

"Kip Mile" Draws Top Runners to Ithaca

By Molly Otoole [Cornell Daily Sun](#)

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Ithaca, NY ([CSTV U-WIRE](#)) -- Some spent this Sunday attending church, studying for finals or going out for a Mother's Day brunch. Others enjoyed the Ithaca summer weather watching a handful of Olympians, collegiate champions and Cornell track alumni, as well as nine sub-four minute milers and a track legend come together at Ithaca High School's track for the inaugural Kip Keino Fun and Fitness Mile.

The "Kip Mile" was the culmination of several months of collaboration between the City of Ithaca, several Cornell academic and athletic groups, numerous individuals dedicated to track and humanitarian work and the Kip Keino Foundation, Inc.

According to the Olympics website, Dr. Kipchoge 'Kip' Keino is a legend, the "Middle Distance Master." Cornell Assistant track coach Kevin Thompson explained Keino was a relatively unknown, un-coached and untrained 28-year-old from Nandi, Kenya, when he broke onto the running scene at the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City.

Though Keino ran the 10,000 meters and a silver-medal-winning 5,000m, the 1,500m race truly solidified his legendary status. Keino beat John Ryun, a highly favored American and the event's world-record holder, for gold. Legend also has it he did so after jogging two miles to the track because he was stuck in a traffic jam, and after being told by doctors to not run because of a painful and dangerous gall bladder infection. Keino's margin of victory, 20 meters, is the largest in the history of the event. According to Thompson, not only did Keino win the race handedly, but he also won it at a time of high racial tension and at a time when distance running was still largely segregated, opening the gates for the flood of incredibly successful East African athletes that have followed in his rapid footsteps.

Keino went on to win two more Olympic medals at the 1972 Olympics in Munich, at the age of 32: gold in the 3,000m steeple chase -- an event in which he had little experience - and a silver six days later in the 1,500m. At one point in his career, he held world records in the 3,000m and 5,000m, and ran the two second-fastest times ever run in the mile and two-mile.

Yet, elite runners and fans from around the world did not come to the Kip Mile to only celebrate Keino's athletic contributions.

The event inaugurated the Kip Keino Foundation, Inc., inspired by Keino's humanitarian work. Thompson and his wife Michelle, a visiting lecturer in City and Regional Planning, are on the planning board. The Foundation is a non-profit organization whose mission is, "to provide economic support and resources to charitable organizations that provide opportunities for underprivileged youth, particularly those in Africa."

According to the race program, the Kipkeino School educates almost 300 students from six to 14 years old. A new high school, under construction, will similarly teach approximately 300 students from 15 to 18 years. According to an article for the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Keino and his wife Phyllis are parents to over 70 abandoned or orphaned children. All of this, from a career that only earned him \$20,000 dollars.

Though the elite categories of the "Kip Mile" were only part of one event in the Kip Keino Weekend of May 12 and 13, among the Borg Warner Health and Fitness Expo and numerous other categories of races, it was these races that highlighted the weekend.

The Foundation worked closely with Robert and Weldon Johnson, both assistant coaches of the men's cross country and track teams at Cornell, and founders of Letsrun.com. The twin brothers, with the help of Will Seidel '07, secured a majority of the competition.

"I'm really impressed with the field that's been assembled in the first year for this event," said Weldon Johnson in a press release. "The strength of the field is a testament to the admiration and respect these racers have for Kip Keino. He's a remarkable athlete and humanitarian."

According to the release and letsrun.com, the men's race was arguably the finest field of mile and 1500-meter runners in the U.S. this year, with three Olympians, three NCAA champions, a Commonwealth Games gold medalist, nine sub-four-minute milers and competitors from the USA, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand and Kenya. Nick Willis, a 2006 Commonwealth Games gold medalist and New Zealand record-holder returning from a stress fracture and Anthony Famiglietti, the versatile and charismatic U.S. Olympian, recent U.S. 8k champion headlined the event.

The crowd seemed aware of the caliber of the competitors as it crowded the fence surrounding the track for the mile events. Famiglietti, a Long Island native, seemed the fan favorite for the men's race, with a group of men's track runners from RIT each spelling out a letter of his last name on their chests.

One of these runners, Nick Lowe, spoke for the group, saying, "we came to see Fam run. It's awesome - we don't get a whole lot of opportunities to see the big meets."

They spelled out "Run Like Hell" on their backs, Famiglietti's personal mantra.

At the gun, Cornell's own Sam Mackenzie '05 took a quick lead, running as a "rabbit" for the other runners to follow, in order to pace them to a sub-four mile. Max King '02 also competed for a respectable 13th in a talented field.

On leading such an elite group of runners, Mackenzie joked, "they wanted a big body that could pace. You just try not to mess it up. ... I think the field really speaks to the Ithaca running community. I always love coming back here."

Despite a solid lead by Mackenzie, the Ithaca wind proved too formidable a barrier for winner Willis to slip under the famed four-minute mark, running a still-blistering 4:00.29 for the \$1,250 first prize.

"It felt really good for one of my first back from injury," Willis said during a post-race massage. "It was really fun to come into a smaller meet."

Willis explained the advantages of a more personal crowd for the Kip Mile rather than the over-80,000 fans that watched his '06 Commonwealth victory.

"A lot of the ego issues aren't there," he said. "You see the kids and crowd ... there are no expectations except to just have fun."

Famiglietti came in a close second in a time of 4:02.25. Immediately after crossing the line, he circled back to give his letter-bearing fans high fives, then bent down to unlace his shoes, which he tossed over the fence to them.

While signing posters, T-shirts, and programs, Famiglietti discussed the race strategy.

"Before the race, [Willis] asked me what I was going to do," he said. "I was going to either run hard or run for the wind. I made the decision to try and make it a sub-four race. ... We ran as hard as we could."

On the low-key race environment Famiglietti said, "it's inspiring for me, makes me want to work harder, especially because [Keino] sent that message to guys like me. I'm trying to send it on in a positive way, and we did that today."

Martin Fagen, who finished fourth in 4:04.3 and is considered to be Ireland's next great runner, gave some insight into the challenges of being a student-athlete - he graduates from Providence this week.

"It is at all times demanding," he said. "You've got to find the right balance."

In the women's race, Megan Metcalfe of Canada out-kicked a young Natalie Hughes for first place in a time of 4:38.63. Hughes clocked a time of 4:40.07.

Again, the alumni represented Cornell track well, with Amber McGown '05 racing for fourth in a time of 4:45.43 and Natalie Gingerich '04 rabbiting.

Hughes, who last year was NCAA runner-up in the mile for Florida State said, "I'm the rookie. I just graduated."

"I feel spoiled and fortunate. It's a big chance. I often ask myself, 'How did I do this beforehand?'" Hughes said of the transition from collegiate to professional running.

Metcalfe is no stranger to professional athletics, but also had a successful collegiate career as the 2005 5k champ for West Virginia. Metcalfe was the top seed going into the race.

"I think things like this are a lot more fun," Metcalfe said. "It is a great way to get to know your competitors."

The Master Men's Mile was won in a time of 4:29.53 by 2000 Olympic marathoner Mark Coogan.

Keino advised the athletes before the races, watched from a seat in the bleachers and congratulated each runner after the race. He handed out the prizes and received a gift of his own when he was presented with a U.S. flag flown over the Capitol.

Metcalfe, the women's champion, captured the day, the work of the event organizers and the crowd sentiment all at once, saying, "it reminds you of what track is all about."

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