

North Africa's rich history of middle distance success was continued by Taoufik Makhloufi when he won 1500m gold at the London 2012 Olympics.

The Algerian's breakthrough season came in 2011 when he won 800m gold and 1500m bronze at the All-Africa Games.

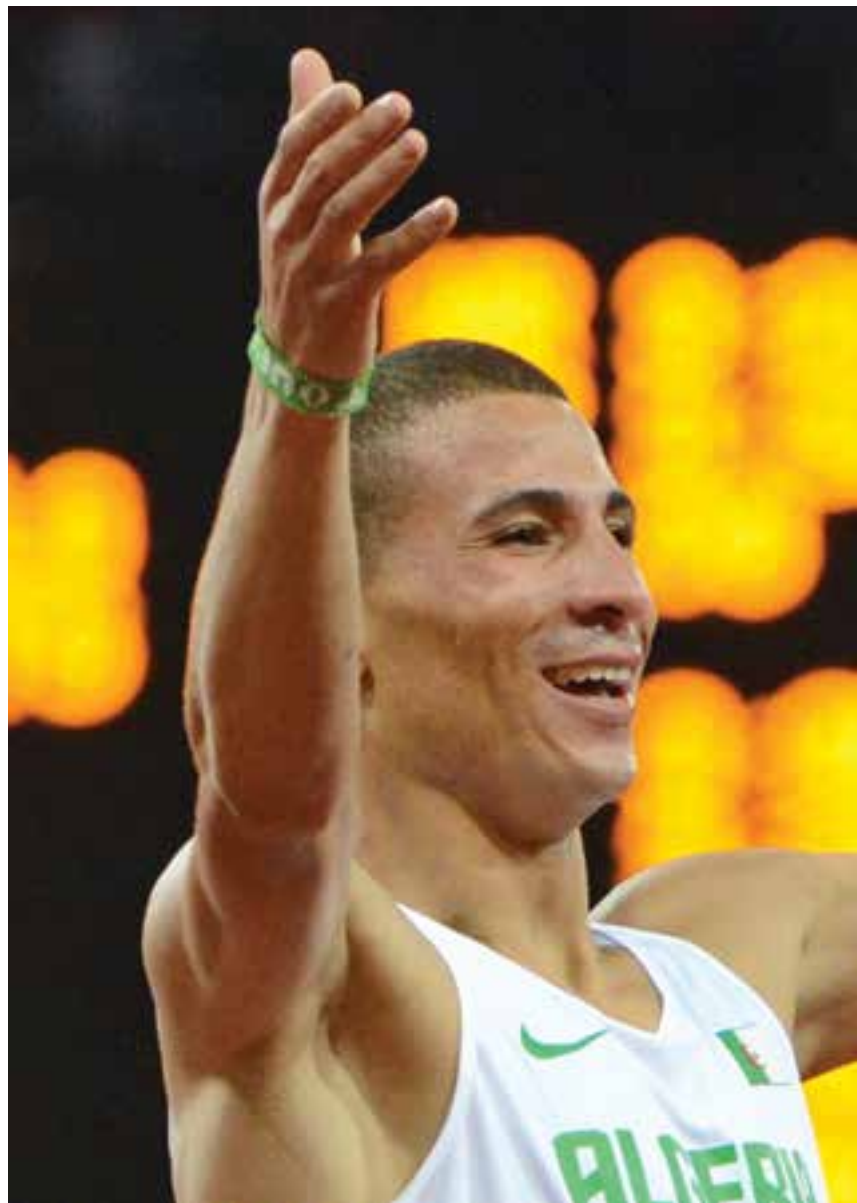
He followed this up with another 800m win at the 2012 African Championships in Benin. Little over a month later he was stood atop the podium as 1500m Olympic Champion, something perhaps even Makhloufi himself might not have envisaged.

But this success was followed by a low point as he was diagnosed with a serious viral infection in May 2013, preventing him from competing for the rest of the season.

Upon his return he reaffirmed his position among the world's middle distance elite, setting new personal bests in the 800m, 1500m and one mile during 2014.

He finished the season by winning the 1500m at Brussels' Diamond League event in an exciting race which saw both Makhloufi and Kenyan Silas Kiplagat thinking they had sealed victory.

While there were lessons to be learned from that race, Makhloufi looks poised to continue his fine form and collect more titles in 2015.



When did you start athletics?

My story began in 2003, when I was in middle school. My schoolmate Mouloud Rahmani had observed my ability in PE lessons and invited me to join his athletics sessions. We trained under the supervision of coach Ali Rajimy, who is also my current coach. This was my first step towards a career in athletics and my ambition is what kept me going.

You won the 1500m gold at the London 2012 Olympics, how did it feel to become an Olympic champion?

I put all my efforts into making that dream come true. When I won the race, I had an overwhelming feeling of joy – I was the happiest person on earth!

How did winning the Olympic gold impact your professional career?

That title shifted my professional career dramatically. Currently, I feel a greater sense of responsibility towards Muslim people and the Algerian people in particular. It was a call to dedicate more effort to living up to their expectations. In addition to this, I was recognised by other athletes, who now seek to take my title.



CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

- 2014** Beat his personal best in three events – 800m, 1500 and one mile
- 2014** Won 1500m and came 2nd in 800m in Diamond League meets in Brussels and Shanghai, respectively
- 2012** Became 1500m Olympic Champion at the London Olympic Game, after improving his personal best in the distance by two seconds over the course of the season
- 2012** Won gold in the 800m at the African Championships in Benin
- 2011** Won 800m gold and 1500m bronze at the All-Africa Games in Mozambique

The 1500m is a very competitive event. How do you train to stay on top?

Runners have to be fully dedicated to their work. It is a sacrifice that all athletes must make. We have to show persistence and be willing to work hard throughout the year. Regardless of our victories, it is important to continue to raise the bar.

What is your daily training load?

Depending on the training programs set, I spend 1 to 5 hours training every day. Each year, I take a 20 to 30 day break from training, usually from early September to mid-October.

In 2013, you were diagnosed with hepatitis A and forced to withdraw from the IAAF World Athletics Championships in Moscow. When were you diagnosed? How long did it take you to return to the track? And what did you do in the mean time?

For athletes, hepatitis A is a major threat to one's sporting career. The disease affects the liver's ability to function. Since the liver is one of the body's main providers of energy, it was a real problem for me. The infection started in May, just before the 2013 IAAF Diamond League in Eugene, USA. After my high-altitude training I was

extremely fatigued and I didn't take it seriously; soon my body could no longer resist the virus. My temperature went up to 39.5°C and I was immediately taken to a hospital in Barcelona. I returned to Algeria and, after more careful examinations, I was diagnosed with hepatitis A.

My doctor in Algeria advised that I rest for 4 to 6 months and eat high energy foods. I returned to training mid-December that year.

I start the mental preparation process a few hours before any competition

During the London 2012 Olympics, a knee injury forced you to withdraw from the 800m race, but you managed to win the 1500m gold on the next day, what kind of healthcare did you receive at the Olympic village clinic?

I damaged some nerve fibres in my knee. It was not serious enough to have me out of the competition. I received extensive medical care at the Olympic village clinic including ice packs, massage of the muscles and ligaments attached to injured knee, anti-inflammatory drugs and painkillers.

What do you do to avoid injury?

High-level endurance athletes are more vulnerable to injuries because of the high volume of training that pushes the muscles and the whole body to its maximum. To avoid injury, it is important that the physical preparation at the beginning of the season is sufficient to help the athlete endure the high-intensity training throughout the season.

It is also important that athletes get enough sleep, eat a variety of foods, keep stress to a minimum, warm up properly and stretch their muscles before and after each training session. They are also encouraged to use treatments such as massage, sauna and icing to allow the body to recover.

During competitions, do you travel with medical personnel?

I don't, as there is always a medical team available at competitions. For me, my masseuse is very important and he travels with me.

How important are the sports doctor and physiotherapist to you?

They are very important for improving my performance. They play a crucial role in developing and maximising the physical qualities required on the track.

You compete in both the 800m and 1500m races. How do you recover after these events at major championships such as the Olympic Games?

Right after the race, I spend 10 to 20 minutes jogging slowly to restore my body and mind back to the pre-race levels. After that, I do some type of muscle stretching followed by 80m to 100m of medium speed running. I repeat this 6 to 8 times. Then, I soak my feet in ice cold water for 10 to 15 minutes before taking a warm shower.

After getting enough sleep, I go for a slow jog for 20 to 30 minutes the next evening. After that, I take a few minutes to stretch my muscles properly and do a few sprints. The following morning, I go for a massage.

How do you mentally prepare yourself prior to major competitions?

I start the mental preparation process a few hours before any competition. I think of my skill and ability to win. I take confidence from my faith. I say to myself: 'do what should be done and success will come'.

Do you follow a particular diet? How do you manage fasting for Ramadan during championships?

I don't follow any particular diet. However, I make sure to choose a variety of additive-free foods. Also, I eat a lot of vegetables and fruits and drink plenty of fluids, especially water. When I travel to high-altitude regions, I eat certain foods like lean meat and lentils.

In Algeria, I do my Ramadan training before breakfast. When I am abroad I don't fast, as a traveller, I am exempt from the obligation of fasting. Therefore, I follow the normal schedule of training until I return back home. After Ramadan, I make up for the days I did not fast.



Left: Taoufik Makhloufi wins the gold in the Men's 1500m Final on Day 11 of the London 2012 Olympic Games.

Right: (L-R) Taoufik Makhloufi of Algeria, Silas Kiplagat of Kenya, Deresse Mekonnen of Ethiopia and Amine Laalou of Morocco race to the finish line during the men's 1500 metres heats during the 13th IAAF World Athletics Championships.

Bottom right: Makhloufi crosses the finish line to win the gold in the Men's 1500m Final at the London 2012 Olympic Games.



Do you find any difference between sports medicine in Algeria and elsewhere?

Yes of course! There are differences in terms of access to the most advanced equipment, the availability of highly skilled staff and experience. However, Algeria is currently taking serious measures to create a proper environment that helps athletes maximise their potential.

You spend most of your time outside your homeland, Algeria. Is it difficult to be away from family? How do you cope?

I spend a very long time outside Algeria travelling in Africa - specifically Kenya, as well as spending time in Europe. It is easy to become homesick, but I imagine the pride I will bring back home with me and this helps me get through the more difficult stages.



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You waved a victory hand sign to the camera during the last part of the 1500m race at the Brussels Diamond League meet. Why did you do this? How did you feel at the end of the race?

I waved the peace sign only to express happiness and gratitude to the crowd. It was very spontaneous and I did not mean anything else. I didn't mean to offend any of other runners. However, it could have cost me the gold medal and even support of my fans; so I should not have done it.

During the recent European Athletics championship, French steeplechase runner Mahiedine Mekhissi-Benabbad was stripped of the gold medal after he prematurely celebrated by taking off his shirt. Do you think that this behaviour should be avoided, at least for the sake of sportsmanship?

I know this runner very well. He is a very kind and polite person. He was overwhelmed and happy with such an impressive achievement. As we know, moments of victory are the happiest in the lives of athletes. However, it is very important for athletes to show more self-control at times to avoid losing their victories.

You visited Aspetar back in May after competing at the Diamond League meet in Doha. Could you tell us about your experience at the hospital?

I visited Aspetar to do some medical tests. I received a very friendly welcome and was impressed by the advanced equipment and highly skilled staff in the hospital. The capabilities of the hospital

make it a perfect destination for world-class athletes who seek to reach the top.

It is a great and high-value project that reflects the outstanding vision of Qatar. It is a facility not only for Arab athletes but also international athletes. I hope to see more places like Aspetar in the Arab world in the future.

I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to Dr. Khalifa Al-Kuwari and Dr Hakim Chalabi for their great hospitality and support, as well as all the Aspetar staff for their warm welcome.



Image: Makhloufi competes in the Men's 1500m Round 1 Heats on Day 7 of the London 2012 Olympic Games.

Image above: Taoufik Makhloufi of Algeria competes in the Men's 1500m Final on Day 11 of the London 2012 Olympic Games at Olympic Stadium.



Image: Makhloufi poses on the podium during the medal ceremony for the Men's 1500m at the London 2012 Olympic Games.

Image below: (L-R) Diego Ruiz of Spain, Abdalaati Iguider of Morocco, Silas Kiplagat of Kenya, Amine Laalou of Morocco, Taoufik Makhloufi of Algeria, Mekonnen Gebremedhin of Ethiopia, Zebene Alemayehu of Ethiopia and Matthew Centrowitz of United States compete in the men's 1500 metres semi finals during the 13th IAAF World Athletics Championships.

Are you going to return to Doha next year to participate in the IAAF Diamond League?

The Doha meet is one of the main items on my agenda. Since it is the only Diamond League event to take place in the Arab region, I will spare no effort to put in my best performance as I am representing the Arab and Muslim world.

I would also like to thank Mr Jama Aden, my former coach and the current coach of Qatar national team. I would also like to express my profound gratitude to my current coach Ali Rajimy, who has been training me since the very beginning. My sincere gratitude also to coach Amar Brahmia, who helped me to rise up to the international arena. A final thank you to Said Aouita, Noureddine Morceli, all Arab champions and my great fans.

Juan-Manuel Alonso M.D., Ph.D.

