

In the US, the racing season is traditionally seen as a summer circuit, starting roughly in April with New Orleans's Crescent City Classic and spring marathons and stretching through the Philly Distance Run in September and fall marathons. The end of year is a time to back off, enjoy the holidays and plan for the next spring. But, looking at the annual list of most competitive races, a surprising number are held right around the holidays, in Europe, South America, Japan. These events attract top track runners in the off season, marathoners looking for mid-training tune-ups, as well as some road racers holding onto late-season peaks. We take a tour of a few of these races this month: races you may never have heard of, featuring runners you know well.

Wincanton Montferland Run

December 2, 2007 / 's-Heerenberg, Netherlands

Unlike in the cities of Amsterdam or Rotterdam, shop-keepers and waiters in 's-Heerenberg, Netherlands, aren't fluent in English, and one gets the feeling that not many foreigners make their way to this rural corner of Holland on the banks of the Rhine on the border of Germany. Yet for the past 12 years on the first weekend in December this town of 8,000 has seen an influx of slightly-built visitors of exotic nationalities who come to tour the green fields, historic villages and dark forests of Monferland during in what is billed as one of the fastest 15-kilometer road races in the world. Those who follow the sport and the Dutch follow it better than most, as evidenced by the cadre of journalists who swarm the city on this weekend would have recognized faces as famous as Tesfaye Tola, Felix Limo, Sileshi Sihine, Resituta Joseph, Richard Yatich (Mubarak Hassan Shami), Khalid Khannouchi, Luke Kibet, Hilda Kibet, Hailu Mekonnen and more through the years. Up until 2007, the fastest, and most famous, was Kenenisa Bekele, who came here as an 18-year-old in 2000 his first competition outside of Ethiopia and won in 43:09. We knew he was good, said his manager, Jos Hermens, about Bekele before that race, but not how good. Bekele returned in 2001 to set a course record 42:42 on this surprisingly hilly course, considering this is the low lands.

That record is part of what brought an even more famous runner to 's-Heerenberg in 2007: Haile Gebrselassie, fresh from adding the marathon to his lifetime resumé of 24 world records. You know me, Gebrselassie said the day before the race. When I run something, I want to do something. That something obviously included breaking the record of his younger compatriot, who now owns many of Gebrselassie's track records. But, Gebrselassie added, Here is very important to test my shape after the marathon. I'd like to run very fast. It's not just to beat the record of Kenenisa.

Race director Carlo Jansen said getting Gebrselassie here was a bit of a coup, but he's been lucky that way. I just mention that I'd like a certain athlete to fellow Dutchman manager Jos Hermens and in a few years, I've gotten them, Jansen says. The timing helps, being off-season for track, and, this year, halfway between Gebrselassie's marathon runs in Berlin and Dubai. While the race doesn't have a huge prize purse, they do pay appearance fees for the top runners, a strategy that both Jansen and Hermens feel is more professional for the athlete and ensures press who come to see the stars.

This year's star shone as brightly as his reputation. Even though Gebrselassie had expressed concern the day before that marathon training had slowed his speed, he led from the gun on a cold, rainy, windy race-day. Effort showed on his face as early as the first kilometer, but by the time they had navigated the hilly road through the classic European forest of the Bergerbos, and emerged at the village of Beek about halfway, Gebrselassie had broken away from all but the surprising Ali Mabrouk el Zaidi of Libya. Gebrselassie continued to push at record pace, his stride long and smooth looking more like the marathoner he is now than the toe-running track star he once was.

At the finish, crowds packed the narrow street despite the pouring rain, and held their breath as the clock ticked away. Then a ripple of shouts, the flashing lights of the lead motorcycles, and the crescendoing commentary of the announcer which needed no translation to communicate that the king was on his way. Then he was there, raising his arms as he crossed in a new record of 42:36, then collapsing briefly in Jansen's arms, looking small, wet and surprisingly mortal. Seconds later he was wrapped in a jacket, standing tall, waving and smiling his trademark grin.

Behind him, el Zaidi tied the old record of 42:42 good for Libyan national record at the distance, and Ethiopian Deribe Alemu won the women's race handily in 48:50. 3,500 citizen runners poured in and overflowed the town in a sea of wet tights and singlets.

The rain was cold on the legs but I wanted to have the course record, Gebrselassie said afterwards. He may be 34, but he's still Haile.