

# STORIES FROM THE VAULT

## THE TRIALS OF A EUROPEAN TRACK SEASON

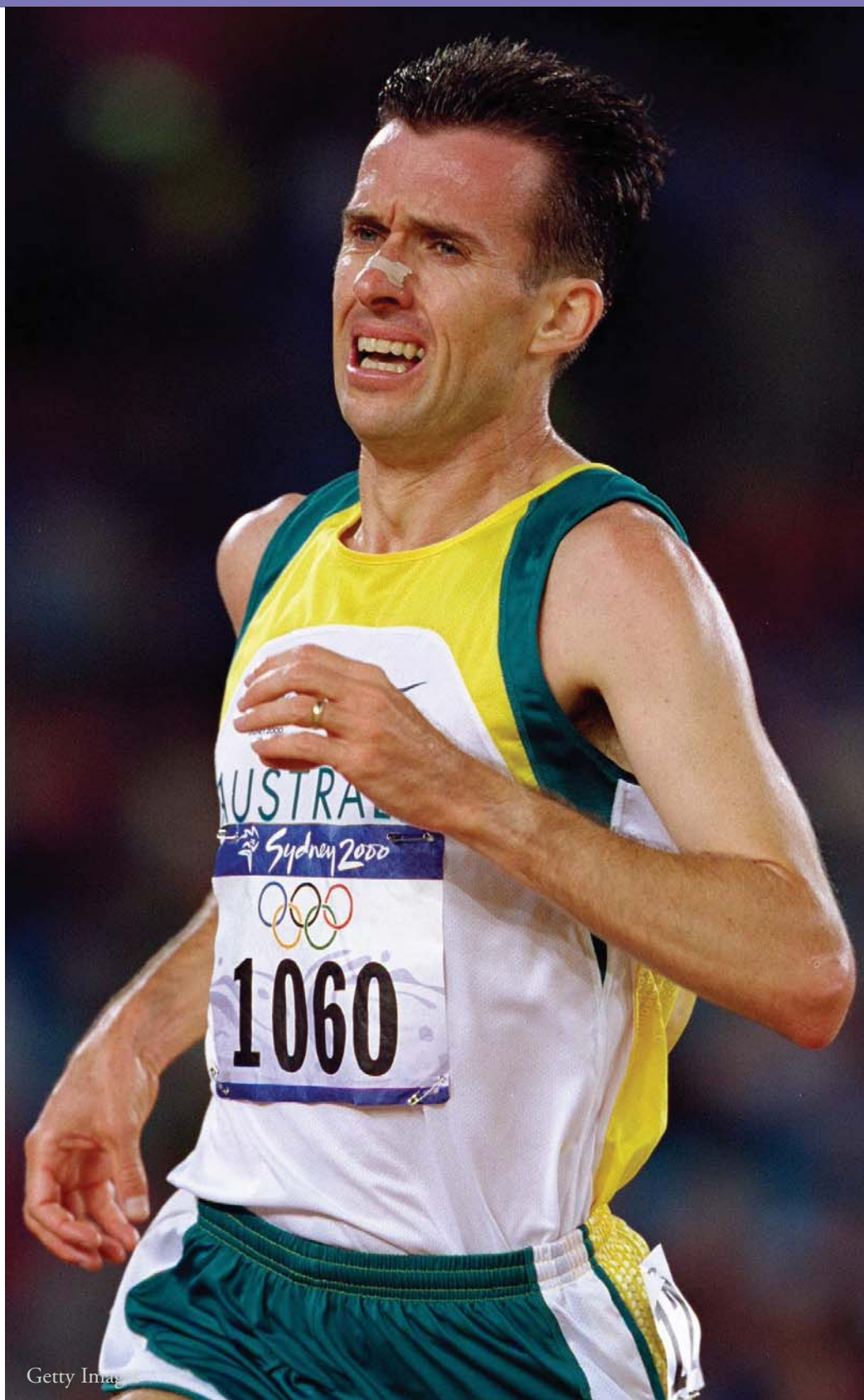
By Shaun Creighton

Having competed in international events from 1988 until 2003 there is a wide range of experiences and stories that readers may be interested in. I've selected this particular story as it brings an insight to competition on the international stage, and may provide some lessons in relation to training, racing and tapering.

The year is 1995 and I had a full racing schedule which started with the Australian domestic track season in January and February, the World Indoor Track & Field Championships (where I placed 7<sup>th</sup> in the 3000m) and the World Cross Country Championships (where I placed 25<sup>th</sup> in the 12km – in the days before there was a short course race). My goals for the European Grand Prix season were to break the Australian records at 3000m, 5000m and 10,000m, compete well in the World Championships final and do the same in the IAAF Grand Prix final.

The international track season started well with a 3<sup>rd</sup> placing over 3000m at the Sao Paula Grand Prix 1 (GP1) meet, and a victory in the New York GP1 meet, also in the 3000m – running 7.46 on both occasions. These early GP points bode well for my chances of making the GP Final. Next stop was Hengelo and an attack on the Australian 10,000m record of 27.39. Despite placing 4<sup>th</sup> behind Haile Gebrselassie, Assefa Mezebubu and Antonio Pinto, I only ran 28.09. A significant point of note was that everyone in the field was lapped at least once as the great man, Gebrselassie, ran a world record of 26.44. It was a rude awakening that although on my day I was competitive against most, I was still a long way behind the world record.

The season progressed well with an Australian 3000m record in Nice (7.42.0), followed by lowering it further in Oslo (7.41.60), and just missing the Australian 5000m record in



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“ The night before the race I found myself in discussions over coffee with Gebrselassie’s agent Jos Hermans and Haile himself ”

Lausanne (13.17.7 to the then Australian record of 13.16.6). The biggest disappointment of that season came at the World Championships when despite running what I thought was a very good race for 5<sup>th</sup> in my heat, I missed the final by one place.

The week after the World Championships I watched as Haile Gebrselassie lowered the world record for 5000m to an amazing 12.39. The next day I went to the track at London's famed Crystal Palace & ran harder than I normally would have in training, on the basis that the bar had been raised and harder training was required. My 1km repetitions in approximately 2.35 left me feeling so flat, my next two races in Europe were only very average and I contemplated returning home and not

competing in the Grand Prix Final.

I ultimately decided to take 10 days break from hard training and still compete in the Grand Prix final in Monaco. This event is the only Grand Prix race where there are no rabbits, with all 12 starters having to qualify for the right to compete. With significant money awarded for the Grand Prix event winner and for the overall IAAF Grand Prix point score winner, it's not unheard of for deals to be struck for those with little chance of winning to act as rabbits. I obviously fell into that category and the night before the race I found myself in discussions over coffee with Gebrselassie's agent Jos Hermans and Haile himself. They asked that I act as Haile's rabbit in his attempt to break the world 3000m record. A deal was struck, including what pace I'd have to run

and for what distance to receive agreed compensation. I wouldn't have agreed to do the pacing had I felt I was still running well at that stage of the season, but as I felt I was done, pacing was a reasonable option for me – I could assist Haile and also return home with guaranteed money in my pocket.

On the morning of the Grand Prix Final I was awoken by the hotel phone. The caller was Kim McDonald, a friend that managed a number of athletes, including Moses Kiptanui who I was also friends with. What I hadn't appreciated was that Moses would be declared the overall Grand Prix winner and if so would collect a \$100,000 prize, assuming he won his steeplechase race and assuming no athlete with sufficient points going into the Grand Prix Final broke a world record. Haile had sufficient points that had he won in a world record time he'd have been the overall Grand Prix winner rather than Moses. As I didn't want to be in a situation that had the potential to become very controversial, I called Haile's agent and advised I would no longer be able to undertake the pacing duties. Jos and Haile accepted this decision with the sort of grace that endears them to many in the track and field community.

As a post-script – Haile won the 3000m but did not break the world record and Moses won the overall Grand Prix champion prize. My roommate in Monaco was Damien Marsh and he surprised many, probably including himself, to win the 100m in a then Australian Record. Damien's career was then tragically cut short with an achilles tendon injury the next year. Even more tragically, Kim McDonald passed away at a very young age a few years later. My own result in this race was interesting in itself. Having taken some time off from hard training, I obviously freshened up well & recorded my 3<sup>rd</sup> fastest ever 3000m (7.42.0), but missed the prize money by 0.1 seconds, having got to the bell with a task of out-kicking both Ishmael Kirui (the world 5000m champion at the time) and Dieter Baumann (the Olympic 5000m champion at the time). I had passed both and thought I was home until Baumann re-passed me in the final few strides.

It's a tough sport, but with dedication and hard work the rewards are plenty.



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