

# WHERE ARE THE KENYAN WOMEN RUNNERS ?



*Starting is not always easy.*

Where are the Kenyan women runners? What happened to Petticoat Princess? At the 1974 Commonwealth Games, 15 year old Sabina Chebichii, running on raw talent alone, clocked 2'02" in the 800 metres final. That year, another girl of comparable age, Mary Decker (now Slaney) of the USA, ran 2'01"8 for the same distance. Decker, despite the inevitable ups and downs of any running career, has endured in the sport and is running even better and setting records 15 years later. But what of Chebichii, the young Kenyan dubbed the Petticoat Princess, who ran so brilliantly in Christchurch? Like others before and after her, she became another lost talent, succumbing to the seemingly inevitable barriers to female Kenyan athletes : a social role that precludes sport for an adult woman.

**By Mike Boit**

After returning from several years of study in the United States, Dr. Mike Boit is now the head of the Physical Education Department at Kenyatta University in Nairobi. He has been one of the most successful and popular athletes on the international circuit and his accomplishments include an Olympic bronze medal at 800 metres in 1972 and the African Record 3'49" 45 in the Mile.

**A** look at the list of Kenya's world class athletes shows that it is a men's list only. Included are such notables as Kip Keino, Wilson Kiprugut Chumo, Naftali Temu, Amos Biwot, Henry Rono, John Ngugi, Paul Kipkoech, Joseph Chesire, Peter Rono and many others. The fact that these men have excelled in major competitions, in spite of a lack of modern scientific coaching, indicates an innate ability for running in our people. It would seem logical that Kenyan women would have this same ability. However, no Kenyan woman has set a world record, won a world championship, won an Olympic medal or even been ranked in the top ten in the world in any running or jumping event. Clearly, the athletic talent of Kenyan women has been untapped.

The key element separating Kenyan men and women in the development of their ability in competitive sport is the status of women in Kenyan society. In other words, poor performance among Kenyan women in athletics is essentially a perpetuation of their low status in society. Until the fundamental problems of social attitudes and practices, as well as low expectations are addressed, any form of encouragement for women to participate on an international level in competitive sports will be fruitless.

## MALE BASTIONS

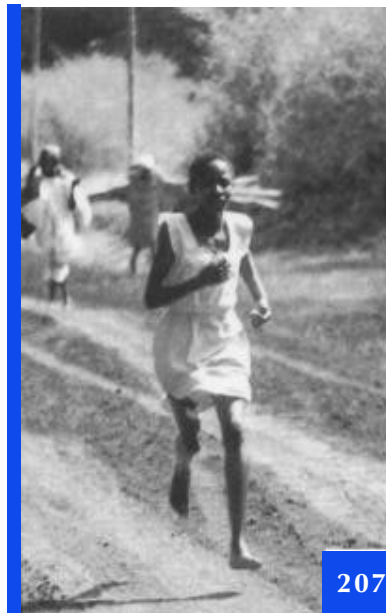
Kenyan society expects women to be homemakers. Child-rearing, cooking, cleaning, and washing are exclusively the responsibilities of women. In the rural areas, these tasks are accomplished without running tap water. Women in rural areas also play a key role in subsistence agriculture, as most own and tend small vegetable gardens. In addition, a rural woman's responsibilities quite often will include the care of the domestic animals (sheep, goats and cows). Most Kenyan husbands do not ask for less and Kenyan girls are raised with these roles in mind. Boys, on the other hand, are raised to play a more aggressive and competitive role. Tra-

ditionally, competitive sport has been exclusively a man's enterprise. This not only applies to Kenya, but is a common phenomenon world wide. In Africa, however, this problem of gender roles affecting sport seems especially serious.

A second problem, one of the root causes of the low social status of women, is the system of bride price or dowry. In a pastoral economy, the parents of the bride acquired wealth through the dowry system. Throughout the ages, this practice was often abused by selfish parents seeking an exorbitant number of cattle as a dowry. With the introduction of a cash economy, the tradition is still subject to abuse by parents who now ask for outrageous amounts of cash for their daughters. This not only creates ill-feeling between the in-laws but it also makes a wife more of an economic object than a partner in a joint venture. This low regard for women must certainly work against any improvement or development of their social status.

Even worse than the system of dowry is the practice of polygamy which is common among the older generations. Although the idea of monogamy may sound foreign to many Africans, polygamy is undesirable in a modern society. Most young educated men do not like the idea of many wives and many children, particularly in view of the pressing high cost of living.

The one means through which many women can achieve a higher social status is education. However, unfortunately, a third major problem is that most girls in developing countries do not have the same access as boys to higher education. At primary level, the numbers of boys and girls enrolled in Kenyan schools is comparable. However, several factors militate against girls receiving opportunities for high school and university education. In primary school, Kenyan girls are generally enthusiastic about competitive sports. By high school age, however, the stereotypic preju-



dices begin to take their toll and the disappearance of girls from the sporting fields becomes the norm.

## SOCIAL NORMS

On an individual level, a devastating problem is teenage pregnancy. Girls who become pregnant seldom go back to school afterwards, making an abrupt end to both education and sports. Marriage is next on the list for preventing girls from achieving their potential in higher education and/or competitive sports. In addition to those factors, if there is a shortage of funds for tuition, most families will give the boys priority.

Girls are also discouraged, indirectly, through low expectations which prevent most of them from pursuing courses which would lead to prestigious jobs. In Kenya, it is a generally held belief that women are good for secretarial jobs only. This attitude prevents most women from aspiring to power position jobs. Girls in school are easily put off by such popular Kenyan educational slogans as “Man Power Combination” representing mathematics, physics and chemistry which implies that the courses are meant only for boys. In addition, women who do attempt to venture into business have a hard time obtaining loans. Since in Kenya most women do not own property they must have their husbands co-sign any documents.

Kenyan women generally do not expect more from life than a low status job or marriage. To an African woman, marriage spells the end to a sporting career as few husbands have the tolerance to allow their wives to neglect their domestic duties and continue with sports. To prepare an athlete to achieve his or her highest potential is a long-term project which requires years of participation and hard work. Most Kenyan girls get married soon after high school, some of them through the encouragement of parents. Given this lack of expectations, it cannot be surprising that Kenyan women do not exhibit the mental drive to excel

which is a requirement for success in sport. Instead, most, including the talented ones, will follow the way of the Petticoat Princess — early pregnancy, marriage and an end to athletics.

The impediments preventing Kenyan women from developing their potential in society, education, and sport are deep-rooted and do not readily lend themselves to easy and quick solutions. How can the social status of women be improved? How can the girls' enrolment at high school be raised to be commensurate with that of boys? What can be done to help girls have a longer and more purposeful participation in sport? And how can the disturbing problem of teenage pregnancy be at least minimized?

## EDUCATING FOR CHANGE

Fortunately, there are some changes taking place. The abolishment of circumcision for women six years ago was a positive step for the dignity of women which must enhance their place in Kenyan society. Three years ago, inheritance laws favouring the sons of a family were also abolished. This change will be a factor in increased property ownership for women and should eventually lead to women assuming high positions and becoming new role models for other women. As positive role models are a critical factor in the development of aspirations, this should lead to an increase in the general expectations of women in Kenya. Meanwhile, the issue of the dowry system remains debatable in view of the established traditions, but there is no question that the practice of polygamy must be done away with.

Education is the main area where big gains can be made in a relatively short period of time. An organized campaign for women's education needs to be established. One place to start is with the question of sex education. This is a very sensitive and controversial issue which most educators in Kenya do not even want to discuss. The traditional sex education by the



grandparents is no longer practised nor are the strict regulations regarding the relationships between boys and girls enforced by our present society. It has been reported in the literature that the onset of the secondary sex characteristics in girls comes four months earlier every ten years. A combination of diet and such biological changes has lowered the average age of the first menstrual period. It is not surprising that youngsters nowadays are confused and this is probably one of the reasons for escalating teenage pregnancies. The taboo scares without adequate reasons will no longer satisfy our curious youth and parents have failed miserably on this very serious and sensitive issue.

## REDEFINING THE WOMANS' PLACE

Once a teenager becomes pregnant, she is ostracized by society and often by her family. She is forced to abandon her education and, if she is participating, her sports. For the majority of girls, this will create a curse throughout their lifetime. Most people, and especially the church, think of sex education as a licence to create a promiscuous society. However, in consideration of the needless suffering which so many youngsters go through, it is clear that there is an urgent need to provide a solution through the church as well as the schools and that the question of sex education must be considered seriously. Sex education, formal or informal, must be a priority for girls, to counteract the risks posed by the above-mentioned biological changes, and for boys to build respect for women. Hopefully, effective sex education would reduce the problem of children having children, allow more girls to continue their education and thereby help to increase the status of women in Kenyan society. This would be a key step in the development of Kenyan women's sport and athletics in particular. It would also go a long way to helping curb the population explosion and the spread of venereal disease which are acute problems facing our country.



*A route strewn with obstacles for women.*

It would be erroneous to assume that the low status of women is a problem in Africa only. It has been noted that the contemporary social status of women, even in the industrialized countries is still characterised by restrictive influences of prejudices and taboos. Through scientific studies, it has become common knowledge that women are biologically robust and more than capable of training for the physical strength and stamina required in athletic events.

## SOLIDARITY

In May 1987, the IAAF Development Department and Women's Committee organized a special seminar in Nairobi which covered all aspects of the participation of women in athletics. For the first time, women from all over Africa came together to exchange experiences and discuss the real roots of the problems they faced. It was clear that technical and coaching considerations are very minor compared to the social problems which African women face. A most positive result of the IAAF Women's Athletics Seminar was the recognition of a growing feeling of community among women who must face

## WOMEN AND SPORT

and overcome their problems in society and sport together. The efforts of the IAAF to develop women's athletics through this seminar and the work of the Development Department must be applauded.

I have discussed the factors, mainly low status and teenage pregnancy, which prevent Kenyan women from reaching their highest potential in society, education and athletics. I would also like to take this chance to make a couple of specific suggestions which I feel would help to improve the performance of Kenyan sportswomen and could be applied to other developing countries as well. The

majority of successful Kenyan sportsmen come from the military and police forces, where institutionalized sports coaching is obtainable. However, these institutions do not recruit a large number of women. There is, therefore, a need to provide institutionalized training for women after high school. This could be achieved through the establishment of clubs and a national sports institute. In addition, there is an urgent need to encourage women to take up coaching and sports administration careers. Finally, all potentially talented women should be given special incentives and encouragement.

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*M.B.*

An uphill struggle.

