

SPORTING LEGENDS: SAÏD AOUITA

SPORT: ATHLETICS

COMPETITIVE ERA: 1983 - 1991

Saïd Aouita (born November 2, 1959) is a former Moroccan athlete, winner of 5000m at the 1984 Summer Olympics.

Born in Kenitra, Morocco, Saïd Aouita dominated middle distance running in the 1980s at all distances between 800m and 5000m.



Aouita's first major international competition was the 1983 World Championships held in Helsinki where he contested the 1500m. In the final, the pace dawdled for the first 1000m, tactics that did not suit Aouita, and he was outkicked, finishing third.

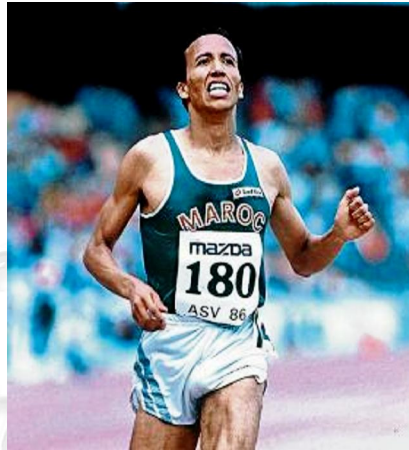
After this experience, Aouita decided to run 5000m at the Los Angeles Olympics. The 5000m final was run at a very fast pace set by Antonio Leitão from Portugal, which suited Aouita much better than the tactics used in Helsinki. He stayed behind Leitão and then sprinted past him on the last lap to win.

In the next season, Aouita ran two world records: at first in 5000m (13:00.40) and then in 1500 m (3:29.46).

In 1986, Aouita was the overall winner of the IAAF Grand Prix series.

In 1987, Aouita broke Steve Cram's 2000 m world record with a time of 4:50.81. For the World Championships held later that year, Aouita had provisionally entered the 800m, 1500m, 5000m and 10 000m (probably to keep his opponents guessing), but eventually decided just to contest the 5000 m.

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Aouita's endurance was simply awesome, matching his fierce determination to win.

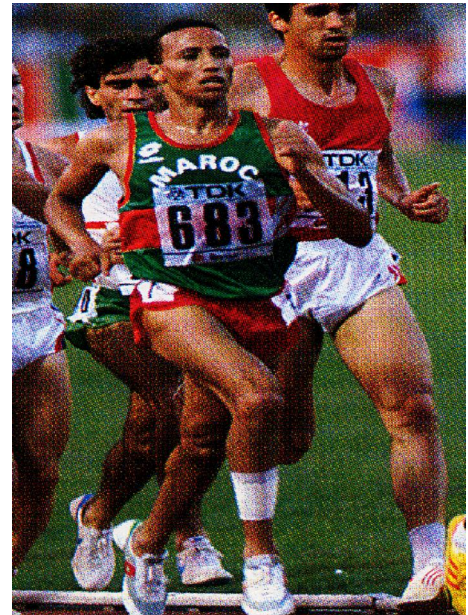
In the 5000m final, John Ngugi from Kenya set a fair pace, but by no means fast. Aouita, always in control of the race, made his move just before the bell, leading a mass sprint for the finish that he won in 13:26.44.

Aouita sought new challenges for himself in the Olympic year of 1988. Instead of staying within the comparative security of 5000m competition, the distance at which he was the reigning Olympic and World champion, he decided to concentrate his efforts on the shorter distances.

At the Seoul Olympics he attempted to try the 800m /1500 m double. Aouita easily won his heat and semi-final in the 800 m, but had his left leg heavily bandaged to protect a recently sprained hamstring.

In the 800 m final, a very fast pace was set to try to nullify Aouita's fast finish. Aouita ran according to his race plan, but in the end he was outkicked by the 800 m specialists and finished third.

His bronze medal made him the only man in Olympic history to win medals at both the 800m and 5000m.



In the next year, Aouita won the World Indoor Championships in 3000m. Later, he ran his last world record, breaking Henry Rono's record in 3000m by the time of 7:29.45. Aouita returned to competition at the World Championships, in 1991 at Tokyo, and finished eleventh in his farewell 1500m appearance.

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Scott Burton's Final Thought

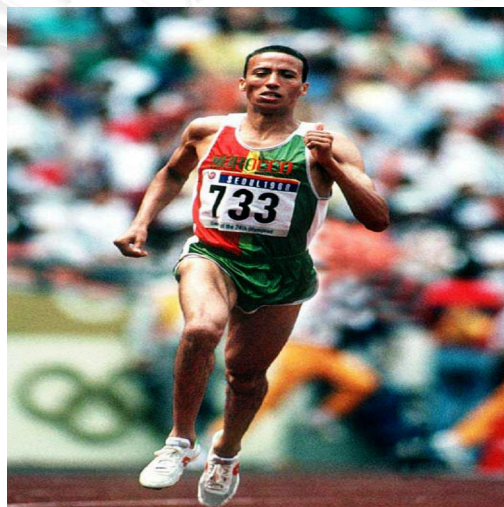
Said Aouita was the finest middle-distance runner of his generation, and that's saying something when you consider some of the great names he competed against in the 80's.

On many occasions, he carried the hopes of an entire nation on his shoulders, becoming Morocco's first true sporting hero. For services to his nation, the king of Morocco gave Aouita a palace! Now that's what I call a sporting reward!

I remember watching on TV some of the epic battles Aouita had, against the likes of Steve Cram, Joachim Cruz, Johnny Gray and Antonio Leitão. There were so many great races over the years, and more often than not, Aouita got the better of them and emerged as the victor.

He had this knack for gradually winding up the pace from about 3 laps out from the finish over the 5000m distance. His maximal speed was not the greatest, but his speed endurance was unbelievable, enabling him to maintain optimal fast speeds for long periods. This tactic burned out the sprint finish of many athletes, on many occasions.

Aside from his own achievements, one must also consider the inspiration that Aouita provided for many young Moroccans during the 1980s. He became a symbol of hope for the Moroccan people, and the personification of what could be achieved through sheer hard work and determination. He is, without question, a true sporting legend.



Aouita was an inspiration to an entire generation of Moroccan sports athletes.