

Masshin Abakar - Honoring her faith by fasting and running fast

It took a few hours before the word started to get around the Norfolk (Nebraska) grandstands at A-2 Districts, but track parents are notorious for killing time by chatting with the strangers around them. The parents from Omaha Central probably said it in passing, followed quickly by, “gosh, the weather today sure turned out better than I expected.” A parent from another high school made the Omaha Central parent say it again.

That girl in the headscarf? The one getting to run the 400? She’s going to go without food or drink for how many hours? She has four events today? How is that even possible?

The United States has always been a melting pot of immigrants, and Omaha has been a frequent destination for new arrivals. In 2016, Nebraska had the highest per capita immigration rate in the United States. While Omaha has had a large Latino community for decades, more recently a large tide of immigrants have resettled from Central America, Nepal, Syria and Sudan. Mahassin Abakar is one of those Sudanese immigrants, arriving in Omaha as an eighth grader.

Sudan was embroiled in a civil war from 1983 to 2005. When Mahassin was six months old, her father left Sudan in search of a better place for his family to live. After traveling through Africa for several years, he arrived in Omaha in 2009. In 2011, his wife and four children began their journey to America. Mahassin, her mother and siblings first lived in a refugee camp in Cameroon for two years. Mahassin said it wasn’t a bad place to live, but she missed her father terribly. In 2015, her family finally reunited in Omaha.

By then, Mahassin was 13. Thirteen-year-olds in Omaha go to middle school, so she was enrolled at Norris Middle School. She spoke no English. She knew virtually nothing about the United States. She didn’t know any classmates. She had never played a sport.

Many established religions have strict standards. Some followers observe these standards all of the time, some do the best they can, and others experience an ebb and flow of adherence as they move through different stages of their lives. Mahassin is Muslim, and she does the best she can to live the Islamic faith.

A key foundation of Islam is the Five Pillars of Faith: (1) a declaration of faith to God and that Mohammed is God’s last prophet; (2) daily prayer; (3) charity; (4) a Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca, the birthplace of Mohammed, at some point during a Muslim’s life; and (5) fasting during daylight hours during the holy month of Ramadan.

Early in my accounting career, I lived in Saudi Arabia for six months. Five times each day, loudspeakers blasted the call to prayer. Nearly all of the Muslims prayed, sometimes in a mosque, but often at work

or at home. In a predominantly-Muslim country like Saudi Arabia, the call to prayer sets the rhythm of daily life and is a gathering time for neighbors and families.

A devout Muslim's obligations expand during Ramadan, the holiest month of the Islamic calendar. Much like Lent is to Christians, Ramadan is the time of year where Muslims focus on self-sacrifice, recharge their faith, increase charitable efforts, and ask for forgiveness. Adult Muslims are taught to abstain from food, drink and smoking during the daylight hours of Ramadan.

I worked in Saudi Arabia during Ramadan in 1991. At the start of Ramadan, abstaining from food and drink during daylight hours is tolerable for most Muslims. However, as the days drag on, it becomes more difficult to replenish the body's nutrients. Fatigue sets in earlier each day, to the point that many of our Muslim co-workers would take sick days because they didn't have the energy to even sit at their desks. My colleagues referred to it as, "Calling in hungry," but that makes light of the physical rigors of fasting. It's hard and uncomfortable. It's exhausting.

The Islamic calendar is approximately 354 days long, so Ramadan starts about 11 days earlier each year on our solar calendar. If Ramadan fell during Omaha's winter, the period of fasting might be as little as 10 hours. However, when Ramadan falls near the summer equinox, then the fasting period in Omaha can last more than 15 hours. Ramadan lasts 29 or 30 days.

In 2019, Ramadan started on May 5 and will not end until June 4. Nebraska's Class A (the largest high schools) Districts were held on May 10, and the State meet was on May 17-18. On the first day of the State Track meet, the gap between sunrise and sunset was nearly 15 hours. Mahassin woke at 4:00 a.m. to eat breakfast, a small meal consisting of cereal, milk and perhaps a little more water than normal. She wouldn't eat or drink again until after 9:00 that night.

Omaha is the home of Tri-Faith Initiative, the country's first-of-its-kind campus that features a Jewish synagogue, Muslim mosque and Christian church. The purpose of the campus is to build inter-faith dialogue, cooperation and understanding. The last of the three buildings will be completed in 2019, but teachers, students and parents within the Omaha Public Schools system have been engaged in this type of community-building for decades. Mahassin's story is not unique within OPS.

In the fall of 2015, during her first semester at Norris Middle School, Mahassin focused on learning English and adapting to American school life. During the spring, a few of her new friends encouraged her to join the track team. She had no athletic experience other than 8th-grade gym class, but she decided that track would be a good way to learn English more quickly and make more friends. Tall and lean, she wasn't a natural runner, but she was a gifted athlete. At the end of the season, she finished 2nd in the 800 and 1600 at the Omaha Public School 8th grade track championships, finishing in 2:47 and 6:10.

When Mahassin entered high school, she didn't join the cross country team. A few months later, a gym teacher pulled aside Trent Lodge, Omaha Central's girls' track coach. "You've got to get Mahassin

Abakar on the track team,” the teacher said. “She’s one of the best athletes in my class.” Coach Lodge convinced her to join the team. Mahassin primarily ran the 400 as a freshman, with a PR of 1:06.4.

With a longer cross country training season, she saw more success as a sophomore and junior, earning top-15 finishes at Districts and top-50 placements at State. However, her highest potential may be on the track in the 400 and 800. During the 2018 season, she qualified for the State meet in the open 800 and the 4x400 and 4x800 relays. She ran her fastest times at State – 1:04.2 and 2:25.8 – during the first week of Ramadan.

If you follow Nebraska Class A distance running, you’ve probably seen Mahassin. She’s polite, shy and more than a little nervous about having an article written about her. In order to honor the Muslim ideal of modesty, she wears a headscarf, long-sleeve shirt and tights during races. Mahassin’s mother has only been to one of her races. She saw how much pain a distance runner must endure to excel. She cannot stand to see Mahassin in pain.

The District meet on May 10th was not an easy day for Mahassin. As one of Central’s stronger middle distance runners, she was scheduled for the 4x800 relay at 2:30, the 400 at 3:45, the 800 at 5:50 and the 4x400 at 7:10. By the time the 4x400 race ended, fourteen hours had passed since her last food or sip of water. She’d wait at least another ninety minutes, until the final hint of sun was gone, before she would break her fast.

After Mahassin’s second event of the day, her father called her to tell her that she should drink water. After all, Islam has a number of exemptions from the abstinence requirement, and Mahassin could atone for drinking that day it by fasting on another day after Ramadan. However, Mahassin didn’t feel that poorly – she was just hungry – and she believed that fasting was important enough to her religion that she should continue to abstain.

She made it through her final two races of the day. In retrospect, she agrees that the races became more difficult as the day progressed. However, for a girl who lived without her father for twelve years, who lived in a refugee camp for two years, and who has fasted through three previous Ramadans – well, she’s had harder days in her life.

It was a productive day. She qualified for State in the 400 and 800, running a PR of 1:00.95 and a season-best 2:26.18. Her relay teams also qualified. By the time night fell, she was riding back to Omaha on the team bus. She ate her first and only substantial meal of the day.

If you teach and coach at Omaha Central, Google is a valuable tool when you need to learn more about your immigrant students. For Drew Thompson, the middle distance and distance coach for the girls’ team, an important Google search was, ‘how to train athletes during Ramadan.’

Ramadan began on the Sunday before Districts. During that week, Coach Thompson emphasized to Mahassin the importance of eating larger meals and maximizing her sleep. With Districts scheduled to fall on Wednesday, the team wasn't scheduled to have a difficult workouts on Monday or Tuesday. However, the forecasted thunderstorms delayed Districts until Friday, so the team added an interval workout on Monday. It taxed Mahassin. She didn't complain.

After Districts, Coach Thompson asked his distance team if they would shift their practices on Monday and Tuesday to 6:00 a.m. so that Mahassin could run while she was fueled. The entire crew said 'yes,' and Monday's interval workout was one of the best practices of the season. The girls ran long on Tuesday morning, and then they shifted back to the afternoon for light practices on Wednesday and Thursday leading up to State. Coach Thompson raves about how Mahassin's teammates have embraced her, but even more about how they've supported her commitment to her faith.

There are four classes of high schools in Nebraska, ranging from A (largest) to D (smallest). On odd years, Classes A and C compete on Friday morning while Classes B and D compete in the afternoon. At the 2019 meet, that meant that Mahassin was able to compete on Friday before she felt most of the effects of fasting. Her Central relay team ran the 4x800 at 9:30 a.m., earning a 7th place medal. She ran the open 400 at noon, when temps were well above 80 degrees. She did not advance to Saturday's finals.

On Saturday, she ran the first of two heats in the open 800 at 10:00 a.m. It didn't go well. At 200 meters, Mahassin was settled into second place, tight on the rail. As the pack leaned into the curve, the lead runner cut to the inside of the first lane, clipping Mahassin's leg. The leader and Mahassin fell into a heap, and the ten other runners quickly flew by. Mahassin got to her knees but froze. She'd never fallen in a race and didn't know what to do next. Someone in the crowd, perhaps her own coach, yelled, "get up and go!" She finished 8th out of 12 in her heat, six seconds off her PR.

By the time she finished the 800, a huge storm front was 100 miles away and headed towards Omaha. Her leg in the 4x400 was scheduled for 4:20 – if the lightning stayed away. At 4:25, the western sky above the stadium lit up. By then, the Central relay team was finishing its last leg. They finished 12th, eight seconds out of a medal. Mahassin's was finished running fast, but she was not done fasting.

Mahassin will be a senior at the 2020 State meet, when Class A and C compete on Friday afternoon and early evening. If she qualifies, she'll run the 4x800 at 3:30 and the open 400 at 7:00 p.m. With Ramadan falling eleven days earlier in 2020, Mahassin's period of fasting will include the conference meet, Districts and State – as well as two weeks of her most important training.

These meets may challenge Mahassin's body, but not her faith. Her faith is strong.

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