

Anti-doping probe targets Russian agent behind Kenyan runners

Agent's strategy involved small US road races

By JOHN LEICESTER and EDDIE PELLIS
Associated Press

NEWPORT, Ky. — Larisa Mikhaylova's business model is simple: In exchange for a cut of their prizes, she enters Kenyan runners into far-flung U.S. road races that are small enough to be winnable but still large enough to offer modest cash rewards to top finishers.

Those smaller races usually can't afford expensive drug-testing.

An investigation by U.S. anti-doping officials and track's world governing body into distance runners from Kenya has now zeroed in on the Russian agent, whose racers have had a remarkable success rate but also a string of positive drug tests, nearly all at races in Mexico. Mikhaylova insists she is blameless, but some U.S. races are refusing to work with her group of athletes.

When Kenyan runner Lilian Mariita finished second at the Great Buffalo Chase 5K on July 4, 2015, in Frankfort, Kentucky, she picked up \$2,500. But her whole way of life — competing in small races across the U.S., and sending winnings home to her poor village in western Kenya — crumbled.

Normally, the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency would have no reason to police the race. This time, acting on a tip, drug testers were waiting, and steroids were found in Mariita's urine sample. The 27-year-old was banned for eight years, the longest of any Kenyan runner, and is now back in her village of Nyaramba.

"I used to rely on this for money and I don't know what is left for me," Mariita said, sobbing in the modest home built with her U.S. winnings.

Investigation targets agent

Track's world governing body, the International Association of Athletics Federations, says it is investigating Mikhaylova and the runners she manages.

"We are working with USADA on her, and that group in particular," said Kyle Barber, the IAAF out-of-competition testing and intelligence coordinator. "The ultimate goal of this investigation is to stop her working, to stop her being an active agent, to stop her being involved in the sport."

Three Kenyans who worked with Mikhaylova have been caught doping since 2012. Jynocel Basweti, the father of Mariita's 2-year-old daughter, tested positive at a



Daniel Sangjib Min/Richmond Times-Dispatch
Lilian Mariita, of Kenya, wins the women's division of a half-marathon in Richmond, Va., in 2014. The 27-year-old's racing career is over, and now she is back at square one: in Nyaramba, the muddy tea-plantation village in western Kenya she thought she'd escaped in 2011, when she left for the promise of a new life pounding American roads.



John Minchillo/AP Photo
Runner Peter Kemboi stands beside a wall of trophies earned by runners working with race agent Larisa Mikhaylova, at the group's boarding house in Newport, Ky. The International Association of Athletics Federations, working with the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency, is investigating multiple groups of athletes and agents based in the United States and Mexico, including Mikhaylova's that has won tens of thousands of dollars from races across the American Midwest but also become notorious for a rash of doping positives.

Mexican marathon for a steroid. Nixon Kiplagat Cherutich was busted for a byproduct of the steroid nandrolone, also in Mexico. And Mariita failed two doping tests in eight months — the one in Frankfort and also one in Mexico.

Mariita, speaking exclusively to The Associated Press, detailed a regimen of unidentified pills she said Mikhaylova told her were vitamins. Her racing schedule was aggressive, aimed at maximizing prize money. She said Mikhaylova gave her three reddish capsules the day of the Frankfort race and regularly gave her tablets for other races, starting from when she joined her camp in 2011.

Mikhaylova, herself the 1998 European Cup champion at 800 meters, denied ever giving tablets to Mariita and said she repeatedly asked her if she doped and warned that she wouldn't work with her if she did.

Mikhaylova told the AP that she registers athletes only for U.S. races and that runners were on their own when they competed in Mexico.

Reach of doping crisis

The runners in Mikhaylova's stable help illustrate the reach of a doping crisis in

in Newport, Kentucky. The house contains dozens of medals and ribbons, hung haphazardly, two and three deep, won by her runners in places such as Akron, Ohio; Fort Worth, Texas; Duluth, Minnesota.

Mikhaylova emphatically denied ever giving drugs to any athlete. She said she provides services for East Africans far from home, entering them in 5Ks, 10Ks, marathons and half-marathons she thinks they can win and looking after their daily needs in exchange for a 15 percent cut. Runners pay her \$10 rent per night, deducted from their earnings, which are wired home.

The runners stay for a month or two and then go back to Kenya, or sometimes Mexico, to train.

An aggressive schedule

It can be an aggressive schedule: In 2014, Mariita ran 24 races in 13 states, earning \$24,000 — more than what 99 percent of Kenyans earn at home.

Mikhaylova also has represented Shitaye Gemechu, an Ethiopian who tested positive for EPO in 2009 and was banned for two years, and Aissa Dghoughi, a Moroccan who got a three-year ban in 2006 for fleeing an anti-doping control in Switzerland.

Without waiting for the outcome of the IAAF probe, race directors in the U.S. are now distancing themselves from her group.

When she emailed organizers in Indianapolis in May 2015 to enter two runners in their Monumental Mile, they responded with a copy of their new anti-doping policy, which specifies that athletes are ineligible for prize money if they work with agents who have had two or more athletes banned.

For Mikhaylova, the organizers highlighted that part in yellow.

Kenya's thriving but ill-regulated running program. The East African powerhouse of distance running won 11 athletics medals at the 2012 London Olympics but has also since suffered the ignominy of having 40 runners banned for doping violations.

The sluggish response of Kenyan authorities is generating pressure for remedial action from the IAAF and the World Anti-Doping Agency, and from Kenyan athletes concerned they might be turned away from overseas races, including the Rio de Janeiro Olympics in August. WADA has given Kenya until next Tuesday to comply with anti-doping rules. Missing that deadline could put the onus on the IAAF to suspend Kenya from international competition, as it has for Russia.

The culture of doping has a particularly strong grip on second- and third-tier Kenyan runners, who mostly race abroad, aren't tested regularly and won't compete in Rio. As well as Mikhaylova's camp, the IAAF said it is also investigating other groups of runners in the U.S. and Mexico.

Mikhaylova runs her stable out of a two-story house in a working-class neighborhood

Astoria athletes dominate meet

The Daily Astorian

BANKS — The Astoria track team returned to the site of last year's league meet, and left with numerous victories on the track and in the field Wednesday afternoon.

Banks was the host of a three-way dual meet with Astoria and Valley Catholic, and the Fishermen were the big winners, taking first place in 16 of the 34 events.

Leading the way for the defending state champion Astoria girls was sophomore Darian Hageman, who won the triple jump (36-10 ¾), long jump (16-9 ½) and the pole vault (9-6).

Teammate Skadi Freyr won the shot put with a toss of 41-8 ½ (best mark since Laura Bobek's 48-7 in 2009), with Halie Korff taking second; Korff won the javelin (118-2) and the discus (103-10) with Freyr taking second and Taylor Cosner third; and Kaylee Mitchell won the 800 meters (2:23.14).

Astoria swept the hurdles, with Victoria Kee winning the 100-meter hurdles in 17.32, and Nara Van De Grift taking the 300-meter hurdles (52.47); freshman Gracie Cummings had the best time in the 200 meters (27.06); and the foursome of Cummings, Natalie Cummings, Kee and Mitchell won the 400-meter relay (51.76).

For the Astoria boys, junior Lucas Caruana won the 800 meters in 2 minutes, 4.91 seconds; sophomore Tim Barnett had a toss of 46-1 to win the shot put over teammate Zander Arnold;

Barnett won the discus (126-1); and Bronson Holthusen took first with a throw of 143-4 in the javelin.

Garvin sweeps hurdles

SCAPPOOSE — Seaside opened the Cowapa track season in a three-way meet at Scappoose Wednesday, with Tillamook also taking part.

Seaside scored six victories on the boys' side to highlight the Gulls' day.

On the track, junior Juneau Meyer won the 400 meters in 53.02 seconds, while junior Will Garvin swept the hurdles, running 16.74 in the 110-meters and 44.14 in the 300 meters.

Meyer and Garvin teamed with Taylor Barnes and Jackson Januik to win the 1,600-meter relay in 3:40.68.

Rafi Sibony and Bradley Rzewnicki finished second and third, respectively, in the 800 meters.

The Gulls added one more win in the field events, as Barnes and Dante Still finished 1-2 in the long jump, with Barnes leaping 19 feet, 5 inches.

On the girls' side, Seaside freshman Anna Huddleston had a toss of 31-7 to win the shot put, while the Gulls' Klara Bednova had the top time in the 100 meters (13.87 seconds). Bednova was second in the 200 meters, and freshman teammate Kathryn Zagata was second in both the 1,500 and 3,000 meter races.

The foursome of Lizzy Barnes, Bednova, Taylor Carson and Bridgette Malone placed second in the 400-meter relay.

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Astoria edges North Marion, 7-5

The Daily Astorian

AURORA — Astoria built a 7-0 lead through four innings, and the No. 2-ranked Lady Fish softball team held on for their fifth straight win, 7-5, Wednesday at North Marion.

Starter McKailyn Rogers

pitched into the fifth inning, as she scattered seven hits with two strikeouts and a walk before giving way to Libby DiBartolomeo, who finished out the game.

Caitlyn Hougham was 3-for-4 to lead Astoria's offense, with two doubles. Mykka Abrahams was 2-for-3

with a double, and teammates Lexi Lyngstad and Kelsey Wullger added two hits apiece.

Astoria scored three runs in the third and three in the fourth for a 7-0 lead, before North Marion scored four in the fifth.

The Lady Fish play Tuesday at Rainier.

Fremstad strikes out the Huskies, 8-2

The Daily Astorian

AURORA — The Astoria Fishermen scored six runs in their final two at-bats Wednesday on their way to an 8-2 win at North Marion in a non-league baseball game at Bob

Brack Stadium.

Astoria's Kyle Strange drove in two runs on three hits, with singles in the first, fifth and sixth innings.

Teammate Fridtjof Fremstad pitched five solid innings, allowing just one hit with six

strikeouts and one walk. Tyler Lyngstad pitched the final two innings.

Trey Hageman had a double and was hit by two pitches for the Fishermen, who host Estacada at 4 p.m. Friday at Aiken Field.

SCOREBOARD

PREP SCHEDULE

TODAY

Baseball — Warrenton at Tillamook, 5 p.m.
Softball — Seaside at Corbett, 5 p.m.; Ilwaco at North Beach, 3 p.m.
Girls Golf — Tillamook Scramble, 10 a.m.
Boys Golf — Scappoose at Astoria, 2 p.m.

FRIDAY

Baseball — Neah-Kah-Nie at Knappa (2), 3 p.m.

Baseball — Estacada at Astoria, 4 p.m.
Softball — Neah-Kah-Nie at Knappa (2), 3 p.m.
Girls Golf — Astoria at Seaside, 10 a.m.

SATURDAY

Baseball — Sandpoint, Idaho at Astoria, 2 p.m.; Warrenton at Willamina (2), Noon; Ilwaco at Ocosta (2), Noon
Softball — Ilwaco at Ocosta (2), Noon
Track — Tillamook Invitational, 11 a.m.

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