

# GREATEST RACES OF ALL TIME

## 2003 World Championships Steeplechase final – A Case Of National Pride

To kick off this new section we are going to relive what I consider to be one of the best races that I have seen in the last decade. In a strange and unusual twist, Kenya was not waging a track war against its mortal enemy Ethiopia, it was against its newest foe, Qatar. And the battleground was in an event owned by the Kenyans for the past fifteen years, the 3000m Steeplechase.

To further complicate the situation, it was four native Kenyans fighting for the title including: one who had recently switched alliances to Qatar amidst rumours that he had been paid to make the switch (Saif Saaeed Shaheen); his brother who was still running for Kenya (Abraham Cherono); and an inform future Olympic champion (Ezekiel Kemboi). The rumours surrounding the country switch implied an amount of \$1000 was to be paid to the athlete every month for the rest of his life if he ran for Qatar. Saif Saaeed Shaheen, who was formerly known as Stephen Cherono, the name change coming with the change in countries, had won a gold medal for Kenya in the Manchester Commonwealth Games just twelve months prior to the championships (editors note: interestingly Ezekiel Kemboi won silver and Abraham Cherono won bronze in this same race for the Kenyan medal sweep). The Kenyans were not pleased with the prospect of other countries poaching their athletes and in order to restore national pride the Kenyan's athletes were determined to retain their seventh consecutive World Championships steeplechase title.

The scene was set for a huge confrontation a week before the World Championships when Saif Saaeed Shaheen had defeated the inform Kenyan, Ezekiel Kemboi, at the Zurich Golden League meeting in a thrilling finish. Running a truly world class time of 8.02, it was only one hundredth of a second that separated the two athletes with Shaheen coming from a metre down to pip Kemboi on the line.

The World Championships steeplechase heats passed without incident as Ezekiel Kemboi cruised to victory in the first heat and Saif Saaeed Shaheen in the second. Once the final was underway the fireworks really began. Shaheen's Qatari team-mate, Khamis Abdullah Saifeldin surged to the front and made the pace lightning fast from the beginning with Shaheen tucked neatly on his heels. The pace was so quick,



Eventual winner Shaheen Saif Saaeed

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the two Qatar athletes had opened up a 20 meters lead in the first lap.

Abraham Cherono, older brother of Saif Saaeed Shaheen, burst from the pack at the beginning of the second lap and set off after the leaders. As he closed in on the leaders, Saifeldin began to fade and Shaheen took up the pace, tearing through 1km in 2.36. With four laps to go Shaheen's lead had opened to 30m on his brother and 50m on Kemboi and it looked like he was gone for all money. But the pace of the opening laps was starting to show and Kemboi sensed that Shaheen was beginning to slow. A phenomenal burst of speed saw Kemboi close down the lead within one lap catching Shaheen with two and half laps still to run. These two runners were now full 70 metres clear of the rest of the field. However once Kemboi caught Shaheen he chose to catch his breath rather than speeding straight past. The 2km point was passed in 5:19, still an exceptional pace for a championship race. It appeared the fast pace had paid its toll and both athletes were marking time to recover. In the process, Luis Miguel Martin (Spain), Eliseo Martin (Spain) and Bouabdallah Tahri (France) closed down the gap until with one lap to go the five athletes were virtually back together again. With 300m left Shaheen unleashed a devastating kick, but Kemboi was able to

hang on and Martin (Elisio) was another three metres adrift. Kemboi hit the water jump first and Shaheen looked beaten. But amazingly, Shaheen fought back and they both flew over the final barrier side by side. In the final 50 meters, Shaheen had the strength to get to the line first, stopping the clock at 8:04.39, just 23-hundredths outside Moses Kiptanui's Championships record from 1995. Kemboi clocked 8:05.11 and Elisio Martin won the race for bronze, breaking his personal best by more than four seconds, 8:09.09.

### Final Results

1. Shaheen Saif Saaeed QAT 8:04.39
  2. Kemboi Ezekiel KEN 8:05.11
  3. Martín Eliseo ESP 8:09.09 (PB)
  4. Tahri Bouabdallah FRA 8:10.65
  5. Cherono Abraham KEN 8:13.37
  6. Martín Miguel ESP 8:13.52 (SB)
  7. Vroemen Simon NED 8:13.71 (SB)
  8. Blanco José Luis ESP 8:17.16
  9. Keskiä Jukka FIN 8:17.72 (PB)
  10. Ezzine Ali MAR 8:19.15
  11. Iwamizu Yoshitaka JPN 8:19.29
  12. Saifeldin Abdullah QAT 8:28.37
  13. Hachlaf Abdelkader MAR 8:35.17
- DNS. Kosgei Reuben KEN