

First-timers rule at Wharf to Wharf

By TONY NUNEZ
Of Aptos Life

CAPITOLA — Perhaps it was running on the trails of Denver, Colo., which Simon Ndirangu said is the perfect mix of weather and elevation for endurance training, that gave him the upper hand.

Or, maybe, it was a close friend that gave him the upper hand.

Whatever it was, Ndirangu was in a world of his own.

The 28-year-old Kenyan notched a 25-second win in the 42nd running of the Wharf to Wharf race on July 27 by crossing the finish line at an unofficial time of 27 minutes, 34 seconds.

"My plan was to come here and win," Ndirangu said. "It's a nice city, beautiful course, a challenging one. I was looking to come here and get the win. That's the most important thing. The field was good enough, but I was better than them for today."

After the crossing the fourth-mile marker of the six-mile course, which runs from the Santa Cruz Wharf in front of the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk to the Capitola Wharf on the corner of Cliff Drive and Wharf Road, the win was well in hand.

Ndirangu separated from the four-man pack of last year's winner of Nelson Oyugi, Ben Bruce of Flagstaff, Ariz., and Scotts Bauhs of San Luis Obispo, and made it a one-man race.

His lead grew from 10 seconds at the end of the fourth mile, to an estimated 20 seconds at the beginning of the final mile.

"The field was strong," Ndirangu said. "We kept looking at each other wondering who was going to make the first move. Nobody wanted to make a move. I made a move. Sometimes you risk it and things work or they don't."

"It was a move, which he mentioned he had a little help with.

His running teammate, and three-time Wharf to Wharf champion, Shadrack Kosgei, provided him with a challenge: go to the "the best little road race in California" and win the \$4,000 first-place prize.

But he didn't send the eventual champion on this mission without some tips and pointers to help make his teammate's first try at the feat a win.

"He said the course was challenging," Ndirangu said. "He told me where and when to make a move. He challenged me, 'go see if you can win this race.'"

Ndirangu led the race from wire-to-wire after blazing into the lead where he and Oyugi jockeyed for position for the next

three and a half miles, before he separated from the pack for good.

Oyugi was eventually supplanted by Bauhs, and Bruce and finished fourth.

Bauhs took home \$3,000 for the runner-up finish and another \$1,000 for being the first American. Bruce's third place finish earned him a cool \$2,000.

Oyugi's was awarded \$1,000 for his fourth-place finish.

Just less than three minutes after the men's race had been decided, Kenyan Caroline Rotich shattered the women's previous course record of 30:42, set by Esther Kiplagat in 2002, by finishing at 30:18 in her first attempt.

The 30-year-old, who trains in Santa Fe, N.M. with Ryan Bolton, was one of three women who either broke or met the past record on July 27.

Risper Gesabwa — the 2012 champion — and Aliphine Tuliamuk-Bolton came in second and third at 30:29 and 30:42, respectively.

The winner, who's specialty is half-marathons and marathons, said she was using this race as a test to see how where her speed was and was a little surprised with the pace.

"It felt tough," she said. "It felt good. After the race I was happy. This was a test to see how my speed was. To see if I still had it in the bag."

Last year's champion Emily Infeld came in fourth at 31:16 after sitting out for five months with a stress fracture to her sacrum.

"Things have been really great," said the member of Bowerman Track Club of Portland, Ore. "I'm not in top form right now, but I was just trying to get in decent shape so that I could put on a decent performance here."

Infeld added that a big reason she came back to Wharf to Wharf was because of the "love" she has for the race.

This year's rendition sported 52 bands along the course and — keeping up with tradition — had the elite runners stay with host families.

It was a nice change of pace for fifth-place finisher Tara Erdmann and runner for The Nike Oregon Project in Portland, Ore.

"Staying with the family kind of takes your mind off the race," Erdmann said. "It's great. You get to sleep in a nice bed and you get that family feel."

Coming in as the top local male finisher at 30:57, and continuing a family tradition, was Watsonville's Dayne Gradone.

A 2009 graduate of Aptos High School, Gradone said he was "born and raised in Watsonville" and went on to run cross country and track and field at Chico State.



Simon Ndirangu (right), who placed first in the annual Wharf to Wharf race, is shown in the lead pack at Twin Lakes State Beach with Scott Bauhs and Ben Bruce.
Photos by Tarmo Hannula/Aptos Life

He graduated in May and has since moved back to his home town, which he takes much pride in.

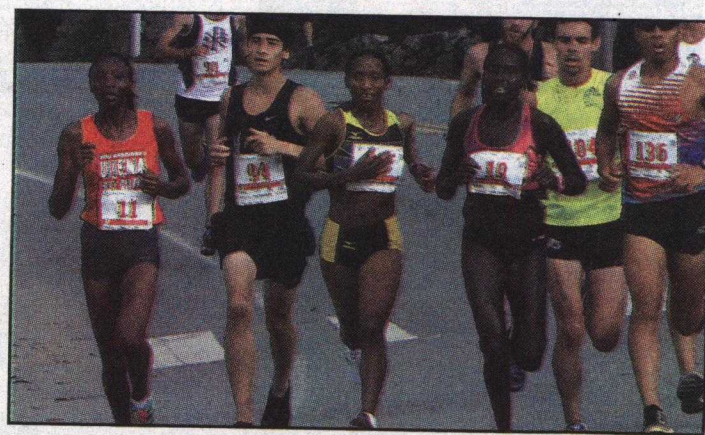
"It's a good honor," Gradone said. "To bring it home for Watsonville."

He followed in Beau Gradone-Rogers', his cousin and Watsonville High grad, footsteps by running at Chico State and now coming in as the top local finish in the Wharf to Wharf.

"It's good to bring it back to the family," he said.

After running the race 11 times before his victory on July 27, Gradone said he knew he had a really chance after fellow Aptos High grad Brett Gotcher, who finished third overall last year, had announced he wouldn't be running this time around.

"I figured I had a shot," he joked.



Caroline Rotich (front row, third from left) of Kenya was the first woman to cross the finish line. Photo by Tarmo Hannula/Aptos Life

He added that while he was a bit disappointed as the plan was to run a minute faster in this race, his first stop of his running season he said, he'll use the momentum to build up for what's next.

"I kept it honest," Gradone said. "I kept composure and kept going."

Watsonville's Amy Schnitger, an Aptos High and Chico State graduate, put on a repeat performance as the top local female finisher coming in at 34:11.