

Who Decides Whom You May Represent?  
Global Sport Events and Passport Swapping in the Middle East.



Ruth Jebet is a talented steeplechase runner. She was born in Kenya in 1996. At the age of seventeen, she traded her Kenyan passport for a Bahraini one. Bahrain had attempted to buy national and Olympic prestige in return for money. And it worked, as a Kenyan with a Bahraini passport, Ruth Jebet won the Asian games in 2013, and she became an Olympic champion for Bahrain in 2016. She herself was more than happy with the arrangement. The deal allowed her to keep training at the highest level and to fund the professional support that this required. She now had a decent pension scheme and her parents and children were taken care of financially. All this gave her the respect of a world class athlete that would not have been possible in Kenya. Knowing that she was Kenyan ‘in her heart of hearts’, the Kenyan population adored her and cheered her on. Kenyan athletics association officials, however, were not quite so delighted. They felt that they had been investing in Jebet’s and other athletes’ talent for many years, and for them it was very bitter indeed to see how their best talents were being poached and were now playing for other countries. This was not what their talent program had set out to achieve. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) and World Athletics (name since October 2019, formerly known as the International Amateur Athletic Federation and International Association of Athletics Federations, both abbreviated as IAAF), also raised question marks, wondering if this would not cause inflation of the Olympic Games, with the wealthiest countries buying the best athletes and winning the most medals. However, the IOC incidentally seemed to be conveniently forgetting that it is already the case that those countries that invest most in sports and athletes do win the most medals (Oonk 2019).

There are four key actors that play a role in cases of ‘nationality swaps’ and they share different and often competing interests.

- (1) Ruth Jebet. Her interest in making this arrangement is clear. By accepting the offer to run for Bahrain in return for money she will be better off. This also includes the fact that Qatar can provide excellent education for her children and she can save for a comfortable pension scheme. In addition, within Qatar she will become part of a team that is trained by excellent trainers, a physiotherapist and a mental skills coach. The training facilities at the Aspire academy are well known and among the best in the world. This will increase her chances to make it to the top. Kenya is simply unable to provide these kinds of facilities and financial compensation for her work. In addition, for her, the change in passport is a technical affair. She is born in Kenya and she will remain Kenyan in her heart.
- (2) Bahrain is small country with limited talented runners. By providing athletes from abroad with excellent training facilities and financial compensation in return for a Bahraini passport, Qatar will increase its chances at major sport-events. Moreover, Bahrain may profit from these foreign athletes in various other forms. They may improve the local talent program with the athletes’ expertise and know-how. They may also become active in local health-programs, against obesity, for example, which is one

of the major health issues in Bahrain. And last but not least, Bahrain is a country of migrants. Around ten percent of the population are Bahrainis with full citizenship. It consists of expats at the top level of the migrant pyramid and a majority number of workers and construction labourers making up the rest. In short, why not have a country of migrants be represented by migrants at the international level?

- (3) The Kenyan Sport-federations are not content with these types of arrangements. They have invested in a costly talent program. If at the end of the day other countries buy their most talented athletes without compensation for Kenya and the Kenyan sport federations, why then invest in the program to begin with? In addition, they may argue that Ruthe Jebet is Kenyan. She is born and raised in Kenya. She has had the option to develop her talent in Kenya and therefore, she should compete for Kenya and not any other country. If these arrangements are legal, couldn't the Kenyan sport federations argue that they should get financial compensation for the investments that they have made?
- (4) International sport federations are, among other things, responsible for organising international sporting events like the Olympic Games (IOC) or the World Cup. (International Amateur Athletic Federation/International Association of Athletics Federations and is since 2019 named as World Athletics). These international games should be 'fair games'. One question that comes up in the context of passport swaps in exchange for money is: what is the point of organizing international games, if the richest countries could buy the best athletes and therefore win most of the medals. If this is allowed it would become a kind 'champions league' of athletics. The problem this would create is it would undermine the sentiment of being proud to compete for your country, to honor the flag, to wear the colors of the nation and to sing the national anthem after you won the gold medal. In addition, the federations and institutions may be apprehensive that the public and the media become less interested if they can no longer identify with the background of the athletes and the tournaments may lose commercial interest.

The big question is, then, should passport swaps be allowed? And who among these four key players should have the last say in this?

### **A short history of passport swaps**

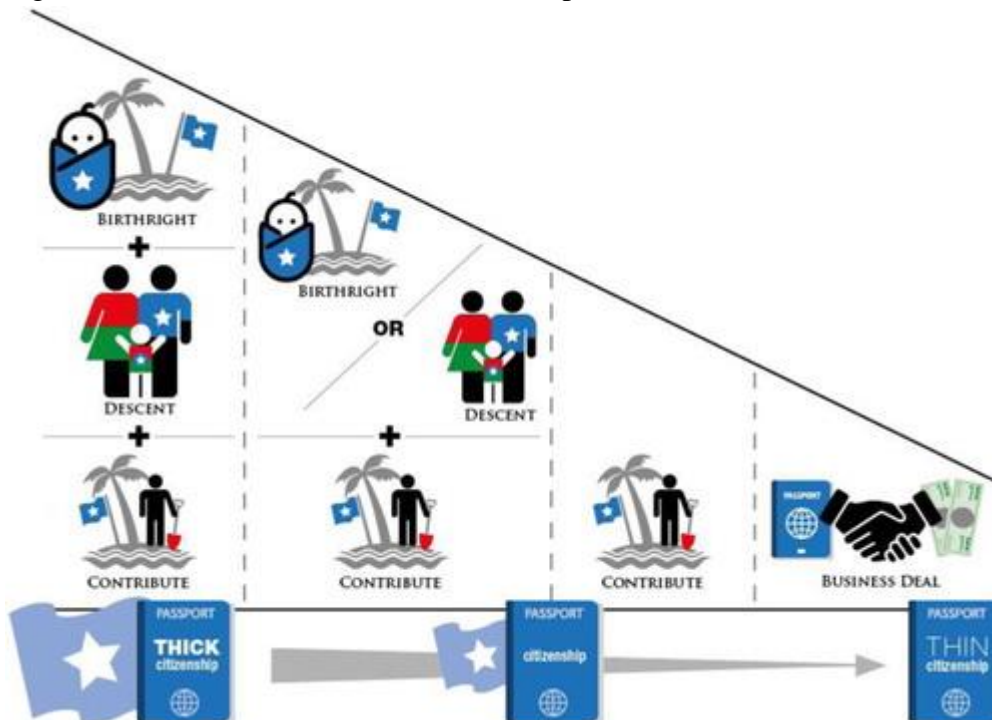
On March 3, 1998, the IAAF announced that it will track and publish nationality changes as of the following summer season. Along with the annual list, the IAAF emphasized the requirements an athlete had to meet in order to compete for a different country. The rules were drawn up to regulate changing affiliations: "The IAAF rules accept athletes" changing affiliations, subject to the approval of their original national federations. Although at the time the IAAF allowed nationality changes, this only applied to athletes who had never played an

international tournament before (Olympic Games, world, continental or regional championships). If an athlete had previously represented another country, a transition was only permissible after three years without international participation. In cases of special applications, the IAAF could shorten this waiting period to one year but only after approval from both the “old” and “new” sport federations (this in reality was granted in almost all cases)”.

## Thick and Thin Citizenship

In short, currently there are three interrelated ways of obtaining citizenship: (1) citizenship acquired through descent (*jus sanguinis*). This form, for example, was the kind of citizenship prevalent in Germany until 1999. If one, or both of your parents were German, you were eligible for German citizenship. In this way, many Eastern European Germans maintained access to German citizenship status during the Cold War. (2) Citizenship by birth in the territory (*jus soli*). This form of citizenship was made famous by the U.S. American citizenship is granted automatically to any person born within and subject to the jurisdiction of the U.S. (3) The stakeholder principle (*jus nexi*) is proposed as an alternative (or a supplement) to birthright citizenship. Individuals who have a ‘real and effective link’ (Shachar, 2009, p. 165) to the political community, or a ‘permanent interest in membership’ (Bauböck, 2006) are entitled to claim citizenship. This relatively new criterion aims at securing citizenship for those who are members of the political community, in the sense that their life prospects depend on the country’s laws and policy choices. This often applies to migrants who work and live in a country for a specific number of years (often five to seven). They are regarded as new members of society who have acquired skills (they work and pay taxes), and can become politically active and thus *contribute* to the state (see [Figure 1](#)).

Figure 1. Thick and thin forms of citizenship.



[Display full size](#)

However, there are some counter-intuitive results of the distinction between *jus sanguinis* and *jus soli*. While a regime of pure *jus sanguinis* systematically excludes immigrants and their children, though the latter may have been born and raised in their parents’ new homeland, it includes the descendants of expatriates who might never have set foot in the homeland of their

forebears. On the other hand, a regime of *jus soli* might attribute citizenship to children whose birth in the territory is accidental, while denying it to children who arrived in the country at a young age. It is important to understand that the current rules for acquiring citizenship at birth inevitably create multiple citizenships in certain circumstances. Dual nationality can be obtained at birth in two ways: First, in the gender-neutral system of *jus sanguinis*, where children of mixed parentage inherit both parents' nationalities, and second, from a combination of *jus soli* and *jus sanguinis*. Multiple citizenships could only be avoided if all states adopted either pure *jus soli* or *jus sanguinis* from one parent's side. However, gender discrimination in citizenship has been outlawed by norms of international and domestic law, and countries that apply *jus soli* within their territory mostly attribute *jus sanguinis* citizenship to children born to their citizens abroad. Given these facts, there is no possible rule that could be adopted by all states to avoid multiple forms of citizenship. In other words, through existing citizenship rules, there is always scope for athletes and states to represent two or more states.

In this model, I define *thick citizenship* where territorial birthright, descent, and contribution merge. Most athletes and their parents are born in the countries they represent. These athletes have acquired their skills in that country and are more than willing to wear the national colours and win medals for national teams. Unsurprisingly, the Sport and Nation group at the Erasmus University in the Netherlands found that more than 90% of all athletes who represented their country in the summer Olympic Games from 1948–2016 fell within this category (Campenhout et al., [2018](#); Jansen et al., [2018](#); Jansen & Engbersen, [2017](#)).

*Thin citizenship*, however, occurs in cases when migrants or athletes do not have any relationship with the country they represented - they gained the citizenship in exchange for money. This is illustrated by the current debates on national belonging and citizenship changes in the Olympics (Shachar, [2011](#); Spiro, [2011](#)). Some countries (including the U.S., Canada, and most Western European countries) have advanced an entrepreneurial attitude towards elite labour and they have developed specific citizenship tracks for foreigners. However, extreme examples relating to participation in the Olympics have emerged from countries such as Azerbaijan, Qatar, Singapore, Bahrain, and Turkey. These countries have actively attracted foreign athletes to represent them internationally. In the cases of Qatar, Bahrain, and Singapore, this can be perceived as part of a wider strategy to attract foreign talent. For Turkey and Azerbaijan, it is a form of self-promotion.

Between thick and thin citizenship, this case locates mixed, or in-between forms of citizenship where athletes only have a connection through two out of three citizenship qualifications: *jus soli*, *jus sanguinis*, or *jus nexi*. Additionally, in some cases, the relationship through *jus sanguinis* and *jus soli* is further distorted by external territorial (colonial) expansion, as well as mixed ancestral backgrounds. Further, this category of in-between forms of citizenship includes cases where the connection is made through contribution, *earned citizenship*, and *jus nexi*, without prior relation through territorial birthright or descent. Overall, the major contribution of this study is to highlight some of the complexities of the 'in between' category, an area that is yet to receive sufficient attention.

## The context of the Middle East.

The IAAF registered 695 nationality swaps between 1998 and 2016.<sup>1</sup> As expected, migrant receiving countries like Canada, the United States and Australia are well represented in this list. In addition, countries like France, Spain, the United Kingdom and Russia accept talented athletes who, for the most part, have ‘genuine links’ such as through former colonies, ethnic citizenship (see below) or cases where foreign born athletes have married local citizens. The list includes the well-known examples of the 61 ‘plastic Brits’ that represented Team Britain in 2002. The very term ‘plastic Brits’ suggests that the ‘Britishness’ of these athletes is called into question. ‘Are some British athletes more British than others?’ (Jansen, Oonk and Engbersen 2020, 40). In 2016 an ‘astonishing 44 foreign-born athletes’ represented the USA (Ekin, 2016). These 44 athletes were born in 28 different countries, indicating the alleged super-diversity that marks our globalized era. Nevertheless, Jansen (2020) takes the ‘Plastic Brits’ debate as a case study to discuss how the nation’s boundaries are discursively drawn, ultimately demonstrating that it was the color of their skin that created the debate in the media rather than their links with the UK. He shows how established groups like white journalists ‘are prepared to offer outsiders some form of recognition as nationals provided that they have shown a degree of loyalty and cultural affinity to the nation. So, while athletes themselves might feel that they belong, their belonging also needs to be recognized by more established groups for certain outsiders to be accepted as ‘genuine’ representatives of the nation.’ (Jansen 2020; 124).

The selection of Bahrain, Qatar and Turkey in this article is relevant for two major reasons. First, these three countries from the Middle East represent the highest numbers of nationality swaps to Middle Eastern Countries in the list of the *International Association of Athletics Federations* (IAAF). In addition, unlike the example of the ‘plastic Brits’, these cases are predominantly examples of *thin citizenship*, meaning that they can be classified as ‘citizenship for sale’, they are examples where there is no prior ethnic nor civic relationship between the athlete and the country they represent. Bahrain represents 46 such cases, Turkey has 32 cases and Qatar 18 cases in the list. These three countries represent 13.8 percent of the total number of nationality swaps in the list, while they represent less than 0.12 percent of the global population.<sup>2</sup> In other words, these three countries are overrepresented when it comes to nationality swaps in this list.

Second, what Bahrain, Qatar and Turkey have in common is a strong ethnic notion of citizenship. The ethnic definition of citizenship considers ancestry as the most important criterion of inclusion (i.e., *jus sanguinis* or the right of blood). An ethnic definition also entails that members of the nation have a common cultural heritage, language, and religion, and the group can be identified unambiguously (Smith 2017). Therefore, it is surprising that these countries are prominent in the list of accepting nationality swaps. Usually, due to the norms of

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<sup>1</sup> IAAF, *Lists of Transfers of Allegiance 1998-2016*. Data selected and provided in: Jorn Schulting (2018), *Migratie en Nationale Identiteit in de Atletiek sport, Een vergelijkende analyse tussen Bahrein, Qatar en Turkije 1998-2016*, unpublished MA-thesis Erasmus University Rotterdam

<sup>2</sup> Gijsbert Oonk and Jorn Schulting, Nationality Swapping in World Athletics: Cases and Contexts from the Middle East 1998-2016. To be published in D. Reiche (ed), *Routledge Handbook on Sport in the Middle East*, Routledge 2021.



these countries they are more restrictive when it comes to accepting foreign born, non-ethnic members as formal citizens. However, they have decided to promote sport and the country's sporting identity by allowing foreign born talented athlete to represent them.

The case of Bahrain and Qatar is particularly striking. Bahrain has two million inhabitants, of whom only twenty percent hold Bahraini citizenship. Qatar is slightly bigger with 2.5 million inhabitants of whom twenty percent hold Qatari citizenship.<sup>3</sup> Neither country has a strong sport tradition and they both have a low membership rate of sport clubs. Bahrain and Qatar are both countries of migrants. Most of the people living in those countries are not Bahraini or Qatari citizens, but migrants. These countries are predominantly built by migrants, be they workers from Asia and Africa or expats from the West. Hosting international talented athletes and employing them in order to have them represent Qatar or Bahrain at an international level is one way to promote the country on the international stage and to promote sport in the country. Therefore, potential athletes are offered citizenship and a salary in return for medals. In the case of Bahrain, they are requested to change their name into an Islamic name and female athletes are required to/ requested to cover using a headscarf outside of competitions. For example, at press conferences or during meetings with domestic sponsors or sports associations. Despite these sensitivities, forty-one percent of the Bahraini cases are female and have been granted citizenship by special decree by the King of Bahrain. A good example is Maryam Jamal who was born in Ethiopia and granted Bahraini citizenship in 2004. She became the first Bahraini athlete to win an Olympic medal, a gold (originally bronze, but later upgraded after two doping violations) in the 1500m women's race in the 2012 Summer Olympics in London. This was also the first Olympic medal won by a woman representing a Gulf state. She received the necessary criticism from Bahraini lawmakers after a photo of her was published in the Bahraini newspapers in 2005. In this photo, Jamal jubilantly crosses the finish line after achieving a 3,000-meter victory in Oslo, wearing shorts and a sports shirt. This caused great annoyance to Bahraini legislator Hamad Al-Humhannadi: "We were all shocked by the look of the young woman who was representing Bahrain at the international gathering. The outfit is not in any way related to the normal clothes that Bahraini young women are accustomed to wearing. We are all aware of the mental, emotional and physical importance of sports and we want to promote athletic activities. However, we must ensure that they are within the perimeters of Islam and our local traditions."<sup>4</sup> In the IAAF list there are no examples of female athletes that acquired Qatari citizenship. In 2012 Qatar was represented by four women, only one was foreign born. This was the Egyptian born table tennis player Aya Majidi (who was not included our sample of the IAAF). One could argue/ it wouldn't be an unfair assessment to assume that the Qatari authorities are more reluctant to accept women in sports than those of Bahrain.

Turkey provide us with a different context. Turkey has more than 80 million inhabitants (almost all Turkish citizens) and it has a strong sports culture, especially related to football, (women's) volleyball and basketball. According to the IAAF Lists of Allegiance, Turkey's ratio of men to women when it comes to representation in international athletics is 50/50. This

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/335rank.html>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/othersports/2363393/Gulf-states-thrive-on-athletes-for-cash-trade.html> as seen 22-09-2020.



is also more or less a reflection of the laws and regulations that Turkey applies regarding nationality and citizenship. For example, this legislation makes no distinction between men and women in the naturalization policy. In the early days of the lists of allegiance in 1998, the Turkish transfers mainly featured female athletes who came from neighboring countries like Russia and Bulgaria. Some of these athletes married in Turkey and thus obtained a Turkish passport and became eligible to compete for Turkey. A good example of this is Nora Ivanova who was born in Bulgaria in 1977. During the 1997 World Championships in Athletics in Athens, Greece, she met Turkish high jumper Kemal Güner of Fenerbahçe Athletics. The couple married in 1999. She became a Turkish citizen and converted to Islam adopting the Turkish name Nur Güner. However, she eventually became known as Nora Güner as after living with her husband in Sofia for a while, the couple divorced. She, however, continued to compete for Turkey until 2006.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nora\\_Ivanova](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nora_Ivanova) as seen on 30-09-2020

Table 1

National background of athletes in the Middle East in numbers 1998-2016.

	National Background of Athletes	number
Bahrain	Kenya	20
	Ethiopia	15
	Morocco	5
	Jamaica	3
	Nigeria	2
	Guinee	1
Qatar	Kenya	6
	Egypt	3
	Sudan	3
	Nigeria	2
	Uganda	1
	Tsjaad	1
	Mauritius	1
	Jemen	1
Turkey	Kenya	9
	Russia	5
	Bulgaria	4
	Ethiopia	3
	White Russia	2
	Ukraine	2
	Jamaica	2
	Cuba	2
	Turkmenistan	1
	Rumania	1
	Azerbaijan	1

Data selected by Jorn Schulting (2018) *Migratie en Nationale Identiteit in de Atletieksport, Een vergelijkende analyse tussen Bahrein, Qatar en Turkije 1998-2016*, unpublished MA-thesis, Erasmus University Rotterdam.

Bahrain and Qatar recruited all their foreign athletes from Africa, except for two athletes from Jamaica. Turkey provides us with an example of a more diverse nationality background. Nevertheless, Kenya is by far the largest supplier athletes with a total of thirty-five transfers. There are three interrelated reasons for this. First, for Bahrain and Qatar, recruiting foreign athletes, and providing them with a local passport is a short-cut to international sporting success. For example, during the Asian games in 2018 Bahrain matched China's twelve gold medals in athletics, which is an amazing feat as China has invested a lot of resources in creating

world-class athletes. Bahrain also won six silver and seven bronze medals, against China's twelve silver and nine bronze. China collected thirty-three medals in athletics, Bahrain got twenty-five. Interestingly, all ten individual athletics gold medals won by Bahrain were earned by runners born on the African continent, they were from Nigeria, Ethiopia, Kenya and Morocco. Of the two gold-winning relay teams, all but two athletes — Hajar Alkhalidi and Ali Khamis — were also of African origin. Second, for African athletes the payment and the excellent sport facilities are important and appealing incentives to make the move to the Middle East. The 1500m and 5000m, gold winner Kalkidan Bekadu explained: "There's so many strong athletes in Ethiopia so it's a challenge to compete, so that's also [next to his salary G.O.] why I changed."<sup>6</sup> Qatar also encourages immigration from talented athletes. Of the three individual gold winners in athletics for Qatar, two are African-born — Abdalelah Hassan (Sudan) and Ashraf Elseify (Egypt) — while the third, Abderrahman Samba, was born in Saudi Arabia. Sometimes African leaders try to prevent their homegrown talent from leaving their countries by asking them to prioritise 'patriotism' over the temptation to change citizenship for financial gains. But if patriotism does not provide food and trainings facilities this has no chance (Adjaye 2010; 34). And third, out of all of the foreign recruited athletes, Bahrain, Qatar and Turkey all recruit the most from Africa, with Kenya at the top who in total have transferred 35 athletes to these three countries. This may reflect the existing transnational networks of coaches and scouts which have been coined 'talent pipes'. (Maguire and Eliot 2008).

## Conclusion

It is remarkable to see that the regulations of the IAAF transformed in a relatively short period (1998-2019) from an open, pro-athlete and flexible citizenship (and eligibility) stance, towards a stricter and (western) nation-state-oriented focus. The 'thin' forms of eligibility as mentioned in my model in 2020 (Oonk 2020) are no longer permissible. This makes it almost impossible for states like Qatar, Bahrain and Turkey to compete on the highest level of the Olympics. It also reduces the chances of mainly African athletes to receive a proper income, to enjoy the best trainings facilities and to compete at the highest level, especially in cases where they could not have represent their country of birth anyway.

It is also noteworthy that this transformation was driven by the concerns of European and African perspectives and World Athletics officials like Seb Coe nor Kalkaba Malboum. They explicitly target the Middle Eastern option for 'thin' citizenship and representation and not, for example, the nature of college scholarships in Canada and the USA. From this angle it is interesting to note that the IAAF list of 2012 contains eighteen nationality transfers towards the USA, from which seven came from Kenya, three from Ethiopia and one from Nigeria. The list includes names like Cheboiywoa and Biwot who were talented runners in Kenya and therefore were eligible for sports scholarships in the United States. They eventually became U.S. citizens. Others gained their citizenship while serving the U.S. army. Paul Chelimo was

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/archive/sports/how-africa-helped-bahrain-match-china-gold-for-gold-646133>, as seen on 23-09-2020.

one of four Army runners to make the U.S. team 2016. All four were born and raised and started running in the highlands of Kenya. They won athletics scholarships to American universities. After college, they enlisted in the U.S. Army, which is open to non-citizens with legal residency. His military service then provided a fast-track to U.S. citizenship.<sup>7</sup>

Middle Eastern countries may in the future use similar paths to attract foreign born talent. They may make use of the ‘residence’ rule of three years as was amended in the 2018-2019 IAAF regulations. Middle Eastern countries could become a team of rejects, a second chance team. They could provide the world with another example of ‘multi-national teams’ that represent a state or nation. This could also symbolize cosmopolitanism. This, then, might come close to the suggestion of Ioworth, Hardman and Jones (2014) that sporting bodies should be more pragmatic in their criteria of national belonging. I agree with them that traditional citizenship requirements are inadequate and outdated methods of dealing with citizenship in international sport. The case of the Middle East shows that stretching the notion of citizenship and identity in arena of international sports should be more athlete oriented -and increase options for individuals – rather than nation-state oriented and restricting options for talented athletes.

### **Question**

Should passport swaps be allowed? And who -among the four key players (the individual; receiving states; sending states and international sport federations) should have the last say in this?

### **Author(s)**

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.runnersworld.com/advanced/a20800158/boaz-between-two-worlds/> as seen 2-10-2020.