye Asefa."

In January he returned to Dubai where he finished 8th in 2:08:56 in a race where Ethiopians filled the top 10 places. As far as races go, it was probably his least impressive performance in two years, but Daegu proved he is on the rebound.

Last October he also won the Beijing Marathon in 2:10:42 on a day when the city's Environmental Centre warned participants about the excessive level of smog. Indeed, the majority of the 30,000 runners wore masks to protect themselves against the particles floating in the air. Despite the poor conditions Birhanu was satisfied with the outcome.

“It was not very hard to run; the biggest problem was that we didn’t have good pacers,” he says of that memorable day. “I would have been able to do better if the pacers and the weather was good. But I was pleased with my victory.”

On that note he sends an advisory comment to Tamarack Ottawa Race Weekend organisers.

“I am able to run the Ottawa course record but the organizers must have good pace makers,” he declares. “I know it is a good course and usually good weather.”

Born in the northern Ethiopia region of Tigry, his parents are farmers. He moved to Addis Ababa to pursue a running career after being inspired by the exploits of the legendary Haile Gebrselassie, the two-time Olympic 10,000m champion and holder of 27 world records. Although he has never met Gebrselassie, he remains encouraged by the master’s unsurpassed career.

As a member of the Ethiopian Defence Force Sports Club, Birhanu is provided with accommodations in Addis. He likes to drive himself to training sites with a car he bought from race earnings.

He will travel to Ottawa with his compatriot Meselech Melkamu who is also managed by Wellay Amare, an Ethiopian sports agent. When he won Daegu last month, Melkamu was the fastest woman on the day recording a time of 2:27:24 two minutes ahead of her nearest rival. With a personal best time of 2:21:01 (Frankfurt 2012), she was clearly running well within herself.

“I have good luck when Meselech and I are traveling together,” Birhanu says pointedly.

The pair hope that their luck will continue in Ottawa. But the fields, once again, are worthy of respect.

Birhanu will face fellow Ethiopians Dadi Yami (2:05:41 best from the 2012 Dubai Marathon), Deriba Merga, the 2009 Boston Marathon winner and current Ottawa 10K course record holder, who has a best of 2:06:38, and Chala Dechase who has a personal best of 2:06:33. Dechase finished just ahead of him in Dubai this year. Meanwhile Kenyan fortunes rest with Alfons Lagat (2:07:11) and Peter Kirui (2:06:31).

The women’s field is also very strong with Ethiopians Yeshe Esayas, the 2012 and 2013 Ottawa winner, and Abebech Afework (2:23:33 in Dubai earlier this year) facing Agnes Kiprop of Kenya. The latter has a personal best of 2:23:54 and so all are capable of getting under the course record of 2:24:31 set by recent London Marathon winner Tigist Tufa a year ago.



The 2015 Scotiabank Ottawa Marathon promises to be another great race for both men and women. Course records are quite possible. One thing is for sure and that is the leaders will be from East Africa and will delight spectators and organisers once again.