

# ***RUN to OVERCOME***

foreword by  
JOAN BENOIT SAMUELSON



*The inspiring story of an American champion's  
long-distance quest to achieve a big dream*

**MEB KEFLEZIGHI** with Dick Patrick



“While Meb’s performances have shown me what is possible for American distance running and urged me, his teammate, to press in for more, his overcoming spirit through the lows have shown me what it looks like to be a real man. Meb has the remarkable capacity never to lose hope and to experience joy in his life no matter what his circumstances. He is truly gracious in victory and defeat. It is this characteristic that I admire most in Meb.”

RYAN HALL

*2008 U.S. Olympic team, marathon; U.S. record holder in half marathon*

“Just when there was a need for another American hero in our sport, along came Meb. He epitomizes everything this sports stands for—courage, determination, commitment, and above all, respect. There is no better role model in our sport than Meb Keflezighi.”

DAVE MCGILLIVRAY

*Race director, BAA Boston Marathon; president, DMSE, Inc.*

“No runner has endured a longer or more arduous marathon than Meb Keflezighi—from Eritrea to Italy to the USA—or conquered the distance with as much optimism, resilience, and grace. *Run to Overcome* is the inspiring story of the man who led the rebirth of distance running in the States. A truly American story.”

JOHN POWERS

*Boston Globe*

“I first saw Meb run as a freshman at UCLA, where he immediately made an impact on collegiate distance running. Meb seems to make an impact wherever he goes and on whatever he is involved in. Whether it is inspiring a resurgence in U.S. distance running or helping his family realize the American dream, Meb is an iconic example of a person setting out to be the best that he can be.”

RAFER JOHNSON

*1960 U.S. Olympic gold medalist, decathlon*

“Meb is one of the key figures who has put U.S. distance running back on the map. More important, he is a personal inspiration to so many people. It is not what he has achieved, but how he has achieved it, that is most remarkable. He has overcome incredible adversity and accomplished what many thought was impossible. Through it all, Meb’s positive outlook and the importance he places on family serve as an example to us all.”

DOUG LOGAN

*CEO, USA Track & Field*

“Runners and nonrunners alike will be moved by the incredible life story of Meb and the Keflezighi family. Strong family values molded Meb into a determined, humble, and hungry competitor. *Run to Overcome* is his story of triumph, perseverance, and victory. It will move you, not just to run faster, but to go through life with the passion and grace of this truly blessed athlete.”

DEENA KASTOR

*2004 U.S. Olympic bronze medalist, marathon; U.S. record holder in marathon and half marathon*

“This book is a must-read for every coach and athlete in America. Meb’s journey has displayed the true qualities of Olympism as well as any Olympic athlete past or present. It is this magnificent display of values that has propelled him to become one of America’s greatest distance runners.”

COACH JOE I. VIGIL

*U.S. Olympic distance coach, 1988 and 2008*

“*Run to Overcome* provides a fascinating inside look at Meb’s efforts to strengthen American distance running.”

BILL RODGERS

*Winner of multiple New York City and Boston Marathons; former American record holder in the marathon*

“Meb’s story is the American dream. He has worked hard to succeed both personally and professionally and to create a better life for his family and those around him. *Run to Overcome* is a book that anyone looking to understand what success really is should read.”

DR. HARVEY SCHILLER

*CEO, GlobalOptions group; former executive director, U.S. Olympic Committee*

“Meb’s vision, passion and disciplined execution have made him an exceptional athlete. While competing with Meb over the years, I had the pleasure of learning that he’s even a better human being than he is an athlete. As Meb continues to couple these exceptional talents and traits, there is nothing he can’t accomplish.”

BOB KENNEDY

*1992 and 1996 U.S. Olympic team, 5,000 meters; U.S. record holder in 3,000 meters*

“Meb’s family instilled in him a persistence and toughness that allowed him to rise above barriers and setbacks that would have defeated most athletes. Meb made himself into a great runner by working on every aspect of the art and science of running. His dedication to purpose and to the details of training is unsurpassed by all the great athletes I have worked with or observed.”

COACH BOB LARSEN

*Four-time NCAA Coach of the Year (track and field/cross country); coach, Mammoth Track Club*

“Meb’s early years in Eritrea were very similar to mine in Ethiopia. His family’s journey ultimately landed him in the United States at a young age. Meb has utilized the support and resources around him to get the most out of his God-given talent and has gone on to become one of the best distance runners in U.S. history. Meb is someone I respect and admire, not only for his achievements but also for his character.”

HAILE GEBRSELASSIE  
*Marathon world record holder*

“Meb’s story is one of the most compelling I know, and one that will lift all spirits. His victory in New York was much bigger than an individual win—rather, it was a win for a family whose story represents the best of this nation.”

MARY WITTENBERG  
*CEO and president of New York Road Runners*

“Meb is a natural runner with a stride as smooth as silk. What I love most about Meb, though, is the way he communicates a message of diversity, so that runners of all races, colors, and abilities are accepted and celebrated in the great sport of running.”

BART YASSO  
*Chief Running Officer, Runner’s World*

“Meb and I had our shining moment at the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens. Those of us who know Meb, know he is a very giving person who loves interacting with people. In person, via e-mail, and by phone, Meb advises me and my Eritrean teammates on many matters related to running. I was very happy to see him earn an Olympic silver medal and win the New York City Marathon.”

ZERSENAY TADESE  
*First Eritrean Olympic medalist; men’s world record holder in the 20K and half marathon*

***RUN to***

***THE INSPIRING STORY OF AN AMERICAN***

# ***OVERCOME***

***CHAMPION'S LONG-DISTANCE QUEST TO ACHIEVE A BIG DREAM***

MEB KEFLEZIGHI with Dick Patrick



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*Run to Overcome: The Inspiring Story of an American Champion's Long-Distance Quest to Achieve a Big Dream*

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# FOREWORD

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BY JOAN BENOIT SAMUELSON

“RUN TO WIN”—Meb Keflezighi’s tried and true mantra—doesn’t begin to describe a life and a career that have helped escalate advancements in distance running among American men in recent years. In fact, winning through running is only a small part of what winning really means to Meb and his family, who emigrated to the United States of America from Eritrea via an escape route through Italy in 1987.

*Run to Overcome* is an inspiring account and autobiography of a highly decorated American distance runner and marathoner who has become a warm and giving friend to many of his fellow athletes. Meb is also a global role model for aspiring young runners.

I really got to know Meb at the TD Bank Beach to Beacon 10K in 2007. That was his first appearance there, and I consider it one of the most rewarding highlights I have enjoyed as founder of the race. Watching Meb interact with the young runners in my hometown of Cape Elizabeth, Maine,

is something that will not fade from my memory anytime soon. His appreciation and respect for his host family, fellow competitors, and race sponsors resonated with the entire community.

Meb's book is full of wonderful stories related to living the American dream. Challenges and hardships were commonplace in Meb's early years, and they were overcome by strong family faith and beliefs. As a boy, Meb developed a work ethic second to none, which was fostered by his father and supported and practiced by his mother and many siblings. Meb is a man who has a strong sense of self and high moral standards. He knows how one person or family can make a difference in the lives of many.

Being able to call Meb my friend is a true honor. As a distance runner, I know the passion and dedication a successful runner needs in order to achieve goals in the sport. Going the extra mile and serving as a change agent in one's community and sport have led to entirely different examples of success, which warrant accolades in Meb's résumé of accomplishments. Meb's story has given and will continue to give countless immigrants and runners reason and confidence to believe in their dreams while following their hearts.

# 1.0 / AN AMERICAN DREAM

I RUN A LOT AND PRAY A LOT, but I generally don't ask God for a win. I was breaking precedent at the 2009 New York City Marathon.

Knowing I've worked my hardest in training, I am usually content to see whoever's best on race day win. But on November 1, 2009, I wanted—I prayed—to be the first across the finish line in Manhattan's Central Park.

Waiting for the 26.2-mile race to start, I stood on the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge in the front row of nearly 42,000 runners, braced against the chilly temperatures with my beanie, gloves, and arm warmers. I couldn't help but think of how far I had come—and how much I had overcome—since my childhood days in a war-torn African village.

I was born in Eritrea in East Africa and, after a brief stay in Italy, emigrated with my family to the United States at the age of 12 in 1987. Growing up without electricity or running water in a rural Eritrean village, I didn't see television

until we moved to Italy when I was 10. I was so naive that I thought real people were inside the TV set. Now I was about to compete in front of 2 million spectators and a worldwide television audience of 330 million. It was just one of many examples of the incredible arc of my life from the third world to the modern world.

In Eritrea, even when I was lucky enough to attend school, I never owned a textbook. Now all my siblings of college age have graduated from or are attending U.S. universities. I went barefoot in Eritrea; now I own enough running shoes to start a small store.

Sometimes I can't believe all that has happened to me. But in New York I really wanted a win and knew it wasn't going to be easy. Race director Mary Wittenberg and elite athlete coordinator David Monti had assembled a strong field, one that Mary was calling the best in race history for men. The lineup included four Olympic medalists and six men who had medaled at the world track & field championships.

Based on PRs (personal records) in the marathon, I was the 10th fastest runner in the field. That seemed like pretty good odds, having only nine faster guys in the race. I've faced a lot worse situations. At the 2004 Athens Olympics, I was 39th fastest on the starting list and wound up with the silver medal. Not many people, other than my longtime coach, Bob Larsen, and I, gave me much of a chance at a medal.

The situation was similar in New York. Some people thought I was too old, at 34, and too complacent, with an Olympic medal, to be a factor. Others assumed my career was in a free fall after a series of disappointments and injuries from late 2007 through 2008 or that I had become too distracted

after my wife and I had started a family. The doubters figured I could no longer summon the focus required for world-class training and racing.

What the naysayers failed to consider is that I have been running to overcome all my life. They forgot how driven I am. When I commit to something, I'm all in, all 5 foot 5½ inches and 123 pounds of me. I am often at my best when things look the worst. Maybe it's an inherited ability. My parents are role models in overcoming adversity. It's because of them that my 10 siblings and I are often called the classic American success story.

We came to the United States with virtually nothing but the clothes on our backs and the faith that we were in the Land of Opportunity, where education could be pursued and hard work would be rewarded. I had no idea that running was even a sport when we arrived in the States. My running journey began with a timed mile in my seventh grade phys ed class. I got all my competitive experience in the United States through middle school, high school, and college meets.

Victory at the 2009 New York City Marathon would be sweet for a number of reasons. To begin with, the race hadn't had an American winner since Alberto Salazar won the last of his three consecutive titles in 1982. Second, I had never had a victory in my previous 11 marathon starts, though I had been close at times, including twice in New York. Furthermore, many "experts" thought my career was over, and even I considered retirement in 2008 because of injury. I also wanted to do something special in honor of my friend and former training partner, Ryan Shay, who died of cardiac arrest in 2007 while we were competing in the Olympic trials marathon in Central

Park. Perhaps most important, my parents, wife, and children were at the race. I envisioned accomplishing something special with them in attendance.

So I had plenty of motivation. And who could fail to get inspired by the ING New York City Marathon start venue? It has to be the best in the world. The Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, with its two towers and the upper deck of its two levels filled with runners, is a striking sight.

If you look carefully when the bus takes you to the start, you can see the Statue of Liberty in the harbor. Lady Liberty is a powerful symbol for all Americans, especially an immigrant like me who, while continuing to love my native country, is so grateful for the privilege of U.S. citizenship.

Given my pride in my adopted country, I thought it was appropriate to wear a USA singlet in a race desperate for an American winner. Race administrators and my sponsor wanted me to wear the singlet to create some buzz among fans. I considered it an honor and a performance enhancer: Spectators would be chanting “USA! USA! USA!” when they saw me, providing an adrenaline boost.

I felt a special relationship with the New York City Marathon. It’s where I ran my first marathon in 2002, finishing ninth. I vowed never to run another marathon after that race; now I call the experience my PhD in the event. I placed second in 2004 and third in 2005. I was 20th in 2006, after suffering food poisoning. So I had a long history of ups and downs with the event.

Twenty-six miles, 385 yards is a long way—a lot can go wrong during that span—even when you’re used to running up to 135 miles in a week. I had trouble sleeping the night

before, awakening at 12:30 a.m. for the first of many times with even more than the usual pre-race jitters.

At the start line, I was in full race mode, clued in to my body and attuned to my opponents. I had one minor worry. I hadn't been able to do my full warm-up of eight to ten strides of 100 meters at race pace; I was only able to get in two. I hoped that wouldn't be a problem in the early going. But there was no more time for apprehension.

The cannon fired. One more quick prayer and we were off.

**RUNNER'S TIP**

John Wooden used to begin each basketball season at UCLA by teaching his players how to put on socks. I'll start you with the reminder to tie your shoelaces securely. If you're going for a morning run, make sure you have everything ready the night before so you don't lose time trying to locate necessities.

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**OVERCOMER'S TIP**

Once you've committed yourself to something, pace yourself to the finish line.