

Track and Field



Abebe Bikila



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In the Service of the Negus

10 September 1960. During the Olympic Games in Rome, journalists, officials and other interested people are all asking the same question: Who is this man? Where does he come from? Is Bikila his surname or his Christian name? There, next to the Arch of Constantine, stood an athlete in a green singlet. He had just won the olympic marathon, and no one knew who he was. Word got around that the man's name was Abebe Bikila (or was it Bikila Abebe?), and that he came from Ethiopia. But what was greeted with astonishment was the news that this man had run the 26 mi 385 yd in bare feet. A great new athletics star had just been born, out of nowhere. The unexpected arrival on the sports scene of this corporal from the Royal Guard represented more than one man's personal victory: it marked the beginning of African involvement in international athletics.

This was no ordinary man following no ordinary destiny. Discreet, mysterious even, as is his country, Bikila often trained at altitudes of up to 10,000 ft. He succeeded even in astonishing his coach, the Swede

Onni Niskanen who was instructing officer to the Ethiopian Air Force. Abebe was capable of running for hours at a time, carried along by thin, sinewy legs and characterized by a particularly spare and economical running style. He hardly sweated at all and in Rome he lost only 7 lbs in weight during the marathon. Added to this, no one who saw him in Tokyo will forget the bewildering sequence of limbering exercises which he undertook at the end of the marathon. In March 1969, tragedy struck. Bikila was involved in a serious road accident which left him partially paralyzed. After being sent to London for treatment by top specialists, he returned to Addis Ababa to see for the first time his son. Bikila came to the Munich olympics in his wheelchair. He died in autumn 1973 after a cerebral hemorrhage.

ABEBE BIKILA

Born Aug. 7, 1932, on the outskirts of Addis Ababa, ETH

Died autumn 1973

AWARDS AND RECORDS

1960 OG: gold medal, marathon, in 2 h 15:16.2

1964 OG: gold medal, marathon, in 2 h 12:11.2

1968: retired from Olympic Games because of injury

Abebe Bikila after running 42 km barefoot