

## January 2016 *Wingfoot* Spotlight: Kirubel Erassa Brings His Joy Back Home

By Barbara Huebner

Ask Kirubel Erassa to name his favorite moment as an athlete and he'll eagerly tell you about a race in which he wasn't even competing.

Ricocheting from one vantage point to another along the blustery course in Terre Haute, Indiana, the redshirt freshman screamed wildly for his Oklahoma State Cowboys as they fought to defend their NCAA Cross Country title in 2010. When three of his teammates came into view near the finish line battling for places in the top 10, Erassa was overcome.



"I cried watching that race," he said. "When they said we won, I was just going crazy. I couldn't even talk."

One of the top Georgia high school runners in history, Erassa has brought that spirit, and world-class talent to go with it, back home as one of the newest members of Atlanta Track Club Elite. Since his arrival in early November 2015, Erassa has turned out strong finishes. He placed seventh in the open men's 10K at the USATF Club Cross Country National Championships, earning him a spot on Team USA at the 2016 Bupa Great Edinburgh Cross Country Meet in Scotland this month.

"We want to raise the level of running and racing in Georgia, and he was part of that," said Amy Begley, head coach of Atlanta Track Club and a 2008 Olympian.

According to Dave Smith, his college coach, Atlanta is special to Erassa, and he predicts that it will soon be vice versa. "Erassa can be very shy at first, and sometimes his shyness can come off as aloofness," Smith said. "But don't read him wrong. Once you get to know him, you fall in love with him. He gets such joy out of running, and I think it's contagious."

A seven-time All-American while at Oklahoma State, Erassa became a U.S. citizen in 2009 and hopes to make the U.S. team for the IAAF World Indoor Championships at 3000 meters, to be held in Portland, Oregon, next March. His personal best for his favorite distance, 7:49.17, puts him squarely in the hunt. After that, the 22-year-old will turn his eye to the 2016 U.S. Olympic Trials, at either 5000 meters or 10,000 meters.

And it all began with one of those three guys who brought him to tears in Terre Haute.

Along with his twin sister Tiyo, the youngest of 12 siblings, Erassa was just 11 when he arrived in the U.S. from Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and settled in Gwinnett County. "We came here in February and it was really cold," he recalled. "I was shocked to go outside. And the highways were so wide and huge, with so many cars." After his freshman soccer season at Grayson High School, Erassa decided to give track a try. He ran his first JV mile in 4:58 and immediately threw up.

"I thought, 'no more running for me,'" he said, but stayed to watch countryman Girma Mecheso run the 2-Mile for Berkmar High School. Impressed, he asked Mecheso for his phone number; inspired, he showed up to the next practice ready to run.



After his sophomore cross country season—“What’s *that*?” he wondered when asked to join the team—Erassa was faced with a decision: run track, or return to soccer? He phoned Mecheso, who spoke of hard work and doors that would open.

“Girma was the key of my life,” said Erassa.

As a senior, Erassa would win the Georgia Class AAAAA Cross Country title and be named the 2009 Gatorade Georgia Boys Cross Country Runner of the Year. His eighth-place finish at the Foot Locker Cross Country National Championships, since equaled by Joshua Brickell, was at the time the best finish ever by a Georgia boy. On the track, his 14:19.82 in winning the 2010 indoor national title at 5000 meters makes him the third-fastest prep athlete in history at the distance.

But his biggest strides may have come in his lowest moments.

The summer before his senior year, Erassa came from nowhere on the bell lap to win his unseeded 2-Mile heat at the outdoor national championships but celebrated early, doing a little dance and appearing to wave a finger at his rival as he passed.

He didn’t know it yet, but there would be no 2-Mile final for him. No Mile the next day, either.

“We’re out of here,” coach Rob Blaszkiewicz told him minutes after the race. Erassa didn’t believe him until they were in the car the next morning, heading back to Grayson.

“It was the longest car ride of my life,” said Blaszkiewicz, who as a member of Atlanta Track Club’s masters team has been reunited with the sensitive young man he refers to as another son. “We barely said a word to each other. Two weeks later, we had a talk and after that he bought in. He was a different kid.”

Erassa proved that he earned an A in the lesson when, a few months later, he shook the hands of his competitors after winning the state cross country crown. Now, could he learn to be a better loser, too? Apparently so: After being mowed down by Tyler Anyan during an epic 3200-meter duel at the 2010 Georgia Olympics—a race in which both athletes ran under 9 minutes, the first time even one Georgia prep runner had broken that mark in 36 years—Erassa held up the victor’s hand.

“Even his teammates noticed that he grew up,” said Blaszkiewicz.



Another turning point came about four years ago, when Erassa returned to Ethiopia for the first time. Without so much as decent shoes, every runner he encountered worked hard, had huge goals, and was mentally tough. Running, they knew, was their only route to success.

“They had no Plan B,” said Erassa. “They are really good because of their mind. My mind completely changed. I’m trying to think that I have no Plan B.”

Remember that “favorite moment” as an athlete? Erassa actually has two, and the second is a perfect example of his new mindset and an ideal bookend to

that redshirt freshman cheering from the sidelines: In 2014, he led Oklahoma State to its first Big 12 Indoor Championships in the school’s history by winning a grueling triple of the mile, 3000 meters and 5000 meters as well as anchoring the Distance Medley Relay.

Going into the meet, Erassa owned a 3000-meter time that safely qualified him for the NCAA Indoor Championships, or so his coach believed. But just as his young star was getting ready to line up for that

race at the Big 12, Smith learned that he had been bumped from nationals by the results of a blazingly fast race elsewhere that day.

“You can let this beat you or you can just go out and run hard,” Smith recalls telling Erassa, who fought back tears. Despite running faster than he had all year, he still just missed re-qualifying for nationals.

“You know what?” Smith remembers Erassa telling him afterward. “God has a plan for me, and I got to do this for you and my team.”

A few days later, a withdrawal put Erassa into the NCAA race. He would finish as runner-up for the 3000-meter title.

“If anyone ever deserved something like that, it was Kirubel,” says Smith. “He’s just got a heart of gold.”