

Bor credits long jump skills, bests field in Olympic Trials steeplechase final

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Hillary Bor takes the TrackTown20 steeplechase title, earning his second Olympic birth with his 8:21.34. Photo by Jay Bendlin

By Caela Fenton and Kate Walkup

After a dramatic women's steeplechase final last night, it was the men's turn today—they didn't disappoint.

Two-time Olympian Donn Cabral took the field out hard and continued to lead for most of the race, which took place in 93-degree heat. 2016 Olympian in the steeplechase, Hillary Bor, tucked himself in behind Cabral, biding his time.

"My goal this year coming in was just to wait until the last 300 and make a move," Bor said. "I made a really, really hard move with 500 to go. I kind of sat behind him as much as I could. I was pretending my kids were behind me [with 250 to go] and I knew this was a killer move because I took it to heart and attacked the water pit, and the rest is history."

The field remained in a tight pack for the majority of the race, only stringing out in the final three-laps. Coming into the bell lap, Isaac Updike and Bor made their move and a front pack emerged, with Bor and Keter blowing by Updike with 300m to go and Mason Ferlic passing him right off of the last water-jump.

The final results were Hillary Bor (8:21.34), Benard Keter (8:21.81) and Mason Ferlic (8:22.05).

Bor and Keter—former and current soldiers in the US Army—fell into each other's arms, embracing before splaying out on the track, likely with a combination of happiness and heat exhaustion.

Bor, who took his terminal leave from the army this year and is now sponsored by Hoka, was born in Eldoret, Kenya and became a U.S. citizen in 2013. He grew up a track and field athlete, but spent most of his time on the field competing in the long jump and the triple jump.

"I was more of a field events guy [in high school]. I used to do long jump and triple jump," Bor said. "But there's something in steeple that just took me in [and made me] want to try. I ran it a little bit in high school, but there were no water pits back in Kenya."

After attempting the steeplechase a few times throughout his high school career, Bor knew it was the event he wanted to pursue in college. In 2007, Bor won a scholarship to Iowa State University.

"I remember when I told my college coach, 'I want to do the steeple.' He was like, 'No, you're too short for the steeple.' And I was like, 'No, I think this is my event.'"

In 2008, Bor placed fourth in the steeplechase at NCAA Championships to earn All-American status.

Bor made his first Olympic Trials debut in 2016, where he placed second in the steeplechase and made his first Olympic team. Although the former field athlete now sticks to the track, Bor continues to give the field events credit when it comes to his jumping abilities.

"I want to say the reason why I have the best water jump is because of my history with the long jump and triple jump," Bor said. "If you see, I can finish the race without touching the water."

Bor himself has been an inspiration to Keter. Both athletes were born in Kenya, competed collegiately, joined the U.S. Army and became American citizens while chasing their Olympic dreams. Keter also looks up to his brother, an Olympic steeplechaser as well.

"I wanted to be an Olympian just like him. You know, I always wanted to continue the family legacy," Keter said.



Benard Keter embraces Hillary Bor after earning his spot on the Tokyo Olympic team on Friday. Photo by Adam Eberhardt

Keter first ran collegiately for Wayland Baptist, winning an NAIA championship before transferring to Texas Tech, where he was a four-time Big Ten champion. He placed 10th in the NCAA steeple in 2016 and 6th in 2017. Keter is the second Kenyan-born Texas Tech alumni to make the 2012 Olympic squad, after Sally Kipyego in the marathon.

Keter only began competing professionally in 2019 and views the pandemic-related postponement as lucky for him. He injured his achilles in May of last year, and likely would have been unable to race the Trials had they been held on time.

After the postponement, he set high goals for himself for 2021.

"I wrote a note to myself, and it's still on my fridge. I told myself I was going to be an Olympian, and possibly running 8:10 this year," Keter said. "So, now I've made the Olympic team but the next goal is to run 8:10, or faster."

And he thinks he can do it this season. All he needs is a fast race, preferably one with a rabbit. "I think if I can get to a race that is going for the time from the gun, I think I can run really fast."

For Mason Ferlic, racing at Hayward Field brings back memories. At the 2015 NCAA Outdoor Championships, he took a tumble into the water jump.



Mason Ferlic celebrates after snagging the final spot on the Olympic team in the steeplechase on Friday. Photo by Jay Bendlin

He can laugh now about the "iconic spill" he took, joking that he "made the U.S. diving team in that race, face first right into four inches of water.

But that fall at Hayward six years ago, in some ways, influenced the athlete that he is today.

"I just remember coming out of the water just gasping for air and being like, 'What the heck happened?' I got complacent [...] And that trip into the water was like, 'Hey, don't take this for granted,'" Ferlic explained. "I turned that high dive into momentum for my senior season, and whether there's parallels or not, the pandemic and 2020 was similar.

"It was a high dive for all of us in this sport. We had the rug under our feet whipped out from under us and the sport came careening into four inches of water, and a lot of people asked what's next, what do we do, and for me that was the reset, that was like, 'hey, stop taking this for granted.'"

Ferlic was the 2016 NCAA Champion in the steeplechase in 2016 and placed 5th in the Olympic Trials that year. This year, Ferlic qualified to race in the 1500m, 5,000m and the steeplechase at the Trials, but chose to focus on the latter. He trains in Ann Arbor Michigan alongside Nick Willis and high school standout Hobbs Kessler.

Ferlic also shares some characteristics with bronze medallist in the women's steeple, Val Constien, in that he also works full-time while competing at the elite level. Ferlic just finished his first year of his PhD in statistics at the University of Michigan.

"I don't consider myself like a monk in a monastery when it comes to running," Ferlic said, claiming that balancing his work, school and running has allowed him to develop holistically as a person and not just a runner.

Ferlic wears a Tracksmith singlet (like Constien), but also works with the brand in business analytics. When pressed about whether he would be seeking a more traditional big-ticket sponsorship moving forward, Ferlic was unsure.

"I'm at the point in my career that I value the connections and the growth," Ferlic said. "It's exciting to be part of a brand that is invested in the sport and invested in the people, and invested in me."

Now, the team of Bor, Keter and Ferlic will represent the U.S. in the steeplechase in Tokyo, with their eyes on the podium.

"I never thought I could be an Olympian in my life; but now, to be a second time, you can't ask for anything better," Bor said.

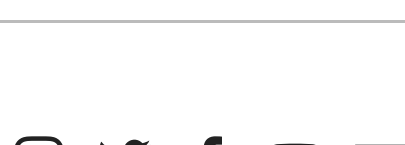
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