

PRESS RELEASE

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Ethiopians break all four course records to wrap up Marathon Weekend

HOUSTON (Jan. 15, 2012) – It was an Ethiopian sweep of the medal stands – and the record books – at the Chevron Houston Marathon and the Aramco Houston Half Marathon on Sunday, as all four winners erased the course records.

"Today was the perfect way to culminate the most significant road racing weekend ever in Houston," stated Wade Morehead, executive director of the Houston Marathon Committee. "Houston was on a national stage on both race days, and our supporters city-wide delivered at every level. We are truly grateful to the community."

Sunny skies and ideal conditions, with a temperature of 52 degrees F at the start, set the stage for the historic day, as the Chevron Houston Marathon celebrated its 40th anniversary not only with an onslaught on the record books, but a record 20,000 finishers in the event's three races.

"The 40th anniversary is a significant milestone," said Brant Kotch, president and race director of the Houston Marathon Committee. "When you think of how far we've come, from 113 runners in Memorial Park to more than 20,000 participants in three races spanning the city, anything is possible."

In the marathon, it was 27-year-old Tariku Jufar winning the men's race in 2:06:51, bettering the mark of 2:07:04 set just last year by countryman Bekana Daba, and 26-year-old Alemitu Abera triumphing in 2:23:14 to take down the 2010 record set by Teyba Erkesso. Both will take home \$35,000 for their victories, plus a \$10,000 bonus for breaking their course records.

It was the sixth consecutive year that an Ethiopian woman took the marathon crown here, and the fourth year in a row for the men.

In the men's race, a pack of four, including Tariku; fellow Ethiopians Demessew Tsega and Debebe Tolossa and Kenya's Festus Langat, went through 10K together in 29:54, and when they all hit the halfway point together in 1:03:08 it was obvious that the course record was in jeopardy.

Langat soon fell back, leaving the three Ethiopians to battle for the podium spots. By 35K, Tsega was being left behind, and moments later Jufar made a huge move. Tolossa fought back gamely, but Jufar broke away and ran alone to the finish. Tolossa followed in 2:07:41, a personal best by more than two minutes.

"I was very much encouraged by the people on the side of the street," said Jufar, who demolished his previous personal best of 2:08:10, set in 2008. A year later, he was badly injured when he was struck by a car while training in Addis Ababa, missing about nine months of competition but, if Sunday is any indication, he has fully recovered.

The women's race was a runaway, with Abera taking it out from the gun, building up a 16-second lead by 5K that steadily grew to more than three minutes at the half over Ethiopia's Yihunlish Delelecha, who by then had been joined by Australia's Benita Willis. In the end, Willis would pull away for second in 2:28:24, a time that almost guarantees that she will be selected to Australia's 2012 Olympic squad. The 32-year-old Willis, a three-time Olympian who trains in Boulder, CO, had not run a marathon since the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing.

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In the Aramco Houston Half Marathon, Feyisa Lelisa and Belaynesh Oljira broke course records held by a couple of familiar names: Lelisa's 59:22 edged the mark set by American Ryan Hall (59:43) in 2007, while Oljira's winning time of 1:08:26 shattered the mark set by American Shalane Flanagan (1:09:41). Hall and Flanagan on Saturday both earned spots on the U.S. Olympic Marathon team for 2012, with Flanagan winning the women's Olympic Marathon Trials and Hall coming in as runner-up in the men's.

Lelisa and Oljira each won \$10,000, plus a bonus of \$7,500 for the record.

The 21-year-old Lelisa, who won the bronze medal last summer in the 2011 IAAF World Championships marathon, was a late entrant, but had little trouble handling the field. Ethiopian Tilahun Regassa was runner-up, in 1:01:28, with American Scott Bauhs on his heels in a personal best 1:01:30. In fourth was Luke Puskedra in 1:01:36, a senior at the University of Oregon who was making his half-marathon debut.

The women's race was another matter. Oljira and Kenya's Caroline Kilel, winner of the 2011 Boston Marathon, ran shoulder-to-shoulder right to the end, with the 21-year-old Oljira, running her first race in the United States, using her 10,000-meter speed to win in a sprint.

"Right from the beginning I was following her and I knew, and I prepared in my mind, that I have to sprint very fast at the last 100 meters or so," Oljira said.

Joan Samuelson, 1984 Olympic gold medalist in the marathon, finished in 1:38:03.

About the Houston Marathon Committee, Inc.

Established in 1972, the Houston Marathon Committee, Inc. (HMC), a Running USA Founding Member, annually organizes the nation's premier winter marathon, half-marathon, 5K and kids' fun run. In 2010, more than 30,000 runners participated in four race weekend events organized by 7,500 volunteers, creating Houston's largest single-day sporting event. In addition to hosting numerous world-renowned road races, including the USA Men's and Women's Half Marathon Championships since 2005 and 2007 respectively, and the 1992 U.S. Women's Olympic Marathon Trials, HMC will host the 2012 U.S. Men's and Women's Olympic Team Trials - Marathon on January 14, 2012.

For more information, visit houstonmarathon.com or call 713.957.3453.

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