

# Eyes on the prize

ETHIOPIANS MEKONEN, DIRIBA CLAIM TOP SPOTS IN ANNUAL 6-MILE FOOTRACE



PHOTOS BY SHMUEL THALER — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

Kenyan Simion Chirchir watches at right, as Teshome Mekonen of Ethiopia passes Chirchir and Silas Kipruto on Opal Cliffs Drive to take the final lead in Sunday's Wharf to Wharf Race. Mekonen won the 45th annual Wharf to Wharf with a time of 27 minutes, 33 seconds.

## Men: Home stretch good for long-legged Mekonen; Salinas' Estrada sixth as top American

By Julie Jag

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**CAPITOLA** » Long legs have their advantages. During Sunday's 45th annual Wharf to Wharf Race, it equaled about a second.

Teshome Mekonen of Ethiopia stretched his lean limbs out as he sprinted down the final, steep hill into Capitola. His extra length gave him just enough of a gap on Kenya's Simion Chirchir to allow him to cross the finish line first, securing the title of the annual six-mile road race between Santa Cruz and Capitola.

Mekonen finished in 27 minutes, 33 seconds, while Chirchir trailed by a second. Kenyans Silas Kipruto (27:41) and Isaac Mukundi (27:44) placed third and fourth to round out the four cash-winning positions. Mekonen will earn \$4,000 for his victory, followed by \$3,000 for Chirchir, \$2,000 for Kipruto and \$1,000 for Mukundi.

"Big and strong runners. A lot of competition," the soft-spoken Mekonen said post-victory.

Diego Estrada of Salinas was the top American, finishing sixth in 27:48. Scotts Valley High alum Nick Heath corralled the Top Local title that had narrowly eluded him in 2016. A year after believing he had finished as the top local, only to find the runner in front of him was from Watsonville,

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Top American finisher Mara Olson (21), who finished third overall for the women, and winner Buze Diriba (15) head out as the gun sounds on Beach Street.

## WHARF TO WHARF

### UNOFFICIAL RESULTS

**Men:** 1. Teshome Mekonen, Ethiopia, 27:33; 2. Simion Chirchir, Kenya, 27:34; 3. Silas Kipruto, Kenya, 27:41; 4. Isaac Mukundi, Kenya, 27:43; 5. Nicholas Kirui, Kenya, 27:47.

**Women:** 1. Buze Diriba, Ethiopia, 31:19; 2. Monicah Ngige, Kenya, 31:36; 3. Mara Olson, United States, 32:21; 4. Samantha Silva, United States, 32:30; 5. Helena Schultze, United States, 33:00.

➕ **Online:** For additional photos of Sunday's 45th annual Wharf to Wharf Race, go to: [santacruzsentinel.com/sports](http://santacruzsentinel.com/sports)

## Women: First time's the charm for Ethiopian Diriba; Aptos' Hiltz earns top local

By Juan Reyes

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**SANTA CRUZ** » Buze Diriba made her debut at the 45th Wharf to Wharf on Sunday and came into the race with one thing on her mind.

"I'm going to win," she said.

The 23-year-old long-distance runner out of Ethiopia did exactly that, earning a first-place finish in 31 minutes, 19 seconds in the women's division. She was a little more than a minute off the course record set by Caroline Rotich (30:18) in 2014.

Not bad for her first time.

Risper Gesabwa, who was one of the favorites to win, was seeking a third straight title but withdrew from the race on Friday for unknown reasons. Diriba took advantage of the defending champion's absence and collected \$4,000 as a result.

Not far behind was Monicah Ngige (31:36), of Kenya, who finished second and kept pace with the leader throughout the race.

"After four miles, (Ngige) was coming up," Diriba said. "Maybe in the fifth mile, she fell back."

Ngige said she was still happy with a second-place finish, even though she was aiming to cross the finish line first.

"It's OK, I still appreciate it," said Ngige, who earned \$3,000 for placing runner-up. "The race was

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he nabbed the title with a 13th-place finish in 30:10.

"It's quite an honor," said Heath, who now runs for Pepperdine University. "I've been putting a lot of work in over the years, so this is really special to me."

In addition to length — Chirchir came up to his chin — Mekonen possessed a few other advantages over the rest of the field. He had raced most of them multiple times and recently beat several of them when he won the Crazy 8s 8-kilometer race in Tennessee last weekend. He also is familiar with the course, having placed third last year behind winner Mukundi and runner-up Kipruto. This marked Chirchir's inaugural Wharf to Wharf race, which was run under overcast skies and temperatures in the high 50s.

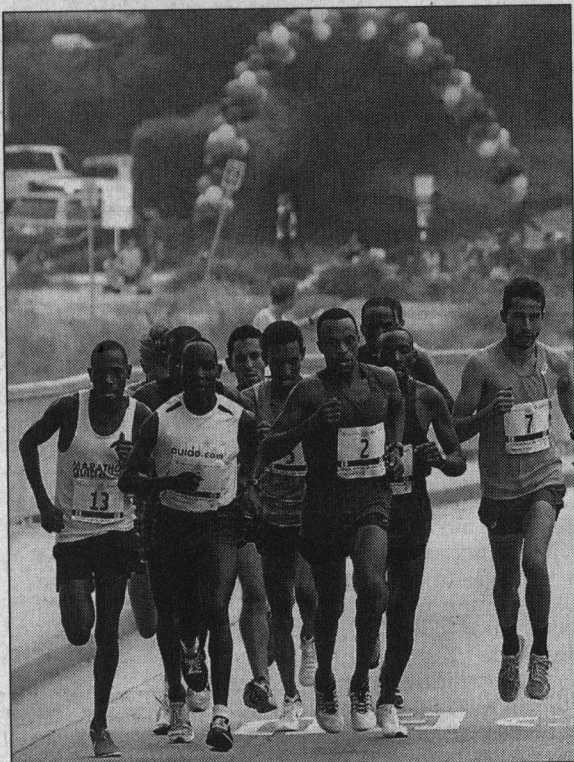
The four top finishers spent most of the race running in a pack of nine — a much thicker group than is typical for the race. They stuck together from the start through Mile 5 along Pleasure Point. Shortly after the mile marker, near 36th Avenue, the pack started to fragment, with Mekonen, Chirchir and Kipruto surging to the front.

"It's the climax of the route," Chirchir said of Mile 5. "If you are still strong, you can go fast from there. You have to change your pace a little bit."

Estrada had one of the best views of the fracture. Running within the main pack, he actually led the race when he surged to the front during the downhill near Twin Lakes beach.

"I pushed a little bit, but they reacted," he said. "Sometimes if they don't know you, they won't react."

But even if the other racers didn't know him, the crowd did. Estrada said he kept hearing his name on the course, which made him feel like a hometown racer, even if it also gave away his cover. So, he readily tucked into the pack, surging on the uphill and slowing on the downhill, as seemed to be



SHMUEL THALER — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

The lead pack heads up the first significant hill on East Cliff Drive shortly after mile marker one during the Wharf to Wharf Race Sunday.

## TOP 10 FINISHERS

### MEN (UNOFFICIAL RESULTS)

1. Teshome Mekonen,	Ethiopia,	27:33\$
2. Simion Chirchir,	Kenya,	27:34\$
3. Silas Kipruto,	Kenya,	27:41\$
4. Isaac Mukundi,	Kenya,	27:43\$
5. Nicholas Kirui,	Kenya,	27:47
6. Diego Estrada Constantino,	Salinas,	27:48*
7. Geoffrey Ngetich,	Kenya,	27:54
8. Scott Smith,	Arizona,	27:57
9. Wilson Kibogo,	Kenya,	28:05
10. Chris Frias,	Ventura,	28:59

### Also

13. Nick Heath,	Scotts Valley,	30:10**
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\* Top American

\*\* Top Local

\$ Cash prize winners

the wont of the leaders. Until they approached the final, long downhill, when they found their next gear.

"They put on a really good move around Mile 5," Estrada said, "and they didn't slow down."

Estrada, 27, didn't leave disappointed, though he is tired of finishing sixth after taking that same position in the men's 10k at the USA Track and Field Championships in Oregon late last month. He also was a bit perturbed that what he called "a slow start" for the elite pack led to his inability to break 27 minutes — something

that hasn't been achieved since he was taking classes at Alisal High in the late 2000s. He'd like a chance to stretch his legs a little more.

So, even though this was his first Wharf to Wharf, he doesn't expect it to be his last.

"Next year, I'm going to have a different routine. I may not do trials next season and I may do more road races," he said. "I'm going to pencil this one in."

"It would be nice to come back and get that win."

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# Women

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good and the cause is good. I like it."

This was her second time at the Wharf to Wharf and it was the second straight year she was runner-up in the race. However, this year Ngige was able to improve her personal record by six seconds. She thinks the cool temperatures in the high 50s played a factor into it.

Ngige said she was neck-and-neck with Diriba up until the fifth mile. That's when fatigue started to kick in and that's when she started falling behind.

Mara Olson was the top American runner (32:21) and finished third in Sunday's race. No American runner has won the women's division since Emily Infeld did it in 2013.

Olson, who recently moved to San Francisco to attend medical school at UC San Francisco, said it's been a rough two weeks with the new transition. But she was looking forward to running in the event.

The 24-year-old Butler University alumna was a three-time Division I track and field and cross country All-American.

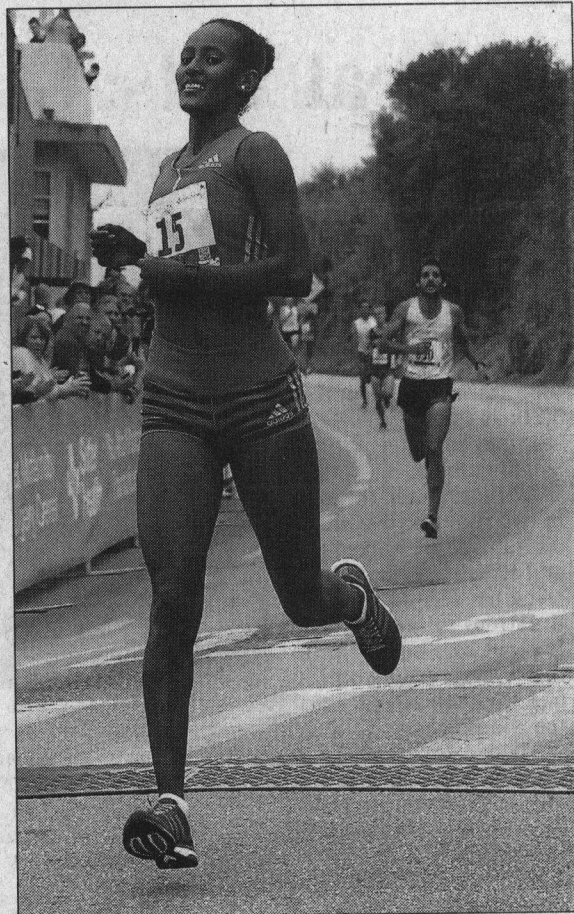
"It was really fun to get out there and race hard," she said. "It was a great welcome to California. First time in Santa Cruz, first time doing Wharf to Wharf and I absolutely loved it. The energy, the people, it's contagious and it's uplifting."

Olson said she quickly fell 80 meters behind the lead pack after passing the first mile marker while going uphill on Murray Street. But she hung in there and it wasn't until Mile 5 where she started to gain ground.

"I found myself sniffing out fourth place and then third place and really tried to hammer hard that last mile and get some distance," she said.

The local top finisher was 22-year-old Nikki Hiltz of Aptos, who placed eighth (33:49). She beat last year's local winner, Amy Schnitger, who finished 14th (34:55), and said she was actually a bit surprised after she heard the news.

The Aptos High alumna,



SHMUEL THALER — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

Ethiopian runner Buze Diriba crosses the finish line in 31 minutes, 19 seconds to win the women's title in the 2017 Wharf to Wharf Race Sunday. Monicah Ngige finished second.

## TOP 10 FINISHERS

### WOMEN (UNOFFICIAL RESULTS)

1. Buze Diriba,	Ethiopia,	31:19\$
2. Monicah Ngige,	Kenya,	31:36\$
3. Mara Olson,	San Francisco,	32:21\$*
4. Samantha Silva,	La Mesa,	32:30\$
5. Helena Schultz,	United States,	33:00
6. Grace Kahura,	Kenya,	33:14
7. Kristen Findley,	Sugarloaf,	33:19
8. Nikki Hiltz,	Aptos,	33:49**
9. Brittini Hutton,	Santa Barbara,	33:50
10. Rachel Mitchell,	Sacramento,	33:56

\* Top American

\*\* Top Local

\$ Cash prize winners

who's been racing in the event since she was 7 years old, has never been the top local before. In fact, last year was the first time she placed in the top 10 by finishing 10th overall.

"It wasn't really a plan," said Hiltz, who competes for the University of Arkansas. "I was kind of just having fun and when I crossed the finish line they were like, 'You're top local.'"

Hiltz said she felt relaxed going into the race and wanted to have fun, like wearing matching NASA T-shirts with her

mom and racing partner. But that doesn't mean it wasn't hard, especially since her background is strictly middle-distance running at 1,500 meters.

"I would say six miles is six times the distance that I usually race," she said. "Everything after the first mile was hard."

But the good thing about being a local runner is having the local crowd behind you, and that's why Hiltz doesn't plan on missing a Wharf to Wharf race anytime soon.

"I'm always going to run this race," she said.