No denying Ngetich this time

Wins Classic 10K after narrow loss two years ago

By Kevin Gleason
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MIDDLETOWN – Only two years earlier, Eliud Ngetich had been nipped at the finish line of the Crystal Run Healthcare Classic 10K. He was outkicked by Mourad Marofit of Morocco.

Not again, Ngetich told himself, not on Sunday. Not even with Bernard Lagat, 42, a five-time Olympian with a gold and silver medal shining from his brilliant running resume, a stride ahead of Ngetich as they entered the Middletown High School track for the final 300 meters to the finish line.

Ngetich, a 23-year-old Kenyan living in Santa Fe, N.M., was confident in his own kick. He started it inside of 50 meters left and broke the tape less than a second ahead of Lagat to capture the 12th annual event, an offshoot of the Orange Classic that blitzed through Middletown streets for 25 years previously.

"The last 50 meters,'' Ngetich said later, "is when I knew I had to sprint like hell.''

Both runners were officially timed in 29:09, a swift clocking along the challenging rolling-hills course.

It was 2:25 faster than last year's winning time of 31:34 by Abu Kebede Diriba.

Ngetich separated himself from a pack of five rather quickly, holding a five-second lead as he hit the first mile in 4:29. The pack dwindled to four by the second mile as Ngetich seemed in control of the race.

But Lagat suddenly caught Ngetich at three miles as they took the turn off Oliver Avenue onto Frank Shorter Way and around Fancher-Davidge Park. From there they ran virtually side-by-side to the finish, with Lagat typically holding a one- or two-step lead on Ngetich.

By the time they approached the track, Lagat had tried to

Eliud Ngetich (11) holds an early lead in the Crystal Run Healthcare Classic 10K. Ngetich went on to win by less than a second over Bernard Lagat, but not before Lagat (6) made a fierce challenge, shown peeking to check on Ngetich just before the runners enter the Middletown High School complex and onto the track for the finish line. [ALLYSE PULLIAM/FOR THE TIMES HERALD-RECORD]

break Ngetich with spurts, by Ngetich's estimate, three times. But Ngetich held his ground, confident that his finishing kick would produce the winner's check of $1,000. Lagat got $900 for second place.

As furious as his final kick became, however, Ngetich's most important asset might have been his poise. He didn't flinch when Lagat pulled alongside at the halfway point. He didn't flinch when Lagat tried to bust him in pieces with Olympic-style spurts.

"I was a little bit nervous,'' Ngetich said of the point when Lagat first approached. "I was a little surprised, but I knew I had a lot left. I knew I just needed to stay calm. Just stay relaxed and see when it's like five meters (left). I knew I had a kick.''

Ngetich will be right back at it on Sunday in Litchfield, Conn., for the Litchfield Hills Road Race, a 7.1-miler that he's won three times. You can bet he will bring along his finishing kick.

"I had to put all the energy I had into sprinting that last 30 meters,'' he said.

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