

# The rhythm of Kenya is running

ELDORET, Kenya — They arrive 1,700 strong, on foot, by bike, via bus and train. Jammed into pickup beds or tractor wagons. Girls in skirts, boys in uniform blazers and pants. Many are barefoot.

This is the scene as runners, ages 3 to 20-something, attend a cross country meet in this northwestern Kenya city on a Sunday morning in late January. For the next couple of hours there will be age-group races with kids directed to start and finish lines by local Olympians, record holders and medallists, including Kip Keino, who in the late '60s became the country's first great runner.

"Welcome to the Great Rift Valley," says Ibrahim Hussein, winner of the Boston and New York marathons. "This is the heart of running."

The Rift Valley cuts through east Africa. Much of the valley lies at least a mile above sea level, aiding in the conditioning of long-distance runners. The valley area has produced the overwhelming majority of outstanding Kenyan middle-distance and distance runners.

There's more at work here than the endurance benefits of altitude training. Terrain, development, economic incentive and incredibly hard training have combined to produce more and better Kenyan runners than ever. They dominate from 800 meters through the marathon and are preparing for another record onslaught as the summer season begins.

## **Worldwide, more success than ever**

The tradition at St. Patrick's High, in nearby Iten is to plant a tree in the courtyard when an alum sets a world record, earns a gold medal or wins a major race. Brother Colm O'Connell, the Irish brother and track coach at the school, apologizes for being "a little behind" in the planting.

The school has produced such stars as 800-meter world champion Wilson Kipketer, New York and Boston marathon winner Hussein, '88 Olympic 1,500 champ Peter Rono and '88 Olympic steeplechase winner Matthew Birir.

O'Connell used to send many of his top runners to U.S. colleges, which were an important developing ground for Kenyans. In 1978 while attending Washington State, Henry Rono set four world records in 80 days. Now it's rare for a top Kenyan to come to a U.S. college because there is so much money to be made on the professional road circuits.

Since the late '80s, when the Kenyan federation allowed athletes to travel frequently, Kenyans have dominated the European track and U.S. road race circuits, where prize money, appearance fees and shoe company endorsements are prevalent. Established runners like Paul Tergat and Moses Tanui can make \$250,000 a year or more in a country where the per capita income is about \$300. Even earnings of \$15,000 on the "B" road circuit in the USA can go a long way.

Now, Kenya has more world-class runners than ever.

There were nine Kenyans among the top 10 in the 3,000 steeplechase last year.

Kenyans had 13 of the top 30 times in the 5,000, 10,000 and marathon, an event Kenya is just starting to control.

"You can't even keep track of them," former Iowa State runner Barnaba Korir says. "There are new names every year."

The talent is so deep, the country exports. Wilson Kipketer, the 800 world recordholder, now runs for Denmark, as does miler Robert Kiplagat Andersen.

#### **A look at the future**

In the day at the races in Eldoret, the stars of the past and present assist the stars of the future.

The event is organized by Fila, an Italian shoe company, at the behest of Gabriele Rosa, an Italian doctor who coaches some of the top Kenyans.

"Some of the young ones, in 10 years, they will be incredible," says Rosa, on the lookout for another Moses Tanui or Paul Tergat, stars he coaches.

The racers include Gideon Kibet, 15, who took a minibus from his home in Kapsabet 20 miles away. Approaching two journalists he mistakes for agents, he asks for shoes to replace the pair cramping his feet and a watch to replace his sometimes malfunctioning model. He also needs treatment for a painful lower right shin.

He's wearing a singlet and, courtesy of neighbor and world-class miler Laban Rotich, shorts. Kibet also has a dream.

"I'd like to run like Paul Tergat or Moses Tanui," he says. "My mother has no money and I'd like to help her."

"I don't have a passport and don't have people to steer me, coach me. If I get the right people, I can be Paul Tergat or Moses Tanui. I have seen them on TV. I think I can do what they do if I practice. Laban Rotich, he starts to practice at home and now he goes to America."

The procession of races begins. The race pattern is identical for the youngest at 500 meters to 10,000 for the seniors. The leaders strike a furious pace. For the most part, they hang on; they slow but don't die.

"They compete so hard," says Hussein, now a top official of the Kenyan track federation. "That's the way we run. Take off at the start."

There are clues to identify the top talent other than the order of finish. Shadrac Lagat has Fila shoes that fit, a color-coordinated sweatsuit and a state-of-the-art chronograph on his wrist. He's 10th in the senior men's race, an encouraging sign for a 1,500 runner who was a medalist at the '96 World Junior Championships before being injured last season.

He has a coach, Rosa, a structured training group and his career looks to be back on track. "I have been to New York," Lagat says. "I have ridden in a limo."

At the other end of the spectrum is Kibet. He finishes 100th among the junior boys.

He's limping but isn't discouraged. He talks about leaving high school to train full time.

He's introduced to Korir, who earned undergraduate and graduate degrees at Iowa State, is winding down a running career and teaches at a high school not far from Kibet's home. They speak Swahili for a few minutes. Korir gives him a phone number.

"Maybe he can help," Kibet says as he leaves. "I think I will call him."

Runners like Korir and fellow Iowa State alum Yobes Ondieki sound like NBA players telling youngsters to stay in school and concentrate on education rather than the pro money.

"It is a moral catastrophe," Ondieki says.

Says Korir: "Young people are misdirected to gain money without gaining education. Not everybody is going to excel in running. You need education. We're having a brain drain."

#### **Shoe companies on fast track**

The proliferation of elite runners has created a feeding frenzy among shoe companies, agents and coaches, all eager to obtain the latest prospect.

The dynamics of the system are changing. "Runners are more closely associated by shoe company than country," O'Connell says. "Now you have tensions between runners in the same village because one is Nike, one is Puma."

The agents and shoe companies provide more development than the national federation. Nike, adidas, Fila and Puma sponsor races plus camps for youths as well as emerging elites.

"The federation has not one dollar for athletes," says Rosa, who is with Fila. "The (federation) coaches know nothing. Maybe with shoe companies it is not the best way to improve. But it's the only way right now. We should not fight so much so we can improve (running) more."

There is animosity among the competing camps. Says Rosa of O'Connell: "He has done an incredible job with the youth, but he has an old mentality. He should stay out of the business of track and field."

O'Connell wrestles with his role. Since 1989 he has been operating camps for promising runners. Since '94 he has aligned himself with agent Kim McDonald and Nike, which pays for two one-month camps that draw 100 campers.

"I stipulate that the assistance by no means guarantees (McDonald and Nike) exclusive rights to sign any of the athletes," O'Connell says. Things change quickly in this situation. A few days later McDonald switches his Kenyans from Nike to a higher bidder, Puma.

O'Connell would prefer to remain independent, but last year he lost two of his best prospects to shoe companies that wooed them away.

"I'm backed into a corner," he says. "People are skimming the cream. There's great temptation to say, 'We're (with) Nike and Kim McDonald.' It goes against the grain for me. But I'm struggling with it."

### **Drugs or workouts?**

Rosa's day job is running a cardiology clinic in Brescia, Italy. His passion, once cycling, is now running, which takes him to Kenya regularly.

He never felt part of the Italian track establishment, but, in the 1990s, he has bonded with the Kenyans. He has bought at least three plots of land in the country and plans to retire there.

He coaches 30 or so runners, including Tanui, the '91 world champ at 10,000 and a two-time Boston Marathon winner, and Tergat, the 10,000 world recordholder and winner of the last four World Cross Country Championships.

The success of Rosa's runners, who won 14 marathons last fall, combined with his background in medicine and cycling have spawned rumors of performance drug use. "I'm suspicious as hell," U.S. marathoner and '93 world champ Mark Plaatjes says.

Replies Rosa, 55: "I'm a doctor, but I can't kill myself. I left cycling because everybody was using drugs. The Kenyans, if you give them an aspirin, they won't take it.

"I'm old. I don't care what you think of me. But, please, respect the Kenyans. They are the best."

Rosa claims he has learned more from the Kenyans than he has taught them. Their workload is staggering. Tanui has 180-mile weeks at altitude. There's one 14-mile run, entirely uphill, starting at 4,110 feet elevation and ending at 9,200 feet.

Tergat sometimes does seven speed workouts a week, compared to the three or four customary for elite runners. One session at altitude: 25x400 in 55 seconds with 90 seconds recovery. That's a 3:40 mile pace, with breaks, for 6.2 miles. "That is incredible," Rosa says.

Rosa, with Fila's backing, has established two marathon camps and a track camp in Kenya. During training the runners live in primitive conditions — no electricity or running water — and are either running or recovering from workouts.

"I don't agree with how Rosa does some things," agent Kim McDonald says. "But he has raised the bar."

### **Tomorrow: Long way off**

How long can Kenya's dominance continue? The power that emerged in the '60s slumped after Olympic boycotts in '76 and '80 but has been on fast forward since '88.

Keino, the godfather of Kenyan running, insists dominance is cyclical: "Today it is Kenya, tomorrow it will be somebody else."