

'The Athlete' Chronicles Ethiopia's Famed Olympian, Abebe Bikila



Abebe Bikila

By Brian Stimson
Of *The Skanner News*

For more than 20 years now, Ethiopian filmmaker and actor Rasselas Lakew has worked to bring Ethiopia's most famous – and forgotten – Olympian to the screen. On Thursday, Feb. 17 and Friday, Feb. 18 the Cascade Festival of African Films will host screenings of "The Athlete" – an award-winning narrative film about Abebe Bikila, an unknown, barefooted marathon runner who won the 1960 Olympic marathon in Rome and became the first Black African to win a gold medal at the Olympics.

But Bikila's story does not end there. Lakew – who also portrays him in the film – says Bikila's life took on epic and humbling proportions. Not only did he win the 1964 Olympic marathon in Tokyo about four minutes ahead of his rivals, he competed in archery and dog sledding after an accident left him without the use of his legs.

The Feb. 17 screening is at noon at PCC Cascade, Moriarty A&H Building, room 104. The Feb. 18 screening

starts at 7 p.m. at the Hollywood Theatre, 4122 NE Sandy Blvd. Please arrive early to guarantee a seat. The screenings are free, like all African Film Festival events.

Directors Davey Frankel and Rasselas Lakew spoke with *The Skanner News* from Germany and New York about their critically acclaimed film, which was "made for more than *Paranormal Activity* and less than *Avatar*. But much closer to *Paranormal Activity*."

The Skanner News: What was it that inspired you to make this film?

Rasselas Lakew: There was a list in 1999 in the *New York Times*, who were the greatest athletes of the millennium. I couldn't find his name. I said, You have to be kidding me. You're putting some guys that I know – I have the highest respect for the American runners and the Jordans and Alis and Jesse Owens' and Gretzkys and ... how about this guy from Africa who is just a shepherd who conquered Rome in his bare feet? How much more do you want him to do, to be in that league? Winning something in barefeet over cobblestones next to the Coliseum makes him the last gladiator. I felt there was a bias in media. I said that is the key. I'm going to make a film and call it the Athlete and everyone's going to see it.

One thing I would like to share about the title – The Athlete. It's a bit audacious. The athlete is a very common name. I really felt he was overlooked, that the generation now was overlooking him. There was an article (by Olympic historian Bud Greenspan) who wrote about Abebe Bikila in 1989 ... I thought I'd take it further.

The main thing in sports is not only the victory, but the place, Rome. It's not Paris, it's not London, it's not Zurich, it's Rome. The gateway for the Western World. When a shepherd comes from Ethiopia, he wears a symbol like David for us, and Rome was Goliath. Because we had gone back and forth for 110 years fighting wars with the Romans. This film is something for the ages. A thousand years from now, they will say, a shepherd conquered Rome. That was

Portland screening
continues the
Cascade Festival of
African Films Feb.
17, 18

Streetball



Look for an interview with the director of "Streetball" in next week's issue.

Abebe Bikila.

And when he did it again in Tokyo, that was the first time a marathon runner had done that in the history of the Olympics. When he did that, he ran every mile the same way, he finished four and a half minutes ahead of everyone. It's the widest margin in Olympic history.

... And then what happens is that he loses his legs. All of a sudden it becomes the Achilles story. Now he has a weakness. God has come and taken his feet out. What is he going to do next? The film is about that. What he achieved after that is the premise of the film. And he becomes the first paralympian in archery, and he becomes a great dog-sledder in the Nordic. He wins a 25 kilometer dog sledding competition in Norway. He dies at 41. So he encompasses everything an athlete would be called because an athlete is tested when his weapon is taken away from him. Just like an artist who lost an eye. He was tested in that way unlike many ath-

See OLYMPIAN on page 13



Everyone's watching their savings grow with S.T.A.R.T.

Join the savings movement that makes saving money easy and rewarding.

With S.T.A.R.T. – Savings Today And Rewards Tomorrow™ – it's easy to save a little every week, every month or with every credit or check card purchase. You can even go online and watch your savings grow.

Reach \$1,000 and you'll earn a \$50 U.S. Bank Rewards Visa® Card. Keep a balance of \$1,000 or more for a year and earn another \$50.

Get your savings off to a great S.T.A.R.T. Join us at any U.S. Bank, usbank.com/START or call 800-720-BANK (2265).

All of  serving you®



usbank.com/START

Enrollment is required. A qualifying transfer from your Package Checking account to your Package Money Market Savings account must be scheduled and maintained. You must open and/or maintain an active U.S. Bank Package, including a Silver, Gold or Platinum Checking account AND a Money Market Savings account. A minimum deposit of \$50 is required to open a Checking account and a minimum of \$25 is required to open a Money Market Savings account. All regular account opening procedures apply. Certain conditions apply to U.S. Bank Packages. Credit products are subject to normal credit qualifications and approvals. Other conditions and restrictions may apply. Program is subject to change. See the S.T.A.R.T. Program Agreement for detailed information. The U.S. Bank Rewards Visa Card cannot be reloaded with additional funds, nor can it be used at an ATM. Terms and conditions apply and fees may apply to Rewards Cards. For complete terms and conditions see the U.S. Bank Rewards Visa Card Agreement available at www.mysbankcorporaterewards.com. Deposit products offered by U.S. Bank, N.A. ©2011 U.S. Bancorp. All rights reserved. Member FDIC.