



URBAN SWARAS RUNNING CLUB

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The background of the entire page is a photograph of a snowy mountain landscape. A narrow, dark trail winds through the snow-covered terrain. Several runners are visible on the trail, appearing as small figures against the vast, white expanse. The sky is overcast and grey, blending into the snowy ground.

MARATHON TOURISM

EDITOR'S NOTE

Hello Swaras,

As we draw a close to the year, we would like to congratulate everyone who pushed their running limits this year.

We are delighted to share with you amazing stories from Swaras who have dared to go the extra mile (for some, quite literally) to achieve their goals. Thank you Victor, Claire, Lyma, Daisy, Ngari, Nyaruai, Muchina, Waichigo, Eric, Rosemary, Cheruiyot and Josiah for your stories.

As you can see, this issue is probably one of the longest we've done - 13 articles deep. So we suggest that you get yourself comfortable - relax put your feet up, drink of choice in hand and settle in to enjoy the exciting read.

Best wishes in the remaining runs of the year and we hope that all the stories featured in this and previous issues shall inspire you to reach greater heights in the coming year.

Your feedback and running related stories are welcome at usrc.editor@gmail.com.

Jerusha

Acting Editor,
USRC Newsletter

Cover images © Victor KAMAU

CONTENTS

1. **VICTOR KAMAU - THE ULTRA KING**
Just who is this man? Is he human? Read his story that will leave you utterly gobsmacked!
10. **TOR DES GÉANTS**
What does it take to run this 356 km endurance trail race? Victor Kamau breaks it down.
12. **MOUNTAIN TO MOUNTAIN**
Claire Baker give her account of the club's annual Ultra Marathon.
16. **BREAKING LIMITS**
Once again, Lyma Mwangi is set up for an imaginable challenge by her husband Peter. She survived it to tell us how it unfolded.
20. **AGAINST ALL ODDS - BERLIN'S PB!**
Read about Daisy Ajima's fabulous performance at this year's Berlin Marathon.
22. **NGARI MAHIHU**
Ngari comes out of the shadows and gives us a glimpse into his running escapades.
24. **MY MARATHON JOURNEY**
Nyaruai Muhoro talks about her resilient marathon journey. Read on to find out what she's up to.
28. **MY 02:59:29 PIPE DREAM**
Ken Waichigo talks about his first World Majors Marathon and his quest for a sub 3 finishing time.
32. **FRANKFURT MARATHON: A SHORT STORY**
Kenneth Muchina shares his 42 @ 42 experience in Germany.
34. **A JOURNEY OF FAITH**
Be inspired by Eric Njunu's one of a kind story of life transformation through running.
40. **MY MAIDEN MARATHON**
Josiah Mugambi finally joins club 42!
42. **RUNNING TALES**
Rosemary Mwangi entertains us with random incidences that have happened to her, and definitely other runners we dare say, when out chasing miles.
44. **2019 RUNNING ROUNDUP**
Check out a summary of the 2019 happenings in the running world.




VICTOR KAMAU

THE ULTRA KING

by CHERUIYOT





Victor Kamau has severally been referred to as the King of Ultra-running in Kenya and it is easy to see why. In just over a year, he's gone from running his first 100 km to covering the incredible distance of 389 km in one of the toughest ultras in the world, the Tor des Géants, set in the Italian Alps.

He is the first Kenyan to accomplish such a feat – running any distance over 100 miles (160 km). In fact, we'll go out on a limb and claim he is also the first Kenyan to have run 100 km, unless you know any who did that before July 2018.

Ultra-running, simply defined, is the pursuit of distances greater than 42.195 km, the standard Marathon distance. So, what makes Victor the undisputed King of Ultra-running in Kenya? Let's retrace his footsteps, literally, from when he did his first ultra:

- **2015:** 56 km Mt. Kenya Ultra marathon
- **2016:** 65 km Mt Kenya Ultra marathon
- **2017:** 56 km Two Oceans Ultra marathon in South Africa
- **2017:** 65 km Mt Kenya Ultra marathon

These are not ultras likely to make anyone King, he was just testing the waters back then.

If 2015 to 2017 were 'testing the waters' years, then in 2018 he waded into the shallows.

On 7th July **2018**, he broke the three-digit barrier by running 100 km for his 40th birthday. The unspoken rule in running circles is that one runs their age for their birthday. But what are rules for? Victor can run 40 km in a yawn, so he set up a 100 km birthday run christened '100 at 40' which attracted 3 other souls -Sarah Wawa (the first Kenyan female we know to have run 100k), Joseph Masika, who ambled along for 55 km, and one Cheruiyot, who was assigned waiter (food support) duties for the group. They ran the 100 km around Nairobi connecting the bypasses skirting the city.

After the 100k at 40, Victor became restless. It may have taken him three years to run his first 100 but it barely took him 2 months to run his second 100. On 18th September 2018, just 2 months after 100 at 40, he toed the line at the Mt. Kenya Ultra 100k. Even before the dust had settled, he was at it again, this time on 12th December, another 100k, retracing the steps of his birthday run along the city bypasses. 3 hundreds inside of 6 months. Is this a classic case of life beginning at 40?

If Victor's 2018 was his venture into the shallows, **2019** marked his dive into the deep seas of ultra-running. If you are already impressed by his achievements, hang on as his 2019 resume gives you the chills. Here goes:

- **5th January:** Circum-lake Naivasha, 74.99km, 7 hrs. 26 min.
- **26th January:** Climbed Mt. Kenya twice, starting at midnight, Old Moses to Lenana peak roundtrip, twice, in 19hrs 26 minutes.
- **16th March:** The only finisher at the Ultra-Trail Mount Longonot. Climbing Mt. Longonot five times within 12 hours - up Mt. Longonot, round the rim clockwise, down to base, up again, round the rim anticlockwise, down to base, repeat five times. A punishing affair. Victor was the only finisher. It took him 11 hrs 6 mins.
- **29th March:** Winner/only finisher at the Last Man Standing set in Oloolua forest. The race format borrows from the now popular Big Dog's Backyard Ultra. It is a race of attrition that involves running a looped distance of 6.4 km, every hour until only one man is left standing. It took 18 hours for everyone else to drop out, Victor was the last man standing, covering a distance of 121km. He was a disappointed winner though, it had ended too soon. He had hoped for nothing less than 30 hours.
- **11th May:** Nairobi to Naivasha ultra, 90km - top finisher at 9 hours 05 mins
- **9th June:** 88 km Comrades Ultra marathon in South Africa - finished in a time of 8 hours 30 minutes despite running with an injury
- **22nd June:** Ran three times up and down the super steep Table Mountain in the Aberdares
- **29th June:** Winner Old Moses classic half marathon, a steep run-up to Old Moses in Mt. Kenya. The following day he climbed Mt Kenya.
- **13th July:** 100 miles (161 km) Nairobi to Nakuru ultra, top finisher. His first 100 miler. Took him 26 hours 35 mins.



- **26th July:** Attempted to climb the three Mt. Kenya popular routes of Sirimon, Naro Moru and Chogoria. Started from Old Moses at 7 pm. Got to Lenana peak past midnight, his navigation tools passed out while going down Naro Moru, got lost in deep fog, found the way down, back up to Lenana, tried to go down the Chogoria route but with no navigation, he got lost again and had to abort. So he headed back to Old Moses. The outing took 24 hours 18 minutes. Unfinished business

Let's put it this way...

Think back to where you were at Midday on 8th September, it was a Sunday. Victor was in Courmayeur, Italy, getting flagged off among 957 other crazies. On Monday morning as you probably went to work, he was soldiering on, only 18hrs in, just getting warmed up. That night as you retired, Victor was braving the alpine cold 30 hrs in. You woke up Tuesday, he didn't need to wake up, he'd been up all night, now 40 hrs on the go, not even close to halfway on to Wednesday > Thursday > Friday, you go through the circle of life, Victor can barely tell what day it is.

On Friday as you look forward to the weekend, he is almost done, only 24 hours to go. Then on Saturday, the 14th September, 37 minutes after 1 pm, he sees the end. One of the 565 out of 957 starters fortunate to make it to the finish line. The Tor took its toll on 41% of the field.

During the race Victor slept 11.5 hours - no sleep the first 24 hrs, 2 hrs sleep the second day, 2.5 hrs the third day, 3 hrs the fourth day, 3 hrs the fifth day and 1 hour on the last day. An average of fewer than 2 hours a day. He's still alive.

But all this was building to the mother of them all - **The Tor des Géants** also TDG also the Tor, on 8th September.

TDG is a mountainous 356 km race in the picturesque Italian Alps, finishers of the race have described the experience as a 'moving postcard'. 356 km is the paper distance, but it turned out as 389 km. Runners have to move day and night, up and down steep mountain scape, braving the extreme cold, freezing winds, snow, rain, sleep deprivation, hallucinations and other lesser imps and devils.

It took Victor 145 hrs 37 minutes, that is 6 days and change.



Finishing Comrades - the ultimate human race



But Victor's outdoor escapades are not only about ultra-running, apart from being the King of ultras, he also rules the Kenyan mountain-running, with blitz fast times up Mt Kenya, the Aberdares and Longonot.

He is a devout mountaineer and has climbed the 5 Highest Mountains in Africa - Mt. Kilimanjaro (twice), Mt. Kenya (many many times), the Rwenzori, Mt. Meru, Simien Mountains in Ethiopia, and in 2017 he had a taste of the Himalaya by climbing the 6600 m high Mera Peak in Nepal.

Who is Victor anyway...

First thing, we asked whether he's human, you never know these days. He answers with a question, *"I feel pain, I get fatigued, sometimes I'm happy, sometimes angry... is that human?"* your guess is as good as anyone's. Moving on...

He is 41 years old, stands at 5'9", tips the scales at 68 kg on a good day, 72 on a bad day. He's a family man, a career Engineer, which means he's an 8-5 fellow whose outdoor escapades are downtime activities.

History

Victor has been running for over 10 years, his initial goal was to keep fit. *"I started putting more time into my running in 2014 while chasing for better half marathon times. After several failed attempts, I shared my frustrations with a friend and that's when I learnt of Urban Swaras. The learning curve was really steep after joining Swaras, from types of running shoes, training programs, types of run or races...."* he says.

Way back in high school he played rugby, tried it in college but says it was 'boring' so he took up body-building. *"Believe it or not I was quite pumped up in college"* he reminisces. We asked for pumped up photo evidence, he couldn't find any, but it is believable as he seems to have some sniff of muscle. Distance running, and muscle mass, we all know, are sworn enemies. And talking of photos, Victor also has a thing for photography and sometimes you'll find him lugging a big camera, or a small phone which both document seemingly unreal images.

Why Ultras?


"At first, ultras just sounded like a cool idea but with time I discovered the joys that come with testing my limits. Getting extremely fatigued, but still having to pick myself up and continue running. I also get to travel to scenic places and meet wonderful people" he adds.

For training, Victor has had to develop his own training plans as since many ultras are unique, generic training plans cannot work. He considers long runs and 'time on feet' as the most important aspects of training. He checks out routes on Google maps or Strava for total elevation gain and this determines gear, like whether to carry running poles and wear trail or road shoes. For self-supported runs, he plans where to restock supplies saying that food kiosks are great because they always have chapati and you can get 'bottled' water most of the time. He also consults the weatherman to know what to carry in his running vests for the expected weather. For runs greater than 60 km he walks for a minute every hour or every 10K.

His exploits have had domino effects, remember his 100 at 40 birthday run of a few paragraphs up? He formed a WhatsApp group that birthed a vibrant Kenyan ultra-running movement. The group, a staging area for the 100 at 40 logistics, comprised of four. After the 100 km, that group was allowed to live for the purpose of staging subsequent Ultra runs. It was later named "Ultra-running in Nairobi", rounded down to "UiN". More and more ultra-enthusiasts have since trickled into UiN and as we go to press the group is 85-person strong. Most of whom have conquered 100 km plus runs.

Victor is also a pioneer of the now trendy one-day ascents up Mt Kenya. Together with 4 other mountain enthusiasts, his first 1 day Mt. Kenya climb was on 17th Feb 2018. But that was just a trial run, he would end up going back severally, setting up fastest times up the mountain.



A scenic mountain landscape. In the foreground, a wooden fence runs across the frame. Behind it is a green field with a few cows. In the middle ground, there is a large, two-story stone building with a red-tiled roof, surrounded by a parking lot filled with cars. The background features steep, rocky mountains with patches of green forest and snow-capped peaks under a clear sky.

Is this mid-life crisis?

A good amount of literature says extreme athleticism is the new mid-life crisis. We ask Victor whether this is his mid-life bug. Well, he hopes it is and hopes it's not. Offering a clever pseudo-psychological explanation which we'll ignore. He doesn't know.

The enablers

For inspiration, Victor follows Kilian Jornet, the Kipchoge of Mountain and ultra-running. And Courtney Dauwalter, a phenomenal and unassuming American who makes a habit of beating entire fields, men and women, and runs in basketball type shorts. And Dean Karnazes- a man who...OK, now you may need to make a friend of Google if some of the names and terms used in this story are foreign, ultra-running tends to still be a niche sport. If we explain everything we'll keep you all day. Locally he looks up to Wingkei Chan, the man who runs the Ultra-running in Nairobi movement, a man whose feats have generated a cult-like following in Kenyan ultra-running.

What next?

He has several plans on the horizon. Running the three popular Mt Kenya routes - Sirimon, Naro Moru and Chogoria in 24 hours. Climbing Kilimanjaro in one day. His next big mountain adventure is Aconcagua, the highest mountain outside of Asia. He is silent on the next ultra-goal. No biggie. When it happens we'll catch the news on our Strava and Garmin apps. Godspeed to him.







TOR DES GÉANTS

356 KM, 145 HRS 37 MIN

by Victor KAMAU



145 hours 37 minutes later

This race, located at the Italian Alps, is 356 km single-stage with an elevation gain of 27,000 m, cut-off time of 150 hours.

It's the challenge that obviously attracted me to the race and the organizers made it easy by posting such warnings on their website:

- *Underestimating the physical and psychological preparation required, as well as the appropriate clothing and equipment, can have dangerous and potentially life-threatening consequences!*
- *To have equipped yourself before the race for total self-reliance in the mountains, so that you can manage any problems involved with this type of endurance trial, in particular: coping alone and in isolation with the physical and psychological problems of extreme fatigue, gastrointestinal upsets, muscle and joint pain, minor cuts and injuries, etc.;*
- *Managing altitude and weather conditions that could potentially cause extreme difficulty (darkness, high wind, freezing temperatures, fog, rain and snow) without any help.*

Other than the statements being correct, I am sure they are used to sell the event.

Training

I couldn't get a training program to follow so I developed a 6 days a week program. Weekends were for mountain running to cover as much elevation gain as I could. I have lost the number of times I have been up Mt Kenya. The most stupid plan we had was to running Sirimon, Naro Moru and Chogoria routes the same weekend.

We started from Sirimon up Lenana, went down and up Naro Moru then our navigation equipment failed and we tried to figure out Chogoria route but found ourselves back Sirimon route. That was the end of the plan, but we will be back...

With hindsight, the table mountain, Aberdares, came very close to the ideal training ground. The 1000 m elevation in 5 km was common in the Alps

Kits


The race organizer had a list of mandatory equipment which included a hooded jacket suitable for -15°C, two survival blankets, anti-slip device (crampons), GPS navigator uploaded with the race route and a knife (not sure what for, but I used mine to peel fruits). The bag weighed like 8 kg throughout the race.

Race plan

I naively developed a plan which was to be on foot for 22 hours and sleep 2 hours a day. By the 3rd day, I started sleep running, hallucinating and crawling. The plan was changed to 2 hours every night and about an hour during the day for the remaining days.

The route has life bases every 50 km, you can get showers, hot meals and a bed at these facilities. So naturally I split the race into 50 km, I covered the easiest 50 km in 12 hours and the toughest one, the 3rd 50km in 28 hours.

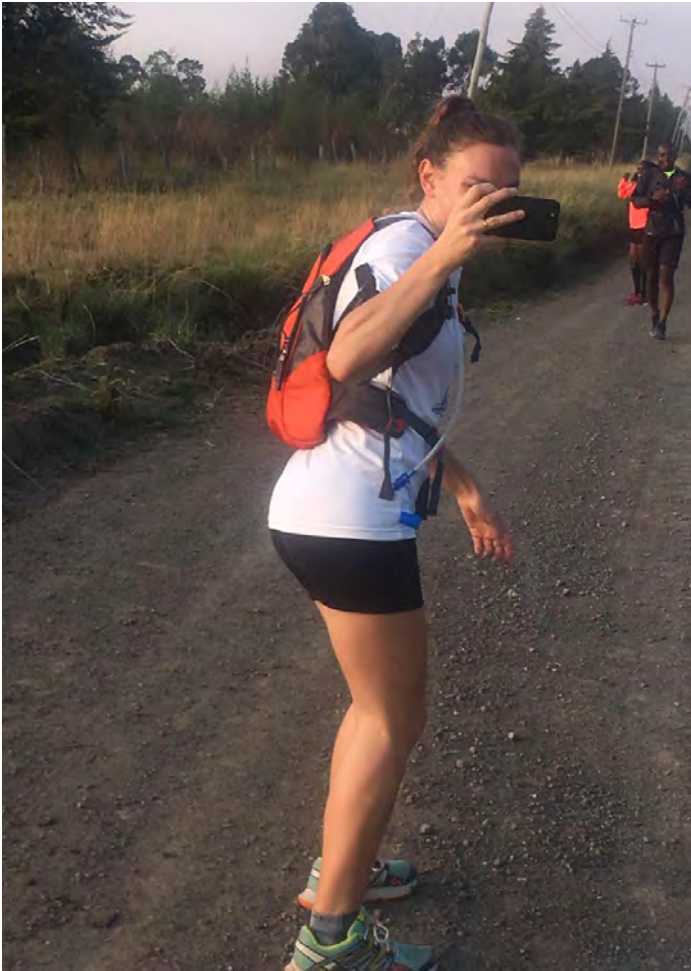
Hallucinations

Hallucinations are interesting since you become immediately aware that you are hallucinating. For me, the most common ones were hearing conversations in Swahili deep in the Alps only to realize I was alone. The best one was seeing a 3D art on the side of a cliff, I think the runner behind me realized what was happening tapped my back to bring me back. 



MOUNTAIN TO MOUNTAIN AND ALL THAT'S IN BETWEEN

by Claire BAKER



These days, in our society, we live by an 'innovate or die' value system. The Mount Kenya Ultra was not, it is fair to say, on the point of dying, but the CRE and the band of merry organizers that jumped on the Ultra bandwagon a few months ahead of September decided to go with 'innovate' to spice up our traditional Ultra. Instead of 'just' putting on an Ultra, they decided to make it an Ultra from one imposing mountain to another, setting out a staggering seven trails, spanning from 21 km to 100 km, from Mount Kenya to Wandare Gate of the Aberdares. The race was on to turn this innovation dream into a reality.

Step 1 was to get people excited about Ultras. Fortunately, with the likes of Wingkei Chan spearheading the democratic and encouraging Ultra Running in Nairobi (UiN) Club, and people like Victor Kamau and Joshua Cheruiyot knocking out 300+ km multi-day races as if it were a walk in the (very large) park, Ultra fever had spread across the city like wildfire, and so the whole running community was looking forward to this annual Swara Ultra outing like children waiting for a school outing to an adventure playground. Planning started well ahead of this, a necessity for such a large undertaking, with more than 100 runners anticipated over seven trails. I was hauled in as a mercenary mountain goat to spread the word amongst Swaras and other clubs, and just generally to make noise (whether animal or human) and all I could do was share my excitement with the rest of the club in the days leading up to the big event.

A look at Strava or Garmin in the weeks before the Ultra were like doing a Google search of Ultra-related terms: 'ultra prep', 'distance test', 'how far can I run without dying' were some of the titles seen floating around on people's run feeds. The training was real. Some of us hydrated, carbo-loaded, and some prepared tutus ahead of the big day, but we all had our own personal goals in mind, which the Swara organisers had happily catered for.

Myself, I drove up the night before, with an encouraging companion who fed me burgers and chips and kept me amused on the long drive up. Some had arrived hours before and already raided the hotel bar, and variously set up tents or settled into comfy rooms, ready for what lay ahead.

As usual, D-Day didn't go without hiccups. The early breakfast call turned into just a call...no breakfast to be seen. We all waited for at least some fruit and mandazi, and then bit by bit other breakfast accouterments surfaced, so everyone was well fed and in high spirits, albeit embarrassingly late. An advance party had already left from Mount Kenya's Naro Moru gate, tired of waiting for the rest of us, and wanting to get a head start and make us look foolish. Fair enough.

You'd be forgiven for mistaking our endeavours for some sort of road trip, with countless talk of different paced 'buses' floating around, and talks of joining different buses. This was all a way to encourage people to go the distance, by hopping on a 'bus' with other runners looking to complete roughly the same distance at a roughly similar pace.



As we set off, the buses trundled off at their respective, pre-agreed paces, and people like me just set off willy-nilly, trying to find the 'Ultra pace' we might be able to stick to for 45, 55, 65, 85, or even 100 km. As it happens, I found myself on a cobbled-together bus, with the likes of Loice Mbogo, Achuka, Masika, Kevin and Timothy, but the passengers on this bus shifted, making room for new ones, picking up stragglers, or swapping the same people in and out at various stages. What was consistent was the fact that all passengers were just along for the ride, however far it took them, and we had fun whilst at it. We called the bus the 'Moto Moto Bus', so read into that what you will. We all had water strapped to our backs, but my lifesaver, and good friend, Munyao, was on hand to dole out coffee, fruits, eggs, bread and other energy boosters every few km, and also to remind us that the world was still a functioning, human place even if we were slowly being sucked into a vortex of 'one foot in front of the other', and nothing else.

We passed people taking breathers at the water stations, we passed ACTUAL mountain goats (we had a bit of a chat, but they didn't have much in the way of ultra advice so we left them and carried on our merry way); we found people struggling through injuries and offered words of encouragement, and we even saw Wingkei, who unlike the rest of us was on his THIRD consecutive day of Ultra Running. All we could muster was a 'wow' and a selfie.

Now I have to admit I came into this with one aim: to beat my personal record of 62 km. So 65 km was what I really had my sights set on. But being the susceptible crowd-pleaser and victim of peer pressure that I am, by the time we hit the 65 km mark and I was still standing it was clear that I wasn't going to give up there.


The funny thing with running is sometimes it's just not your day, in which case you shouldn't force it, and sometimes it is. Today it was sort of my day-ish, so I rode with it and was able to tick off kilometre after kilometre, admittedly, each one getting harder than the one before. I think I have the continued support and encouragement of Munyao to thank for this. By about the 70th km it was just me and Masika. I'd had a sip of the Villager's cold beer, when he'd sprung out from a bar along the way to cheer us on, dressed like the village drunkard but sporting running jargon that only a Swara could know, and that spurred me on for the last 30 km which I can only equate to the difficulty of childbirth, which I'm yet to experience but imagine it can't be tougher than that. Let's just say I uttered more than one swear word, aimed variously at my mother, the Villager, the whole CRE, Masika, myself, and most importantly, the ground that we were running on, for NEVER ENDING.

As darkness fell around us like a blanket, (but not the comforting sort you wrap yourself in at bedtime) I was thankful to still have Munyao trailing us, with bags full of water, yoghurt, sugary snacks and wholesome treats, as well



as headlights to reassure us, and also to have Masika still by my side, albeit nursing a pretty crippling and bothersome injury. We strode through, one step at a time until we came across a secret agent enveloped in darkness otherwise known as Mr Bond. To the rescue! He coaxed us through the last kilometres, an almost sheer vertical ascent up to Wandare Gate, where a cheering crowd of Swara friends was waiting and screaming at the top of their lungs, without whose cheers I'm not sure we'd have made it those last steps. Let me tell you, that first taste of sitting down, sipping water without thinking 'must be off again', and sipping my OWN cold beer, was the sweetest feeling, and I couldn't help but shed a tear (OK, fine, I shed many tears, and they weren't pretty, I can tell you that much).

It never ceases to amaze me what we are capable of doing when we have the right variables: the right shoes, the right training, the right people, the right energy drink, and most of all, the right positive but steely determination. So many people broke their own personal records, or proved something new to themselves, or showed what they're capable of sacrificing to make OTHER people's running dreams come true. And every single one of these people deserves to be honoured with a moment's thought as you reach the end of this write-up.

How will Swaras continue to innovate into the years to come? Do we need to innovate, or can we just keep on being awesome and encouraging ourselves and the people around us to make ourselves proud, for whatever feat we end up achieving on the trail? 



BREAKING LIMITS

AND NAILS, TOES, SPEED, DISTANCE TO BRAG ALL YEAR!
by Lyma MWANGI



September 19, 2019, I walked in on a telephone conversation at our office.

Peter Macharia: Yes, register her.

Other caller: How many kilometres?

Peter: I think 45 km or maybe 55 km.

Other caller: Ok.

There and then, my dear reader, my fate was sealed! There was no considering any other way, it's Peter's highway... with my feet! Oh my, AGAIN! He always does this because I think I am a joker when it comes to running. (**Editor's note:** Read the USRC Issue No. 005 to see what Lyma's talking about.)

Peter (addressing me nonchalantly): Yes, we are going for the Mt. Kenya Ultra.

As usual, I was going to show up and wait to see what would break this time. In any case, it was already a broken telephone conversation between Peter and the other caller. My feet would live to tell the story and the bragging rights

(if I survived), which are not transferable to Peter. One day of running, and I will brag a whole year before being dethroned by Standard Chartered's 42 km in a few weeks.

I was all set for the ultra. I remembered to pack all the courage I needed and forgot a hydration pack and all those niceties discussed in the WhatsApp forum like marshmallows, koo, chocolate, etc. All I had was me, myself and I. I'm sure Peter wouldn't even remember me, not unless I failed to show up on the judgement line. He would brag that 'madam ran 55 km'. Of course, I didn't even know the distance I would cover, but I just need to show up at the start line.

I'll tell you what, running couples' chronicles need a whole day in the best company. I divorce him 40 times over every time he signs me for some of these things. I'm pretty sure my clan would support me anyway because this was torture in sickness and health running.

We got to our Airbnb apartment on Friday, the eve of the ultra. Surprisingly, I had no butterflies in my stomach, not with my breakfast chapatis stuffed in it by 10 pm. "Eat food with 'slow release'", Daisy, my Majors friend, had insisted. That's precisely what I was doing with the chapatis.

Banter with Swaras got me laughing when they kept talking of 55 km. Look, my plan was just to run, and keep running to the other end. The ultimate distance to be covered was a grey area at that moment. Well, that was until I met Herman chatting with Charles and Peter. *Salaale!* It took me a sec to realise that this was the famous Herman! I stared-looked at him. He was... Uhm... normal, and young! And he had flown in just to break the ultimate 100 km ultra-distance! I was in awe.

That's all the motivation I needed. I decided that I would be in it for the long haul. Grey running distance became clearer and now 65 km was on the table with no consultation with the legs. They just had to play ball. Additional motivation – Avani, a major, would be by my side, Amanda, would have all the snacks and water points every 5 km. 5 km is my normal warm-up run, anyway. Do or die.

Race day!

I boarded the Wahome bus that was the height of hilarity. Shouts of "We are too fast!", "Slow down", "Amanda you are too fast", "Amanda slow down" rang in the air.

As the bus continued, we were very comfortable and could see 100 km just doable. Enough chat with Avani, Mhesh Kiai, Mugambi, got me going but didn't reduce the distance. The bus started offloading and keeping the lighter machines, running machines.

At 29 km, I stuffed enough mandazis because I wasn't sure when I would see the pickup again – after all, it had taken a year to show up! However, the mandazis made the distance even more unbearable. I suspect I had taken too much dough that was not generating enough energy. To counter that, I





thought it was best to take water – too much of it actually – that made me take a thick bush for a loo. Sweets from Avani got me through 35 – 40 km. By the 41st km, I was getting a little immobile. I was not about to ‘DNF’. Either way, I was going to cross the 42nd km. I convinced Mugambi, who at 35 km had threatened to throw in the towel, that we should at least ‘DNF’ at 42 km not at some random distance. He recharged, and we took off.

At 42 km, we were still feeling good and decided to push on till 56 km. Should we DNF at that point, at least we’d confirm that we could run the Two Oceans marathon someday. Who says advocates can’t be lied to when we can cheat them with fame? I reminded him of bragging rights.

After taking enough selfies, we plunged into another 10 km into the horizon. He was now pulling me and running ahead. I regretted my words and soldiered on and finally caught up with him.

At one point we met *Mhesh Kiai*, and we walked leisurely through the 45 – 47 km stretch. But to walk in a Swara t-shirt is akin to total abomination! With no warning, he dashed off to the next water point. Mugambi, Racquel and I had no choice but to follow in hot pursuit – Uhm... brisk walking – only to find him enjoying chocolate and niceties.



By now, the sun was scorching. I was determined to keep going and at least cover the remaining distance – 55 km. I took off in revenge, and all followed suit. We broke everything within reach - our barriers, legs, toes, nails, wind, brains, speed and the remaining distance to claim 55 km.

The evening was full of surprises as Peter received all my bragging rights! The joker became the runner. Lyma surprised Lyma too.

Lessons learnt:

- Drag someone to reach their ultimate best.
- If you need to convince an advocate, lie and cheat at the same time.

We did it! [US](#)



AGAINST ALL ODDS

BERLIN'S PB!

Daisy Ajima is not a stranger in the USRC Newsletter. We've had the pleasure of documenting her running escapades from back to back marathons in Chicago and New York (October and November 2018 respectively) to a very random 50-mile ultra in Washington D.C. (April 2019). After that, she went on to conquer other ultras – Voi 60 km and 50 km in Karura forest and Ngong' (Berra-Corner Baridi). All these, plus numerous long runs, were in preparation for her third World Major Marathon in Berlin (September 2019).

With a sub 4 target, she was well on course to hit it, until her back injury thought it otherwise and flared up at the 25 km mark. She soldiered on for 5 more kilometres where she sought medical attention only to be told that she couldn't proceed with the race. She ignored the advice and went on to smash her Chicago Marathon PB by 18 minutes to finish at 04:17:11! What an incredible performance!

Her only regret about the Berlin outing was, *"The only unforgivable thing for the organisers was the alcohol-free beer at the end. Oh, and the kind guy who served me the second helping as I sat on the cold pavement and not telling me that I was just freezing in the rain for nothing, drinking useless cold frothies making my body temperature drop further!"*

With 3 majors and numerous marathons remaining, we are certain that Daisy will achieve her sub 4 goal and then some! [US](#)

04:17:11





No, that's not Boris Johnson behind Ngari

NGARI MAHIHU

Unless you are not observant, it's very difficult not to notice Ngari's imposing physique on the trails tackling TQ's hills with determination. Admittedly, this Newsletter was pleasantly surprised when he answered

the call for articles. Typical in a senior citizen fashion, his email was short and to the point as below.

Our curiosity was piqued, and we pried into his running affairs.

Name: Ngari Mahihu

Age: 62

Participated in 2019 BMW Berlin Marathon

PB 5:34:01

Running history

Ngari's running journey started 7 years ago at the Jaffery Sports Club track. He started by running the distance of two street lamps and walking the rest of the lap. He gradually increased more lamps to his running distance until he was able to run one complete lap (440 m) without walking any section of it. The foundation was laid. *"That first complete lap remains to date my greatest achievement because I consider it as my first building block,"* he says.

While living in Mombasa, he got together with some friends and they

regularly ran 4 to 5 km 3 times a week. Well, that was ok, until they met Caroline Onger, a Swara who had relocated to Mombasa and was looking for a running group. So, they invited her to join them. Meeting her changed the dynamics of their small running group. *"You see, up until that point we considered ourselves (great) runners, but she changed all that. Our comfortable running distance of 5k or thereabouts gradually increased weekly. Before long, she declared us fit to run the Stanchart Half Marathon,"* he says.

Into the marathon world

After several half marathons, he decided to plunge into the marathon world and took a shot at the 2015 Paris Marathon. *"Wow! That was a near-death experience!"* he recalls. He endured it and clocked a time of 6:08. *"I swore I would never run a full marathon again. But come 2018, I watched Eliud Kipchoge break the World record, and I was convinced that he would go on to break the 2-hour barrier in Berlin in 2019. I decided to enter Berlin 2019 so that I could have a story for my grandkids about how Eliud and I were running together when he broke the 2-hour barrier. Unfortunately, he let me down and went to Vienna instead."*

So, he went ahead and completed the 2019 BMW Berlin Marathon at a time of 5:34:01 shaving and an incredible

34 minutes off his last marathon time. In case you are wondering, no, he is not going to chase the remaining 5 majors. *"I think I will listen to my knees and stick to the half marathons which I do comfortably every Saturday. The Urban Swaras club present a wonderful chance to run different trails every Saturday in great company"* he adds.

Running achievements and targets

His very first complete lap in Jafferys remains his greatest achievement and will be etched in his mind forever. It affirmed him that he was a runner. He is targeting to do a sub 2 in the half marathon. His current PB is 2:20 and a sub 5 in the full - which he could have achieved in Berlin had he not broken the cardinal rule of marathon running of not eating anything one has not trained in. *"I broke the rule, and it cost me so much time dealing with an upset stomach,"* he regrets.

Memorable and toughest runs

He says he will never forget the Paris marathon – no one forgets their first experience. Locally, he believes one of the toughest runs he has done is a 7 km distance from Wanyororo to Dundori with a 500 m elevation gain up to 2400 m altitude. US

05 : 34 : 01





MY MARATHON JOURNEY

by Nyaruai MUHORO

Challenged to inspire another human being, I hereby jot down an account of my marathon journey.

My name is Nyaruai Muhoro and I am a runner. I have this innate ability to run for many many hours wrapped in my own thoughts. My first love I may say is hiking. In hiking, we learn endurance. You walk all day long with your backpack and your thoughts and nature to keep you company. And if you are lucky, companions as crazy as you to lighten your journey. Sometimes you walk for 6 days in a row and like in my most recent adventure - The Ruwenzori mountains - you wake up and walk from morning to evening for 9 days. This I guess explains my resilient nature, the ability to go on and on.

I started my running journey 6 years ago from peer pressure with a gentle prod from a friend, *'You are too fat, let's go running'*. My first run was 17 km and I almost died- literally. And I swore never to run again (something I do until now) but the following weekend I was there again, and the next and the next. Then came my time to join marathoners. Again, peer pressure from a group of (may I dare say) heartless friends. Heartless because they have been with me through all my running, they know my speed challenges and my weaknesses, yet they plunged me in the deep end, and they sat back - to have a beer.

**“Know
your tribe,
love them
hard!”**

My first marathon, Stanchart 2017 ended in a DNF at 17 km. I was crushed, and again, I swore never to run again. Kilimanjaro marathon 2018 I FINISHED!!! Yes. In 7 hours, 20 minutes - you read that right. I had the privilege of being the last runner and had the full escort of police, about 3 cars, ambulances, marathon organisers and my beer-drinking friends. They were there to witness the spectacle. For this, I got a medal and a t-shirt. Both of which I adorn proudly.

I'm an adventurous spirit. Later that year I did the Cape Town Sanlam Marathon with a time of 6 hours 19 minutes. Almost 1 hour off. I was validated! I can do this thing. Kilimanjaro 2019 I did in 6:40 hours - let's just say that run is a B! I'm not going back there.



BANK OF AMERICA

Chicago Marathon



Majors

In the meantime, there was a new buzz word in town, Majors and with it came Generals - Jack, Avani, Felicita among others. Always being the curious one, I asked 1000 questions, googled and applied for everything that came up and voilà! I got the lotto entry for the 2019 London Marathon. And since Facebook is my friend, I read and read and discovered that there are fellows who do the majors in one year. Since am never going to do a sub 3 marathon, why not try a new crazy? Run all of them! After all I can blame it on mid-life crisis.

My achievements so far: London- April 2019, Berlin - September 2019, and Chicago - October 2019. My justification, when you are planning for a run, you have a training program. In your program, you have a long run every 3-4 weeks. My long runs will be the actual marathons.

They say numbers don't lie.

CURRENT STATS

Oct 2017	Nairobi Marathon	DNF
Mar 2018	Kilimanjaro Marathon	07:20:00
Mar 2019	Kilimanjaro Marathon	06:49:25
April 2019	London Marathon	06:28:56
Sept 2019	Berlin Marathon	06:09:38
Oct 2019	Chicago Marathon	05:51:38

Long runs and mileage do work.

Weight

I started the year at a high of 74 kg, having stagnated here for well over a year. I was feeling heavy but with a strong determination to deal with it. By the time I went for the Kilimanjaro Marathon I was at 72 kg. Today, oscillating between 68 – 69 kg, I struggle to fit in my clothes (this is a compliment and the ladies will agree). I feel I have been able to achieve at least one of my fitness goals.

Time

I will not say I am not under pressure for time. I always try to better the last run. I analyse my run, over analyse it, discuss with friends, make resolutions, promises, place bets but most important, I always, always enjoy my run. Because you never know if you will ever have the opportunity to do the same run again.

I am my biggest critic. I think I am an under performer. Half the time I get tired of running with me because I am too slow. It takes real dedication to put in the mileage when you are slow because you require double the time everyone else does. That can be annoying and interfere with your 'normal' life. However, the benefits are great. It feels good to go to a bar and they ask you for your ID for example. Or have someone refer to you as that young lady over there ... (spring in my step). I do most of my critical thinking during runs and I believe come up with pretty solid solutions. I long gave up on getting a personal trainer for my running. I learned that this was an opportunity to turn another person into a frustrated human being as I don't meet their expectations on speed improvement or volume of runs. Now I turn unsuspecting Kenyans into my training partners. If I spot you on my normal running route 3 times, I chat you up and get your program. Then join you for a month or 2. Before you get to know me well I move on to the next person. That way you will not know you are training me and you will not get expectations. And I get a temporary (free) trainer!

The best part of it, I have visited new countries, new cities. I have met new people, lovely people from all over the world. I have made new friends. I have met my hero in the most unexpected of ways. I remain grateful and humbled.

They say, know your tribe, love them hard. I met this man with the frog walk. Fresh from a marathon. I smiled at him. In the next 30 minutes, I knew his life story, his fantastic tour of Europe, all his marathons, the good, the bad, the PBs, the disappointments, his dreams, plans, training. The only thing we forgot was our names and where we were from. Interesting thing is that I hang onto his every word. It sounded like it had been lifted off my book. 'Know your tribe, love them hard!'

The adventure continues!

The placement of the majors is such that you have 3 at the beginning of the 2nd half of the year and the other 3 at the beginning of the 3rd half. To do all them means you will be in transit every 2 or 3 weeks in that particular time-space. I'm not sure what is more pressurising - to run a marathon in 1:59:59 or do all majors in one year?

What do you think? 

Editor's note: As we go to press, Nyaruai had successfully completed the TCS New York City Marathon that was held early this month. Two more majors to go.



London, April 2019



Berlin, September 2019



Chicago, October 2019

MY 02:59:59 PIPE DREAM

by Ken WAICHIGO

Five years ago, I never imagined the magnitude of matters I'm penning down at this moment. Back then I was just pressing buttons on a treadmill and just getting my heart rate elevated hoping it would eventually have fat burn results and set me up on a weight loss journey. At the beginning of my running journey, there were no set time trials ambitions but a year later and a 'eureka moment', randomly out of the blues thoughts of having to run a half marathon under 2 hours got me an adrenaline rush. To feed this feeling I searched for ways to get my pace up.

My first time-trial run was in Ndakaini 2015 after a few treadmill runs. I was certain of this highly prized sub 2 half marathon, let's just say it never went as I had expected. My prayers along the way seemed to ease the pain felt then and assist me to come home at a time of 2:23, but the elevation on this course was out of this world. To date I think it qualifies to be termed as mountaineering rather than running.

I still don't know what drove me to this madness. But the feeling I get when I'm in pursuit of whatever goal I set is inexplicable. Those who knew my pre-run days are amazed by the lengths and breadths I put in this running business in terms of time, money, lots of sacrifices and tremendous dedication.

Anyone reading this and has gone through my earlier escapades will wonder what became of this recreational runner going bonkers chasing a BQ (Boston qualifier) time of an 18-year-old. This article's inspiration hit me while on a work trip, at that point I was 5 weeks into lining up with elites



Dressed to face the elements

and running enthusiasts alike in the Windy City of Chicago, USA. I have come a long way and I have a long way to my destination.

As a recreational runner, a work-life balance would never allow a good training plan. I stepped on too many trails at different altitudes and on different times of the training that just threw away my training plan. It got to a point that I just told myself, "Que sera sera" (what will be will be). Depending on the ship's journey if faced by a rough sea, a wise helmsman steers according to the journey's challenges and I took a decision to first chase a PB to beat Paris' (April 2019) time 3:17:42 at a much comfortable finish and then, if it came about, hit the much elusive sub 3.

Preparations

My preparation had been satisfactory based on the mileage I put in the preceding 2 months hitting 437.8 km and 460.8 km. I had put in some decent long runs and to top it all, I had not picked up any injuries during the training. I guess the fact that the course is nicknamed 'pancake flat' reassured me a little, but one can never be too sure in any marathon as curve balls abound.

Advocate Health Care 5 km run before race day

Having taken place just a few hours after breaking 2, the Kenyan flag that we carried was an eye magnet to most in the crowd with many runners requesting for photo ops with it. All this excitement was perhaps the best nerve cooling experience I have ever had before a marathon. A well-sized field of Kenyan recreational runners gracing the event, making noise around the Chicago beautiful architectural skyline was mind healing to the anticipation and race jitter was exactly what the doctor might have ordered.

Race day chronicles

Race day morning was the usual runners' early morning drill – early wake-up call, invoke divine intervention, fuelling (pasta in this case) and rush to the train station. I was very fortunate to be accompanied by one Jerusha, who was very conversant with this kind of train travel and I put all my trust in her and caught a few winks on our way to the start. However, just before we got to our stop, she was thrown off course by a nervy runner who alighted two stations before the destination causing an almost stampede as all other runners in the coach followed suit. When in Rome, do as the Romans, we had no choice but to follow the crowd. We were not exempted from the usual pre-race jitters.

Once out of the train, it hit us we had an approximately 2.5 km warm-up run to the start, with Jerusha making sure that I got to my corral gate on time. That was kind of her. Thanks, Jerusha! 😊

The time came for my corral to be let out into the city as the crowds roared in anticipation. Definitely, there is a push that one feels at the start of a charged field of runners, I usually use this to propel myself to better running times.

The start was okay and I let my body decide the pace to run on the day, unfortunately due to the skyscrapers my Garmin was rendered redundant, and to make it worse in that part of the world they use imperial system of measurement (miles), so it was kind of hard juggling between catching my breath and multiplying every mile signage with a constant 1.6. But by rough estimation I knew all was not lost, hoping for a negative split like my compatriot Eliud Kipchoge (insert sceptical laugh) I would come home fine this time around.

Battling the elements

They don't call it the 'Windy City' for nothing. Cold wind gusts from Lake Michigan sure made their presence felt, tormenting runners from all over the world. Coming from a tropical climate, I battled it. The 5k run, the previous day had my fingers frozen and I was afraid that this would impede my ambitious target.

03:10:44



Not giving the low temperatures a chance, I wore two sets of gloves which worked wonders. I felt like I was running in a warm room. If only I could do something about the wind. It got me cursing every time it gushed mercilessly in between the streets as if its intention was to swallow up the runners.

At about 30 km, I had a fairly good picture of how my race was up to that point. I engaged a 'cruise control' approach which meant maintaining the same pace till the finish line, unlike my previous races whose approach is usually to 'run to failure' then walk to the finish line. Haha!

The hurt

By now I have accepted that when running a full marathon, the body will always pain past 30 km. I always wish that it would delay till the end. For this race, the pain set in both calves at the 34th km. My initial assumption was that I was electrolyte deficient so I kept replenishing the body with Gatorade every chance I got to a hydration station. I am awkward at taking fluids on the go. I have never mastered the swift movement of picking, sipping, breathing and moving. At one point it got messy as the water made its way out through my nose and I had to slow down gasping for air! Urgh! Precious seconds lost. How do the elites do it?

Remember my painful calves at 34 km? At 36k, they were really tight and I had to reduce my pace to a manageable 5 min/km or thereabouts. I figured that with that pace, I'd comfortably cross the finish line. Surprisingly, even with the pain, I still maintained my sub 5 pace and only went over it by a second at the 37th and 42nd km. Eventually, after making a final left turn on the course and in full view of the finishing line, I attempted a surge or a burst of pace to lower the final time but it was not to be the as nagging calves wouldn't allow for that. I clocked a personal best time of 3:10:44.

Later after consulting more experienced runners, I learnt that this pain was lactic acid build-up. This means I had exceeded the body's expected running pace. So, in reality I was not keeping to my lane as far as my speed was concerned. This is the next area of improvement.

Recovery after the race

The good thing about this Chicago marathon was that they know the pain runners suffer at the finish line and they offered a pain killer with a 4% alcohol content titled 26.2 that worked wonders on my pain. That, coupled with post-race endorphins eased the discomfort. In the true spirit of the current '*parte after parte*' wave, I flew out to the city of angels to a family that means a lot to me.

The Berhe's family treated and pampered as if I was an elite runner who had bagged the prize money and I'll forever be indebted to them for the kindness they accorded my achy self. Haha! I enjoyed my extended stay with them in LA. The send-off party they threw made me realise that even though running is a solitary sport, it is not just about pounding the tarmac. It often leads to deep connections, tapping into good vibes. The Berhe's can't wait for me to achieve the much elusive sub 3. In fact, they'd really wish it to be broken near them so that we could blow the roof off in merriment!

Who knows, God willing, their wishes might be granted. ^{US}

CURRENT STATS

2016	Nairobi Stanchart Marathon	03:44:00
2017	Nairobi Stanchart Marathon	03:40:00
2019	Paris Marathon	03:17:42
2019	Chicago Marathon	03:10:44





Medal flossing at Grant Park



Partaking the post-race 'pain killer' with a fellow Swara - Peter



The great Berhe's send off



FRANKFURT MARATHON A SHORT STORY

by Kenneth MUCHINA

The 38th Mainova Frankfurt Marathon...

...was not in my 2019 plans when the year began. I had no intention of attempting a full marathon this year. Coming out of an extended period of injury with a good number of false recoveries, I was in poor shape physically, and extremely cautious about getting back to intensive programs needed to train for a full marathon lest the problem with my right foot flared up again. My plan was to prepare for and run in the half marathon distance in the 2019 Nairobi Stanchart marathon later in the year;

...became a possibility when I made the mistake of listening to one Erastus Ngatia's pitch selling to me the Frankfurt Marathon. To be fair to him, he is a great salesman... and it wasn't the first time I was allowing myself to listen to him. In 1991, the man won me over for Christ :-). But I digress! In addition, I was doing OK in my training, and I fancied that with a measured (read: long, like 22 weeks and gradually incremental) training program, I could hack it. Anthony Murage's, endorsement of the Frankfurt Marathon convinced me to try it. After all, he ran there last year.

...became the second full marathon that I would ever attempt. The first and only at this point was the 2015 Nairobi Stanchart marathon. A race I was ill-prepared for, and in which my naivety in preparations and tactic showed greatly. I posted a very strong positive split in that race, took 4:41, besides aggravating an existing injury to an extent that it would take me close to 3 years to fully recover.

...became the venue of my 42@42 run and my attempt at a 4:00:00 full marathon. I started feeling the pressure to tick off these two 'goals' this calendar year.

...turned out to be the perfect race for me - incredibly flat, with a close to ideal running weather conditions, a hospitable city and top-class organisation. So good, I clocked 3:57:00, a solid 3 minutes below my target time. This despite somehow adding 700 m to the distance AND, according to TomTom, adding some 6 minutes of 'still time' to my total time, as TomTom worked out my active time as 3:51:08. Yeah, it looks like I need to work on my running strategy to eliminate toilet breaks, learn to drink when on the move, and follow the blue line religiously! Otherwise, I maintained an even pace throughout the full distance - my 5 km splits were uniform, from the first to the last. I had never done that for any run above 20km.

I am grateful to many for this wonderful experience that the last few months have been:

- Urban Swaras Running Club members for all sorts of help, and cheerleading.
- Loise Mbarire, if you had not pointed me to Kimaiyo, I don't know if I would have found the path to sustained recovery.
- Daniel Kiplimo: a great physiotherapist, trainer and kit supplier. Dietician even!
- Ngatia for slave-driving, and confidence in my ability
- Murage for very considered advice and confidence in my ability
- Daisy a.k.a. Major, a solid training accountability partner
- Joyce 'Tata' Nduku, who charmingly mixes slave driver tendencies and great cheerleading to great effect, and is a great inspiration.
- People at Runfit Club. God knows I needed those runs in Karen to build confidence.
- People at Shem led 'splinter' groups: Wakimbizi and more recently, Sunday Swaras.
- People at my beloved Alliance Classic Run's organising committee.
- Run Beyond for the gait analysis, recommendations on improvements in running style and recommending the fantastic shoe that is Asics Gel Pulse 10.
- My family, for allowing me to 'waste' my Saturday mornings doing long runs and frittering away family money in pursuit of a medal and vague attainment: a 'personal best'.
- Anne and Joseph, a cousin and friend respectively, for taking time away from their respective lives over the marathon weekend to travel 200 km to Frankfurt to meet up with and cheer up this middle-aged fellow and his travelling partners: Erastus Ngatia and Muthoni wa Maina - fellows with no hope of podium finishes. Blessed I am, to have such family and friends.

What next?

More running attempts to lower the 'personal best' over the half and full marathon distances, God willing! US

Genesis 2:2

New International Version

By the seventh day God had (edit:) ***nearly*** finished the work He had been doing; so on the seventh day He (edit:) ~~rested from all his work~~ ***organised a marathon so that the humans He had created could enjoy the world He had just created.***

03:57:00



A JOURNEY OF FAITH RUNNING MY WAY INTO FITNESS

by Eric NJUNU

Those who have recently known Eric, (by recent we mean within the last year) may not understand why most Swaras on the WhatsApp group laud him each time he posts his photos. We sought him out for a glimpse into his weight loss journey. The 40-year-old architect, IT consultant and project manager was very willing to indulge us...and now you.



The motivation

I would describe my fitness journey as a blend of an odyssey of self-discovery and self-awareness and spiritual quest. This personal endeavour has been driven by the desire to achieve a close relationship with God Almighty and achieve harmony with nature and mankind.

Background

I was born and raised in Lower Kabete area of Nairobi. As far as I can remember I was always an adventurous child - from swimming in Gataara and Getathuru Rivers in Lower Kabete, hunting rabbits and other small animals to trudging up steep hills and running with abandon downhills in my home rural home of Kigoro (5 km to Ndakaini Dam).

It is with this background that my love for running was nurtured. Apart from the physical education associated sprints and runs around the school field at Lower Kabete Primary School, I took part in my first cross country race when I joined a Kamuthatha Boarding Primary School in Embu in Standard Five.



Young Eric (circa 1984)



At Kamuthatha Boarding Primary School with family (circa 1991)

This school was set in rural Embu with splendid views of Mount Kenya. The cross country was part of the curriculum and it enhanced the holistic learning experience. While initially, it seemed like an arduous task, I later came to enjoy the runs which took us to the surrounding areas of Kivue, Ena and Kithimu. We would later in class 8 hike the steep Karue Hill on the Embu-Meru Road which was a highlight of our experience at the boarding school.

My passion for running was grounded in Alliance High School where I learnt that the school took seriously the cross-country culture dubbed 'Oroso' and it was a punishable offence to miss this important part of the extra-curricular activities at the school. In fact, it was an obligatory activity every evening after class time in the first term, that is how serious these guys were. We ran on two trails - hilly terrains which provided a great setting for endurance and stamina training.

I joined the school a chubby lad who would walk the entire route from beginning to end in Form 1 but by the time I was in Form Four, I finished in the top 50 students in the cross-country challenge. This feat I realised planted a seed in me that would grow the belief that I was made for running cross country. The period after finishing High School is typically characterised by youthful missteps and I must admit there was little incentive to nurture the running talent.

I carried on running when I joined the University of Nairobi. My colleagues and I used to do morning runs from the halls of residence to the Nairobi Arboretum and back before attending our morning classes. However, our enthusiasm for the morning runs was eclipsed by the social agenda which entailed visits to the women's hostels popularly known as Box. But I digress.



At Alliance High School, Kikuyu (circa 1995)

Downhill

Skipping forward to working life, it quickly became a waking nightmare that my waist was bulging with every day because of the 'good life' I enjoyed because of being able to eat pizzas and consume copious amounts of alcohol. This necessitated some stopgap measures that involved attempting to run in the morning before work along Lang'ata Road.

However, because of the lack of discipline and consistency, I abandoned running and succumbed to the many tempting treats that further made my waist bulge. Moreover, the stressful work environments combined with frequent travelling within and out of the country only exacerbated the weight gain problem and a visit to the doctor confirmed that my blood pressure was beyond acceptable levels.

This was made more complicated because I would drive to and from work and did little walking which would have eased the weight issues. My self-esteem lowered as I gave up on the 'war against weight' that I felt I would never win.

I needed a turnaround strategy.



After several years of working life (2008)



While posted in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania (2015)

Take two...

It was after I went back to school that the desire to lose weight recurred. Borne out of the realization that stressful environments nurtured bad dietary habits, I changed tact and stop eating junk food and opt for organic foods and local delicacies such as sweet potatoes (Ngwaci) and arrowroots (Nduma) for breakfast and grains such as beans and maize food (Githeri) and peas.

The strategy worked out and I shed around 12 kg and my esteem was buoyed once again. In fact, when I was sitting my final examinations, I would do a jog in the morning at the University pitch initially doing 5 km and gradually being comfortable running 10 km. I also did interval training which I had read about online and it was effective in maintaining a good fitness form and in enhancing my stamina. One benefit of running in the morning was that I was alert in class and this also made me an efficient student which was clear when we sat the final examination and I emerged as one of the best students.

The fall

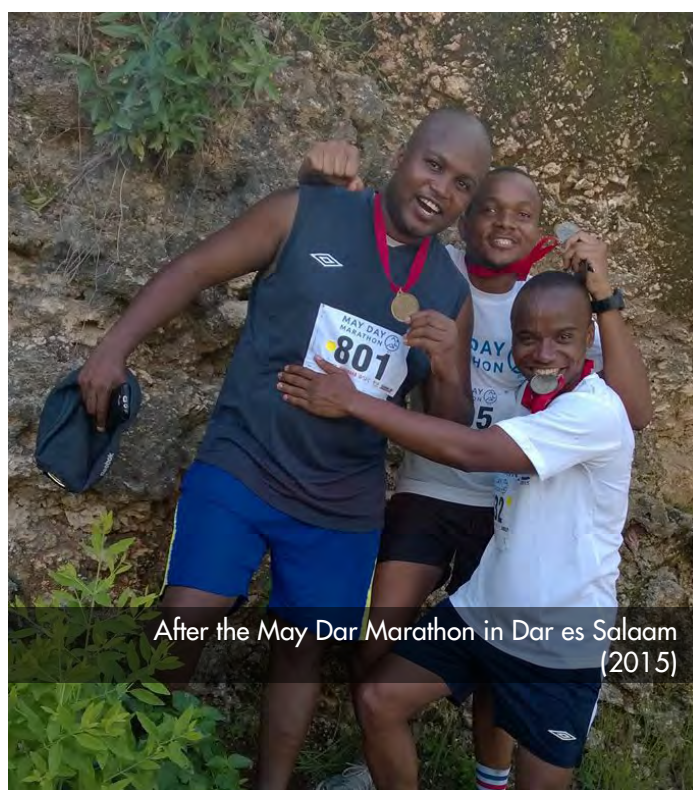
As fate would have it, I then re-joined the working environment again and within no time, the effects of a demanding work environment coupled with the inability to control my diet resulted in weight gain.

I once again went into a sedentary lifestyle devoid of workouts and replete with calorie feasts. While I tried to do some workouts where I would run when I got home from work, these efforts were not consistent and the dwindling motivation to get into shape did not help. My weight was around 90 kg and going up.

Take three – Third time's the charm?

In 2014, I worked in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. The change in environment was fascinating with the coastal environment providing a relaxed setting and many interesting places to visit. It had dawned on me that the richness of dietary choices would present a challenge in maintaining my weight to acceptable levels. This is because the coastal cuisine is replete with carbohydrates, sugar and fats and therefore a fitness regime would be very necessary. So, I teamed up with one of my colleagues for evening runs after work and early morning weekend long runs comprising three 7.5 km circuits.

We carried on with this routine for about a year until work got in the way and we became less consistent. We did, however, take part in a few races in Tanzania – The Dar May Day Marathon (May 2015), Bagamoyo Historic Marathon (June 2015) and Kilimanjaro Marathon (March 2019).



After the May Dar Marathon in Dar es Salaam (2015)



During a run in Dar es Salaam (2015)



Maiden Swara run in Ndeiya (2016)

Joining Swaras

My initial encounter with Urban Swaras was in 2016 as a guest runner during the Ndeiya Escarpment run. And what a baptism by fire, that was! I posted a note my experience on as below:

This morning I joined Urban Swaras for a military-style marathon/rock climbing trail on the escarpment of the Great Rift Valley off the Mai Mahiu road starting from Githungu Primary School approximately 2.5 kilometres as the crow flies. Any illusions of grandeur of myself being a seasoned Marathoner (note how I loosely used that term) evaporated soon after we began the treacherous trail. "This race is not for everyone. It is a very difficult course and is not recommended for runners trying a distance of 18 km for the first time" quipped one experienced runner who I was later to learn was Ajaa Olubayi, the founder of Urban Swaras. I was soon to learn along the way.

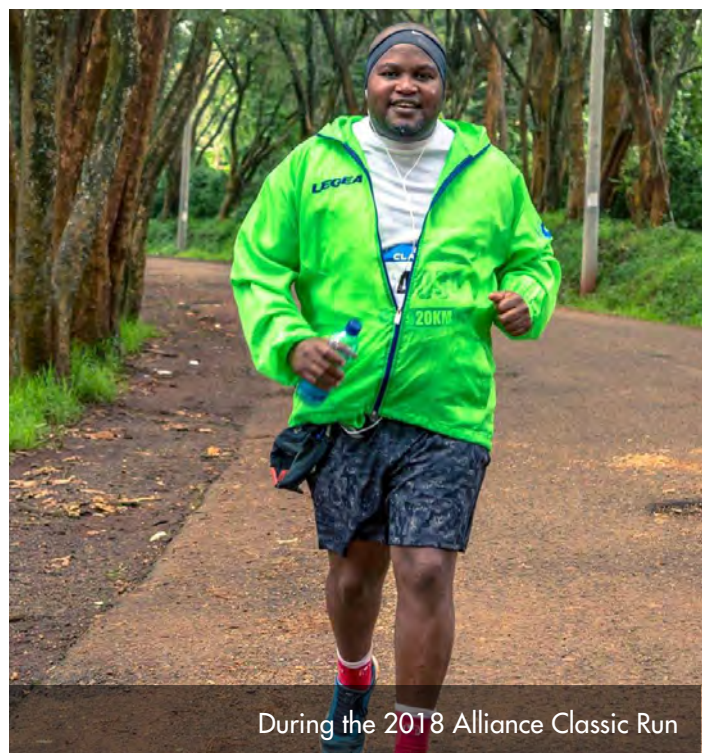
However, it is a most rewarding run as the scenery is magnificent with ledges approximately 100 metres high overlooking the Great Rift Valley with spectacular views of Mount Suswa and Mount Longonot. There was always the pervasive danger of falling off cliffs as trails were on the edge of the ledges. The race was a great run and although very tiring, it should be considered in difficulty no more than a marathon effort. Your pace will be slow so the most tiring part will be staying on your feet for 2 and a half hours or so.

"Remember, many people are just going to run it and not worry about racing it. The run is truly an experience you will not forget soon. Come along and earn your Great Rift Valley stripes" suggested one other Urban Swara. As a recovery run from the Kili marathon 2016, it was a real challenge and finishing was the reward.

This run made me yearn to join the Urban Swaras who I realised were serious runners who also gave new runners confidence and shared a wonderful camaraderie during and after the runs.

The fall...again

In 2018, I was not doing a lot of running and this showed as I gained a lot of weight. By the end of the year, I was 110 kilograms. While I took part in the Alliance Classic Run on May 19th, 2018 where I ran 20 km, I was heavy, and I resolved to take some action to enhance my general well-being and become an effective runner.



During the 2018 Alliance Classic Run

Take four...

In 2019, I resolved that I would aim to be a better person both physically and spiritually, so I watched my diet and engaged in runs every weekend. I have taken part in almost all Urban Swaras outings since February 2019 and this has improved my pace and stamina and helped in building endurance in my runs. The variety of runs by the USRC has also helped in pushing my mileage up and giving me the courage to take up more challenging opportunities like the Voi Ultra and the Nairobi to Nakuru challenge. I've also done the Kili half marathon in Moshi, Kigali Peace Marathon and the just concluded 17th edition of the Standard Chartered Nairobi Marathon. Apart from running I religiously go to the gym to build my core strength.

So far, I have lost 29 kg - from 110 kg to 81 kg.



Eric with John Mugambi at the Kilimanjaro Marathon (March 2019)



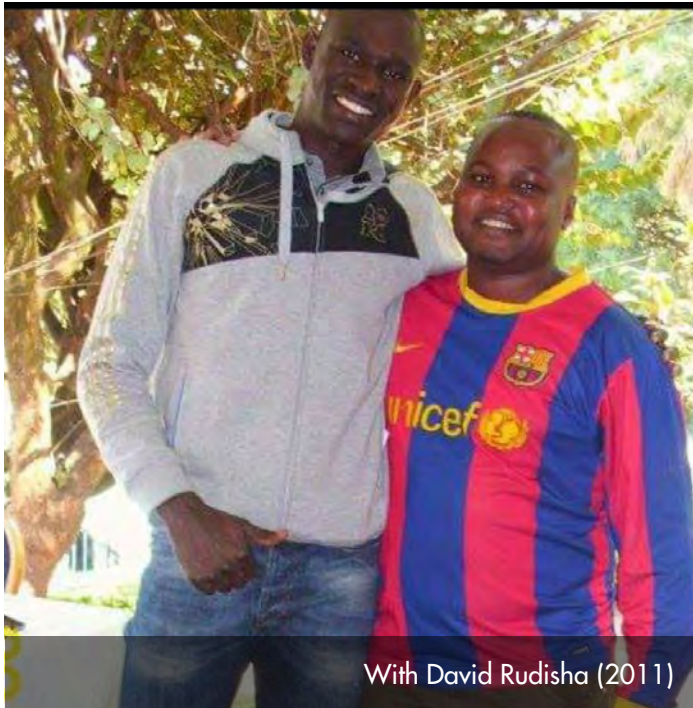
Kigali Peace Marathon (May 2019)



USRC Voi Ultra (June 2019)



At the gym (October 2019)



With David Rudisha (2011)

Inspiration

Like many runners, recreational and professionals alike, I draw my inspiration from Eliud Kipchoge and David Rudisha.

Lessons learnt

One of the lessons I gained from joining Urban Swaras Running Club is the importance of building endurance and stamina through running. It is instructive that most routes crafted by the USRC make one run in different terrains, across rivers and with relatively good elevation gains thereby helping the members to be better prepared for marathon competitions and promote their general well-being.

In addition, I have made good friends in the club with the camaraderie shared among runners fostering unity and pursuing common goals. 

04:29:31



2019 Nairobi Standard Chartered Marathon

A full-page photograph of a man running a marathon. He is wearing a bright yellow-green t-shirt with a logo, black shorts, and a race bib with the number 1288. He is smiling and giving a thumbs up. The background shows a tree-lined road with other runners and spectators.

MY DEBUT MARATHON

by Josiah MUGAMBI

Now, what will I be thinking about for 2 hrs?

I've always been active but always found doing long-distance running rather tedious. In fact, my excuse has always been this: 'what on earth will I be thinking about, keeping my mind occupied for 2,3,4 hrs??!!' Nonetheless I always managed to put in a few kilometres here after university days when I was more active, though usually not over 6 km :).

Why are you going to the gym?

Getting a car however can make one rather sedentary, so soon after that, I signed up at a nearby gym and my skinny self was promptly put on a program. I've been asked many times why I go to the gym. You see, I've always been between 70 and 80 kg since university, averaging 75kg. For my 6 ft 3 frame, that's well within a healthy BMI (assuming it's a useful metric). I struggle to **gain** weight, thanks to a high metabolism. So I've been asked severally why I bother with the gym. Anyway, once I got past the initial soreness, learning things like DOMS, it became almost addictive and I promptly forgot running - though I did the occasional jog.

Trying to start the engine

It was only in 2006 that I got back on the saddle and decided I wanted to try out 10k at the Standard Chartered Nairobi Marathon. My mindset, as usual, was - what on earth would I be occupying my mind doing 21k let alone 42k! Anyway, I did my first 10k in a not too shabby time of ~ 48 minutes. I didn't have a running watch, or smartphone for that matter so the old school Casio did the trick.

The following year, I was back for 21k, this time having done a little *kienyeji* training with some people in my neighbourhood. What I remember most for this run is me passing this approximately 60+-year-old *mzee* then a few km later, having to slow down because of a stitch (I hadn't gotten used to drinking/ fuelling while running), and him trotting past as I looked on forlornly. My knees ached for days after this. Nonetheless, I did a ~1 hr 42 min half marathon, which I haven't surpassed to date (one goal for the next few months).

The team matters

I then was on a hiatus of sorts from recreational running (marriage, lots of work etc.), only attempting a 10k in 2012 for Standard Chartered marathon at a relatively slow pace, and keeping fit via the gym, until 2014 when I slowly started running more and more, in a large part because of meeting more recreational runners. I joined Urban Swaras a few years later, thanks to Jerusha, and was able to get my cardio fitness back up.

However, each time an event I want to take part in comes up, I seem to get injured. I somehow did Ndakaini Half and Nairobi Marathon 10k 2017 while nursing an injury. I wanted to do the marathon that year, but then signed up for 21k because of the injury and lack of training, then dropped to the 10k. I set a 10k PB though, after dosing myself with painkillers, my leg didn't like me afterwards.

Getting to my maiden 'proper' marathon:

This year (2019), I turned 40 in July, and of course attempted a 40 at 40, backfiring spectacularly after I pushed myself too hard and messed up my fuel. I had never done a 42k (shock!), so I was intending to hit 40k and go beyond.

I got the chance to 'revisit' 40 at 40 (I'm still 40 after all) in September when Per was prepping for Berlin and needed some support at one of the Swaras long runs coincidentally in the neighbourhood I grew up in. I don't know what I was thinking but I decided, 'why not?' and clocked 41.1km (40k officially...), my longest ever run at that point, over some rather hilly 900m+ elevation and muddy terrain. This served as part of the prep for my maiden 42k that nearly didn't happen!

About 3 weeks to the race, I was, again, down with an injury and a cold which was worsened by meds. I wasn't worried about the cold, but the injury felt like a sucker punch. I even lost 2kg(!) during this period. Before watching Kipchoge breach 2hrs, I went on a run, aiming for a slow 21k over 1hr 59min but couldn't even finish that. This had me thinking, "What about a 42k? Will I end up walking 75% of the distance?" Even walking that #159 day wasn't fun. I took a complete break, literally no running, lots of rest and a couple of physio sessions. Very motivated. One week to the race, I still wasn't sure but decided that I'd still keep to the 42k and not drop distance to 21 or 10. I did a short treadmill run that week and felt that the leg, same problematic right leg as 2017, would hold up. And it did! But I'm getting ahead of myself.

I spent that race week carb-loading on my favourite meal; oatmeal + water in the microwave, super easy and lazy, I also use it when I need to put on mass. I also shopped for accessories that I would need (GU goes out of stock pretty fast...). On race day, I got up at 4:30 am, had a slow breakfast, changed, stretched a bit, then headed to Nyayo Stadium, though I somehow arrived later than the assembly time.

I met many Swaras, and Team Jasho guys that I knew, as well as other friends, and soon we were off! My race plan was very basic, borrowed from something I'd seen online, and I had adjusted it to factor in my reduced training time. Run at below my target race pace for the first 15k, pace up to race pace for the next 15k then see what happens for the rest of the race. In theory, this should result in an even or negative split. Enough of theory though.

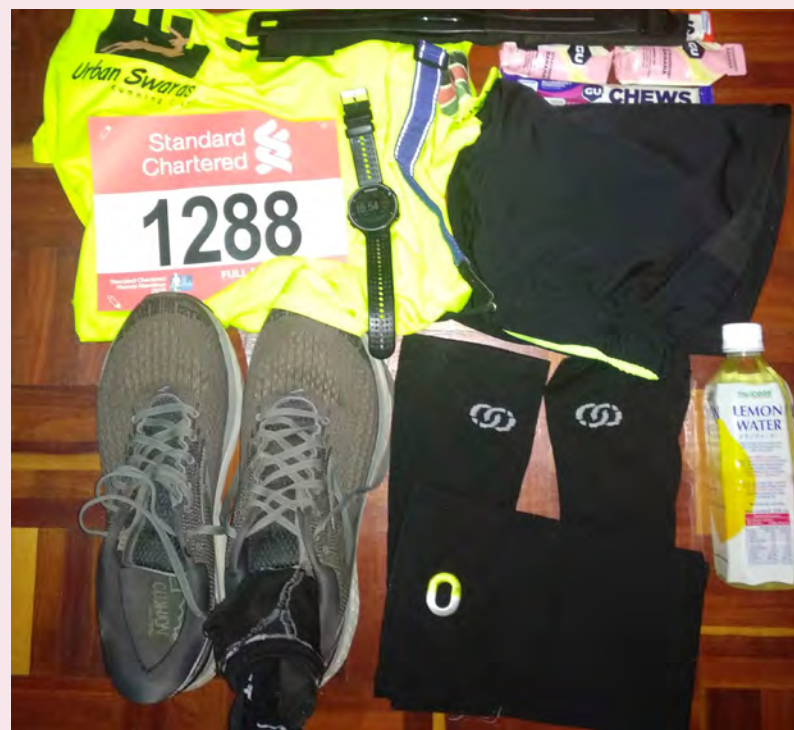
I was comfortable up until 30k. The rest of the race was an exercise in trying not to stop running. I knew that if I didn't push on, press on and avoid walking, there was a good chance I would not finish the race. Before the race, I thought I'd have the strength to speed up the last 3-6 km, but my body felt otherwise - especially that last stretch between Parkside Towers and the Stadium. Getting to the stadium - navigating through all the people streaming leisurely out of the entrance (not fun!) was pure relief. I was totally elated to see the finish line, was too tired to do the Kipchoge chest pump but ran a few more metres to make sure the Garmin locked in on 42.2 km, at 3:52:01. I had a set of goals: #1 finish (done), #2 finish in 4 hrs (done), #finish in 3:30 hrs (soon...).

Lessons

Lots of lessons for me in life, faith, *biashara* - on keeping on no matter what - that I take to heart in all facets of my life. I encourage anyone able to run a full marathon to do so. It's a good test of one's mental strength, ability to persevere. The discipline required to train for and run 42km is invaluable.

I'm looking forward to the next marathon once I've rested and recovered fully from the injury. Perhaps try out the majors when I have the time, resources, and 'permission', and also *maybe* join the Ultra crowd properly. US

03:52:01



RUNNING TALES

OF MEN, CHILDREN & DOGS

by Rosemary MWANGI

As runners, I am sure most of us share similar experiences when out on solo runs. Allow me to indulge you in four incidences that have happened to me.

For instance, *what is it with men and competitiveness?* I just don't get it.

There I was one Saturday morning minding my business, dragging my feet through Riara Road, in no mood to run, grumbling & mumbling to myself that I had to do this long run. Usually, on my Saturday morning runs I encounter many people walking to work or going on about their business. This Saturday was not any different.

As I went about my very slow-paced run, a random guy zoomed past me. I gave him a quick look over. He had on black casual trousers, a white shirt and dress shoes. It was very clear that he was NOT dressed for a run. I knew he had seen 'a girl' and decided to show her some dust.

The previous Rosemary would have stopped running completely and allow the guy to run too far ahead to catch up with. The current version, however, would have none of that! I decided to show him some of that dust and engaged gears. Forgetting everything I have learnt about pacing, I mustered all the strength I had and ran at top speed until I caught up with the guy and overtook him. When I was sure I was way ahead of him I stopped running, caught my breath and smiled to myself feeling smug.

You'd think, he'd have had his fun and quit, right? Oh, no! He was hot on my heels! We chased each other for a while before I got fed up of this lil' game and shot straight ahead as he took a turn down Argwings Kodhek Road. I saw him looking back several times disappointed that the competition was over.

Turns out that children are excited by this chasing game too.

One early morning (about 6:30 am) I was running along Parklands road, and as is the norm during a school day, I came across many children on their way to various schools. Out of the many uniforms, I recognised the Hospital Hill Primary school one. A girl of about 8 or 9 years donning this uniform watched how I was running, mastered my running style and joined me running in step by my side all the way to the school's gate. It must have been a distance of at least 300 m. I was flabbergasted! We exchanged pleasantries and we went our separate ways. I was amazed at generations to come, there is the hope of getting more runners in future.

Early this year, during the Voi run – and what a punishing uphill run that was! – I met 5 small kids when I got to 25 km (see image). These 6-year-olds and under seemed to be quite fascinated by me and bombarded me with many questions – who was I? why was I dressed in running gear? where was I going? etc. We interacted a bit and they told me they were on their way to get milk at the top of the hill. The same hill threatening to take my lungs out! Off we went. They were good company and gave me the boost I needed to clear the remaining distance of the hill.



What is a running experience without an animal in it?


We've heard of runners hitting their PBs courtesy of random geese and dogs that come across their way.

My experience was not any different. Again, one cold, chilly and foggy morning, when out on a long run, I bumped into about 5 -6 dogs. There were hardly any cars or humans on the road, so you can imagine how terrified I was. Suddenly all I could remember were the horror stories I'd heard from Swaras about similar situations. But, none of the advice of what to do or not to do sprung up in my mind! Do I stay still? Do I play dead? Do I turn back? Do I continue running? I was paralysed! I ran on, convincing myself that I

was a dog lover, and somehow understood their language.

I picked up my speed and ran past them only for one of them to chase me. I petrified! I glanced at it and noticed it was wagging its tail, a sure sign of having a great time. I relaxed. We ran together for quite a while before, I suppose, it got bored and turned back to catch up with the others.

Over and over, these situations have recurred with slight variations here and there. I guess they are what that make my running experiences interesting.

I share this to let you know that running is living and that I'm running and living! 

2019

RUNNING ROUNDUP

by CHERUIYOT

THE MAJORS

MARATHON	FEMALE WINNER	MALE WINNER
TOKYO - March	Ruti Aga (Eth)	Birhanu Legese (Eth)
LONDON - April	Brigid Kosgei	Eliud Kipchoge
BOSTON - April	Worknesh Degefa (Eth)	Lawrence Cherono
BERLIN - September	Ashete Bekere (Eth)	Kenenisa Bekele (Eth)
CHICAGO - October	Brigid Kosgei	Lawrence Cherono
NEW YORK- November	Joyciline Jepkosgei	Geoffrey Kamworor

It's interesting that the majors were only won by two countries. Kenya took 7 winnings to Ethiopia's 5, not too big a lead but well take it. 2018 had a Briton, a Japanese, an American, 2 Ethiopians and 7 Kenyan winners. 2019 is clearly a better year for Ethiopia, static for Kenya.

THE WINNERS

Road Running

- Eliud Kipchoge runs 1:59:40- The single biggest running event of the year.
- Brigid Kosgei WR: 2019's big surprise, by an unassuming and laid back Brigid, unexpected in Chicago. After aggressively winning London, and running the fastest Half Marathon ever albeit in a non-WR eligible Great North Run course. Brigid is a rare breed of elite runners who wins internationally and also races local races like Kakamega Forest half marathon in 2018.
- Lawrence Cherono: Wins both Boston and Chicago in sprint finishes, rubbing the rule that in a sprint finish between Kenyan and Ethiopian the Ethiopian will always win.

- Kenenisa Bekele: Sending chills down many a Kenyan spine by almost taking off with Kipchoge's record in Berlin.
- New York Marathon: The race is won by Half Marathon record holders – Geoffrey Kamworor reclaiming his 2017 title and Joyciline Jepkosgei announcing her entry into the big stage.
- A Kenyan pacer completes his duties as pacer and goes on to win the Istanbul Marathon.

Ultra World

The biggest news in the ultra-world is probably Maggie Gutierl winning the Big's backyard ultra. The first woman to do so. It was only a matter of time as last year's runner up was a woman, Courtney Dauwalter. It has been rumoured that in ultras women are generally stronger than men.

She won in a time of 60 hours, which is 60 loops of exactly 6.7 km, run every hour. A total of 402 km with no sleep. The most one can do is catch a few winks before the next lap.

Watu wa ground- the Kenyan recreational space

- Victor Kamau: Becomes the first Kenyan to run over 100 miles by completing the Tor des Géants in Italy - 389 km, 27000m elevation gain.
- David Thuo from the running club across the road (Runfit) runs the fastest non-elite marathon at Berlin, 2:38:59. Pipping the 2:39:55 set by Davis Munene earlier in Tokyo.
- Eddah Gichangi: Runs the fastest Marathon time by a female Swara. Gliding to a smooth 3.22.00
- We also had a few Swaras finish their maiden marathons: Lyma Mwangi (6:31:02), Carol Mungai (5:22:19) and George Rutto (4:34:30) - Kilimanjaro Marathon; Eric Njunu (5:37:41) - Kigali Peace Marathon; Josiah Mugambi (3:52:01), John Mugambi, Rachael Hongo (04:57:05), and Joseph Mwenda (4:38:02) – Nairobi Standard Chartered Marathon.
- Nyaruai Muhoro loses it and completes five full marathons in 2019, four of them Majors, three of them within a space of 35 days. That's just outside a month. And then she silently elicited lumps down people's throats by getting to hang out with Kipchoge twice.
- Tata Nduku, the marathon Gran'ma, completes her back to back Comrades marathon.
- Ndakaini Half Marathon: The top 10 finishers in the female category included Sarah Wawa, Felicita Kagwanja and Linda Omondi.
- Then crops up this epidemic of trail runs around Nairobi and further afield. At this rate we foresee all Saturdays being taken, then Sundays, then nights,... outdoor life in Kenya on steroids. **US**



Lawrence Cherono beats Lelisa Desisa by one second to win Boston Marathon © Christopher Evans/Boston Herald



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