

My Sub-2 half marathon journey and losing 20 kilos

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The journey to doing a marathon, any marathon, begins with willpower. And then some. Plus, you need someone and something to push you when that last half mile seems like a light year.

When I started running in 2016 - reluctantly, I must add - the villager pushed and shoved me forward, while my weight pushed me down. The villager is Erastus Maina; my husband and the father of our three kids.

See, roundabout that time, I tipped the scales at 80 kgs. And the problem with body weight is that, if one doesn't get a hold of it pretty damn quick, it is likely to spiral out of control. My BMI was 32.9. It needed to be 23.5.

Running was not even on my mind. It was what others did. I'm a wife, mother and career woman; what do I know about running except getting off to running stats on research papers and proposals, and running a tight ship at home?

One happy day - (for him, he-he, not me!) - the villager finally got me out on my maiden 6kms run. Thank God for supportive husbands. Thank God for brothers who don't laugh at you when you you're half-walking and half-running - okay, three-quarters walking - but they make you feel like you're giving champion marathoners a run for their money.

The thing with a maiden run is that it seems like, with each step that you make, the distance grows further by two steps. And at times it seems like you're going backwards. Or that time has stood still. Speaking of time, don't keep looking at your watch but at the road ahead.

"Baby, are you sure this is not 60 kilometres?" I kept asking.

"You're a champion, you can do 60," the villager joked, and my muscles screamed in pain.

Did I hear you ask how long I took to finish that maiden 6 kilometres run? Let's just say that it was a personal best ... until the next day when I "broke" that record. And that first day when I recorded a personal best, I almost asked the villager to call a press conference.

Seriously, though, I learnt that, contrary to what most people think, the first day is not the hardest, but going out the next day ... and the next. Because, that second day, your muscles are in so much pain you think you made a mistake.

Do y'all know that muscles talk? I swear, muscles talk. When you're doing your maiden run or you've hit the gym for the first time, the doggone muscles talk nineteen to the dozen. They won't let you to put a word in edgewise.

Your glutes will be like: "Girl, did he tell you that no pain no gain? He lied through his teeth, the only thing you're going to gain is more pain." Your hamstrings will be like: "Stop this torture right now, or else we'll pull us a hamstring." And your hip flexors and calf muscles will be the typical Kenyan and threaten to go on strike unless you acquiesce to their demands.

After that first day, my mind was torn between hitting the tarmac and waiting for my muscles to heal. But the villager taught me that muscles heal when you take them out again ... and again. That's why it's called, exercise. Because it has discipline. He taught me that it's a battle of mind versus matter. He drilled into me that I should not listen to my muscles, but my inner woman.

I kept doing it. Kept running 5 days a week. It grew into a habit, and a good one at that. I couldn't shake it off if I wanted to.

Fast forward to ...

My Sub 2 half marathon 1st attempt

On 27th March 2018, I packed my bags and my high hopes. I was travelling to Cape Town, South Africa raring to go run the most beautiful marathon in the world: This was the 20th consecutive Old Mutual Two Oceans Half Marathon run under the rules of IAAF, Athletics South Africa (ASA) and Western Province Athletics (WPA). I was here attempting my first Sub-Two Hour Half Marathon.

Wikipedia defines a half marathon as a road running event of 21.0975 km (13 mi 192½ yd) - half the distance of a marathon. It is common for a half marathon event to be held concurrently with a marathon, using almost the same course with a late start, an early finish or shortcuts.

I was as ready as I could be. I had trained for the two months with the Urban Swaras. Urban Swaras Running club is the largest recreational running club in Kenya .They organize weekly Saturday runs mostly in and around Nairobi, as well as out of town runs at scenic locations all over Kenya. Their goal is to promote recreational running in Kenya. I would wake up early to join the Swaras for their runs in various parts of the country.

For my first half marathon, the Kenyan in me had packed chapatis. I had heard tales from runners that chapatis did the magic for a runner. I don't know how true this is, but as long as it is not a banned substance - and the testimony came from other runners - I was going to give it a try.

I know what you're thinking; that I can't get enough of chapatis. That I was just using this as an excuse.

We stayed in a hotel near the starting point at Newlands. On that early beautiful morning before the run, I had my chapati just to

ensure I was well fueled for the day. The weather was great. I ensured I was on time at the starting point outside the SA Breweries in Newlands.

Together with runners from all walks of life, as the sun kissed the skies, we waited patiently for the countdown and off we went at exactly 6am.

This is usually a family fun day in Cape Town. There was song and pomp on the way. Many families were on the roads as early as 6am just to cheer the runners.

I hope one day Kenya will have such a running culture. I mean, it will not just be about breaking records and winning money, but just having fun and it being a way that we can build a healthy nation and prevent lifestyle diseases.

The starting point was a bit crowded. But as soon as I was on my second kilometer, I was able to join one of the buses for Sub 2. Hills slowed me down but I was able to join another bus. We had a great captain and loads of fun singing and dancing all the way to the finishing line at University of Cape Town's sports field.



I finished my half marathon with a finishing time of 2.04 hrs. It was so close yet so far. I knew shedding off about five minutes or more was no mean feat. But I knew my dreams were valid.

On finishing my run I quickly grabbed the Kenyan flag and went to cheer the villager and other runners who were running the 56kms Ultra Marathon.

As soon as we were back to Kenya from OMTOM on 2nd April 2018, we reviewed my performance of the half marathon. The

villager committed to my sub 2 achievement. He helped me to develop and enrich my training program which I followed religiously. He became my training and accountability partner, which made life easier.

We agreed on running three days together.

"A Sub-2 achievement requires speed work and hill work," the villager put me in the know. "Your schedule and life will have to change ... you need not only to work hard but smart."

"Mauritius is all yours," he encouraged me. "*Hii Sub-2 ni yako.*"

At times I believed it. Other times I doubted my ability. Those are some of the conflicting emotions that one has to balance. But having someone who believes in you sure helps; because at times those five minutes can seem like five blue moons.

The cake before the icing

My 2nd Attempt for a Sub-2 Half Marathon was on 15th July 2018 during the Mauritius Marathon. I was ready for a fantastic challenge which takes place in one of the most picturesque parts of Mauritius!

The villager helped me to develop my schedule. On Mondays, I did strength training. Tuesdays were for speed work. Wednesdays were set aside for tempo runs. On Thursdays I did hill work. I rested on Friday, then Saturday I did endurance and Sunday I did a recovery run.

As part of my training, the villager introduced me a seasoned recreational runner, David Thuo of Run Fit Club kenya.

Thuo became my mentor. He reviewed my schedule weekly. He paced me on my last 6km run which I ran at a pace of 5.31 km/hr. He reviewed the half marathon profile and gave me last minute tips.

Since I worked in Nairobi, I joined Thuo and the Run Fun Fit club team at Heron Court on selected days. I needed to leave home at 4am so

as to start our run at 5am. I knew this achievement was not a walk in the park. It required tons of focus, discipline, sacrifice and persistence.

We did hill work sessions in Ngong on Thursdays at 5am. I dreaded the speed work sessions, but I knew that they were a vital part of being prepared. I also kept this mental note: I don't have the luxury of a third attempt.

D-Day

On the D-Day, we left the apartments in the North at 4am, to be at the starting line on time at the La Praire Coast road at 6.15am.

Being mentally prepared gave me confidence. I had done enough physically in the build-up. I trusted my body to get me to the finish line.

And that's the thing. After you have done all you can do, just trust your body. Your body has been a model student - studying, doing the preps - and it can ace this exam, if you let it.

As we drove to the start point, I went looking out for the Otoro chalk marks all the way and I did not find any. I started panicking. I knew there was some unfinished business. Otoro chalk marks are the most loved and dreaded marks in Swara runs as at one time they take you to a river and the next time you find yourself on some hills.

I quickly fished out my phone to confirm the starting point again. The vehicles were still on the roads and little did I know we would have to share the road with the vehicles. The traffic police were at strategic points guiding the runners.



I got on the starting point on time and ran 2kms to warm up my muscles. And soon I was back waiting for the countdown. I knew that I was on my own and I ran as fast as my legs could carry me along the beautiful beaches.

Along the way, I listened to the seagulls chirping and squawking, as if to encourage me. The waves hitting the seashores were just what the doctor ordered: they calmed my nerves and made me to concentrate on my pace.

The track went through La Prairie coastal road, Le Morne Village and finish line at Saint Felix Beach, along the scenic lagoon of the Island and across typical coastal villages.

Mauritius Marathon combines sport challenge and discovery of the natural and cultural heritage of Mauritius. At each corner, from Le Morne village to the finish at Saint Felix public beach, the course unveils spectacular sights and sounds, especially the unforgettable views on the vast lagoon of the south.



The weather was great for a run. When I hit 6kms, I tagged onto a runner who was running at my pace. I remember meeting the villager at about 10kms and I was as re-energized as he clapped and cheered me on.

"You'll make it," he hollered, and I increased my speed.

I kept on checking whether my legs were still intact as I keenly monitored my Garmin watch. And I was still 7 minutes ahead of the finish time.

I knew the remaining 10kms was the deal breaker. This gave me momentum to move and increase my speed. At the 15th km mark, I somehow slowed as

there was a bit of a hill. Moments later, I picked up and got energy to the finishing line.



FinallyCelebration time

I finished at a time of 1.57.57. I was so elated. My worst nightmare was to be on the finishing line and my Garmin beeping 2.00 hrs.

I am not sure I would have forgiven myself. I had trained well. I went out there with oodles of confidence. I remember my new Garmin Watch was beeping the record time for the half Marathon. It was all song and dance by the beautiful Mauritian dancers at the finishing line as they put the medal round my neck. I was so elated with a runner's high.

After my Sub-2 it was time to party, celebrate and enjoy the beauty of Mauritius for the next four days. And on 19th July 2018 it was time to head back home. Mauritius, I will be back.

I would not have made it without the support of my training mate and hubby Erastus Maina, aka the villager. Thank you for always pushing me out of my comfort zone believing in me and taking this journey with me. To our 3 lovely kids, 1st & 2nd Nyerian and Jakara; thank you for cheering mummy.

To my great mentor David Thuo; thanks a million for helping my dreams come true. To my training buddies Carol, Nyokabi, Gracie and Wangui and to all my friends; asanteni sana for cheering me on.

Drastic changes occur when you keep your eyes on just doing your thing and not, in this case, constantly staring at the scales. You know what? I have shed 20 kgs in 2 years. Yeah, you heard me right; two-zero kilos.

What was, initially, a dreary undertaking has morphed into a love affair. It has become something that I cannot live without.

Running is living!