

## **Meb Keflezighi Stands Up Against Hate and Prejudice**

The marathon legend and his brother Hawi discuss why it's so important to stand together.

By Nicole Duncan

In the running world, Mebrahtom Keflezighi is a household name, so much in fact that, like many notable celebrities, he's often referred to by a shortened first name alone: Meb. He is a four-time Olympian, whose accolades include taking silver in the marathon at the 2004 Athens games and winning both the New York City and Boston marathons in 2009 and 2014, respectively. The latter was an especially personal victory; as an Eritrean-born American, Meb was eager to win gold for the U.S. in the year following the Boston Marathon bombings. When he succeeded, it was the first time an American man had won Boston since 1983.

He retired from professional running in 2017 but still regularly participates in the sport, including family 5Ks with his wife and three daughters in Tampa, Florida. He also has more time to dedicate to the MEB Foundation, which raises funds through the New York City and Boston marathons. Through these donations, the nonprofit can provide resources to communities in need, with a focus on youth health, education, and fitness initiatives.

But for all his accomplishments in the sporting world and beyond, Meb has faced his share of challenges, including the prejudice Black men face in America. That's part of the reason why, back in 2021 when Together We Stand held its first Maud 2.23 Run (now the Stand Up Run), he donned one of the event shirts and shared it with his fans on social media. It's also why, three years later, he continues to support the organization and its mission.

"I think running is a beautiful thing, but you have to have safety. It took Ahmaud Arbery's death and George Floyd's death and many other things to expose that that's not always the case," Meb says. "Memory fades, but it should not be eliminated. We all have to look back and say, Hey, I did this work in honor of Ahmaud and to stand up for others because it hasn't stopped. There are other people facing the same challenges that he did."

For many white, cisgender runners, Arbery's murder shone a light on how people of color and other marginalized groups must navigate in all facets of their lives. White runners may think nothing of running through an upscale neighborhood or exploring a trail in an affluent part of town, but for Black runners, such activities require extra vigilance.

Back when Meb lived in California, he liked to frequent a trail in a fancier part of town, where the wood chip path was soft and perfect for a recovery run. But Meb says he probably only ran it once by himself. And when he did, he had a nearby address at the ready in case someone stopped and questioned him. Even now, two decades after he was catapulted into running stardom, Meb admits there are certain running routes he won't do alone.

It's a sad reality that running should be so complicated and potentially dangerous when the sport has served as a great connector—and equalizer— throughout Meb's life.

“I like the fairness that running provides. When the gun goes off, it doesn't matter what religion you are, it doesn't matter what political side you are, it doesn't matter how much money you have in your account, you're just going to run to the best that you can,” he says.

## **Running together**

Meb immigrated with his family to the United States when he was 12 years old. Growing up in Eritrea, he was already accustomed to differences in language and culture; the small, East African nation comprises nine tribes, with each possessing its own dialect and customs. To a degree, this diversity prepared him for life in a foreign country, but he still encountered many cultural surprises.

In between Eritrea and California, his family briefly lived in Italy, and Meb recalls it was where he first saw a Caucasian person. Similarly, it was the first time many of his Italian classmates had met a Black person. The students were curious about him, with many asking questions and wanting to touch his hair, but he says these interactions were warm and kind. And when teachers and school friends would invite him over for dinner, he felt immersed in a new culture.

In Southern California, it was yet again a new experience. Meb found himself surrounded by people of all backgrounds, as well as other immigrants, whom he would regularly encounter in ESL classes. At school, Meb was quiet until athletics provided a means for understanding and connection.

“Sports, I think, was a big breakthrough for me. When I was in seventh grade, I didn't speak much. I couldn't really express myself,” he says. “But P.E. class opened things up; if you run hard, you're going to get an A or B, and if you mess around, you're going to get a D or F. So I just ran as hard as I could. And when I got that 5:20 mile, it helped open up others' eyes. They accepted me for who I was as an athlete instead of an immigrant or other thing.”

Like Meb, his younger brother Hawi credits sports—for him, basketball—as a bridge to belonging. Though the brothers live in different states now (Meb in Florida and Hawi in Indiana) they're very close; Hawi has served as Meb's agent throughout his career and also counts among his clients other running stars like, Olympic marathoner Aliphine Tuliamuk and retired marathoner Katherine Switzer, who was the first woman to run Boston.

## **Encountering racism**

Four years his brother's junior, Hawi thinks it was easier in some ways for him to adapt to life in the U.S. That said, he also thinks the age gap came with a bit of naivité. Both brothers attended the University of California, Los Angeles, and Hawi remembers how carefully his brother would drive his 1973 Ford LTD around campus and the city.

“Let's say he's taking me from his apartment back to the dorms; we have nothing to hide. We're good citizens; we're students at UCLA. But Meb would get nervous and cautious around the

cops,” Hawi says. “At that young age, I was naive, and I was just like, ‘Why should we be scared?’”

Hawi experienced a direct case of racial profiling a few years later at the UCLA School of Law. On a Saturday morning, he was heading to the law school library with his laptop bag but was diverted by a police officer and questioned for 10 minutes about a possible theft. At the time, Hawi didn’t know he was being treated like a suspect; he thought he was just helping in an investigation. When he later realized what the officer had been insinuating, he was frustrated, not just about being profiled but also because the police had wasted so much time questioning him.

“Those types of experiences don’t happen every day, but they do show that it happens. No matter how educated you are, no matter how accomplished you are, no matter how squeaky-clean your record is, it happens to a lot of people,” he says. “And I think that’s important for Meb and I to share. Just because we have had some success doesn’t mean we’re immune to this type of racism from society.”

### **Speaking out**

In 2020, less than four months after Arbery was chased down and shot by three white men and mere weeks after George Floyd was suffocated by Minneapolis police, Meb opened up about his own encounters with racism and prejudice in a Q&A with *Outside* magazine. His inner circle of family and friends knew about these stories already, but it was the first time he’d spoken publicly on the topic.

“Meb has always had a positive outlook, but he felt it was important—given the platform and the opportunity and the time—to share those experiences. And it was amazing how impactful it was because the running community was saying, ‘if this can happen to Meb, it can happen to so many others,’” Hawi says. “It gave a lot of credibility to so many voices that have been screaming for many years. It helped amplify other voices by just sharing a part of his story.”

In that same vein, Meb’s support of Together We Stand has helped the organization reach more people, both in its home state of North Carolina and much farther afield. One thing the two Keflezighi brothers say they like about Together We Stand is how it fosters meaningful conversations at an individual level. Social media platforms can unite people in a shared mission and grow grassroots causes, but that digital connection goes even further when it’s translated to real-life encounters and relationships.

Hawi remembers how a former UCLA teammate reached out to them when the Black Lives Matter movement was starting up. Over the years, this teammate, who is white, had become a good friend of the brothers, so he was comfortable enough to ask them about their own experiences as Black men and the larger movement in general.

“It’s great to have a relationship where somebody can honestly say, ‘I’m confused. I don’t understand. Can you explain this to me?’ And that’s where we could have an honest dialogue in a trusted space,” Hawi says. “If you can have those honest conversations and not feel judged but also be respectful of the situation, I think that’s how everybody can grow from it. You can convey it to a friend who can convey it to his network and his family and sometimes those one-on-one conversations go so much further than blasting things on social media.”

In addition to bringing people of different races, backgrounds, and orientations together, Meb also thinks it’s critical to include a wide range of ages, especially younger people. Back in 2004, when he returned from Athens, an elderly neighbor had asked to see the medal and invited Meb to drop by his house. But when Meb did so, the teenage granddaughter who met him at the door wouldn’t shake his hand.

“That was a shock for me. Here I am, your grandfather got up in bed to give me a hug and you wouldn’t shake hands. And that kind of hurts because you would think the new generation would be more approachable,” Meb says.

It’s yet another example why ongoing communication is absolutely necessary in bringing about any sort of sustainable progress. To that end, Meb and Hawi say it’s important to speak up, not just in the wake of a tragedy or the face of blatant injustice, but also when it’s smaller, everyday prejudices. Just as changing someone’s perception for the better can have a ripple effect, so too can microaggressions and passive racism snowball into gaping inequity and violence.

“I think we all can admit there’s racism in our society. In school, in work, in business, in life, in relationships—it exists. But when you see racism lead to killing, then it’s like, OK, you know what? This is a serious issue that needs to be addressed wherever we encounter it. Sometimes, if it’s something small, you might let it pass. But we do have to address it because these ‘minor issues’ could lead to bigger issues,” Hawi says. “Racism can have so many negative fruits that grow from a seed and can lead to the death of an innocent person trying to enjoy a walk or run.”

## **Standing up**

Both Meb and Hawi are proud to be American citizens; Hawi even describes the United States as an amazing country. They have always been appreciative of the many opportunities it has offered them as immigrants and now citizens. That said, it’s possible to be proud and appreciative but still see deep flaws. To overlook them would be to deny the very real suffering of others and to hamper any sort of progress.

“I feel it’s our duty to say we are thankful. We wouldn’t have these opportunities if we were not in the United States. But to deny some of the experiences that we’ve had is also not being fair to society as a whole,” Hawi says. “It’s always good to have that balance.”

Meb says his father always used to tell them not to judge a book by its cover, and it’s a principle he still lives by today. Just as he doesn’t want someone to judge him by the color of his skin or

the accent in his voice, so too does he strive not to make snap judgments about others. He knows there are lots of good cops but also some bad ones. There are good people but then also ones who act out of hate and fear.

For him, it's important to maintain a broad-minded, balanced perspective. He's aware of the negative and works to combat it through his own voice and platform. At the same time, he knows that to fix society's wrongs requires focusing on and believing in the positive, too.

"We just try to focus as much as we can on the glass being half-full. If we look at it as half-empty, the progress is not there at all. But if we see it as half-full, even if the progress is not where we want it to be, it's still progress," Meb says. "It's like a marathon; it's progress in the right direction. And I think that's very important to acknowledge."