



AN ETHIOPIAN AWAKENING

KENYAN RUNNERS TAKE THE LION'S SHARE OF ROAD RACING TITLES, AS EVERYONE KNOWS, BUT IT'S ETHIOPIANS WHO TEND TO COME OUT ON TOP IN LONG-DISTANCE TRACK EVENTS. DAVID BRADFORD TRAVELS TO BEKOJI, HOMETOWN OF KENENISA BEKELE, TO TRY TO FIND OUT HOW TO TRAIN LIKE A KENYAN-BEATER - AND WHY WE BRITS TRAIL SO FAR BEHIND

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The track becomes a hive of activity, with the main training group divided into many sub-groups, each completing a different session - and coach Sentayehu somehow keeping an eye on everyone

RAISE THE SUBJECT of long-distance running with a non-runner and see what happens. Go on, I dare you. If their response doesn't peter out after recapping the highlights of their mate's mum's seven-hour marathon and reliving the beardy scenes from *Forrest Gump*, it's nigh-on guaranteed they'll tell you about "the Kenyans". In bemused, overawed tones, they'll parrot truisms about how Kenyans dominate race after race in seemingly "unbeatable" fashion. You'd be forgiven for thinking that, on the world stage, running has become a one-country race. Except it hasn't.

We have constructed in our minds a mystical, untouchable tribe of runners radically different from us, yet undifferentiated from each other (individuals are rarely named), and very nearly reduced to their nationality (always one of "the Kenyans", never simply "Kenyan"). Granted, the sheer number of world-class runners in Kenya is phenomenal, but these athletes are not superhuman and they do get beaten - usually by Ethiopians. In the 10,000m, for instance, Ethiopian men and women have won 20 of the 28 Olympic and World Championship titles since 1993; add to that, eight out of the 10 men's World Cross Country titles of the past decade. What's more, Ethiopians hold all bar one of the available world records for

5,000m and 10,000m - and they would hold the full complement, were it not for Wang Junxia's literally incredible women's 10,000m mark of 29:31.

Altitude training is rarely discussed without a reverential nod to the Kenyan town of Iten, which, as we know, has produced many champions. Less often mentioned - until recently - is a comparably fertile hub of running in Ethiopia, the town of Bekoji. This small highland settlement is located in the Arsi Zone, in the Oromia Region of central Ethiopia - and, like in Kenya, most of Ethiopia's endurance stars come from the same locality. Much of the Arsi Zone is at an altitude above 2,000m, and its administrative centre is Asella, birthplace of distance legend Haile Gebrselassie. Situated just 35 miles south of Asella, Bekoji is the hometown of innumerable running greats including the Bekele brothers, Kenenisa and Tariku, the Dibaba sisters, Tirunesh, Genzebe and Ejegayehu, as well as Fatuma Roba, Derartu Tulu and Mestawet Tufa. Between them, Bekoji athletes have won eight Olympic golds, 32 World Championships and have set 10 world records - not bad for a small, rural town that doesn't even have an all-weather track.

I first heard about Bekoji through film-maker Jerry Rothwell, whose daughter trains with my local running club Lewes AC. He told me about a documentary he was working on, *Town of Runners*, which follows the progress of two young female athletes from Bekoji, and invited

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me to a preview screening. The beauty of the film shattered my misconceptions: here was an Ethiopia not parched and tragic as in news reports, but lush, green and teeming with healthy, flourishing runners. Needless to say, my brother Matt (also a keen runner) and I didn't need much encouragement from Jerry to contact 'visit-and-train' charity Running Across Borders (RAB) and book our flights. With that, we were on our way to Bekoji to train amid the world's most successful training group. Oh cripes, what had we let ourselves in for?

INTO AFRICA

Cosseted westerners that we are, Matt and I are sure to experience a culture shock, and it hits us shortly after landing in Addis Ababa. Together with fellow Brit Richard Scott, a 2.22.00 marathoner who is in Ethiopia training for his next race, we board a minibus for our first taste of Ethiopian road travel – and 'chaotic' doesn't begin to describe it! There's no such thing as lane discipline here; you don't sit in-line but instead hoot your horn and keep going, taking your chance among a maelstrom of trucks, taxis, horses, dogs, beggars and cattle. Thankfully, RAB's driver has seen it all before and does an expert job threading us through the sprawl and out into the highland countryside. Bekoji is about 170 miles due south, a journey that takes roughly four hours, passing all manner of amazing sights: camels, baboons, straw-roofed huts of nomadic farmers, and breath-taking views across the vast savannah.

Training takes place at 7:00am five mornings per week, which is 1:00am Ethiopian time. The local system of time is a little discombobulating at first but makes perfect sense once you get used to it: because of its proximity to the equator, Ethiopia has 12 hours of daylight consistently throughout the year – sunrise is at 12:00am (what we'd call 6:00am) and sunset is at 12:00pm (6:00pm). Hence, 1:00am means it has already been light for one hour – time to run!

One of the most remarkable things about the training setup in Bekoji is that the original coach – the man who trained Tulu, the Bekeles, the Dibabas et al – is still here after 30 years of unparalleled success. His name is Sentayehu Eshetu but he's referred to simply and affectionately as 'Coach' by all the local athletes. And he is at our hotel door at dawn, keen to lead us to the location for our first Bekoji training session – just down the road to an open expanse of rough, grassy fields.

of Lewes has as large a population as Bekoji, yet we're lucky to get 30 runners turn up for a track session. To the best of my knowledge, no Lewes athlete has ever won a world or even a national title. Perhaps the level of participation and, in turn, training-group size is an important reason for our relative lack of success; certainly, it's a striking difference between our towns. But it isn't the only one, as Matt and I are about to discover...

Coach divides the huge group into about half a dozen sub-groups, setting each a different session and somehow managing to keep an eye on everyone. We're sent off with the largest group and instructed to run for 50 minutes at "slow" pace. It's sunny but still cool at this time of day, and everyone begins the session still wrapped up in training tops and jogging bottoms; so as to fit in, Matt and I do the same – our first mistake.

Everything seems fine at first as we jog gently downhill, but before long the terrain gets rougher, the temperature rises and the pace increases. The fields are so rutted and uneven – in places, literally ploughed – that it's impossible to get into any sort of rhythm. The locals don't seem affected; they're gliding along with apparent ease, incrementally upping the tempo. I'm no longer sure which is worse, the terrain or the lack of oxygen. The altitude of Bekoji is 2,800m, so the air is thin; my pace has slowed to an ungainly jog, yet I'm gasping for breath.

Countless twists and stumbles later, we loop round and head back uphill towards the start. Now it's really starting to hurt. A smaller group of Ethiopians have slowed down to stay with us, but I'm barely running now – more like a death-shuffle. The increasingly warm sunshine is an added hindrance; I'm absurdly overdressed and overheating badly. Matt is suffering even worse, melting into his waterproof jacket and being goaded by a diminutive lad at his side: "Come on, keep up, I'm only 12!"

This session sets the tone for everything that's to follow. Matt and I are forced to accept that, despite being two of the best runners in our club back at home, we are among the slowest here. Our compatriot Richard fares significantly better – he is, after all, one of the top 25 marathon runners in the UK, an exceptional athlete by British standards – but even he gets left for dead during the hard runs with Bekoji's fast guys. Things are so different here that an athlete of Richard's calibre doesn't stand out from the crowd, while Matt and I stand out for being well below average. If you can compete at the front of the fast group in Bekoji, you're not just excellent, you're probably bordering on world-class.

THE TRAINING BEGINS

When we reach the start place, about a dozen runners are already milling around, others are arriving in dribs and drabs. And they just keep coming! Within half an hour, a huge group has assembled: easily 150, perhaps as many as 200 athletes. Bear in mind, it's only a small town; how on earth do they get such a massive turnout? Our hometown



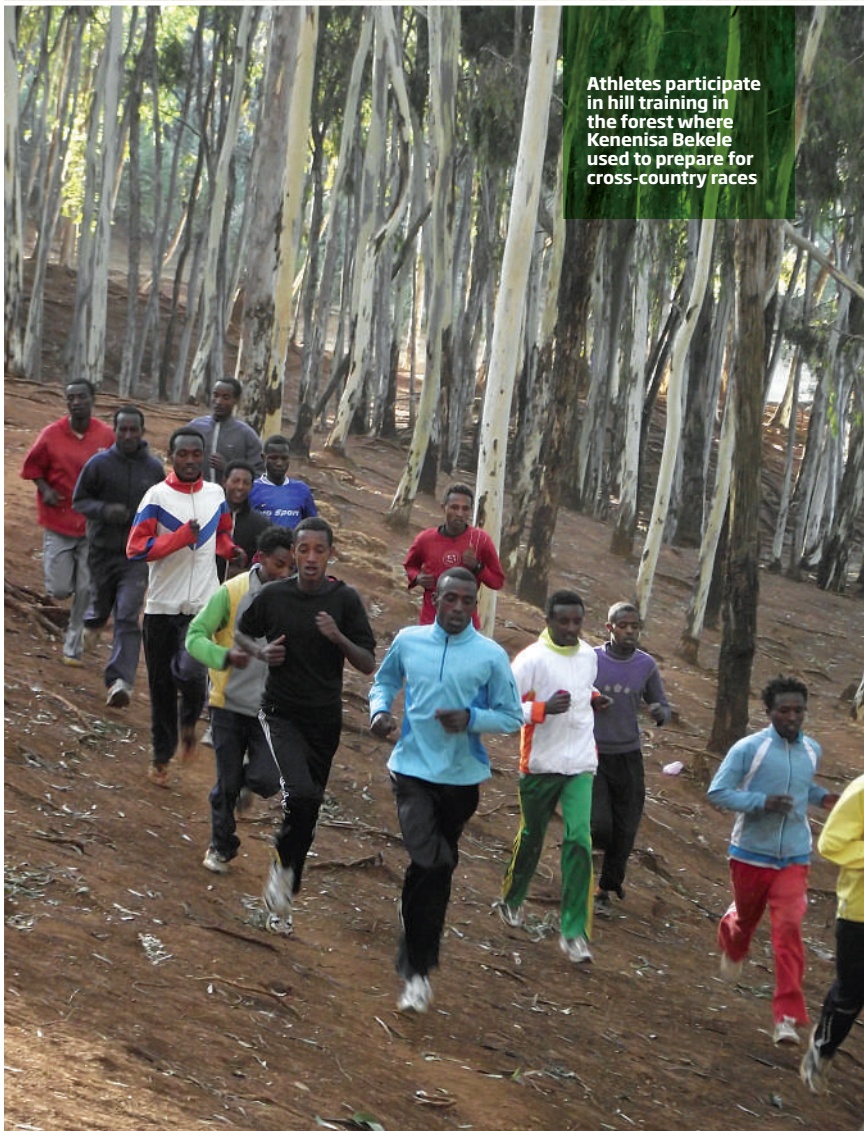
Athletes listen attentively and in silence as coach Sentayehu gives post-training debrief



Athletes train at Bekoji's dirt track, inside of which is a football pitch



Coach Sentayehu at his desk



Athletes participate in hill training in the forest where Kenenisa Bekele used to prepare for cross-country races

WHY ARE THEY SO GOOD?

There are all kinds of theories proffered to explain why eastern Africa produces so many brilliant long-distance runners. Many people cling to the belief that "indigenous East Africans" are somehow genetically advantaged, born with the best physical attributes for endurance – lighter limbs, blood that carries more oxygen, muscles that use less fuel, etc. However, the evidence for this is virtually non-existent. While ethnic, geographical and cultural commonalities are self-evident among particular clusters of African runners, no significant patterns of genetic inheritance have been found – one Ethiopian runner may be as genetically dissimilar to a team-mate as he is to a white British runner.

So if it's not genetics, what is it that makes the massive difference? This might seem crazy, but my hunch is that the *massive difference* is itself an illusion, a false premise, almost a pre-emptory excuse. Yes, many Ethiopians and Kenyans seem able to run much faster than we westerners, but no inherent differences between 'them' and 'us' have been proved. I'm not denying that we Brits are lagging far behind eastern African nations in distance running – how could I? – but I don't think it can be accounted for by a difference in what we might call hardware, our physical bodies.

To take this computer analogy further, I suspect that we are all born with, on average, the same amount of disc space (aerobic capacity) and RAM (speed); the difference is the operating software we install and the programmes we run (pun intended). Just as a computer does only what its software and our input instructs and allows it to do – few are stretched to their full potential – the same is true of our bodies.

The computer's software and the human-input it receives, translated into running terms, are the influence of our culture, lifestyle and external factors such as environment and coaching. It's in this area that there are big differences. As a kid growing up in Britain, I could have chosen pretty much any sport I'd fancied – most likely, football, rugby or cricket, as they are the most popular, our 'national sports'. Instead, I sat around eating too much, getting gradually podgier and more lethargic – gluttony: our true national sport, the one at which we excel!



Posters on the wall in coach Sentayehu's office bear the pictures and records of many of the highly successful athletes he has trained over the years, including Kenenisa Bekele



Matt Bradford (centre) keeps his composure in a quadriceps stretch, part of the lengthy warm-down routine undertaken at the end of each session

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I didn't take up running until much later, after graduating from university, which is why I'll never progress beyond reasonable-club-runner level – stuck forever playing Pong on Windows 1.0.

In Bekoji – and this is true of much of Ethiopia and Kenya – there are far fewer choices. If you're lucky, you get an education up to the age of 15 or 16, but you're unlikely to go to university; there are fewer sports to choose from (owing to lack of facilities and equipment), and fewer high-calorie snacks lying around the home. You can either settle for following in your parents' footsteps – typically, a life of hard manual labour on a small farm – or you strive to emulate the stratospheric success of those Bekele guys from down the road. I'm drawing a simplified picture, of course, but the differences really are that stark.

Coach Sentayehu keeps an eye on Matt Bradford, doing his best to keep pace with our guide Biruk Fikadu

HIGH ACHIEVERS

Several athletes with whom we trained in Bekoji mentioned the “food problem” they face and which prevents them from doing higher-volume training. This relates more to poverty than to regional food shortages; there is no serious famine threat at present, food production is improving and Ethiopia's economic growth is strong. Even so, most Ethiopians still survive on less than a dollar a day. When runners like Bekele and Dibaba break through and achieve international success, they earn hundreds of thousands of pounds and their lives are completely transformed (ditto their families'). For Bekoji's aspiring athletes, seeing their neighbours run their way to a better life is a powerful source of inspiration which motivates them to aim for the highest achievements.

Trying their absolute best to become world-class athletes simply seems the natural, irresistible plan for runners in Bekoji. Why wouldn't you? Everyone else is turning out for training every day, and they seem to be having a good time, so what have you got to lose? There is a strong sense of community within the training group – it's obvious that many of the athletes are very close friends – and, crucially, there is a respected leader: Coach. At the end of every session, everyone listens to Coach's debrief in total silence with undivided attentiveness. And then everyone goes home to rest.

Meanwhile in Britain, clubs struggle to rally decent-sized training groups; once you are reasonably fit, it's hard to find training partners who are able to keep up; there are hardly any paid coaches to advise you on what to do next; morning training sessions are ruled out because everyone's at work; and getting proper rest is almost impossible for the same reason – we have jobs to do, because we need to earn enough money to maintain our lifestyles.

The lifestyle conducive to distance running success is ascetic, disciplined and provides plentiful spare time; it's a way of life that's far less conducive to developing a lucrative career and indulging in the manifold vagaries of middle-class extravagance. Eking out every drop of your athletic potential requires total commitment and the opting-out of other pleasures, hobbies and opportunities. For us in the west, that's a gruelling, high-stakes gamble with a miniscule chance of paying off. For Bekoji's budding runners, who are brought up to accept the necessity of hard physical work, it's an instinctively logical venture: the sacrifices are fewer, the prospective rewards far greater – and they've every reason to believe they can succeed. 🏃



Coach Sentayehu talks an athlete through the session

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Why Ethiopians are faster than Kenyans

Renowned sports scientist Ross Tucker (sportsscientists.com) has studied what makes Ethiopian runners so devastatingly fast in long-distance track races

SPRINTS AND STRIDES – “No Ethiopian training session is finished without doing some sprint drills,” observes Ross Tucker, and our experience backs up this observation. Even during so-called easy sessions, which might begin at a leisurely jog as slow as 11:00/mile, the latter stages are always very fast – incorporating short bursts of speed and usually finishing with a de facto race over the final 100-200m. “They will do 50m strides, beginning at a fast pace and finishing at a sprint,” notes Tucker.

HILL WORK – According to Tucker, the Ethiopian focus on hill work is crucial to their athlete’s track speed. “They also do an incredibly high amount of hill work, doing steep hills of less than 100m in length.” This was vividly borne out in the training we witnessed in Bekoji, where Coach Sentayehu insists on one session each week in the hillside forest where Kenenisa Bekele used to prepare for cross-country racing. The main hill is only about 60m in length, but athletes sprint up it many times as part of a gruelling circuit course.

The type of hill work is vitally important, reckons Tucker: “Most important is that the stride rate is kept high – at least 85 to 90 strides per minute.”

It’s not just the gradient and length of the hill, but how you run it too.

“If the hill is short, you have to make it very steep, making sure you keep your form all the way up. By form, we’re talking running on the toes, pulling short and fast with the arms, and keeping the trunk vertical, hips forward.”

By running hills in this fashion every week, Bekoji’s athletes develop a deadly combination of endurance and explosive power, as Tucker explains: “When you watch an Ethiopian launch a finishing kick over the final 400m of a track race and marvel at how they seem to bounce off their toes so easily, that’s sprinting and hill training doing it for them.”

PLYOMETRIC TRAINING – A big shock to Matt and I when we began training in Ethiopia was the elaborateness of the warm-down. Everyone performs a lengthy ritual of stretching and core strength exercises, usually carried out in perfect synch with one another, almost like a dance routine (perhaps another form of bonding to nurture team spirit). These routines also served to humiliate me and Matt, of course, as we were plain hopeless at them!

“The Ethiopians also do a great deal of what is called plyometric training,” explains Tucker. “This is bounding, skipping, bouncing and technique training that improves running performance by teaching the body how to be elastic during the period from when the foot hits the ground until it leaves it.”

So these rather quirky practices really make a difference?

“There is a lot of evidence now that suggests that African runners might have a more efficient mechanical running stride than white runners.”

Take a deep breath, because here comes the science part: “To briefly explain, most of the muscle activity during running happens while your foot is still in the air, about 100 milliseconds before it hits the ground. Your muscles are firing hugely at this point, and the reason they are is that your body is preparing itself for when it hits the ground. Once you hit the ground, these ‘active’ muscles catch the energy, like a sprint, and then harness it, so that when you push off again, you do so with more force than if you just pushed off without this ‘elastic’ component. What the Ethiopians are doing is harnessing this by training it specifically; I’m not sure that the Kenyans have done this quite right yet.”



L-R Richard Scott, David Bradford, Sentayehu Ashetu, Matt Bradford

Ethiopian-scale ambition

Richard Scott, 35, is a geneticist at Great Ormond Street Hospital. He spent time training in Bekoji as part of his preparation for the 2012 London Marathon, where he finished 38th in 2hrs 24mins

“I’ve been running noticeably faster since my return from Ethiopia, both in training and races. I was hoping for sub-2hrs 20mins in the marathon, but sadly paid the price for a fast start. Training over there is different in a number of ways – altitude, for one. But it’s not just that.

“I’ve never trained as hard as during the week I spent in Bekoji. My normal routine is to train hard three times a

week. In Bekoji, they manage four or five hard sessions. The attitude of the runners is different too: they all dream of being the next Bekele or Dibaba and give everything, physically and emotionally.

“The thing that impressed more than anything, though, is how much the athletes retain their sense of joy. I think Coach Sentayehu has a big role in that. He has an extraordinary aura about him. Whatever the reason, they love their running and feel excited about their prospects as athletes – a real key to achieving success. It also means that Bekoji is a happy place, despite the poverty and social difficulties.”



THANKS

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