

Account of the Run2Gether Run – Kijabe

Why our Chairman is like a prophet

The Man had set his phone to beep at 5.45 am, heeding the Chairman's warning to leave early as the road to *Kijabe* was likely to be covered in fog. But it was not until 6:30 am that he managed to drag himself out of bed, another sign of his gradual slide to sloppiness, a process that had begun three months back.

The track



So it was a mad dash to throw in assorted running kit into the car, grab some sugar water (another recommendation by the Chairman, more on this later) and drive off. Living in *Ruiru* County has few benefits, but this morning was one of them. He did not have to drive through town as the Northern bypass, the shortest route to *Naivasha* by far, passes just nearby. On hitting *Limuru* the fog started, exactly as the Chairman had ordained.

So did a series of maddening traffic jams which he later learned were caused by an overenthusiastic road construction crew that was doing repairs near *Kimende*. (*Kimende* means 'big cockroach' in *Kikuswa*).

Driving like a Kenyan

The Man was glad to note he was not the only one running late. From his rear view mirror he could espy *Godec*, a few cars back, who was trying his best to beat the clock by weaving in and out of the glacial traffic. Despite totting a chase car and a ride that looked like the half brother to 'the Beast' he was not

getting much respect from the early morning *Matatu* drivers. Clearly it is not enough to run like a Kenyan. Sometimes you have to also drive like one.

The Man made it to the venue with three minutes to spare. He has been here before, during the opening of the 'Run2Gether' track and club house a year back. But he has never run these trails.

As promised, the Chairman started the run at 8.00am on the dot. The trail started with a gentle slope toward *Mai Mahiu* (hot water) road, then turned left just before the tarmac and became a flat stretch that seemed to go on forever before suddenly curving left again and morphing into a long hill that ended somewhere near an abandoned railway station.

The club house



Run2gether - a fount of youth talent

Since *Nyingi* found his running *mojo*, and the Man lost his, they are no longer able to run together. Their interactions these days are limited to a brief *Jambo* and a quick *Kwaheri* before *Nyingi* sprints off and puts some serious daylight between them. The man misses those long running-chat-fests they used to have, some which used to go on for 15Km. But he has no one to blame for the loss but himself.

This morning would have been especially apt as he wanted to talk about the young people who have created 'Run2gether'. Especially their discipline, hospitality and organizational talent – the trail was impeccably marked; the food was tasteful and in plenty and their training schedule, which the Man found posted on a wall, was a sign of a team that that seems to have a real purpose.

"What would it take to seed the country with many such groups?" he thinks as he recalls again the amazing talent he has observed from years of travelling and interacting with youth across the continent of *Africa*. Much of that talent is to be found right here in Kenya. Unfortunately it is often expressed in negative ways.

The Man was recently the victim of an attempted robbery, a carjacking ordeal that lasted over four hours. From this experience, he was able to observe the high level of planning and organization that it takes to put together such a mission. The four young thugs seem to have thought of everything, from getaway cars, to dimly lit ATM booths where they could draw money, to multiple disguises and escape routes. They had even rehearsed the mission. The only mistake they made was in abducting the Man and two other fellows on the brokest night of their lives. The three happened to have less than 3000 shillings between them. But the point is this; the youth of this country are brimming with talent. Run2gether is a good example of how such talent can be channeled positively.

Boston lite

But let us get back on the trail. The runners crossed the railway line for the second and last time just before the start of the escarpment. This was at the top of gentle slope which the Man thought was the famous Boston hill. He even stopped to quiz two Swaras who had over taken him just before the end.

“Is this Boston hill?”

“I don’t know, but it had better be” the Swara replied with a determined glint in his eye. “I am sure it can’t get worse than this” he added as he took off. If only he knew.

“I have a bad feeling about this,” the Man was left speaking to himself, as he spied the wall of mountains a hundred meters to his right.

The railway line hugged the side of these mountains and for a moment, it seemed like we would run along a long it, which would have been another flat cruise back to the start. But then *Otora* has never seen a mountain that he did not want the Swaras to climb. Thus, barely fifty meters ahead, the trail turned right. Giant arrows (double ones for emphasis), pointed straight up and, I am sure, at the steepest slope that *Otora* could find.

The flora



Lessons in flora, fauna and topology

The Man gave up running and started walking. It was a painful thirty minute trudge to the top, mitigated only by the sheer beauty, which for once he was able to enjoy at some sort of leisure, thanks to his more sedentary pace. Too bad he had left his camera back home.

This mountain, an escarpment actually, forms part of the northern edge of the south-eastern branch of the Great Rift Valley. It rises almost 2000 meters from the valley floor and although much of the land is settled, some of it is too marginal to farm and has retained much of the original vegetation. This has formed a giant carpet of green covering every valley, down which the morning fog was rolling slowly like incense in a giant Cathedral. It was simply beautiful.

The Man amused himself by trying to see how many plants he could remember by name and uses. Here were *maigoya* (*prectranthus barbatus*) used as a hedge, for ripening bananas, and sometimes as toilet paper. *Mirichu* bushes (of the *acocanthera* family) whose roots make potent arrow poison, yet the fruits (*ndicu*) are edible and indeed were a favorite of the Man and his peers when they were growing up. Then there was the rare *mukandu* (*ocimum gratissimum*), menthol plants used for curing toothache and common cold and the *macuna* bushes (*pavonia urens*) used for making soap and treating hives to attract bees. Finally the deadly *datura stramonium*, *mugurukia*, so feared that even today the man will not shelter under this plant for fear of going mad.

There were many other plants he recognized but he could no longer remember their names. "My late grandfather would be unhappy about this." The man thought.

Having been raised by a medicine man grandfather, there was a time the Man used to know every plant and its uses. But the Whiteman's education had interfered and now he knew... what? He looked down in some embarrassment; even though there was no one but the birds to see his shame.

Then his eye was drawn to a grey snake lying across the path. But, on close attention, it turned out to a line of army worms. They are so called because they march in military single file, their grey color making them look a little bit like Nairobi city council *askaris*. There were quite a few army worm squads out on parade this morning, but not enough, the Man hoped, to create a swarm. He remembered, years back when he a small boy, his mother telling him that, when they swarm, army worms can be more destructive than locusts.

"They will eat everything that grows. But, unlike locusts, even birds don't like to eat army worms" she had said.

The fauna



What a SOB story

Not that the man had ever seen locusts but his young imagination could easily fill in the blanks. For many years dreams of spiny skinned crawly army worms and clouds of blood thirsty locusts that darkened the sun, were a staple of his childhood nightmares. Luckily those nightmares hand ended, unlike the night of this never ending mountain. At some point *Davis* caught up with him, briefly interrupting his reveries.

“What happened to you?” He asked. Translation: “what went wrong with you man. We used to run together?”

The Man trots out his tattered sob story.

“It was like this, you see. I went travelling for two months and I could not run. That is why I am so badly out of shape.”

The story sounds so lame that the man dare not look *Davis* in the eye. But *Davis* is a real gentleman, however and he has the politeness to pretend that he believes it. Up to a point of course, as he then says a brief good bye and quickly runs away. “Was that a smirk I just saw on his face?”

The man was left behind, berating himself.

“What a liar you are! So you traveled and you couldn’t run. Was it to a country in the sky, one that has no ground on which you could run? Or was it a dictatorial regime where running is a punishable offence? The truth is, Man, since you missed that chance to run the Two Oceans Marathon you have become a no good slob, more wedded to junk food and beer than the bracing morning runs that the Swaras are known for. You are no better than a....”

The hills



And the real run begins

Luckily at this point his self flagellation is interrupted by the end of the steep mountain slope. The trail turns flat and then starts going down to join much bigger road where he meets *Godecs* detail waiting for their boss. They wave a cheerful good morning and he waves back.

“That is a good spot to wait,” the man thinks. In case he is too knackered from climbing that Boston hill, he can take a ride home. If only he knew.

Five hundred meters further on, the trail turns right and starts a gentle, innocent looking climb. Electricity power cables have been strung up on the left side, stretching arrow straight up a mean looking escarpment to what seems like heaven and beyond. But much of the slope is obscured by trees and hedges and the Man cannot tell whether the trail follows the power lines. It does. Welcome to Boston hill.

“If this is a hill, then these Run2gether fellows must have a real gift for practical jokes or understatement”, the man thinks. For a start, this is not a hill.

Newton has nothing on this

In another life, when the man used to do serious running, he run the Boston marathon. He can confirm that the steepest part of the Boston marathon trail, the *Newton* hills, have nothing on this monster of a mountain. In fact, the man could bet, there is nothing like it in all of New England. When the Chairman warned the Swaras to bring running supplements and drinks, it turns out; this is what he was he trying to prepare them for. But if you think the Man listened, think again.

Then again it is impossible to prepare anyone for the experience of *Boston* hill. Not even a photograph can do it justice. Nothing can capture the difficulty, the dizziness, shortness of breath and pain in every muscle that attend the first time one attempts it. So how do you explain it to someone if you must? Here is a poor attempt:

Think of the *Ngong* hills. The steepest slope of the biggest *Ngong* hill is about a 200 meter climb. Take ten of those stretches and string them together to form a 2 kilometer ladder. Find a nice spot and lean this ladder against the sky. Now to try to run up the damn thing!

You would think it is not doable. Even walking up is an almost impossible challenge as some Swaras, including the Man, found out. But this is where the Run2gether crew come to train. Watching some Swaras like *Nyingi*, *Dennis* and *Benson* fly up this mountain as if it did not exist was an awesome sight.

The view



A glorious finish

One good thing about surviving Boston is that nothing more that the run organizers can throw at you comes even close. The rest is a fairly gentle slope and some minimal climbs. The Man estimates he has about 5K to get home. Not that he is absolutely sure, ever since those punks stole his Garmin; he has learned to run Zen. He is liking the experience so much that he might delay buying another running gadget.

The trail ends with a glorious view of the blue *Mt Longonot* straight ahead, just as the Chairman had prophesied. The view alone makes it all worthwhile. But the challenge and especially the beating that they took from the trail, is something that will keep many Swaras coming back.

The Man plans to be among the number. Hopefully he will be back in running shape by then.

Hiyo Boston hill itaona.