

THE EAST AND CENTRAL AFRICAN INTERNATIONAL  
ATHLETIC CHAMPIONSHIPS

---

MOGADISHU, SOMALIA

NOVEMBER 17-18, 1977

FROM: MAL WHITFIELD

USIS-SPORTS AFFAIRS OFFICER (AFRICA)

1. A record crowd of 35,000 spectators witnessed the finest international track and field meet ever held on the African continent, one day after some of the heaviest rains in Somali history fell on Mogadishu, capital and host city of the sports meet. The cheering spectators saw heated competitions among six East and Central African states who tested the speed and strength of their athletes in running, jumping and throwing events at the recently opened Mogadishu Stadium, built by the People's Republic of China and located on the outskirts of Mogadishu. Kenya and Uganda set the pace in winning most of the gold, silver and bronze medals, followed by Somalia, Tanzania, Sudan and Zanzibar. The participants were surprised by Somalia's superb organization in hosting the third biggest international track and field meet of the year, and at the same time, winning nine medals: 1 gold, 1 silver, and 7 bronze.

2. Somali women, whose chic daily dress makes them appear as if they are competing in a fashion show in Paris, prepared themselves for a new look for the new sports arena. Women athletes have for the first time competed against female opponents in track and field events. Though new and inexperienced, the Somali female athletes have made a remarkable amount of progress because of their daily training schedules and final competitions. Mr. Hassan Agabane of the Sudan, who represented the International Amateur Athletic Federation, headquartered in London, stated in his official interview: "This is the best East and Central African Track and Field Championship I have ever attended." Mr. Agabane categorized the order of major events in the athletic season as U.S.A. first, European Championships second, and East and Central African Athletic Championships, third.

3. Long hours of conducting nightly officiating courses for 125 teachers and sports officials, training sessions for some 45 in-camp-training athletes, weekend timetrials for officials and athletes, organizing the Soviet-Somali international track and field match, programming government officials to assist in overall logistical operations for the East and Central African visitors - all of these and additional work behind the scenes, all carried out in Mogadishu within nine weeks - ended triumphantly for all persons associated with Somalia's first international sports presentation.

4. The cooperation received from the Somali government was quite tremendous and far different from our experience in past years when we offered technical assistance in sports and other fields of education. On November 15th -- a day before the official track and field ceremony -- a dedication ceremony was held at the new Stadium with the donor country, China, and the recipient country, Somalia, in attendance. Somalia's head of state, President Mohamed Siad Barre and China's Deputy Minister of Sports and Culture, Yu-Pu Hsueh, were among the guests. The ceremony was followed by a friendly soccer match between Somalia and China. Some 27,000 people attended the dedication ceremony and this helped set the stage for the following day's Athletic Championship competition. During the opening ceremony on November 16th, the Somali Minister of Sports, Colonel Farah Wais Dulleh, told the assembled crowd: "Promoting friendship comes first, winning medals comes second." The ceremonies started with a parade of athletes, each group hoisted their national colors, and then the banner of the East and Central African Athletic Association -- a white flag with a black hand holding a flaming torch -- was flown. The actual two-day athletic competitions then began.

5. Somalia's capital city - Mogadishu - was decorated with banners proclaiming "Unity Through Sports" and "Sports: The International Language." At the end of the two-day athletic competitions, the athletes were invited to an evening of Somali folklore dances at the Chinese-built National Theatre. Somali government officials and the Diplomatic Corps attended the closing ceremonies of the athletic championship. The government provided free accommodations to the visiting athletes. Nightly, U.S.I.S. Olympic films were shown at the Ministry of Sports, U.S.I.S. Cultural Center, and at the University lodging quarters for the visiting teams. The Somali Ministries of Health, Foreign Affairs, Sports,

education, Transport and Information gave a helping hand in implementing the athletic championships and that was a far cry from the R.Y.O.'s previous experience when Somalia hosted the 1972 Olympic Training Camp, and gave meager assistance to the camp. At that time, the Russians held the upper-hand in Somalia, but there were thousands of Russians on their way out of Somalia when this major sports event was taking place.

6. Prior to this major sports event, there were two leading friendly competitions in which Somali athletes participated -- Russia versus Somalia in a track and field meet, and the Arab Students Games held in Libya. At both meets, Somalia competed well, winning first, second and third places. Those two international sports events offered additional mental and physical preparation of this championship. For the first time, Mogadishu residents saw first-hand performances by world-class athletes. Somalis needed an opportunity to see other athletic competitions because they value soccer more than any other sports event. The Minister of Sports commented at the closing ceremonies of the Athletic Championship: "We will stress co-educational sports, and not so much soccer." The time was ripe and suitable for the East and Central African Athletic Championship, and no other solution except sports could cool down the tensions and hostile political climate in the Horn, among which were an airline hijacking, and the continuing bloody liberation struggle between the W.S.L.F./S.A.L.F. and Ethiopia.

7. Somalia, a once unrepresented country in Africa's sports arena, has come to life and is now recognized as one of the finest countries in East and Central Africa in the programming of major sports events. Following this Athletic Championship, the East and Central African Soccer Championship is currently underway in Mogadishu and this indicates that Somalia has cut the political red-tape that existed among some of its neighboring African countries. Now things are done in a professional way, thus adding color to programming sports in the Horn of Africa.

8. At the end of the East and Central African Athletic Championships, the Somali Ministry of Sports received a congratulatory cable from the International Amateur Athletic Federation commending the Somali Democratic Republic for its success in hosting this international sports event.

9. The major roads that linked the city center with the sports complex were jammed with heavy traffic, thus showing the interest of Mogadishu residents in the athletic competitions. Bellowing cheers from the excited spectators reached the front rooms of the residential quarters near the sports complex --- once a bush area at the outskirts of Mogadishu where camels trekked their way to the market places but which now must detour because of the high concrete walls that make the fence of the largest and most attractive sports arena in East and Central Africa. This is what sports is all about in Somalia.

#### COVERAGE:

Most of the program was video-taped, and photographed for follow-up use. The entire program was filmed by the Ministry of Information of the Somali Democratic Republic to be shown throughout the country. Voice of America and the B.B.C. carried the results of the competitions and the Somali Government officials were pleased to hear favorable comments reported in the wireless files.

The local press did some features on American specialists Herbert V. Tobias and R.Y.O., and the Government Radio Mogadishu reported daily about the tremendous efforts the two Americans had put forth during the athletic competitions.

Mr. Tobias introduced sports medicine procedures during incamp training and gave all teams necessary medical treatment during the course of the two-day event. He set up a medical center at the Stadium and a first-aid clinic on the field which were certainly visible to all persons associated with the program. The sports medicine concept is a new one to sports development in Africa.

#### PROGRAM FOLLOW-UP:

For persons associated with this major sports attraction of the year in Mogadishu, it is a fact that it could not have been as successful as it was if outside technical assistance had not been added to the overall program, planning and development of these championships. At the peak of the Russian departure from

Somalia, the two Americans received nothing but praise for contributing professional know-how for this meet. At no time was their presence hidden as 'behind the scenes workers', as is sometimes the case in other African states which feature major international sports events.

...Somali Government officials have publicly expressed their appreciation.

Special requests from the Ministry of Sports are as follows:

- a. Request R.Y.O. draft a plan for a national athletic program for the Ministries of Education and Sports to be channelled through the Orientation Centers throughout Somalia.
- b. U.S.I.S.-Sports films to be shown in all Orientation Centers as a motivating factor supporting the proposed objectives of the Ministry of Sports.
- c. The best athletes who were in the in-camp training program will tour the country and demonstrate their skills thus supporting the Ministry of Sports' regional athletic plans.
- d. R.Y.O. to pre-plan a calendar of sports events leading to the All Africa Games scheduled to be held in Algeria in 1979, for the first time.
- e. R.Y.O. to assist in establishing an Athletic Officials' Association which will benefit schools, Orientation Centers and overall sports programming.
- f. Pre-plan a nine-week in-camp training program (late April-July 1st) in Mogadishu for Africa's underdeveloped countries in preparation for the upcoming All-Africa Games to be held in Algiers.
- g. R.Y.O. to program in May, 1978, the first Arab Marathon Race to be held in Mogadishu.
- h. Train all sports officials to operate the U.S.I.S. film equipment for film shows when requested.
- i. Mogadishu will host the 1978 All-Africa Girls Basketball Championship.
- j. R.Y.O. will make periodic trips to assist in special assignments at the request of the Somali Democratic Republic.