

# KENYANS ON INFORMAL PATH TO SUCCESS

*Kenya's runners carried off some fine successes in Seoul : Julius Korir, gold medalist and Peter Koech, silver in the 3000m.*



*By Jane Perlez*

Every morning during his school vacation as the sun brings the first light to the fields, 14-year-old Philip Mosima springs out of bed onto the dirt floor of his thatched room and heads off through the hills and valleys to run. In cool, fresh air, he runs past grazing cows, on narrow red earth paths that separate small plots planted with tea and maize, brushing the green plants with his bare legs. He runs 3 kilometers uphill before the terrain drops a bit then rises again; over all, he covers 12 kilometers (7.46 miles).

**P**hilip is the future of running in Kenya, the East African country that in the past has produced generations of elite runners and continues to do so in greater numbers and diversity.

### TRADITION IN SMALL TRIBES

At the World Track and Field Championships in Tokyo, Kenya was expected to dominate in the middle-and long-distance events; do well in the sprints, and possibly bring home a medal or two in women's events.

Traditionally, Kenya's runners have come from two of the country's smaller tribes, the Kisii and the Nandi.

Philip is a Kisii and lives in a region where every inch of the sharply undulating ground is cultivated with food crops.

The Nandi live further east and a little higher up - about 8,000 feet - on the escarpments above the Rift Valley and earn their livelihood raising livestock.

### TRAIL OF HEROES

Both tribes have their running heroes. Kipchoge Keino, who set world records in the 3,000 and 5,000 meters in the mid-1960's, is a Nandi, as are 18-year-old Richard Chelimo, who was still 17 when he surprised even his countrymen by finishing fourth in the world cross-country championships in March, and William Tanmui, the world's top-ranked 800-meter runner in 1990.

At the sports stadium here, Nyandika Maiyoro of the Kisii, 58, who ran the 5,000 meters in the 1956 and 1960 Olympics, still provides a role model for poor youths like Philip and Thomas Osano.

### STAYING BEHIND

Philip's coach thinks he is too young to compete in Tokyo, but Osano joined Tanmui and Chelimo in Kenya's lineup for the

10,000 meters. And on the women's team at 10,000 meters was Delilah Asiago from Kisii.

In this largely rural country of 24 million people, where the minimum wage is about \$30 a month, athletes often have to scrounge a pair of running shoes and their training is uncomplicated and non-technical. They seem to learn from the constant competition. From January to March, schools, then districts, then provinces compete against each other in cross-country.

It is at these events that coaches keep an eye out for new talent, said Fred Omisire, the principal of Kebirigo Secondary School in Kisii and the assistant secretary of the Kenya Secondary Schools Sports Association.



*Peter Ereng after winning the 800m in Seoul.*

## NATIONAL COMMITTEES

Omisire said that good runners are encouraged, but not pushed, to run before and after school. The travel to running events is arranged.

Why have the Nandi and Kisii excelled at running?

Omisire thinks it is a combination of geography, diet, a tradition of fitness and a love of sports.

*Peter Rono at the 7,500m finish line in Seoul.*



### A LIFE OF FITNESS

"People like athletics in Kisii," he said. "Even at a small sports event they will turn up. Among the Nandi, even more so. Then there is the geographical setting. Kisii is about 6,000 feet above sea level; it's mountainous. The air is clean, the water good and the diet is the right one." At his coeducational school, the boarders eat ugali - a traditional porridge of maize and water - every day, along with vegetables and milk. They eat meat once a week. "We can't afford more," Omisire said.

There is also a fitness that comes from the demands of life in the impoverished countryside. "if you take a primary school and say to everyone out on the field between the ages of 8 and 13, 'I want you to do three laps,' 90 percent will finish and be standing and fit. With the Europeans it takes weeks to accept the idea of running."

When Philip Mosima was 11, he ran the 5,000 meters in the Kenyan trials for the 1988 Olympics; to the thrill of the crowd he finished ninth against such stars as John Ngugi (who went on to win the Olympic gold medal for Kenya that year). "It was a demonstration of courage," Omisire said.

Now Philip is training day and night at the boarding school and at home, looking to shave three seconds off his best time of 14:02. Philip knows his target, the world junior record, time for 5,000 meters - "13:59," he said with a wide grin - as well as he knows his name.

When 15-year-old Josphat Machuka from Kisii won the secondary school cross-country championship last year, Omisire said he knew that Kenya had found another future star. In the national trials for the Tokyo championships two weeks ago, Josphat finished third in the 10,000 meters with a time of 28 :15, only 10 seconds behind the winner, Chelimo.

Josphat ran in the trials in bare feet. How did he manage to do so well ?



## AVOIDING BURNOUT

"I wanted to beat them," he said of Tanmui and Chelimo. "Next time I'm planning to defeat them."

Josphat wasn't chosen because it was thought that he was too young.

Indeed, one of the problems facing Kenyan trainers and selectors is pacing the careers of the young athletes. Too often, young runners have burned out from too much heavy competition.

Another new star, in the women's ranks, is 14-year-old Lydia Cheromei, a Nandi, who won the 10,000 meters in the qualifying trials for Tokyo. But her coach, Sister Christine Heverin, said Lydia was too young for Tokyo event though she won the world cross-country junior championships in Antwerp in March and was part of the Kenyan road racing team that beat the Russians and the Americans in Hawaii last December.

"In the past the girls have been taken too soon; there's been too much, too fast," said Sister Christine, who coaches at Singore Girls Secondary School at Iten on the edge of the Rift Valley. "We're trying to control the competition and let the enthusiasm build."

Young girls in rural Kenya develop fitness by doing their chores - collecting firewood and fetching water - around the family farm. But traditionally, it has been difficult to persuade Kenyan girls to participate in athletics.

## DEMANDS OF SOCIETY

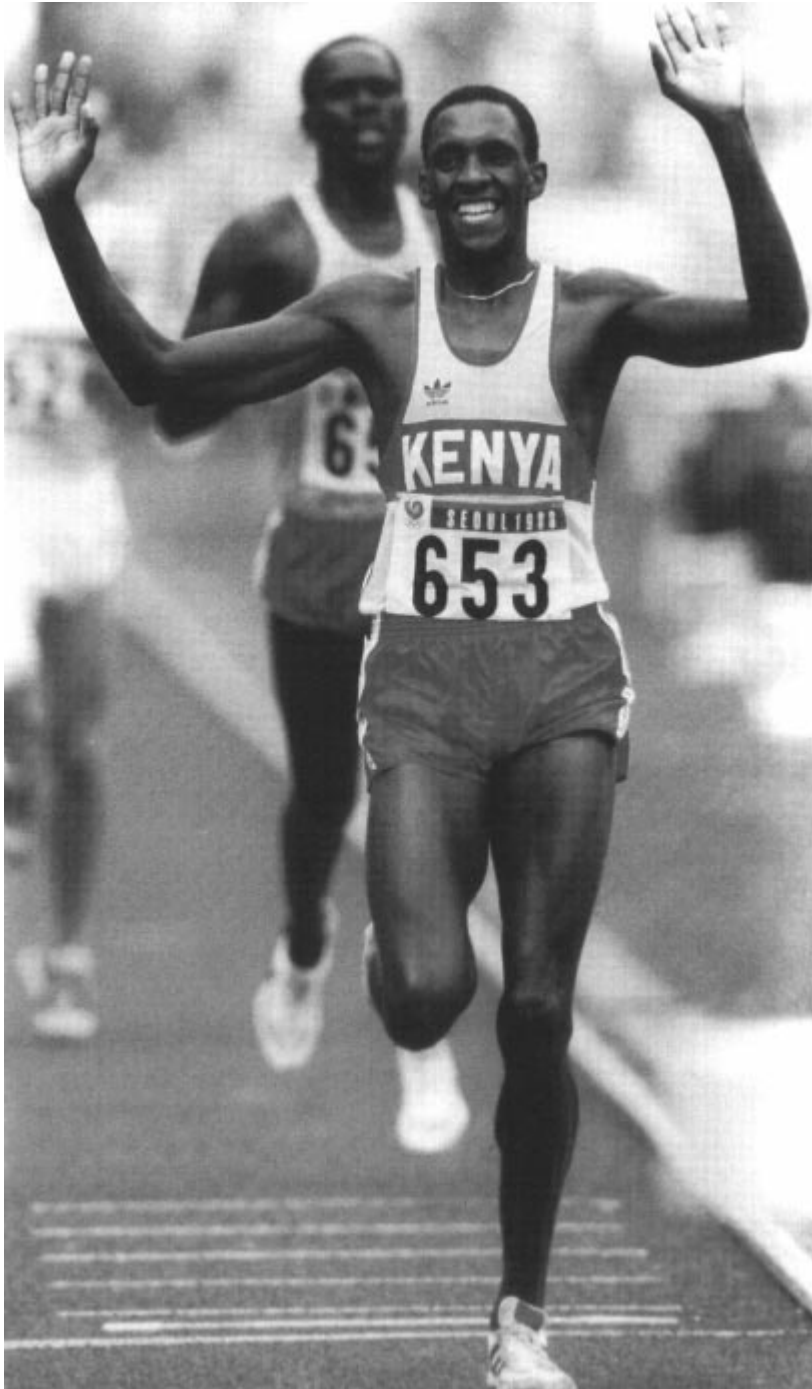
Society demands that girls marry, have children, run the farm and be subservient to men, particularly in rural areas.

Last year, 21-year-old Helen Kinayio, who held the African record for the 3,000 and 1,500 meters, had to drop out of the Commonwealth Games because she was pregnant with her second child.

But these days, Sister Christine says girls are becoming more competitive.

"The girls are seeing a bit of TV and they listen to the radio and they are

*John Ngugi after his win in the 1988 Olympic 5,000 m.*



becoming aware that they haven't had the chance of the boys," Sister Christine said.

Singore is the sister school to St. Patrick's Secondary School which has produced more international-level Kenyan runners than any other. At least 35 of its athletes are attending colleges in the United States, Sister Christine said, adding that there would be more if they could get visas.

To understand what it was that made for such an extraordinary record among the Nandi - who make up the bulk of the student body - a Swedish medical team visited St. Patrick's last year.

### FANCY TESTING

To the amusement of the staff, and presumably the students, they arrived with fancy testing equipment and took air, blood and muscle samples from the students.

"They didn't come up with anything," Sister Christine said wryly. The secret, she said, was to have a training program but not make a big issue of it. "It's there but very low key," she said. "It's not technical. It's to encourage them, to be with them and walk with them and talk to them." At Singore, she said, they don't even have a track.

*J. P.*

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