THE NOMADIC OLYMPIAN

MOHAMMED AHMED

Mohammed Ahmed is a Canadian long-distance runner. Ahmed won the bronze medal in the 5000 m at the 2019 World Athletics Championships in Doha, the first Canadian to medal in the event, and is a two-time silver medalist at the Commonwealth Games in the 5000 and 10,000 m events. Ahmed competed at the 2012 and 2016 Summer Olympics. He also ran the eleventh fastest indoor 5000m in history in Boston in 2017, setting the Canadian national record in the process. He was born in Mogadishu, Somalia to Said Yusuf and Halimo Farah, and moved to Canada at the age of 11. He began running track at the age of 16. Ahmed's family is originally from Hargeisa, Somaliland.

Whenever I am asked to share my story, I am always a little hesitant. I am not sure of the exact reason for my reluctance, besides maybe the feeling of having told the story so many times. But another reason may be knowing that Canada, a country built by immigrants, sustains itself through the contributions of millions of us with similar stories. In this context, one might wonder whether mine would be considered all that special or different from the typical immigrant Canadian story. This, however, does not mean I downplay the importance of sharing ideas and experiences and the positive impact doing so can have in our society.

One can choose to identify who someone is in a variety of ways and, for me, my nomadic way of life is an interesting part of how I see myself. I would describe myself as someone who wasn't meant be here. Pardon the melodrama, but I say that based on the circumstance of my birth. I was born in Somalia, the country that sits on the eastern-most corner of Africa, straddling the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea.

I was born there in 1991 at the height of the country's civil war. The thing about conflict is it displaces things and obviously people. But the way my parents stuck it out together at ages 22 and 23 and decided to bring me into the world is a testament to their indomitable spirit. Two months after

my birth, my parents decided to escape to safety. I like to think they finally had enough of the bullet-riddled life marked by tremendous uncertainty, but my arrival was the thing that finally gave them the push to leave.

My parents arrived in Kenya at a refugee camp and then, through monetary help from uncles abroad, were able to relocate and settle in Nairobi. It is there that we lived for some time until, unexpectedly, my parents decided to uproot our growing family once more – this time under slightly different circumstances than those of our first move. For logistical reasons, my dad was not going to be making the journey with us this time. In November 2001, just as winter was approaching, my mom, my twin brothers Kadar and Ibrahim, two-year-old little brother Hamza, my cousin and I arrived in Canada – with nothing but the few suitcases holding our African weather-specific attire.

I look back on our first year to 18 months in Canada and recall how all I seemed to do was complain. It's dissimilarity to our place of origin, the foreignness of the language, the fact that I missed my friends, my father and, yes, the sun. I recall one day in particular. My mom dragged me along with her to make a grocery run on our only means of getting around the city during that time, public transportation. As we waited for the bus to arrive, which was running a few minutes late on a bitter cold winter day, I turned to my mom, freezing and asked her: "why Mom? Why did we come here? We don't know anyone or have anything. How are we supposed to make it?" Despite her reply: "calm down, relax my son", I kept on and on with my complaining. So, my mom turned to a Somali verse to soothe me. She recited:

Oh, you I bore first with delight
No matter the circumstances of life
No matter how bleak the plight
No matter who might attack at night
Or out at sea who might pass one another in full flight
We seek protection in Allah's might
For his companionship is never out of sight
So darling never hesitate with fright
From our present circumstance we will rise
From uncertainty we will take flight
So darling never hesitate with fright
The future is full of bright light
So darling never hesitate with fright.

It was a tough and bitter cold adjustment, but we managed.

The lessons I learned from my family's move to Canada are many, but a few in particular stand out: first, you ought to take risks in whatever endeavour you choose. My mom deciding to bring her kids to a country she knew very little about, unable to speak the language, without a partner or father figure to help with raising four boys, represented risk-taking on a tremendous scale. How did she know we were going to stay on the straight and narrow and follow the life that she had envisioned for us? She didn't. She only made what she thought was the best decision for herself and her kids, uprooting her whole existence and hoping for the best. How did she manage to shoulder all the worry associated with raising kids in a foreign land and also providing for so many mouths? She believed in herself, leaning on whatever supports she could find – friends, one another, God.

They say heroes wear capes, and I'll agree to that if a hijab can be included in this definition too. If

a hero exists in my life; it is my mom. The stubbornness, courage and will in that woman have propelled my brothers and me very far in our lives. My brothers and I are all university educated, most of us with multiple degrees and still working on making mama proud. I share this story not to elicit pity, but rather to underscore the importance of risk-taking, of going for it when you don't know the outcome. Be brave, be fearless!

Believe it or not, it was in Canada that I discovered running, despite having lived in the country that dominates the sport for most of my early childhood.



Mohammed with his superhero Mom, Halimo Farah

In the summer of 2004, my brothers and I watched the Athens Olympic Games in our basement. Watching the victories of Kenenisa Bekele over 10 thousand metres, Hicham El-Garrouj's textbook finish in the 1500-metre event, and both of their epic battles with Eliud Kipchoge over 5000 metres, provided me with a push towards running. I can vividly recall how after each one of those races, I quickly proceeded to do laps in my basement. It was those Olympic Games that instilled in me the desire to one day want to compete at such a level.

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When school started in September, the first thing I made sure to do was sign up for the cross-country team and, though I was not a terrible runner, I quickly discovered I was not great either. I had plenty of baby fat around the face and had not stretched out quite enough, just yet. I was a middle of the pack runner for the majority of my middle school years, but that did not stop me from writing in my grade 8 graduation yearbook next to future occupation: Olympian.

When I arrived in high school, I continued with my streak of signing up for the cross-country team. On my first full high school cross-country season, things were changing a little for me. I was finishing up slightly more towards the front of the pack than I had in the past. It might have been the little bit of training that I was introduced to, or maybe the fact that my body finally stretched out to pretty much

its current long and lanky frame. Throughout high school, year by year, I made slight improvements; initially one place from making it to OFSAA – the Olympics of high school running in Ontario, to top ten my second year, and finally back-to-back OFSAA XC Champion my junior and senior years. With the guidance, training, and knowledge I gained from the local track club I had joined, I learned that I could get my education paid for and race alongside some of the best in the sport in the NCAA.

I chose the University of Wisconsin-Madison and I remember one of my pleas before I committed to Mick Byrne – Dublin born and bred, but with a terrible New York accent too: "Hey, Mick, on my third year, I want to be on that 2012 Canadian Olympic Team. He replied: 'Yeah, yeah, yeah, whatever. Just initial and sign those damn papers and we'll discuss it when you get there,' 'Deal!', I said. I came to Madison with dreams of gaining individual success, team titles and, most importantly, of joining the Olympic team. I can vividly remember during the 2010 World Junior track and field Championships after my freshman campaign, where I competed in the 10k and finished 4th. Athletics Canada leadership, our country's governing body, sat all the members of Team Canada down and told us we were the 2016 candidates, and all I could think of was that I wanted to make it in 2012 and fulfill my 8th-grade ambition of being an Olympian, at the earliest opportunity.

When that third year came around, having capped off a national team title in the fall, I convinced Mick to redshirt me during the winter in order to put in the necessary preparation to tackle the Olympic standard for the outdoor season. I don't know how I did it, but on a cool night in May, at the Payton Jordan invitational, I managed to get together a decent enough effort to snag the Olympic standard. I surprised even myself because, despite my deep desire and drive going into that race, I needed to improve on my Personal Best by almost a minute in order to have a fighting chance. I went into those Olympic Games, running on fumes – a-tired college kid, just happy to be there – but also determined to soak in all the experience I could for the years to follow.

I left the 2012 games with the 2016 Rio Olympics in my sights and a podium finish on my mind. After graduating from UW-Madison, I joined the Bowerman Track club – a Nike group in Portland with plenty of talented athletes. I was intimidated at first, as I am sure my teammates could attest to, with all the nervous tics I displayed. But the nurturing environment at Bowerman and the high goal-oriented nature of the group was a perfect fit. After a transitional 2015 year, where I was a world championship finalist and set a Canadian national record in the 5000 metres, I welcomed 2016 with plenty of excitement. Right out of the gate, I bested my Canadian record by almost 10 seconds in the first race of the outdoor season at the Prefontaine Classic, just narrowly missing the 13-minute mark with a time of 1:01 p.m. to finish third. That race took me to the games as a potential medallist. Something I had been dreaming of by this point for almost two decades. I put in a lot of work at altitude in Park City Utah in preparation and was setting personal bests in training.

My confidence going into the games had never been higher. Besides the Canadian Olympic Trials where I got to compete alongside my little

brother Ibrahim – I did not run another race after the Pre-Classic. I qualified in both the 5K and 10K. Dating back to my days as a youth athlete, I had always perceived myself as 10,000-metre athlete – I ran the 10K on the track as early as Grade 11, competing at World Juniors, where I ran a personal best and just sneaked in the top 10 with a 9th-place finish. Suffice it to say, I really liked my chances in the 10K at Rio and thought, if I was going to medal, it would be in that race. Those who have watched the race would know that I certainly did not medal and, after getting dropped at around 7k, I would go on to finish in 32nd place – dead effing last.

Going from hopes of medalling and maybe even winning, to getting lapped multiple times and finishing last, left me feeling devastated. I couldn't believe what had happened. How did it go so badly? I was questioning everything – Am I not fit enough, am I not mentally strong enough? I had almost a week before the 5K to toil with my emotions. I stayed at a Hotel in Rio de Janeiro far away from the hoopla of the Olympic Village in solitude. I would call my mom and little brother in the days leading up to the 5000m heats just unloading all of my emotions and insecurities. As always, my mom, was there for me once again, my hero in a hijab. She reassured me and built me back up the way only a mother can.

After many days I finally put the disappointment of the 10K behind me and stepped on the line for the 5000m heats in the sunny Rio de Janeiro daytime heat, where I made it through to the finals. I was determined not to repeat the failure from the previous week. More than anything, I wanted to get some revenge – that was my mantra, seek vengeance. Wearing an all-white Canada kit, I took the lane and shadowed the reigning Olympic champion. The Ethiopians were determined to make an honest race. They strung together laps of 62 and 63 seconds, taking us through four laps in 4:12. I stayed patient and geared up for a big kick, ready to show the world my newfound speed. As we rounded the turn to take the Penultimate lap, I was in a bad position, stuck on the inside. I managed to find an escape and latch on to the breakaway group of 4, after taking some elbows. At the 200m mark, I was still in it and with 150 metres to go, I attempted to pass wide and overtake for third, where I was met with some fiercer elbows, as the saying goes: if you're not rubbing, you're not racing. My momentum was derailed, and I ran out of gas in the last 50 metres – once again finishing outside of the medals.

After initially getting disqualified along with two other athletes, I was reinstated and was officially fourth in the final standings – which to me might as well have been last. I didn't take any solace in being close. Looking back on it, I am proud of the way I bounced back and the lesson I drew from those games is the importance of not panicking when things get difficult. You will experience bad patches, you just have to fight through them and show up with more vigour the next time – when things got difficult at around 7K on my first race, pandemonium ensued and I mentally shut down. But I was able to grow from those disappointments and not let them define me. The fondest memory from the 2016 Rio Olympic games was finding my coaches, Jerry Schumacher and Pascal Dobert, outside the stadium after the 5000 m final and telling them: 'I have gained something from this. I am ten... even a hundred times the athlete I was entering these games.' Experiences leave marks that have lasting influence and create sparks.

In 2019, I achieved my highest accolade to date, placing third in the 5000-metre race at the World Championships, a demonstration of my growth as an athlete and strength in overcoming past disappointments in Rio and the years that followed. My podium finish in Doha was not a first for only me, but also marked the first time the Canadian maple leaf flew above the medal stand on a track event longer than 800 metres. If I were asked which I am the proudest of, the former (the individual achievement itself) or the latter (the fact of securing Canada its first medal in a distance event), I would choose the latter; the Canadian Heritage moment, because historic achievements will always have meaning and significance to someone or somewhere in society by the mere fact of being 'the first.' In contrast, individual achievement's apex of celebration is only in the moment it happened. It can be replaced by accomplishments in the ensuing years.

Comparison is a major part of the business of sports, and I am certain my Doha performance will most likely be celebrated not for the mere fact that I did it, but for that fact that it happened – the former uniquely tied to the circumstances it was accomplished in and leaving it open to critique, the latter forever linked to and venerated for its place in the history of Canadian distance running. If I were asked to name my most defining moment to date as a Canadian, I would most certainly name this moment. It is impossible to isolate one event in one's life and derive all meaning from it alone. The experiences I had of growing up in Canada shaped who I am as a person and manifest themselves through me everywhere I ago. However, I have often had to examine the nuance of my identity, given its complexity.

The dichotomy of a hyphenated body (Somali-Canadian) as well as the duality of being simultaneously both an immigrant and a citizen raised in me questions of belonging and meaning, which proved too difficult to grapple with at certain junctures of my life. By representing Canada around the world in the last two decades, I have had the chance to work through these varying dimensions of my identity and have come to a better understanding of each



Mohammed at the 2019 World Championships

aspect. The diversity of names, background and skin colour of my national teammates allowed me to develop an appreciation for what being Canadian means and solidified in me a deeper understanding of how I fit into the country.

Securing Canada's first ever global medal in a distance event will always be an event I take immense pride in, because Canada provided my family and me with a home when it did not have to and gave us a chance for better opportunities. This event further adds to my bond to this nation, just as the different experiences in wearing the maple leaf on my chest have helped forge a confidence in my Somali and Canadian identity and made sense of my nomadic way of life.