

Track: A world record, and a win for home team

By EDDIE PELLIS
AP National Writer

DOHA, Qatar — The message American hurdler Dalilah Muhammad kept telling herself when her career was running into roadblocks: Why not me?

The message Qatari high jumper Mutaz Essa Barshim kept receiving from an adoring home crowd yearning to celebrate a champion: We love you!

On a thrill-filled night at the track and field world championships Friday, Muhammad answered her own question — again — by setting her second world record in 10 weeks, while Barshim loved everyone back by becoming a repeat world champion, winning this one on home turf.

“I’ve won a lot of gold medals, but this one is home,” Barshim said. “It feels different. I just felt love.”

The late-blooming, 29-year-old Muhammad smoothed her way through the 400-meter hurdles in 52.16 to break, by 0.04 seconds, the world record she had set at U.S. national championships in July.

Both she and Barshim — they call him “The Qatari Falcon” — will head into the Tokyo Games next year as reigning world champions. Muhammad will also go in as the defending Olympic champ — and almost certainly as the world record holder, too.

“I didn’t even know who won the race,” Muhammad said. “I was looking to see who won, and then I noticed, when they said ‘world record,’ that I had broken it.”

Simply winning the race has become more difficult because of the rapid rise of Sydney McLaughlin, the 20-year-old phenom who juggles, rides a unicycle and seems destined to win a gold medal one day.

McLaughlin also finished second to Muhammad at nationals — but that one was by 0.68 seconds. This one was by 0.07, and her time of 52.23 would have been the world record had she run it 10 weeks ago.

“We came into this season knowing who the main opponent was going to be,” said McLaughlin’s coach, Olympic gold medalist Joanna Hayes. “It’s not a surprise.



AP Photo/David J. Phillip

Dalilah Muhammad, of the United States, poses for a photo with the clock after winning the women’s 400 meter hurdles final, setting a new world record at the World Athletics Championships in Doha, Qatar, on Friday.

Dalilah has experience over Syd, so all I wanted her to do was get some experience. And run her best. And she’s surpassed that.”

How close did Muhammad come to missing out on this? Shortly after graduating from Southern California in 2012, she went to Olympic trials and completely flopped. Out in the first round, she had neither a spot at the London Games nor a sponsor.

Things changed: She won nationals in 2013, then a silver medal at worlds. Then

they changed again: She faltered in 2015 and watched those world championships from home.

“I had an epiphany one day, ‘Why not me?’” Muhammad said. Now, she has an Olympic title and a world championship.

She barely broke stride in clearing the 10 hurdles. It was, she said, much closer to the perfect race that she decidedly did not think she had run at national championships in the rain, in Des Moines, Iowa.

And yet, this race still came down to a lean at the line against an opponent who’s only getting better.

“Next year’s going to be amazing,” Hayes said.

Close as the race was, though, the men’s steeplechase was even closer.

Conseslus Kipruto and Lamecha Grima rambled over barriers and through the water over 3,000 meters, and as they approached the finish, there was nothing separating them. With fans in the jam-packed crowd screaming, they sprawled as they reached the line. A photo finish showed Kipruto had crossed in 8 minutes, 1.35 seconds. That was one-hundredth of a second faster than Grima.

“I was praying, ‘Let me be faster than him,’” Kipruto said. “I waited. I prayed. I saw the screen and saw it said ‘Conseslus.’ It was my name. I was definitely happy.”

In the men’s 400 meters, Steven Gardiner of the Bahamas won gold over Anthony Zambrano of Colombia and American Fred Kerley. Finishing 1-2 in the discus were Cubans Yaime Perez and Denia Caballero, who ran to the stands to share hugs with

their small group of fans.

But no win brought more joy throughout the stadium than Barshim’s.

He brought the fans out of their seats every time he cleared a height, and not long after it was over, he was sharing a hug with the ruling emir of his country, talking about how Qatar’s first gold medal of these championships was won.

Much has been made about the heat and poor attendance, the efficacy of air-conditioned stadiums and the legitimacy of the bid process that brought not only these championships, but the 2022 World Cup, to a country that’s striving to raise its profile beyond that of a mere oil supplier.

For one night, at least, Barshim’s victory set all that aside. Qatar looked like a sports country, and nothing could ruin that — not even the fact that the sound system malfunctioned at the end of the evening, thus postponing Barshim’s medal ceremony to Saturday night.

“I did it for them,” Barshim said of his fans and countrymen. “They’re the champions tonight.”

Whittaker, Adesanya headline UFC 243 Down Under

Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — Robert Whittaker says he’s in the best shape of his career for his UFC middleweight world title defense against Israel Adesanya.

Whittaker, a New Zealand-born Australian, and New Zealand-based, Nigerian-born interim champion Adesanya, meet in a much-anticipated 185-pound unification bout which headlines UFC 243 at Melbourne’s Docklands Stadium.

The early Sunday afternoon time slot for the main bout in Australia will translate into a Saturday evening

television viewership in United States.

It will be Whittaker’s first fight in Australia in almost three years and the first UFC world title defense by an Australian.

“It’s a milestone for my career, it’s something I’ve always wanted to do,” Whittaker said. “I’m given the moment to get out there, defend my title and I’m just making history.”

Whittaker last fought in June 2018 in Chicago. He was scheduled to fight in Melbourne in February but pulled out with an undisclosed illness. So the 28-year-old has put himself

through the hardest preparation of his career.

“On the back of what happened last time I just jumped back into training with a fervor,” Whittaker said. “I focused on my strength, my conditioning, focused on my health, on my fitness and just honestly, I’ve thrashed myself this camp.”

Adesanya said Whittaker’s lengthy layoff could be an issue.

“For ring rust, he can say what he has to say to keep him believing, but there’s a difference between fighting in front of 50 people in some hall and fighting in front of 60,000 people in a stadium,”

Adesanya said during a conference call two weeks ago. “I’ve been active, he hasn’t. I have momentum on my side, he hasn’t.”

On Friday, Adesanya said Whittaker will be feeling the pressure of fighting in his home country.

“He doesn’t want to let everyone down,” Adesanya said. “Pressure is an acquired taste, like caviar. He’s not going to like the way it tastes. I think it’s delicious.”

Officials said ticket sales are on track to match, if not exceed the world record attendance of 56,214 at the previous Melbourne UFC

card in November 2015.

Whittaker won on the undercard that day behind the Ronda Rousey and Holly Holm headliner won by Holm. Holm was scheduled to appear on Sunday’s card, but was forced to pull out with a hamstring injury.

Sunday’s lineup also features a fight between two world-ranked lightweights, American Al Iaquinta and New Zealand’s Dan Hooker. Hooker is the most established Kiwi in the UFC ranks with 12 fights for the organization over the last five years.

Hooker fought in both UFC Fight Nights in Auck-

land in 2014 and 2017, but New Zealand has yet to host one of UFC’s pay-for-view shows.

Whittaker is currently rated ninth and Adesanya 14th in the pound-for-pound ratings.

“You look at the winner of this fight in the top five pound-for-pound in the world,” UFC chief Dana White said.

When asked what he planned for the next few days, Whittaker replied: “I’m going to make the weight on Saturday. I’m going to fight on Sunday, and I’m going to go back to my kids on Monday.”

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