

## Thank You, Meb

I remember it like it was yesterday: July 7, 2013. It was my 23rd birthday, and I was celebrating in Clevedon, a quaint little seafront town on the Bristol Channel in England. I sat in a beautiful flat with one of my dear friends and her family, bent forward, staring deep into the television's soul. Hopes and dreams rested on the television screen, ones that were generations in the making.

On that fateful Sunday—the seventh day of the seventh month, 77 years after the last Briton won a men's Wimbledon Championship title—Scotland's Andy Murray captured victory at the All England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club, snapping one of the longest droughts in sports history. Great Britain had reclaimed the crown at Wimbledon.

Watching Andy Murray win and seeing the subsequent outpouring of love from his nation—a mixture of relief, jubilation, pride and emotion—made me think of a streak that marathoners recall every April: how long it has been since an American won the Boston Marathon.

In the days after Murray's victory, I reflected and observed, watching how Great Britain reveled in the joy



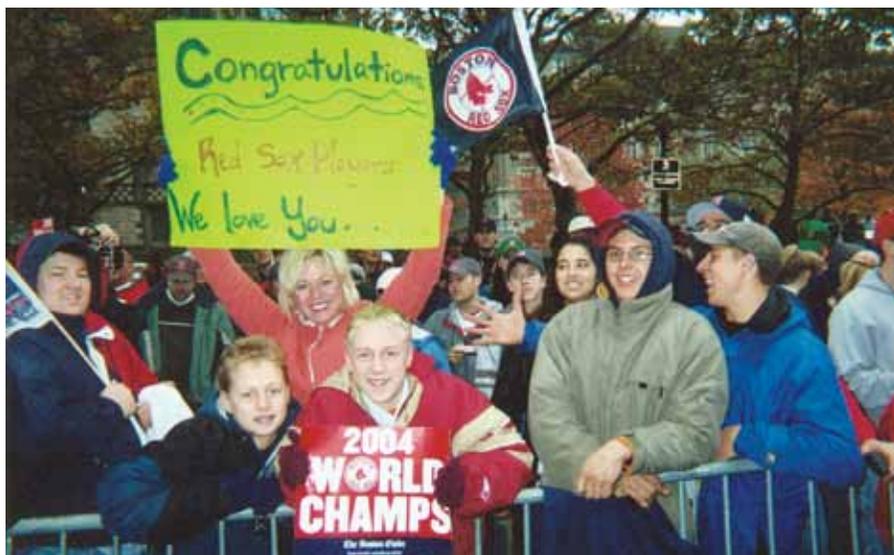
of a homegrown talent winning the nation's most prestigious sporting tournament. Writing for *Race Results Weekly*, I tried to put my thoughts on paper.

“While watching the duel come to a close, thoughts of other sporting droughts came to mind, particularly in athletics,” I wrote on July 7, 2013. “It’s been 28 years since an American—male or female—has won the Boston Marathon (1985, Lisa Larsen Weidenbach); 10 years since Great Britain’s Paula Radcliffe set the women’s marathon world record of 2:15:25 (2003); 14 years to the day (July 7, 1999) since Hicham El Guerrouj set the mile world record in Rome, timing 3:43.13.”

*Streaks in road racing and track and field, I thought to myself, have to be broken at some point. Right? Just keep the faith, and it will happen. Someday. Someday.*

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Growing up outside of Boston, I sat on the edge of my seat as the Boston Red Sox swept the 2004 World Series, breaking an 86-year streak dubbed the Curse of the Bambino. The Sox hadn't won a World Series since 1918, before Babe Ruth was shipped to the New York



Courtesy of Chris Lotsbom

▲ Streaks such as the Red Sox World Series drought that ended in 2004 resulted in the celebration of millions—including the author (holding the 2004 World Champs sign) and his family.

Yankees in one of the most lopsided trades in sports history. That all changed on October 27, 2004, when the team and all of Sox nation celebrated their championship. I celebrated that day, too, jumping around my house and screaming with glee.

If I learned one thing from that 2004 Red Sox team, it was reinforced by Andy Murray’s win at Wimbledon in 2013: just believe, and eventually it will happen. Just give it time. Keep the faith.

For years I had thought and dreamt about an American—male or female—winning Boston, the granddaddy of all marathons and the longest consecutive run marathon in the world.

In 2009 and 2011, we—I say *we* as in Americans—had come oh, so close. Kara Goucher was brought to tears after placing third in 2009, some nine

seconds behind Salina Kosgei of Kenya in a race that saw her take the lead less than a mile from the finish.

“I’m proud of how I did, I just,” she said in her postrace interview, taking a deep pause and trying to hold back tears. “I just wanted it for everyone that supported me. I wanted to be the one that won for everybody.”

Hopes came again two years later, when Hansons-Brooks Original Distance Project star Desiree Davila ran a tactically flawless race, conserving energy early before racing down Boylston Street in front, only to be passed by Caroline Kilel. Davila finished two seconds behind Kilel, though her placing and tenacity were yet another testament that America was getting closer.

On the men’s side, consistent top-five finishes by Ryan Hall (third in 2009, fourth in 2010 and 2011) and

Jason Hartmann (fourth in 2012 and 2013) provided a glimmer of hope. After all, top fives were much better than Americans had fared in the generation before. In the 17 years from 1988 through 2004, a combined five American men finished in the top 10 at the Boston Marathon. That period included a stretch of six consecutive years without a patriot finishing in the top ten on Patriots' Day.

Before the tragic terrorist attacks of April 15, 2013, rocked the marathon's finish line, it was Shalane Flanagan of Marblehead, Massachusetts, gutting it out for a fourth-place showing. Coming to tears moments after crossing the line, she showed how much she wanted to win for her home city, state, and country.

"I've been thinking about this moment and running in this race for a really long time, so I'm extremely happy to have fulfilled a lifelong goal of mine," said Flanagan in April 2013, tears welling in her eyes. "But I dreamt of winning. I dreamt of a laurel wreath on my head, and it didn't happen, but that's the reason why dreams or goals are big, and they're hard.

"The hardest part about Boston is that the Bostonians want it just as bad as you do," Flanagan continued. "We want to be that person. We want to be the next Joanie."

Of course, she was referring to Joan Benoit Samuelson, the second-to-last American women's champion in Boston (1983).

For years athletes have talked about how snapping streaks like the ones in Boston and at Wimbledon are much

more meaningful than simply being crowned champion. The longer the drought, the more pressure there is, a feeling that motivates athletes and provides frustration for both athlete and nation alike. Entering the 2014 Boston Marathon, I had a good feeling. There was just too much energy in the air for an American *not* to win Boston.

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"Hope," "patience," and "determination." I kept thinking of these words, telling myself that if an American did not win Boston 2014, then I wouldn't be disappointed. As I had grown accustomed to saying in relation to the Red Sox: wait 'til next year. There is always next year. Someday it will happen.

But for 29 years, Bostonians and Americans had waited 'til next year, only to see athletes from Italy and Portugal, Russia and Germany, and, yes, Ethiopia and Kenya claim victories.

The 2014 Boston Marathon was special, extra special. No, it was more than extra special. It was exceptionally significant, extraordinarily momentous. For more than 12 months, runners and nonrunners alike had been looking forward to Marathon Monday. There was a palpable excitement in the air all throughout the city and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

A total of 36,000 were entered in the 118th Boston Marathon, the second-largest field in event history. More than half of the starters were Americans, all of whom had been touched by the bombings a year before. Of them, a handful of Americans were part of John Hancock's elite-athlete field, the best

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of the best ready to go to battle on the streets between Hopkinton and Boston. Surely one of them had what it took to claim the laurel wreath.

I truly believed that 2014, a year filled with so much strength, resilience, and anticipation, was *our* year. An American would win the Boston Marathon.

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Naturally superstitious, I didn't make any predictions, none whatsoever. When asked, I would say it's a legendary field and anybody could win. I would say that it would be historic and the biggest win in American history if a compatriot broke the tape on Boylston Street, but I made sure to say "if" and "would," not selectively picking out any athlete or two. I didn't want to be the one jinxing the race, after all.

Deep down, I gave Shalane Flanagan the best chance. She was from Boston and had so much pride and determination that I figured that alone would carry her through the tough patches and on to victory. After her appearance on *60 Minutes* with Anderson Cooper, Massachusetts was swept up in Shalane mania. Images of her would appear on the nightly news and in the daily papers, creating the biggest athlete-specific buzz I had seen in Boston since the days when Tom Brady began leading the Patriots to Super Bowl victories. Everyone knew her by first name and hometown: Shalane, the girl from Marblehead. My immediate family—not into running whatsoever—asked about her, wanting to know if indeed she had what it took to win Boston.

With a front-row seat on the women's lead vehicle, I watched Shalane cruise through the early miles and pass 10 kilometers well under course-record pace. The determination was evident on her face, her stride fluid like a metronome, with a handful of Kenyans and Ethiopians resting in her wake meters behind.

She would describe the crowds like a stadium, rattling her insides and eardrums in each of the eight cities and towns. Chants of "USA! USA!" rained down more and more as the miles passed, with fans shouting encouragement from all directions. From the media truck, you could hear various pronunciations of Flanagan's name, but all had one thing in common: the hopes and desire of a USA victory.

"Go Sha-*leen*, go Sha-lane-*ee*, go Sha-lane!"

When the hills hit in Newton, Shalane was digging down deep. The hopes and dreams were there, and her pace was still hot: she had trained to run 2:22:00, which would have won each of the last 11 Boston Marathons. No one had predicted the pace (a blistering 1:09:25 at halfway) would continue on over the hills, with reigning champion Rita Jeptoo taking charge and never letting up.

Although Shalane dropped back and out of sight, everyone on the lead vehicle knew she was running a spectacular race, the race of her life. As she turned onto Boylston Street, the crowds cheered their hometown hero to the fastest-ever performance by an American on the Boston course:



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▲ Shalane Flanagan used the support and cheers of her hometown crowd to carry her to the fastest finish ever by an American woman in Boston, 2:22:02.

2:22:02. Flanagan had run more than a three-minute personal best, something everyone was proud of. Yet the fire still burned in her heart.

“I have a good friend, Joan Benoit Samuelson, and for three years she’s told me to run my own race,” Flanagan told members of the media, her eyes welling with tears just as they had a year before. “Today, I wanted to go out and do just that. I wanted to see if it was good enough to win the olive wreath.

“It does mean a lot to me that my city is proud of me, so yeah. I’m proud of how I ran, and like I said, I don’t wish it was easier. I just wish I was better. It was a really heartfelt effort today,” she added.

With Shalane’s finish, I had come to the conclusion that Boston 2014 was a success even though an American didn’t

win. While she may not have earned the coveted laurel wreath, Flanagan ran an amazingly fast time and inspired a generation of runners and nonrunners alike, coming back home with gusto and flare, trying to snap that overdue streak. With her ties to the Bay State, her race was even more meaningful.

That was when a friend told me Meb was in front with a mile to go. Yes, Meb Keflezighi, the ageless wonder, long the face of American marathoning.

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I have had the pleasure of covering Meb Keflezighi’s career for the better half of a decade. Over that span I’ve seen the ups (a 2009 victory at the New York City Marathon, his fourth-place finish at the London Olympic Marathon), and the downs (last year’s New York City Marathon, a heart-rending

2:23:47 performance). After last year, many people thought Meb was done, that he would race one more marathon and go out with a decent top 10 finish, waving to the crowd before retiring as one of the most decorated marathoners in American history.

He would join the Mount Rushmore of marathoners representing the USA, in between Frank Shorter and Bill Rodgers, winners through and through. He would be remembered for his persistence, his caring nature and story: fleeing war-torn Eritrea, succeeding in high school and college in California, and then racing to dozens of national titles and World Marathon Major podium finishes at New York and Boston and at the Olympic Games: living the American dream.

But Keflezighi entered the 2014 Boston Marathon with purpose. Having read Rodgers's book *Marathon Man*, he was ready to give Boston hell, bring home the glory for those who were sick and tired of the winless streak. Most importantly, he wanted to win for Martin Richard, Krystle Campbell, Lu Lingzi, and officer Sean Collier, all of whom lost their lives in 2013. Those four victims' names were written on his bib number, and would hold a special place in Meb's heart.

Meb was like Andy Murray at Wimbledon and the 2004 Red Sox. He was destined to make history, inspire a generation, and end a drought that had lasted far too long.

"I used them to propel me forward," he would say, speaking of the crowds that lined the 26.2 miles and willed

him on to victory. "I just wanted to run strong and see what happened."

Sometimes, when the heart takes over, it leads you to the glory land.

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Greg Meyer, the last American male to win Boston, was there on Boylston Street as Keflezighi looked back with less than a quarter mile to go, the finish tape right ahead of him and a chasing Wilson Chebet behind.

The streak was about to be broken. Thirty-one years was long enough. The glowing image of Meb breaking the tape will go down in history, one filled with emotion, triumph, disbelief, and fulfillment.

At the winner's press conference on Marathon Monday, as well as the wrap-up gathering less than 24 hours later, Keflezighi talked at length about how winning Boston was the final to-do left in his career. With the victory, he had fulfilled his goals by "110 percent." He was the first athlete in history to win the Boston Marathon, New York City Marathon, and a medal at an Olympic Marathon. And most importantly, he was an American.

"I was delighted to have that 99.9 percent of my career fulfilled, but today," he said, "today was the missing link on my resume."

In a way, it seemed that the 2014 Boston Marathon wouldn't be complete without an American claiming victory. That's what made April 21, 2014, all the sweeter. That's what made April 21, 2014, a day that will go down in history: running history, American history, and world history.

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Meb won for America. He won for the victims. He won for his family and all those who stood by his side. He won for Shalane and the millions of American runners who had dreamed of a win for decades, pleading with the running gods to let it happen again. He won for a sport. He won for America.

Meb won for Meb. He made it happen.

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On the train home, eight or so hours after Keflezighi had lifted the winner's trophy, I sat by myself thinking. I recalled a series of years in the mid- to late 1990s, when my family would travel to Newton or Framingham or Natick and take in the marathon.

I would sit on my father's shoulders and ask him who the leaders were. He didn't follow the sport of marathoning in the slightest.

"Daddy, who is that?"

"I don't know but probably a Kenyan. They are fast and win," he would say.

Each year I would ask him, and I would get the same response.

Kenyan. Ethiopian. Kenyan. Ethiopian. Not an American.

As I got older, I learned about Bill Rodgers and Alberto Salazar, Clarence DeMar and Johnny Kelley. With their stories, I grew hopeful that someday, some year, an American would reclaim Boston.



Courtesy of Chris Lotsbom

▲ Moments after crossing the finish line, Meb Keflezighi shares a moment with Greg Meyer, the last American to win the Boston Marathon before Keflezighi.



Courtesy of Chris Lotsbom

▲ Meb Keflezighi brought smiles to millions of faces with his victory at the 2014 Boston Marathon, breaking a 31-year winless drought for American men.

I knew it would be a day all would remember, a day that would be punctuated with a celebration unlike any other. It would be a day when that victorious American would capture front-page headlines in all of the nation's major papers, be the leading story on the primetime news, and even make it onto ESPN.

Meb Keflezighi embodied a community, nation, and world on Marathon Monday. He proved that hope and inspiration can lead to the most joyous of times, that hard work and dedication do indeed pay off when you keep your

head up. The impossible is attainable when you have a goal and a dream.

While the national anthem played and the mayor of Boston stood shoulder to shoulder with Meb on the winner's podium, there was a twinkle in their eyes. An American had at last reclaimed the top spot. The drought was over, and no one could have asked for a better storybook ending.

We don't have to wait until next year anymore. Thank you, Meb. You made what once was a dream come true. You embodied the sport and community. You were Boston Strong. You are a hero.