

## The Marathon at the End of the Earth

(By: Ndungu Kahihu – December 30 2018)

When you have been pounding the pavement for as many years as I have, some things tend to stick to your mind, either because of their uniqueness or the sheer banality. This one is from the latter category. I refer to the early morning shuffles to a Marathon start line. Almost always made in silence, save for a newbie or two who can't keep their excitement in check.

From the unique memories category is a Marathon start heralded by the pyrotechnic bursts of multicolored fireworks, louder than any starters gun. The patterns are so beautiful that you are forced to pause and look up, ignoring the booming voice of the starter to 'keep moving! The run has begun!'

By this time the elite have already taken off and are perhaps a kilometer away. They are missing the entire show. This thought somehow fills you with some evil satisfaction.

'Serves them right,' you mutter to yourself, 'for always running so fast. Life is not always about haste, you know. Sometimes one needs to stop and smell the cordite.'

This is how I was introduced to the wonderful show that is the start of the annual Honolulu Marathon. The run begins and ends on the famous Waikiki beach, on the beautiful Island of Oahu in Hawaii State of America. Many Kenyans know it as Obamas hood, before he discovered Chicago, K'Ogello and Michelle, not necessarily in that order.

But wait, how did I even get here? After all, the last time we met I was sitting by the roadside outside the Nyayo stadium, dejected, trying to get over the shame of my first ever Marathon DNF.



*Stanchart 2018 – cruising to a fall*

How my disaster morphed into a marathon attempt more than half way round the World, is a long story. One so long that I fear I'll be stretching our Editor's patience a tad if I try to tell it here. So let us save the longer version for a beer, shall we?

The short version is: Ferah and Saxo made me do it. How?

When I limped off the trail at the Nyayo Stadium 30Km turn, having crashed out of the Stanchart Marathon, I found Ferah and a number of other Swara's waiting.

'What happened?' they all asked, with some concern.

'I got an injury, my toenail...' I gasped as I tried to bend my hurting legs so that I could sit on the kerb. Of course anyone who has ever seen the horror that is my feet will know this not even half the story.

'Can you help me to find my cars key?' I ask Ferah, 'I left them with Mbarire.'

'Of course I can. Mbarire is somewhere up the trail. Wait here, I'll go and get them for you.'

And with those words she took off. At a run. So fast that I was left wondering. 'She probably fears that I'll have croaked before she gets back.'

Then Saxo showed up, beer in hand and evil grin on his face. A little tipsy on his feet, but no sign of toe injury on him. Not even fatigue. I can't remember the point when he took that infamous photo of me sitting under the pedestrian bridge looking half dead. The next time I see it was when it was splashed all over Social media. Finally I was trending. For the all the wrong reasons.

Guilt is a powerful emotion. Its effect on human society is so important that we can't do without it. For instance the entire Religious industry is based on guilt. So is the lucrative scam that parts men with their cash in exchange for flowers, diamonds, lingerie and other crap to buy forgiveness or love from their other halves. So it is not surprising that, being human, I felt guilty for failing myself and my team. So guilty that that condemning voice that runs background music to my every self-inflicted disaster was going full blast for a week.

'There is only way to make up for such terrible failure and the great shame you have brought upon the family of Urban Swara's,' the voice shouts in my head.

'There is? What way?'

'Commit Harakiri! At once!'

'Yes Sensei.' The only way.'

And so, with a heavy heart I put on my faded kimono. Grab my rusted sword and head outdoors to do the deed.



### *The Marathon at the end of the Earth*

‘But: Wait! There is one more thing. If you travel West. To the end of the Earth. You find a Marathon and run it before the year is over. The Swaras may then forgive you, although why they would defeats me.’

‘Edge of the Earth. Run Marathon. Finish. What If I don’t finish?’

‘If you don’t finish, I invite you to jump over the edge.’

Thus reprieved, and with the warning ringing in my head, I hastily make some arrangements. I jump onto a KQ plane which soon takes off and flies. And flies, and flies some more. For over nine hours. Surely we must be approaching the end of the Earth?

‘Is this the city at the end of the Earth?’ I ask a friendly Taxi driver when we finally land.

‘Well, it has been known by many names. My favorite is the City of never ending pleasures. But we prefer to call it Bangkok.’

Oops, wrong direction.

So I jump back on another plane, back to Nairobi to try again. But not before sampling some of the never ending pleasures of Bangkok. Purely for the sake of scientific enquiry, of course.



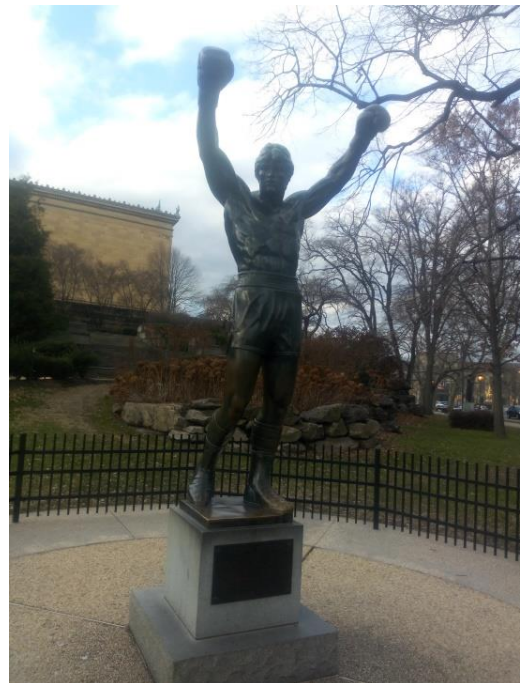
***Bangkok - chilling with a friendly pachyderm (don't try this at home)***

Luckily when I land in Nairobi, I find another flight waiting. This one seems to be pointing in the right direction. I hop on board and 27 hours later, I am in the city of brotherly love. Not quite the end of the earth but it feels close.

I have never been to Philadelphia before. In fact I have always thought of it as the City of Rocky Stallone. Ever since I watched the first Rocky movie as a teenager and almost found a new calling in boxing. Happily my pugilistic enthusiasm was quickly knocked out of me when I made the mistake of sparing with a 60 kilo Bantam Weight. I weighed all of 25Kg at the time. Mosquito weight. It was not pretty.



***Philadelphia - making like Rocky***



***The real Rocky Balboa***

Philly is a beautiful city with many claims to fame beyond Rocky Balboa. For instance did you know it was the first Capital city of the US of A? It even had a beautiful White house, which the Canadians burned down in a fit of bad neighborliness. Philly (west Philadelphia to be precise) is of course home to that 90's sitcom main character, Will Smith. An all round cool place if you ask me.

But after a week of Philadelphian coolness I am fed up with all the *"Chilling out, maxing, relaxing all cool"* and remembered my destiny with a marathon at the end of the Earth. The year was quickly winding down. If I didn't want my life to get all *"...flipped, turned upside down"* I had to get going.

So I hop on a plane to Honolulu. It is far, I can tell you that. Over ten hours far. I land in Honolulu on a Sunday afternoon. This place reminds me of Mbita, specifically Rusinga Island. Same vegetation. Same cocky but friendly natives. They seem to have a hundred ways to remind you that you are in the most beautiful place on Earth. I need to find my way to Waikiki beach where I am billeted. Meanwhile, I am feeling a bit like David Livingstone, freshly arrived on Lake Tanganyika on a journey of discovery.

'Aloha! Honoluluans? Oahuans? Waikikians?' I try tentatively. 'I come in peace. I am the first Black man to discover your Island. Take me to your leader, at once!

'By the way, is there a Marathon here by any chance?'

'Aloha visitor! First things first: you are not the first Black man here. The natives of Hawaii are Polynesian, black. We got here 10,000 years before you.'

'Secondly our Leader is Donald Trump, although he doesn't seem to know it. Luckily for you, he is safely freezing his backside on the mainland; otherwise there would have been some deportation talk.'

'Thirdly, there is a Marathon here. Are you planning to win it? Your fellow Kenyans have won every one of them for the last five years.'

'Sorry I am not that kind of Kenyan.'

'In that case, most welcome! The Marathon starts at 5.00am tomorrow morning. You have 12 hours to get over the jet lag and the winter induced stiffness of Philly. You have of course registered for the Marathon, Kenyan. Have you not?'

'Registered? There is registration? Of course....stupid, stupid me. No I have not registered.'

Lucky for me, the Hawaiians are a relaxed lot. They keep the registration open until the last day.

Unluckily, this is the last day. The expo closes in two hours and I have no idea where it is. Why does this feel familiar? Like a flea to a dog, drama seems to attend my every Marathon attempt.

Thanks to a friendly taxi driver, I make it with 30 minutes to spare. It turns out the Expo was happening at King Kamehameha II hall, just 1Km away. I could have jogged there as a warm up, but no sweat.



Now, all fully registered and micro chipped, I repair to my room to prepare and carbo load. Unfortunately the jetlag picks this exact moment to kick in. I collapse on the bed and will not wake up until the next morning. The long of it is I'll be running this Marathon on an empty stomach.

Luckily I had remembered to set my alarm. 3.00am it beeps. Two hours to the starters gun. I quickly dress and grab a bottle of water. I join the long shuffle to the start. The weather is warm. They had promised a 20 degree Celsius start; it is 19 degrees. Thank God for small mercies. But I am still hungry. I grab another bottle of water from a road side watering station, intoning a mental apology to the poor sod whose water ration I may have just stolen.

I need not have worried. The Honolulu Marathon is one of the best organized I have ever run. Even my very empty stomach turns out to be no big hindrance. After the first 5K, every water station offers a choice of Gatorade flavors and even chocolate. Of course I help myself generously.

The run route is somehow similar to Stanchart. First a convoluted tour of down town Honolulu, then round the famous diamond hill and a long loop up and back along the pacific coast. Finally another half loop round diamond hill, back to Waikiki beach for the finish. But for the fact that much of the run is done in total darkness, this would probably be one of the most scenic Marathons anywhere.

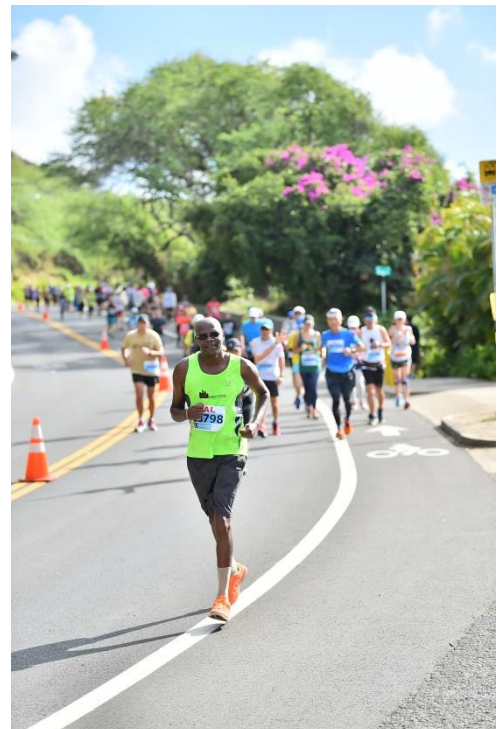
Honolulu Marathon is heavily patronized by Japanese people. Not surprising when you consider the distance from here to Tokyo, 10 hours going west, is shorter than to the Eastern Coast of mainland USA. In fact, I now realize, If I had taken a direct flight from Bangkok to Honolulu (over the Pacific) it would have taken me 16 hours to get here, instead of the 47 I took going the other way. I should have known, missing Mrs Wambugu's Geography classes would come back to bite me one day.

I finish the Marathon at 10.30 am, having hit the wall twice and run through myriad cramps and assorted pains. But I dared not, DNF. I collect my medal, finishers' shirt, a donut and a banana. Then I collapse on the grass for an hour, half dead.

Then I hail a cab and guess what? It the same cab driver from the mad dash to the Expo yesterday.

'Wow! Small Island!' we both exclaim.

'So, did you win?'



*Cruising to a finish - finally*

'No, I told you I am not that kind of Kenyan. But I was well represented. Kenyans swept the medals again this year.' Now that is the problem with being a Kenyan overseas. Everyone expects you to run like the wind, no less. No matter the terrible shape you may be in.



*The reward - a gong and reprieve from ritual suicide*

'Well, you finished. That is the important thing. I hope you enjoy your visit to Hawaii.'

With these few remarks, he dumps me outside my hotel. Where I limp painfully to my room, collapse on the bed and sleep for ten hours straight.

Soon it is time to wake up. I have a flight to catch. My last six hours in Honolulu are another mad dash. First to the Duke Kahanamouki restaurant where my massive breakfast order leaves the waiters mouths agape. Then another dash through the shopping mall, luckily every Hotel on Tourist mad Hawai seems to host a shopping mall. My bag is soon full of touristy trinkets and assorted souvenirs. Just in time to grab a cab to the Airport, where I repeat my westwards exodus back to Jamhuri. This time the flight from Philly to Nairobi takes us 26 hours, not 27. We must have been going downhill.

Thus ends my end of year Marathon adventure. I may not be out of trouble yet, seeing as I am so badly out of shape. But at least I kept my promise to self, to run at least one Marathon a year and, hopefully, retrieved my honour among the Urban Swaras community.

Have a lovely running 2019 my friends.