

# **Abebe Bikila**

## **The Barefoot Runner**

Abebe Bikila was born in Ethiopia, the son of a shepherd. As a young man, Abebe decided to join the Imperial Bodyguard to support his family and walked more than 100 miles to the city of Addis Ababa. Abebe qualified for the Ethiopian Olympic team in the 1960 Olympics held in Rome. He grew up in the plains of Ethiopia running barefoot, and that's how he ran in the Olympics. Abebe shocked the world by winning the marathon in a record time of 2:15:16 and became the first African to win an Olympic gold medal. He opened the door for Africans, primarily Ethiopians and Kenyans, to start dominating distance running.

Abebe returned to Ethiopia as a hero. Emperor Haile Selassie promoted him to the rank of corporal position and awarded him the Star of Ethiopia. However, a revolution occurred and Abebe, who didn't understand politics, was forced to take part, but refused to kill dignitaries. When the revolution failed, all those involved were sentenced to death by hanging. Abebe was placed in prison, where he stayed for months, often being beaten, and it appeared he would be hung. However, his supporters finally convinced officials that Abebe had been unfairly charged and imprisoned.

Shortly before the 1964 Olympics in Tokyo, Abebe had an acute appendicitis. He was told he would not be able to participate in the Olympics and would therefore be unable to defend his marathon title. Not to be denied, he snuck out and started jogging in the hospital courtyard at night. He not only competed (this time wearing shoes), but won again in a record time of 2:12:11, becoming the first athlete in history to win the Olympic marathon twice. Abebe was a hero in Ethiopia and received a car, which was a real status symbol, since there were not many cars in Ethiopia at that time. Ironically, a car accident left him a paraplegic. At the age of 41, the legendary Abebe Bikila's life came to a tragic end when he died of complications from the car accident.

### **Questions for Thought:**

1. Abebe grew up without shoes but overcame that to be an Olympic champion. What obstacles have you overcome to be successful?
2. Despite being a paraplegic, Abebe remained a positive influence on other people. How can you be a positive influence on people even when things are not going right for you?
3. Abebe became the first African to ever win an Olympic Gold medal. He started a longstanding tradition of Africans dominating the distance events. What type of tradition could you start?