

Pacer Ronoh Stuns Kipsang, Kimetto in Mattoni Olomouc Half Marathon

OLOMOUC, Czech Republic – As the lead car and press truck rounded the corner and chattered over the 13th century cobblestones lining the way toward Horni Square, the gathered fans raised their voices in anticipation of one of a triumphant finish by one of the fastest distance runners of this generation.

What they witnessed instead was a staggering upset by a widely anonymous runner whose bib identified him only as "paceman."

Kenyan Geoffrey Ronoh, a man with only one professional race under his belt who was enlisted by marathon world-record-holder Wilson Kipsang to set his tempo in the race, pulled away from his raining partner over the final three kilometers to earn a stunning eight-second victory in an event-record 1:00:17 in the fifth Mattoni Olomouc Half Marathon Saturday night.

"I know this is a surprise what I did, but it was part of my running technique," Ronoh, whose lone race prior was a sixth-place finish in 2:15:51 at the 2013 Ahmedabad Marathon in India, said afterward. "I have been training with Wilson Kipsang even before Olomouc. In coming here, he told me to pace-make as fast as I could to make 28:20 [for 10-K]. I achieved it running 28:15. After that, it was if I feel strong at the end I had to finish."

Two-time marathon world champion Edna Kiplagat of Kenya left little drama in the women's race, outclassing the field after a mere five kilometers on her way to a 30-second victory over defending champion Betelhem Moges of Ethiopia in an event-record 1:08:53. Moges set the previous mark of 1:10:38 last year.

After hitting 5-K in 15:50 along with Faith Kipsum and with Moges just three seconds back, Kiplagat crushed her two closest competitors over the next five kilometers. By the time she hit 10-K in 32:16, she had opened a 16-second lead on Moges and Kipsum. Although she found the windy conditions and nearly three-kilometers of cobblestone on the course to be cumbersome, Kiplagat only grew her advantage from there.

"I didn't have any doubts that I would win," Kiplagat said. "I was prepared to come and do my best. I knew that if I felt good I would be able to go for the record. I am happy that I was able to do it."

While this is the first time in the 20-year history of RunCzech-organized events in the country that a pacer has triumphed in a race, according to organizing committee president Carlo Capalbo, it certainly is not an anomaly in men's running.

The most famous incident of a pacer beating the favorites happened on the track, when American Tom Byers was employed as a pacer for the 1500m in Oslo. After covering the first quarter in 57.52 and going through the half in 1:54.83, race favorites Steve Ovett, Steve Cram and John Walker did not follow and were some eight seconds back, a gap of approximately 50 meters. Byers remained in the race, and although he faded badly he managed to hang on to win in 3:39.01, 52 seconds in front of Ovett.



Similar instances have also occurred frequently in the marathon. Some of those include:

In 1994, Paul Pilkington was hired for \$3000 to rabbit the Los Angeles Marathon, but after building a two-minute lead 10 miles into the race, he kept going and wound up winning the race in 2:12:13. Six years later, Simon Biwott of Kenya was scheduled to pace the first 30-kilometers of the Berlin Marathon but went on to win in 2:07:42.

In 2006, Joseph Ngeny of Kenya joined the field for the Standard Chartered Dubai Marathon as a pacer scheduled through 30 kilometers. Feeling strong at 27-K, he called to his manager in the press car and asked if he could finish. When he was told yes, he remained in the race and won in 2:13:02. That same year, pacer James Kutto of Kenya won the Florence Marathon in 2:08:41.

This, however, registers as more shocking.

The expected showdown between 2:03 marathoners Kipsang and fellow Kenyan Dennis Kimetto never materialized. From the opening gun, Kipsang, Ronoh and RunCzech Racing Team member Nicholas Bor took off, leaving the rest of the men in their wake.

By the time those three hit 5-K, crossing five bridges over Mill Creek and the Morava and Bystrice Rivers, the three were on world-record pace of 58:10 and had opened an 18-second advantage on Kimetto and the chasers.

"That was part of the plan," Kipsang said. "We wanted to start really fast so that we can get the pace. It's hard, but we wanted to run hard and then stabilize."

"I was not really thinking that a fast pace was going to happen from the start," Kimetto, who finished third in 1:01:42, added. "That was a surprise."

Bor was dropped during the eighth kilometer as the runners passed through Smetana Gardens, leaving Ronoh and Kipsang out in front of the rest of the field. They hit 10-K in 28:16, slightly ahead of schedule and well under one-hour pace, some 20 seconds clear of Kimetto.

Emboldened by the strength in his legs going up Holy Hill in the countryside and confident in his abilities as gauged in his long runs and speed work with Kipsang, Ronoh began plotting his move.

"Since I started training with him last December, I have been giving him tough challenges," Ronoh said. "On long runs, I used to be with him until the last kilometer and that is where I feared him because he had a hard kick. But more than that, I also knew that he is a just a man like me."

When the tandem reached the 18th-century military hospital at 15-K in 42:43, Ronoh slowed a bit, baiting Kipsang to pass him. When he didn't, Ronoh gradually stepped up the pace.

"When I gave him a chance to go past me, he stayed a few steps behind. That is when I learned that I was capable of winning," Ronoh said. "I knew if I would come to the last kilometer with him, he would beat me. I have been training speed work with him. So I tried to push before so that I could paralyze him so that by the time he was reaching the last kilometer I would be more than a step ahead in which he could not catch me."



Ronoh eventually opened a 40-meter gap on Kipsang, and although the tempo slowed significantly over the final two kilometers, it proved to be too wide a margin to overcome.

"Even though he hasn't done any competition of late, I knew through our trainings that he was very strong," Kipsang said. "He really had more power to really push. In the end, I appreciate that he was there because without him, we would not have run a good time."

Ronoh, who earned €4000 in prize money and time bonuses for finishing under 1:01 and breaking the course record of 1:00:44 set in 2011 by Ethiopia's Dawit Abdulehi, believes what he showed in this race is indicative of what he is capable of in the future.

"This is [Kipsang's] time, but in the future I believe I will have my time," he said. "Today I came here as a pacemaker. In the future, I hope to be invited here as an athlete and that is when I believe I will run my best time. Making sub-2:08 is possible for me."

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