RUNNING WITH THE KENYANS

Discovering the secrets of the fastest people on earth

‘Captivating.’
SUNDAY TIMES
Sports Book of the Year
Running with the Kenyans
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‘An engaging memoir … The book is populated with engagingly drawn characters and towards the end, Finn’s quest – the burning need to attain a certain marathon time – is gripping.’ Daily Telegraph
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Discovering the Secrets
of the Fastest People on Earth
ADHARANAND FINN

To my fellow collaborators Marietta, Lila, Uma and Ossian When the divine is looking for you, that’s a pretty powerful force.
PREM RAWAT

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Prologue
I hear someone else’s alarm go first. I’ve been waiting for it, in my half-sleep. A shallow, impatient slumber under the thin sheet, the name of the hotel stamped across it in green ink. BOMEN. The light from the corridor makes the room visible. Bare walls. A dark pink colour in this light, but in the day an intoxicating bright peach. An energy-saving light bulb hangs from its wire above my head.

A phone rings. Godfrey, in the other bed a few feet away, answers it immediately, as though he’s been holding it in his hand, waiting for it to call. He speaks in calm, wakeful Kalenjin, and then hangs up.
‘Chris,’ he says in the darkness. He knows I’m awake. ‘You know Chris. He wants to go down for breakfast.’

My alarm starts off, buzzing on the bedside table. I reach over and turn it off. 4 a.m. Time to get up.

The hotel is a clatter of pots and pans and people talking. Some of the guests must be turning over in their beds and wondering what is going on, checking their watches. I head out along the corridor. The leaves of a palm tree bristle at one end. At the top of the stairs I meet Beatrice, standing in the shadows, unsure whether to go down. She smiles, her teeth white against her black skin.

‘Let’s go,’ I say.

Without replying, she follows me down.

In the dining room the waiters are ready. They’ve been pulled out of their beds in the middle of the night and pressed into their waiting suits. They don’t look pleased.

‘Tea, coffee?’ asks the head waiter, walking over to us with a tray of pots and cups. We both shake our heads. I sit down at the table. Beatrice follows, sitting down opposite me. Outside the street is silent. I look at Beatrice.

‘Ready?’ I ask her.

She smiles. ‘I will make it,’ she says, nodding.

Japhet and Shadrack walk into the room. Two young men in their early twenties. Neither of them has ever been this far from home. Japhet is all big toothy smiles, excited, while Shadrack looks permanently as though he has just seen something both shocking and incredible, his eyes pointed, bulging from his head. The head waiter is at the table with his tray.

‘Tea, coffee?’

‘Chai,’ says Shadrack so quietly he has to repeat it twice before the waiter understands. Japhet just nods. The waiter, pleased, pours out the tea.

‘You both feeling ready?’ I ask. Shadrack looks at me confused, as though I’ve just asked him if he has ever been in love.

‘We’re ready, yes,’ says Japhet, grinning. The waiter, on a roll now, brings us all a plate of fruit. Shadrack pokes his watermelon nervously with a fork and offers it to Beatrice. Then the waiter brings us all plates of bread and fried eggs.

‘Whatever you do,’ Godfrey told us the night before, ‘don’t eat eggs for breakfast.’ I look at the others.

‘You like eggs before a race?’ I ask them. But they’re already tucking in. I decide not to make a fuss, but I leave mine untouched. Two slices of bread and butter is enough. I eat up quickly and return upstairs to my room.

I had planned to go back to sleep after breakfast, but I’m too awake, so I pack up my bags and sit on the bed. My foot feels fine. I rub it to make sure, pressing my thumb into the sole where the injury was. I pull out a bottle of Menthol Plus, a balm from the pharmacy back in Iten. I rub it on my foot, then pull my socks on and sit back on the bed. Slow, deep breaths. An hour later, it’s time to go.
The dawn is casting a faint light across the parking lot as we all stand around beside the minibus, waiting for Godfrey. I left him combing his hair in the bedroom. He has a grade-one crew cut, but still spends five minutes combing it each morning. The others stand quiet, patient. Finally he turns up.

‘Sorry, guys,’ he says, sliding open the minibus doors. The junior members of the team, Japhet, Shadrack and Beatrice, climb into the back of the bus. Chris, Paul and Philip, all veteran runners, take the middle row. As the sole mzungu, white man, I’m given the front seat next to Godfrey, our trainer and driver.

We bump our way out of the drive and along the dirt street to the main, paved road. People are up walking around, herding goats, carrying large sacks across their shoulders. Crowded matatus, small buses, pull over and more people squeeze in. The day is already under way.

Inside our bus nobody speaks. Godfrey fiddles with the radio, but he already knows it doesn’t work. He drives on, the road straight, rising up along the edge of the savannah, which spreads out vast and empty on one side. On the other side are makeshift houses, small fields of maize, kiosks painted in bright colours advertising phone companies.

After about twenty minutes we reach the main entrance gate to Lewa, a 55,000-acre wildlife conservancy 170 miles north of Nairobi. A long line of 4×4 cars is filing through. People are walking beside the road. We join the queue of traffic. The savannah spreads out on both sides now, filling the world. This is the classic African landscape. Dry grassy plains, dotted with spiky acacia trees.

In the back they’re all getting excited suddenly, pointing out of the window.

‘What is it?’ I ask.

‘Look,’ says Godfrey, pointing to one side, where an elephant is standing, as still as a statue, just a few feet away.

‘Is it real?’ Philip asks, craning over my shoulder to see.

We bump on through the clouds of dust from the other cars. The elephant has lightened the mood in the bus. Godfrey starts out on his pep talk.

‘OK, guys. Here we are. I know we have a winner in this car. You’ve all done the training, now it’s time to run. Remember that this is a marathon. You mustn’t go too fast at the beginning. But you need to stay in touch with the leaders. You know you can do it.’

Godfrey pulls the bus to a halt. Even though it’s still barely past 6 a.m., hundreds of people stand lined up behind a rope, being pushed back by security guards. Runners in shorts and vests, numbers pinned to their chests, are streaming along the track towards the start. Before I know it everyone is out of the bus and has disappeared.

‘They’ve gone straight to the start,’ says Godfrey. ‘You go, I’ll meet you there.’ It’s already warm, so I strip off my tracksuit and throw it in the bus. Underneath is my yellow vest. My number, 22, is pinned to the front. Along the back are the words ‘Iten Town Harriers’.
The start is buzzing with over a thousand runners. Among the mêlée I spot a group of yellow vests, the rest of the team. They’re with my wife, Marietta, and my two-year-old son, Ossian. My daughters are somewhere watching from the sidelines. Marietta’s waiting for me so she can take a group photograph.

We huddle together. Godfrey doesn’t want to be in the picture, but we haul him over. We couldn’t have done this without him. He stands at the back, his face lost under the shadow of his hat.

‘OK, thank you,’ says Marietta, releasing us from our pose. ‘Good luck.’ And with that we’re lining up. We all shake hands, but there’s nothing left to say. This is it.

Months of training on the line. The wild plains of Africa lying before us. Waiting. Still. Helicopters hover overhead. The man with the microphone doesn’t say it, but we’re waiting for some lions to move off the course. The helicopters are swooping low over them, trying to force them on. It seems a long time to stand there. I stretch my arms. Twenty-six miles. Forty-two kilometres. But they’re just numbers. One step at a time. One breath at a time. The morning heat rising from the spiky grass. My children, big smiley faces, waving at me from the side. And then we’re counting. Five. I feel my breath filling me with life. Four. People hold their watches, crouching. Three. Two. This is it. One. Go.

1

We’re running across long, wavy grass, racing for the first corner. I’m right at the front, being pushed on by the charge of legs all around me, the quick breathing of my schoolmates. We run under the goalposts and swing down close beside the stone wall along the far edge of the field. It’s quieter now. I look around. One boy is just behind me, but the others have all dropped back. Up ahead I can see the fluttering tape marking the next corner. I run on, the air cold in my lungs, the tall poplar trees shivering above my head.

We go out of the school grounds, along a gravel path that is normally out of bounds. My feet crunch along, the only sound. An old man pushing a bicycle stands to one side as I go by. I follow the tape, back down a steep slope onto the playing fields, back to the finish. I get there long before anyone else and stand waiting in the cold as they come in, collapsing one after the other across the line. I watch them, rolling on their backs, kneeling on the ground, their faces red. I feel strangely elated. It’s the first PE class in my new school and we’ve all been sent out on a cross-country run. I’ve never tried running further than the length of a football pitch before, so I’m surprised by how easy I find it.

‘He’s not even breathing hard,’ the teacher says, holding me up as an example to the others. He tells me to put my hands under my armpits to keep them warm as the other children continue to trail in.

*
A few years later, aged twelve, I break the 800m school record on sports day, despite a few of the other boys attempting to bundle me over at the start in an effort to help their friend win. Five minutes later, I run the 1500m and win that too. My dad, sensing some potential talent, suggests I join the local running club and looks up the number in the telephone directory. I hear him talking to someone on the phone, asking directions. From that point on, a course is set: I am to be a runner.

It all begins rather inauspiciously one night a few weeks later. I put on my shorts and tracksuit and walk across the bridge from our suburban housing estate in the town of Northampton to the nearby shopping centre. The precinct is half-deserted, save for a few late shoppers coming out of the giant Tesco supermarket. I head down the escalator to the car park, and then across the road to the unmarked dirt track where the Northampton Phoenix running club meets. It’s a cold night and all the runners are crammed into a small doorway in the side of a huge red brick wall. Inside, the corridor walls are painted blood red and covered in lewd graffiti. Further down the corridor are the changing rooms, where men can be heard laughing loudly above the fizz of the showers. I give my name to a lady sitting at a small table.

Rather than head onto the track, as I had imagined, I’m taken back across the road with a group of children around my age to the shopping centre’s delivery area, a stretch of covered road with shuttered loading bays all along one side. The road itself is thick with discharged oil. A man in tights and a yellow running jacket gets us to run from one side of the road to the other, touching the kerb each time. Between each sprint he makes us do exercises such as press-ups or star jumps. I begin thinking, as I lie back on the cold, hard tarmac ready to do some sit-ups, that I’ve come to the wrong place. This isn’t running. I had imagined groups of lithe athletes hurtling around a track. My dad must have got confused and called the wrong club.

I’m so convinced it isn’t the running club that I don’t return for another year. When I do, they ask me if I’d like to train in ‘the tunnel’, which I take to mean the shopping centre loading bays, or head out for a long run. I opt for the long run and am directed over to a group of about forty people. This is more like it. As we set off along the gravel pathways that wind their way around the council estates of east Northampton, I feel for the first time the sensation of running in the middle of a group of people. The easy flow of our legs moving below us, the trees, houses, lakes floating by, the people stepping aside, letting us go. Although most of the other runners are older and constantly making jokes, as I drift quietly along I feel a vague sense of belonging.

I spend the next six years or so as a committed member of the club, running track or cross-country races most weekends, and training at least twice a week. Much of my formative years I spend out pounding the roads. Even when I grow my hair long and start playing the guitar in a band, I keep on training. The other runners nickname me Bono. One night, when I’m about eighteen, I pass a bunch of my school friends coming back from the pub. We are in the last mile of a long run and are going at full
pace. My school friends stare at me open-mouthed as I charge by, one shouting incredulously: ‘What are you doing?’ as I disappear into the distance.

I first become aware of Kenyan runners sometime in the mid-1980s, around the same time I join the running club. They seem to emerge suddenly in large numbers into a running world dominated in my eyes by Britain’s Steve Cram and the Moroccan Said Aouita. I’m a big fan of both these great rivals, Cram with his high-stepping, majestic style, and the smaller Aouita, with his grimacing face and rocking shoulders, who is brilliant at every distance from the short, fast 800m right up to the 10,000m.

But by the 1988 Olympics in Seoul, it is all Kenyans, winning every men’s middle-distance and long-distance track gold medal except one. What impresses me most about them is the way they run. The conventional wisdom is that the most efficient method, particularly in the longer distances, is to run at an even pace, and most races are run that way. The Kenyans, however, take a more maverick approach. They are always surging ahead, only to slow down suddenly, or sprinting off right from the gun at a crazy pace. I love the way it befuddles the TV commentators, who are constantly predicting that a Kenyan athlete is going too fast, only for him to suddenly go even faster.

I remember watching the World Championship 5,000m final in our living room in Northampton on a warm mid-August evening in 1993. My mum keeps coming in and out, suggesting I go and sit outside in the garden. It’s a lovely evening. But I’m glued to the TV. The pre-race favourite is the Olympic champion from Morocco, Khalid Skah, while the television cameras also focus in on a young Ethiopian called Haile Gebrselassie who won both the 5,000m and 10,000m at the world junior championships the year before. The athletes stand beside each other on the start line looking back into the camera. They smile nervously when their names are announced, and give the odd directionless wave.

The race sets off at a blistering pace, with a succession of African athletes streaking ahead one after the other at the front. Skah, who has taken on and beaten the Kenyans many times before, tracks every move, always sitting on the shoulder of the leader. Britain’s only runner in the race, Rob Denmark, soon finds himself trailing far behind.

With seven laps still to go, the BBC television commentator, Brendan Foster, is feeling the strain just watching. ‘It’s a vicious race out there,’ he says. Right on queue, a young Kenyan, Ismael Kirui, surges to the front and within a lap has opened up a huge gap of about 50 metres on everyone else. It’s a suicidal move, Foster declares. ‘He’s only eighteen and has no real international experience. I think he’s got a little carried away.’ I sit riveted, screaming at the TV as the coverage cuts away to the javelin for a few moments. When it switches back, Kirui is still leading. Lap after lap, Skah and a group of three Ethiopians track him, but they aren’t getting any closer. The camera zooms in on Kirui’s eyes, staring ahead, wild like a hunted animal as he keeps piling on the pace. ‘This is one savage race,’ says Foster.
Kirui is still clear as the bell sounds for the last lap. Down the back straight he sprints for his life, but the three Ethiopians are flying now, closing the gap. With just over 100 metres left, Kirui glances over his shoulder and sees the figure of Gebreselassie closing in on him. For a brief second everything seems to stop. This is the moment, the kill is about to happen. Startled, frantic, Kirui turns back towards the front and urges his exhausted body on again, his tired legs somehow sprinting away down the finishing straight. He crosses the line less than half a second ahead of Gebreselassie. But he has done it. He has won. Battered and bewildered, he sets off on his lap of honour, the Kenyan flag, once again, held aloft in triumph.

That evening I head down to the track for a training session with my running club. I try to run like Kirui, staring straight ahead, going as fast as I can right from the start. It’s one of the best training sessions I ever do. Usually, if you run too hard at the beginning, you worry about how you’ll feel later. You can feel it in your body, the anticipation of the pain to come. Usually it makes you slow down. It’s called pacing yourself. But that night I don’t care. I want to unshackle myself and run free like a Kenyan.

The night I spend hurtling wide-eyed around the track after watching Ismael Kirui turns out to be one of the last sessions I ever do with my running club. Just over a month later I pack my belongings into my parents’ car and drive up to Liverpool to begin university. Although I join the college running team, my focus on training is soon lost amid the whirlwind of university life. Like most teenage students I’m unleashed into a new world where anything is possible. Running seems to belong to a previous life, although I never completely let it go.

The extent to which my training peters out becomes clear by the time the British Universities Cross Country Championships come around the following March. The night before the race, I take off on a spontaneous road trip to Wales with three friends, clambering onto the team bus the next morning ready for little other than sleep. It’s a miracle I make it at all.

A hundred miles away in Durham it’s a cold, blustery day. I lace up my spikes and go through the familiar routine of jogging and stretching, but once the race starts, my legs, sucked down by the thick mud, give up without a fight. I jog around, unable to rouse myself to run any faster. I finish in 280th position. My good friend and rival from my days running in Northampton, Ciaran Maguire, comes second. Just a few years before we battled neck-and-neck all the way in the county cross-country championships, until he edged past me on the line to win. And now here we are separated by almost 300 people. I see him after the race. ‘All you need is to give yourself one good year of training,’ he says consolingly. I nod, but deep down I know it is not going to happen.

Over the years I’ve met others like me: former runners who still, every now and then, dig out their old trainers and start lapping the local park in the vague hope
of remembering what it felt like. We sign up to a local 10K or half-marathon, determined to get back in shape. But something – life, an injury, a lack of dedication – always gets in the way, and we stop training. But the embers refuse to die. We refuse to chuck our old mouldy trainers away. We know we might need them again, that the urge to run will return.

After I have children, it becomes even harder to find the time to train, that is until I manage to land a freelance job writing race reports for *Runner’s World* magazine. Although it doesn’t pay much, it makes the running feel less self-indulgent. It isn’t just me doing something for myself in an effort to revive some lost childhood fervour. It is now work.

With regular assignments from *Runner’s World*, over the next few years I start training more frequently, although with young children it’s still hard to get out more than twice a week. I descend the stairs from my office to find Marietta with little Ossian hanging off her hip, struggling to get the lunch ready, my two daughters, Lila and Uma, screeching at each other as they tussle over a book. The garden is overgrown, the bins need taking out and the phone is ringing. It’s not easy to say, ‘I’m just popping out for a long run. See you in an hour or so.’ So even though I start racing regularly, my times barely improve. I run my first half-marathon when I’m twenty-nine in 1 hour 30 minutes. Seven years later I’ve run three more in exactly the same time.

I keep telling myself that one day I will train hard and run really fast. I’m not sure what that would mean exactly – a sub-3-hour marathon, perhaps? But the years are slipping away. Every time an athlete over thirty-five wins a big race on television I tell myself that there is still hope. It isn’t that I want to achieve any specific goal; I just don’t want to one day look back and regret that I never gave myself a decent chance to see what I could do.

2

I sit looking out of the car window on the way to a 10K charity race near our home in Devon. It’s a blustery September morning and I’m not feeling well. If I wasn’t writing about it for *Runner’s World*, I probably wouldn’t run. I make myself feel better by resolving to start at a slow pace and to just enjoy the scenery. The course loops around the grounds of the lovely Powderham Castle, past deer and along the Exe estuary. It will be nice to take in my surroundings as I run for a change. As we park the car, I have no idea that something is about to happen that will make me rethink my whole approach to running.

Once I get to the start line, I seem to forget about my illness, instinctively snaking my way to the front. I can’t let myself start behind with all the fun runners, no matter how bad I feel. There are almost a thousand people in the race, but most of them are here purely for the fun of the event or to raise money for charity. The actual running is
just the excuse. For many, it’s the chatter of friends, the picnics on the grass, and the
general sense of occasion that brings them out.

It occurs to me afterwards, though, when we’ve all finished, that perhaps, secretly,
it’s the other way around. Afterwards, the race is all anyone wants to talk about. What
time did you do? I couldn’t get going. I went off too fast. People beam as they tell
each other how tired they feel, their faces flushed, their bodies tingling as they pull
their tracksuits back on. Perhaps, really, all the other stuff is the excuse. If it comes
disguised as a charity event, with team T-shirts and picnics, then people will have a
good excuse to run. In fact, they’ll come flocking. A thousand people, and nearly all
of them feeling better for it afterwards. Perhaps the running really is the main
attraction. One woman tells me, as we sit on the grass afterwards, that she thinks
running is like getting drunk in reverse. With drinking, it feels great at first, but then
you start feeling awful. With running, you feel awful first, but then, after you finish,
you feel great. That sounds like a much better deal.

As the starting gun fires, we surge forward across the grass. I’m near the front as we
reach the first corner. A sharp bend leads us onto the gravel drive up towards the
castle. As we run, a man beside me asks me what my personal best time is. ‘I don’t
know,’ I say. I did run a 10K a few years before, in 47 minutes, but I’m sure I’m
faster now.

We clatter in under the arched entrance to the castle and across a small courtyard.
My daughters, Lila and Uma, are standing there with my mother-in-law, Granny Bee.

‘Here he is,’ she tells them, pointing me out among the sea of charity T-shirts.
‘Come on, Dhar,’ she shouts. My daughters just stare at me as I run by. I smile at
them, to reassure them it’s OK, it’s still me. And with that we head out under the arch
and off into the countryside.

The course dinks down a short hill and then along by the Exe estuary, the sailing
boats bobbing and clinking out on the water. I’m still near the front, and decide to
stretch my legs to make use of the wind blowing behind us. No one else seems to have
the same plan, and they let me go, racing off at the front, blown like tinder along the
path. The 2 km marker seems to appear almost instantly. Surely they’ve put it in the
wrong place – we haven’t run that far already, have we? I look back. I’m now a good
40 metres clear at the front. If I keep this up, I think, I could finish in the top ten. In
my mind I’m already rehearsing how I’m going to tell the story afterwards. ‘I was still
in the lead at 3 km.’

End of this sample Kindle book.
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