



ABOVE: David Rudisha ran the finest 800m ever to show how it's done.

The Art Of TAKING CHARGE

Thoughts on what we can learn from the races at the London Games

By Roger Robinson

History will probably record that the 2012 London Games were a success, because Seb Coe took such firm and astute charge. He used to do the same in his races. I only wish there had been more runners this time with that ability in the races I love most. Some were worthily Olympian, but others were frustrating because of the lack of tactical initiative the runners displayed. We can always learn from race narratives at this level.

Rudisha Reigns To start at the top, the spectacle of the games for me was not the opening ceremony or Bolt's double double, but David Rudisha taking charge of his supreme creation, the finest 800m race ever run, his epoch-making 1:40.91 world record. That came from splits of (brace yourself) 23.4, 25.88, 25.02 and 26.6. To watch the tall Maasai, so gentle and smiling in person, so commanding and god-like on the track, unhesitatingly run that pace unaided from the front was awe-inspiring.

In his wake, to their immense credit, USA's Duane Solomon and Nick Symmonds took the inspiration without the awe. Solomon leapt to world class with a 1:42.82, while Symmonds gutted his way from eighth to almost fourth, rewarded with a big PR of 1:42.95.

The race isn't over, courageous Symmonds showed us, just because you're struggling in last place at the bell and it all seems over your head. Some will inevitably come back, provided you're still in there fighting, as Symmonds fought, ready to take them (including the formidable Abubaker Kaki). I wish he'd got a medal for it.

Rudisha, and Russia's Yuliya Zaripova in the women's 3,000m steeplechase, were the only front-running winners, and even they had to find late surges to hold off unexpectedly strong challengers. Controlling the race from the front is a powerful tactic if you have the temperament, but you must never forget that it goes on to the very end. Even Rudisha would have been caught by young Nijel Amos if he hadn't stayed in charge and found one last burst of power.

Waiting for Mo Watching some other track finals, I was screaming for creativity, for someone to take control. The men's 10,000m and 5,000m were "cracking" races (as the Brits these days like to say) for Mo Farah, but static and passive until Mo's moment arrived. It was like some nightmare version of an immobile Samuel Beckett play, "Waiting for Mo." No reflection on Farah and Galen Rupp (Team Salazar), who ran exactly the tactic that suited them and executed it superbly. Farah's last 200m in the 5,000m was faster than Rudisha's. But knowing how good Farah is at a fast-closing 800m off a slow pace, why did the others so supinely set exactly that situation up for him?

In my mind's eye, old nostalgic that I am, I was watching Emil Zatopek (1948, 1952) surging and slowing, disrupting everyone's rhythm but his own; I could see Vladimir Kuts (1956) blazing fast 200s every lap or so, and Murray Halberg (1960) catching them napping by sprinting his last lap with three laps to go, and Billy Mills (1964) running his PR 5,000m at halfway, and John Ngugi (1988) leaping out from the pack with a 61-second lap after the first kilometer. Let the sprinters sprint all they like — if you've got a 50m lead like Halberg and Ngugi, chances are they won't catch you. Ah, they knew how to take charge in the old days.

In recent years, the Kenyans and/or Ethiopians have taken charge, usually with two lesser runners riding posse for their team's top gun, Tergat, Gebrselassie or Bekele. But in London they all trotted along on low volts until Farah decided to throw the switch. Perhaps it's because these days Kenya and Ethiopia

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have to field a B team on the track, because their top runners are seeking bigger money in the marathon. Anyway, my consolation Initiative Prize went to Craig Mottram, who gallantly tried to persuade them to race 5,000m instead of 900m. But he's not the man he was three years ago and no one would lend a hand.

The women's 10,000m was better, with the action starting a bit earlier thanks to Werknesh Kidane, until Tirunesh Dibaba inevitably came into her own, but in the 5,000m all was dull inaction, setting it up again for Dibaba and Meseret Defar. I'm puzzled why Vivian Cheruiyot, having trusted her sprint against Dibaba in the 10,000m and managed only third, would do the same again in the 5,000m, with Dibaba and Defar both poised to strike. If it doesn't work, send it back and try something else.

1500m Fizzle I don't like even thinking about the two 1500s. It's sad when waiting for the results of the drug tests is more exciting than the race. What a fizzle. The noble event of Mel Sheppard, Jack Lovelock, Herb Elliott, Peter Snell, Seb Coe, the beautiful, tactical, enthralling 1500m—these versions, men and women, were an insult to a great history. Both were boring jogs followed by a 300m sprint. Most high school miles are more interesting.

Leonel Manzano and Matt Centrowitz brilliantly seized the opportunity, proving once again that nothing is ever certain. If you're fast and there when the action starts, it can be your day. But two good American placings don't make a great race, and I've met no one who watched it without regret and embarrassment.

My favored Nick Willis, he of the silver medal from Beijing, after looking so great through

the qualifiers and the first three laps of the final, inexplicably lost power when the attack came. And Morgan Uceny, poor agonized unfortunate, got decked, for the second time in a major championship race. It's tragically unfair. I believe she would have won.

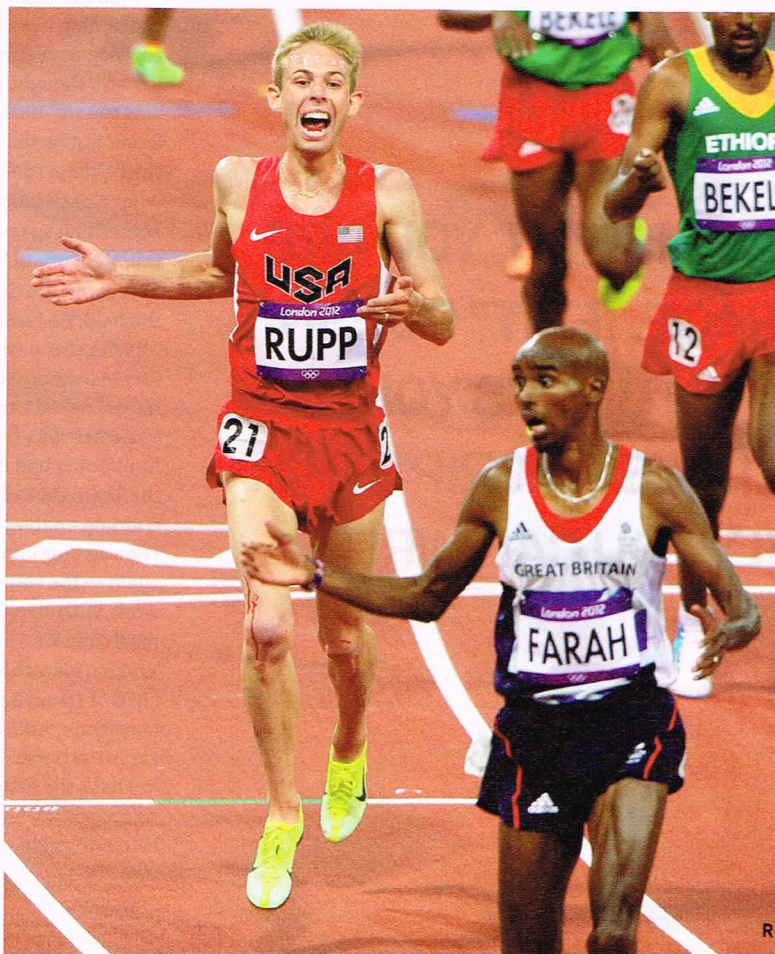
But to cast a cold nonpartisan eye on their races, the tactician could ask why Willis was still passively hanging about at 1200m waiting for something to react to. Or why Uceny would put herself into that maelstrom of proven risk, a big jostling pack at the bell, moving at a dangerously slow pace but obviously about to accelerate, and especially just going into a bend. It's like a groundhog trying to cross the freeway.

Willis and Uceny were both quoted as saying they were "in perfect position." Maybe they're right. Being a control freak, I'd prefer to be where Farah was at that point in the 5,000m, scooting along out front, accelerating through the gears, in charge, defending his front spot against all comers, the pure embodiment of the old runners' phrase "eyeballs out." If Farah had left it till the last 200m, he might never have run his closing 23.6, because Lagat could have outprinted him, or he might have been nicked from behind as Lagat actually was, when it was too late to recover the lost momentum.

You Are the Race The point is to minimize risk and maximize your chances. To do that, you have to be active, take control. Several runners in London were quoted as saying that they were "waiting for it to open up." Excuse me, a race is not an "it." A race is you. You are the race. If "it" doesn't open up, it's your fault. It's a script that only you can write.

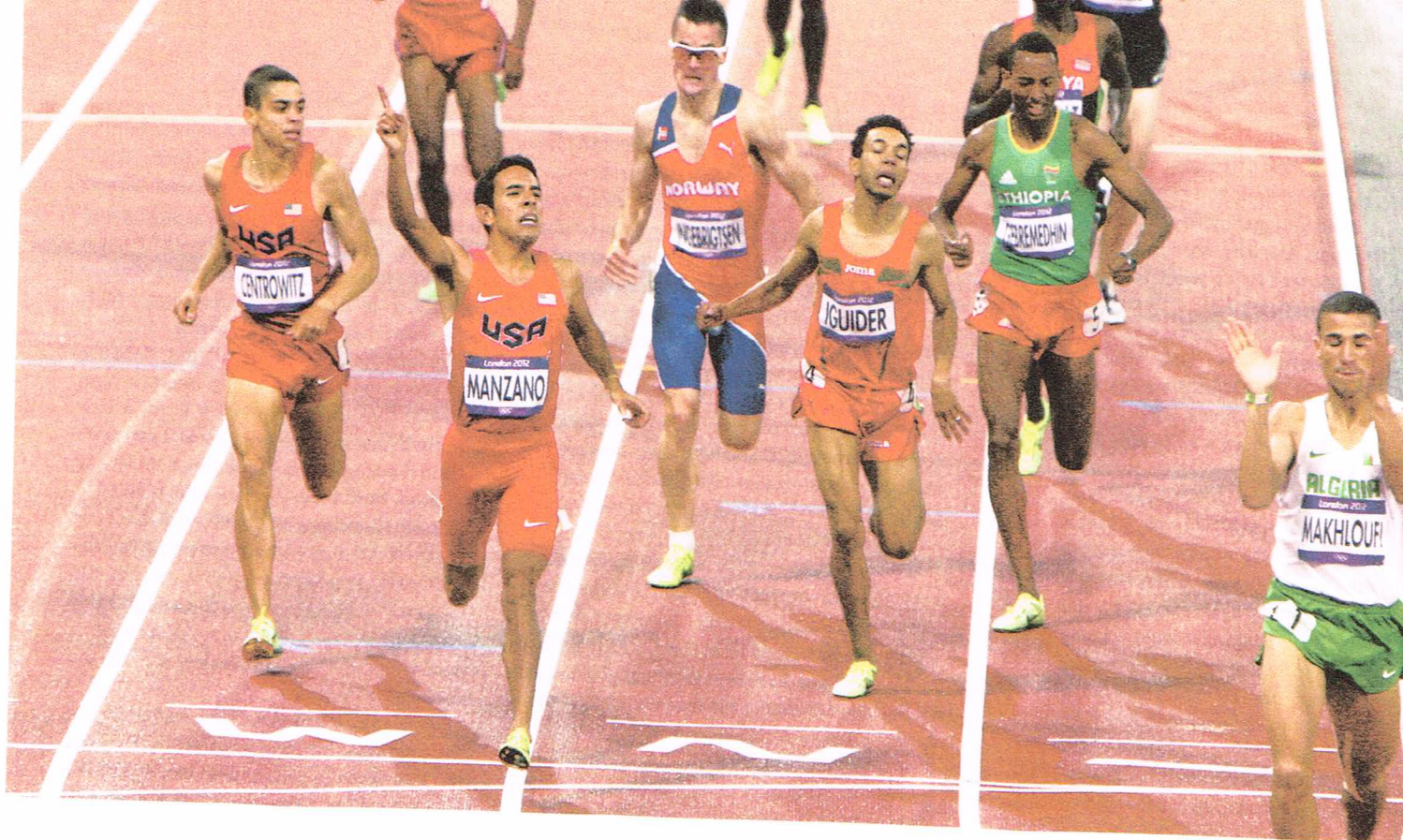
I've left the marathons till last, because they prove and disprove my argument. In both, someone took charge—Mary Keitany a little after halfway, taking a small breakaway pack; Wilson Kipsang at 8 miles, seizing a 15-second solo lead. Both blew the race apart, and succeeded in shunting a lot of powerful rivals out of contention, but without putting away the win. Kipsang finished third, Keitany fourth. Tiki Gelana was unbeatable on the day (and probably several other days still to come), and no tactic could have suppressed the emerging brilliance of Stephen Kiprotich.

People said later that Kipsang was crazy, but they didn't say that when Frank Shorter used the same tactic in 1972 or Joan Benoit Samuelson even earlier in the race in 1984, or Mizuki Noguchi (2004), or Sammy Wanjiru and Constantina Dita (2008). You need to choose the moment. To take charge is not necessarily to



LEFT: Kidane and Dibaba made things happen in the women's 10,000m.

RIGHT: The men's 10,000m and 5,000m followed the script, "Waiting for Mo."



ABOVE: Leonel Manzano and Matt Centrowitz brilliantly seized the opportunity in the 1500m.

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win. But it puts you in the best possible position to make that happen, or to get your best possible result on the day.

Meb Keflezighi took control in a different way. Short of training because of injury in June, he was struggling early on to even stay with the chase pack. His coach, Bob Larsen, thought "he looked terrible, like his best chance was top 15." Keflezighi couldn't dominate the race at the front, but he did what we can all do, wherever we are in the field: He took charge of his own race. He kept hold of what Coach Larsen called "the belief that he can make something special happen." He didn't permit himself to fail: He worked his butt off, got through the bad patch, overcame the discomfort of a blister, fought slowly up the field. He finished fourth.

"Who else with an Olympic silver medal and a New York City Marathon victory behind him would have fought that hard?" asked Larsen.

Larsen was happy that on a day when the other two Americans had injury problems, Keflezighi proved that the Team USA concept "still has momentum," that team training enables us to be among the marathon medals. The startling improvement of the British proves the point again — the way to elite success is through intense group work, with strong coaching, along with medical and technical support. Farah and others have benefited from the "London Marathon Training Camp" at Iten in Kenya, brainchild of David Bedford and funded by the Virgin London Marathon. And, of course, Farah joined Rupp and Salazar in Portland.

That's the future. If you want to make it to the top, join a good group. And then model your mind and your will on Meb Keflezighi. **RT**