A diner has skipped out on his bill and indicated to the waitress we will pay. We talk amongst ourselves and it emerges that no one can recall seeing the man, who, apparently, was seated a few tables away. We lean out of the veranda and scour Iten’s main thoroughfare. The waitress dutifully follows. It is early morning and traffic, human and otherwise, is still sparse. He cannot have gone far but we don’t see the diner among the few people walking, huddled into sweaters and jackets, bracing against the chill. Attempts to get a description are futile. “Was he a runner?” someone asks. The waitress shrugs. The only thing he said before he left was that he was from up the road. We cannot ascertain if he meant his workplace. One last look and still no one; he seems to have vanished into thin air leaving only a white receipt for two cups of tea in the waitress’s hand.

When she hands the bill specifically to Alex Kipkosgei, we attribute it to his ‘counsellor’ status. Alex is the Head of Maintenance at Iten District Hospital. He has also been professional athlete for ten years, runs an organization named Aldai Sports Development Association and is the liaison for a Holland-based agent. His multiple roles connect him to all sides of the community – the runners, civil servants, businessmen and farmers. Walking through the town is a slow progress. An unkempt man with wild hair from the Ministry of Works, who looks like he has been drinking all night and not made it home, pulls him aside for a few minutes to talk about a project at the hospital. A group of eager young runners, their leader in a Nike t-shirt with a swoosh and ‘Run’ emblazoned on it, stop to ask about management, key to breaking into the lucrative European Circuit. In another town, Alex could easily pass unnoticed. He is small, quiet and looks younger than his thirty-three years because of the constant athletic training. But in Iten, where there are 400 to 700 runners during peak training season, he is sought out for his connections in the running world.

Iten is a town with no centre. It has formed around a T-junction, the shops on the main street of the town lining the tarmac road that comes from Eldoret and goes to Kabarnet; the other shops line the road to Kapsowar. From Eldoret, thirty kilometres west, the town is hemmed in by farms, from thousand acre tracts to small subsistence plots. The land is flat, with fertile red soils suitable for grain, mainly maize and wheat. The even expanse of the Uasin Ngishu plateau drops spectacularly into the Kerio valley at the edge of the town. Sitet Complex, a hotel built near the cliff, offers tea with great panoramas, but its curtains are often drawn against the view. It is testament to the fact until now land value was weighted a lot more on productivity than vistas. Cliff land, which used to be given to unmarried women in Keiyo society, has gone up tremendously in value as hotels that cater to elite runners and foreign managers are built.

The valley is dry, with thorny acacias, and people eking out a living from the thin soils, in contrast to their better-off neighbors in the plateaus above. A deep narrow gorge at the bottom of the valley holds the Kerio River. Crocodiles sun themselves on a sand bank and the small boys with fishing rods a little way down
the river seem unconcerned, clambering up the rocks to sell their catch on the side of the road – delicious whiskered catfish. It is said the crocodiles, which knew the taste of vanquished warriors from old feuds, had come to taste the blood of modern feuds too. Most of the day the Tugen hills on the far side of the Kerio are blue, but the late afternoon light shows the hills to be green as the sun changes position and they seem to move closer; Kabarnet, on the spine of the hills, can be seen beginning at twilight as a cluster of lights. On a clear day you can see beyond the Tugen hills, which separate the Kerio Valley from the Rift Valley, to the Laikipia plateau. The formation of the valleys pushed up the adjoining areas into high tables of land with altitude conditions ideal for training, thus the profusion of athlete training camps on both sides, in Nyahururu and Iten.

While waiting for Alex to finish speaking to some acquaintances, I see a bench on the side of the road. There is a man with cut earlobes sitting on one side of the bench selling his wares: shaved tree barks, multivitamins in plastic containers, and a thin brown liquid in a Keringet bottle that reminds me of a foul-tasting concoction my grandfather boiled from barks and prescribed as a cure all. He places a sack for me to sit on the damp bench and we watch the comings and goings of town. “Daktari,” his clients call him as he wraps them a mixture of barks and vitamins in newspapers and places it in a plastic bag. Matatus to Eldoret and Kabarnet crowd in front of the brightly painted post office. Those to Kapsowar and Marakwet line up on the opposite side. Tractors and pick-up trucks carrying milk tankards fuel at the petrol station owned by Christopher Cheboiobi, a former steeplechase runner turned marathoner. The gates to KCB, the only bank in town, open and people begin to trickle inside. Daktari’s commercial instincts kick in and he starts to ask deeply personal questions about my reproductive health. I escape to take pictures of the post office when a local council official starts to question my presence in a wary manner, with a view to perhaps levy some small amount of money. “It is because you are not from here,” Daktari says. It speaks of a close-knit community, where a stranger is instantly recognized and easily categorised. “We read the newspapers and know what is going on. Just because we sit here quietly…” he continues, summarizing people’s views on Nairobi inhabitants’ preoccupation with themselves as the center of gravity for the country.

The camp is a few hundred metres down the Kapsowar road at mwisho wa lami, the end of the tarmac. It is a 2 bedroom rented house across the road from the hospital housing where Alex lives. There a lot of camps like this, set up by individuals, mostly experienced or retired runners. I am told a farmer in the area is running a camp on his land, to support something that has become a regional industry, and also hoping the runners will offer him some part of their winnings when they get to the international circuit. He will have no way of enforcing the remittance of the earnings, as by this time, they will have signed contracts with
foreign management that will cater to their needs, and will no longer be dependent on him.

There are four athletes staying at the camp. Two, Evans Ogaro and Onesmus Nyerere, are experienced runners who have raced in the European circuit for some years. The other two, Felix Keny and Christopher Korir, are young, still in initial training, and have not yet left the country. Rent is paid by their manager in Holland, who visits two or three times a year on recruitment trips and to check in with the athletes; in between, he relies on dispatches from Alex. The furnishing is spare, conditions martial, like soldiers in barracks, not much regard for privacy, just the common training objectives. There is a jiko in the kitchen, various utensils scattered about and the ubiquitous thermos for tea. There is one bed and a couple of thin mattresses with blankets crumpled on top on the red cement floor. Gauzy curtains covering the window look tacked on, like it was done hurriedly. The walls are painted blue; most of the houses I visit in the town have the same aqua blue interior. It appears it was either a fashion or a contractor with the local monopoly ordered an excess of blue paint. Outside running shoes stained by the distinctive red mud of the region dry against the wall and varied athletic attire of all brands hang on the wood fence: Adidas socks, Puma warm-up jackets, Nike shirts, Fila tights.

On this particular morning, the athletes lean against the fence and talk about the long-run. Christopher has pulled his mattress outside on the grass and is basking in the sun while offering everyone hot milky tea with lots of sugar. It is some of the best tea I have ever tasted. He cooked it on the jiko and it absorbed the smell of smoke. People in the Rift Valley drink tea with almost religious devotion, at least three times a day, at breakfast, mid-morning and afternoon, more if anyone visits, then the thermos is brought out without question and tea automatically poured. The only question the visitor may be asked is how many spoons of sugar they take, and sometimes they are saved from making this decision as the sugar was already added in the pan. To refuse is to insult your host and will only bring inquiries on if they can prepare it differently for you, perhaps leave out the sugar. Visitors to homes often drop in unannounced, laden with tealeaves and sugar to replenish supplies they will undoubtedly use, and prices of these commodities are followed carefully. A study conducted by an American University on the nutrition of Kenyan athletes concluded, almost with amazement, that milk and sugar in tea are among the top sources of protein and carbohydrates respectively for runners. It is one of those continuous attempts to extricate the one thing that separates Kenyan runners from their counterparts elsewhere in the world, without looking wholly at the tea drinking ritual that is cemented into everyday life, becoming more than basic nutritional sustenance.

Training is all-consuming. The day begins at 5:30am and by 6am the athletes are gathered at the starting point of their morning run, which lasts forty-five minutes to an hour. They return, have breakfast, rest, and then prepare for the main training later in the morning. At 9:30 or 10 they have day specific for six days of
the week. Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, an easy to moderate run, Tuesdays, speed-work at Kamariny track, Thursdays are alternated between hill-work and Fartlek training and Saturday, a long-run of 30 to 40 Kilometres where they reach as far as Moiben. Sunday is the only day of rest, with most of them going to church and the family men leaving, perhaps once a month, to visit wives and children in other towns.

Alex has told us a big group of athletes meet every Thursday at 9 am for Fartlek training, a funny-sounding Swedish word for an exercise that simultaneously builds speed and endurance. It is about 9:15 and there are only five runners in front of us. One of them comes to the car to talk to Alex. His name is Amos Maiyo. He is twenty-three, tall with long strides, and has never been to Europe. He is slated to go in September and appears to be in excellent condition. He will lead the group of runners today. Within a few minutes other runners arrive, bringing the number to thirteen, and start warming up with rapid kicks, legs bent at the knee.

The group seems large enough but we are waiting for Jason Mbote, who came in second at the Seoul Marathon a few weeks before. Jason is a strong runner, easily the strongest of the group that will be running today and his presence will be a big advantage as he will push the group to perform harder. Among the runners are a 10,000 metre Commonwealth champion and a pacesetter at the Seoul Marathon. The larger the number of strong runners in the group the better – they will maintain the high pace that the group will adhere to, making the training that much more beneficial. It is the same reason there are two women training with the overwhelmingly male group.

At 9:30 and Amos tells us that the group will be move to the starting point. It seems they will train without Jason. It is supposed to be his first Fartlek since he returned from Seoul. It is cool, almost cold. It will still be cool at midday – another reason Iten offers ideal training conditions. It is never too hot so athletes can train all day. The group takes off at an easy pace, running in a tight pack. They cut across a field to avoid the matatu stage and join the road to Kapsowar, past the venerable St. Patrick’s Iten High School, which has produced more world-class runners than any other institution, past the district hospital and long narrow rental houses, which house a number of the athletes training today. Nobody on the road pays much attention to the runners: they are a common sight. We are almost at the starting point when Jason passes with a small group including his wife, sister, brother and two friends. Running has become a family enterprise for them.

There are about thirty runners now gathered at the junction of the access road in conversation. They look relaxed; the five-kilometre run from the main road has barely exerted them. The core group, including Amos Maiyo, Jason Mbote and Alex Kipkosgei, are affiliated with the same management. They train together, support each other and scout new athletes for their management based on their local knowledge of upcoming talent. The rest of the athletes are friends and
acquaintances, who join them for the benefits of group training; many athletes live and train in Iten for this reason – you can constantly pit yourself against the best. Amos Maiyo comes to the car. “One minute slow, one minute fast,” he says. Alex sets his combination wristwatch-stopwatch. The group of runners starts off at the slow pace they used to get here. We follow at a distance.

In a minute Alex’s watch beeps and the runners take off at a furious speed. Feet pound the road, soles of shoes flashing in rapid succession and arms move piston-like at their sides. They keep it up for one minute, which seems like an eternity, then slow down to a one minute recovery jog. They will repeat this alternation twenty-five times for a total of fifty gruelling minutes. After four or five intervals, one of the women in the group drops back. We pass and hear her laboured breathing over the sound of the engine. Her sweat-soaked shirt is plastered to her back and her strained face is set determined lines as she measures the rapidly widening distance between herself and the group.

At thirty minutes, the group is still almost intact. The leaders keep up the relentless pace on the fast sections of the interval. Each subsequent interval is harder, the recovery jog losing its restorative power. The group mentality kicks in, the individual pegging performance on the group, transferring individual tiredness onto the pattern that can be followed automatically beyond each runner’s endurance. I struggle to reconcile the loose relaxed stances of the runners a short while before to the collective will at work here, determined to press forward at all costs, and fall convert to a trite phrase I have heard uttered by many runners: ‘Train hard, win easy.’ Still, a few more people fall back, their bodies failing beyond the point they can get reserves from the group’s progress. We pass them and they are now going at a steady jog. “Well, those ones are just doing a long-run now,” says Alex noting they do not do the speed alternation. We leave them behind. They will try to catch up during the slow sections.

The course takes us through long stretches of access roads that pass between farmland, ploughed red soils preparing for planting, or newly planted with maize. It is dotted with things running winnings have built: we pass Michael Kite’s farm with a stone house, and a large tractor parked outside. He is not shy about the cost of these things, 1.2 million shillings for the house and 800,000 for the tractor. Passing cars tilt to one side of the narrow road to let the runners by. At one place with a deep puddle of muddy water, the athletes form a single file and run on a thin sliver of dry land the edge. If it were the fast part of the interval, they would have had to splash through. Of the people we pass, only the children show excitement and wave, even running behind the athletes for a little while. It is easy to see them as future athletes, easy to see continuity: the children following the runners, mostly young and not yet in their prime earning years, training on roads that take them past symbols of running success. Their time will come and the ranks will keep rejuvenating themselves.

“There are two really bad hills coming up,” Alex says. Until now the course has been rather flat. They are not as fortunate as with the puddle, the climb up both
hills comes at the fast-paced part of the interval. The human body straining at maximum output is a thing of marvel, pounding up the hill and round a curve only to encounter the second hill. Jason is toward the front of the group, which, surprisingly, stays together. He is a gauge for the younger runners. With his experience and high placement in races, they know that their training is going well and will have confidence of measuring up in international meets. There is a flat section and we are back to where we started, having covered a distance of about 17 kilometres. A few runners are bent over, lungs bellowing, sweat evaporating from their foreheads. But they recover quickly, and apart from their soaking shirts, you can barely tell they have just completed an arduous physical task. Various groups leave till the core five runners, who were there first in the morning remain talking, resting their feet against a stump. They will eat, rest and go for an easy run in the evening. When one of the runners passes me in town an hour later in his civilian clothes – a slightly oversized blazer and pressed trousers, he looks like any other farmer on the streets of Iten and I almost don’t recognise him.

Alex never intended to be a runner. He played football while studying at Kenya Medical Training College (KMTC) in Nairobi eventually signing up with Mafuko Bombers in Meru. He attended college during the week and practiced on school grounds, before travelling during the weekend to play for the Bombers. With the state of Kenyan football being what it is, he decided to switch to running. As he points out, “All you need are two pairs of running shoes and some sports clothes.” He began training seriously after college, living with athlete friends in different parts of the country including Njoro and Nairobi. After entering some local races, he came to the notice of a German manager and was soon racing in South Africa. But it is not until he went to Germany and began racing in the European circuit that he started making good money. Utilizing his KMTC training, he found a job at the hospital in Iten and started training before and after work. The job is flexible, allowing him to race several weeks during race season in Europe and come home with ten or fifteen thousand dollars a year.

For every Boston, New York, London, and Vienna marathon there are many smaller races – the Würzburg 10K, Sevenaer Run, The Great Scottish Run, Zwitserlootdakrun – 10K, 15K, half-marathon events modelled after their more prestigious counterparts. The events are part of the towns’ social calendars, with media coverage that attracts sponsors. The races also raise money by charging entry fees to the general public, who in turn enter for the challenge, to raise money for charity, or for just plain fun. Race organizers work with agents and managers to secure places for the Kenyan runners, who set credible race times, and whose formidable reputation brings a certain prestige. This leads to a whole class of middle-tier of athletes who run, not to represent the country in Olympic or world championships, but to make a living. They are journeymen with no illusions; in other words, true professionals.
These middle tier runners live and train in Kenya, and go to Europe for up to three months a year. They stay in small apartments with other runners under the same management, driving from town to town to races every week. The perception of running centres on elite runners who dominate the news. It is far from reality, where a talented, but not necessarily outstanding athlete with training, the right connections to get into the right races, can make enough money to live on, or in some cases to supplement their incomes. This in itself is not an amazing discovery. There exists a whole system to support this industry, from the governing athletic body that oversees the relations between agents and runners, to athletic visa guidelines in the Nairobi embassies of host countries. This is a widely known practice among officials and other sports professionals, but not in the general public consciousness where running is still a thoroughly nationalistic sport.

On Saturday night we go back to Amani Café, site of the bill incident, to have the evening meal. The waitress still doesn’t know who exactly left the bill, nor has she seen him since. The town is slightly raucous and there are still a lot of people walking around. Saturday represents a kind of loosening for the runners as they will not train the following day. Strict diets slacken as we order the only thing left on the menu, chips and fried chicken of a texture that is generously described as flinty. Any other night and we would have insisted on rice or ugali with vegetables. Accompanying us is Elias Kiptum Maindi, Alex’s team-mate and friend. They both come from Nandi and went to the same primary school. Their professional lives converged three years before, when Elias came in third at the Aldai half-marathon held every August by Alex’s organization.

Elias is young, confident and believes he will be running a 2:06 marathon within a year; his half-marathon best is 1:03:06. The world-class time is repeated often, with a mixture of seriousness and jest. He describes an incredible negative split he saw, where the last half of the marathon was completed in three minutes less than the first. He has been competing professionally for two years and this year made good time in various road races, and paced champions including Felix Limo and Martin Lel in the London, Rotterdam and Bonn marathons. The optimism is clear in his open, ready smile. Women like him – from the waitress to the pregnant neighbor who comes often to visit the house he shares with Alex. He tells me she is very happy, believes the baby is good luck, and she will run faster after she delivers. Alex, ever rational, says it must be something to do with the stability attained when they have families that enables them to focus. The whole weekend, Elias is on the phone with someone named Sos. Sos is a friend who works in a bank. The 4,000 dollars (288,000 shillings) he earned pacing the London marathon was wire-transferred by his agent to Sos’s account and he needs to pick up 100,000 shillings to pay for a piece of land, an eighth of an acre, he wants to buy in Iten.
The athletes sleep early on weeknights but today they are among the people walking around. I am curious to see how far this Saturday slackening of their rigorous routine goes. Big races are televised on Sundays at a hall behind the main line of shops. On other days, the community comes to watch European League football. This particular hall belongs to Arsenal fans, and at the bar attached to the hall we find a couple of runners drinking. The walls are the hard-to-escape aqua blue and there are Arsenal posters, banners, ornaments everywhere. The sign above the door reads ‘Highbury.’ Alex, for one, is a strong proponent of the analgesic and sedative powers of alcohol after the Saturday morning long-run. But I have never seen him drink. Elias asks for a soda. At less than sixty kilograms, and coupled with the infrequency of their drinking, the table is really cheerful after only two drinks. There is dancehall music playing and the proprietor takes a turn on the floor. When they find out I am a writer, they ask adamantly not to be identified and the mood dampens. It seems an altercation is imminent when I make assurances of their anonymity and Alex intervenes to back me up. They do not want to be known to race organizers as drinkers and carousers. One of them yells over the music, “And nowadays on the Internet, these things can be seen all over the place. You think anyone will want to book you!”

The place is cramped, with a wooden table and two benches on one side and a small cleared space for dancing. A young woman with blonde braids and skin the same color as her hair comes and sits on one of the runner’s lap. They talk for a few moments then she looks as us and leaves. When she stands I notice her expensive trainers. Even the prostitutes in Iten wear running shoes. I am told there is a small but growing number of prostitutes in the town, drawn by the runners’ money. But the training exhausts them and they rarely came out except on Saturdays: they make for slim business. They continue to come as long as there is money. The runner’s life does not lend itself well to vice. Excessive slackening – rich food, a little too much beer – is immediately felt in one’s performance. Disappointingly, everyone goes home by ten-thirty. The bar will close at eleven.

The following day, we are in a Toyota Townace matatu, a seven passenger model that fills up quickly, racing towards to Eldoret. The day is clear, skies a deep blue. Farmland stretches on each side for miles, broken by small shopping centers every couple of kilometers. Elias accompanies us both to pick up his winnings from Sos and to see Felix Limo, whom we intend to visit to try and gain some insight into what distinguishes a champion from the journeymen. “There is the plot,” Elias says, excited. It is a few kilometers from Iten, just off the main road. I can barely distinguish it from the surrounding farms till he points to a fence as a marker. He hopes to begin building by the end of the year so he can have a permanent residence close to where he trains, and entertains thoughts of starting a family.
Since Felix Limo has asked that we take no pictures of his home, I am not sure what to expect from the athlete ranked at the top or near the top of Road Race Management winnings list for the last two years. The listings for 125,000 to 150,000 dollars do not tally with what I hear on the ground, which estimate his yearly earnings, including a contract with Adidas, at 200,000 to 300,000 dollars. Thunder rumbles above. I ask which way the rains usually go and Alex points to the direction of Mt. Elgon, now obscured by deep gray clouds. “It won’t rain here,” he says. The house is simple, neatly constructed with thin wood boards and an iron sheet roof. The windmill that generates electricity is turning on a rudder to catch the strongest gusts of wind. When you notice Felix, it is for his stillness and unnervingly direct gaze. He has just returned from a win at the London marathon. Casually dressed, the only outward clue of his athleticism is the Adidas cap on his head. Felix is from a village in Nandi not far from where Alex and Elias come from. He gestures for us to sit outside on two wooden benches. A small white Toyota is parked in the middle of the compound. There are a few chickens scratching about and four sheep so puffy with wool they look like overstuffed pillows that have split. He says he is looking for someone to shear them.

We launch immediately into a discussion on his career trajectory. “I realized that I can do something when I almost beat Tergat in Brussels 10,000. I ran 27:04. I realized also I can beat also all these other big guys,” he pauses for a moment and I look to the side. The merinos have moved close behind us and are just standing there, trembling. “In 2001 I realized my potential also was on the road not on the track when I broke the world record of 15 Kilometers, beating Haile Gabresellasie.” He left track for road racing, posting a 2:06 time in 2003 in Amsterdam, his first marathon. He has been running 2:06 since then, and boasts one of the top ten fastest times ever posted in marathon running.

Before that, his primary goal was to complete his education. After finishing high school in 1995, he was called to Maseno to study Information Technology. A fruitless search for a sponsor to pay his fees closed the education avenue and led him to running. His early years were a struggle; training in starts and stops when the shoes he bought in mitumba wore out. A manager made promises of races in Europe that never materialized. “I consolidated some money from my uncles and bought some shoes,” he says, and resumed training till November 1998 brought his first race in Europe. He wants to go back to school when he retires from running, but will not divulge his specific plans.

Felix trains in Kaptagat, a lushly forested area about 30 kilometers south of Iten. He is at home 100 days in the year, races about four weeks abroad, and spends the rest of the time in camp. “You should be at the camp to focus... very important to focus.” He looks around, “You can’t be thinking about rain is coming... The cows need pasture... You have to be away. So that they can be independent. So that they can think for themselves.” The they he refers to are his family, his wife and two children, and other inhabitants in the compound.
An agent I speak to attributes a big part of Felix’s success to the strategy of limiting his events. He races sparingly, attending only four events a year – two half-marathons, and two marathons. “I normally call this half-marathon tune-up race. I have to go see... test. I go there one month before the race [marathon], when I come back I have to evaluate. Where was my weak part? Was it endurance? Was it speed? So I have to work on my weak part so that during the race I know that I am comfortable.” Commentators at the half-marathons have mistakenly written off his performances, not understanding their purpose in his overall strategy. He returns to “prepare for the real war now.” His keen tactical sense is only matched by a fiercely competitive spirit. “You should be thinking about how am I going to win it, and you know winning is money. I am not saying I am not after money. I am after money, but I don’t put money on my mind because it will destroy me during the race. I put it... what I put in my mind is winning.”

Felix is more guarded than any of the other runners I have met so far, balancing the necessity of interacting with journalists while controlling accessibility. His environment is far more telling, the simplicity of his home deceptive. He owns two well-sized rental houses down the road and points to fifteen acres of maize. When Elias asks the price of an acre, Felix holds up eight fingers, one for each hundred thousand. I am also told of houses in Nairobi and possible shares abroad. He preempts what he expects to be my question on the lifestyle he has chosen, which is very deliberately not ostentatious, when he speaks about runners buying big cars and properties they cannot maintain when the earnings slow to a trickle. He seems to be acutely conscious that this is something that could end abruptly, because of injury, and also because high-level competitive sport by its very nature is a temporal pursuit.

After the interview, he loosens up considerably and invites us inside the house for tea. His wife brings out a Jeroboam of a flask and we drink one cup after another. Her waist is swollen with their third child, and the others play outside. She has a warmth and radiance, and as she pours the tea he talks about IT courses she is taking, perhaps moving the family to Nairobi so she can have better job opportunities. As with most runners I meet, a family was always in the calculations, with none of the cynicism toward family structures exhibited by my peers. There are other visitors in an adjoining sitting room and the flask moves back and forth between our table and theirs. A visitors’ book is passed around. There are a lot of recent entries, from Kapsabet, Eldoret and elsewhere, congratulating Felix on his London victory; there is one from a pastor that wishes blessings on the house.

At some point he turns to me and asks why I haven’t started a family. I feint and dodge with murmurs of this and that. I get a view of his ‘It isn’t over till it’s over’ competitive streak when he points to Elias as a candidate, not alarmed at the prospect that Elias is seeing someone; he cites margins I can exploit in order to ensure the results turn in my favour. The message is clear: this is still an open field. I look to Elias for help but he just grins accommodatingly. As Felix walks us
to the matatu stage at the end of the road, he is more expansive, gesturing to his maize farm, the shoots about knee-high. Neighbouring children gathered to play follow our progress along the fence saying, shy at first, but growing more insistent, “Habari mkimbiaji! Habari mkimbiaji!” He is a little amazed at the attention he gets from his little neighbours. Until London, he could walk around in relative anonymity.

The profusion of runners in this region makes jogging as a layman a thing of bravery. Encountering a man on an evening jog in Eldoret’s affluent Elgon Veiw neighbourhood, shirt stretched so tight over a tumid belly you could see the indentation of his navel, a friend remarked archly, “Definitely not one of ours.” So when the runners at the camp offer to don their trainers, on a Sunday no less, and take me for an easy 5 or 7 kilometres, I point to the sandals on my feet and say perhaps another day. We have tea and mandazi near the camp at Victory Café. Again I marvel at the blue walls. We ask for the bill but Elias has paid already and stepped outside. Evans smiles, “Wacha alipe. Si bado ana Euro.” Let him pay, he still has Euros. After breakfast we go to the Keiyo forest a little way off the Kapsowar road and walk the forest courses. Some parts have indigenous and some plantation forest – planted by an area sawmill. Sing’ore Girls, another high school athletic powerhouse, is nearby. On a clearing at the edge of the forest, a few cows graze lazily and the children herding them have fashioned hurdles out of sticks. We watch their game as they race and jump over the obstacles. “Angalia vile wanafanya tizi,” Evans says at their play. He points to one of the children. “Huyo atakuwa mkali sana... Unaona vile ako mweusi na mserious hivyo.” He laughs, “Sikuwa nimeona watu weusi namna hiyo mpaka hapa.”

Evans and Onesmus are from Kisii. They tell me of the decline of the running tradition back in Kisii. When Evans was in primary school, if you were on the track team, your school fees was reduced and if you excelled, your schooling was free. The schools used to nurture runners but have now stopped. So the athletes are getting older and there is a gap between them and the next generation, who are not picking up running shoes, but looking for other pursuits.

“People are allowed in the forest with animals?” Onesmus asks. Alex turns to him, “There is a forest ranger station in there... You try to come even with a knife.” Onesmus has used his part of his winnings in Europe to establish a timber business with his father back in Kisii. Elias points to him, “Huyu alijaribu kubeba power saw kwa hand luggage.” This one tried to carry a power saw in his hand luggage. Howls of laughter follow as incidents of airport scrutiny are remembered, removing shoes, the paranoia carrying even a nail cutter on board can cause. There are speculations about the forests Onesmus must have cleared with his power saws in Kisii while we examine a fallen tree, but from the rough scar, it appears have fallen from other causes.

The runners are well traveled, more than most Kenyans. Among them, they have been to Asia, South America and the Caribbean and most countries in Western
Europe. Yet, they travel very specifically to race, staying in hotel rooms or apartments. It is like a businessman who stays in conference hotel for the duration of a seminar abroad and sees little else. The ‘been to’ airs, that supposed cachet that comes with international travel, are little in evidence. There is consciousness of a deficiency, being from a small town or a village; one of them expresses anxiety about navigating Nairobi despite having been to various European capitals. When traveling, the runners usually depend on their managers. Visas are arranged by sending a letter to the Nairobi embassies of host countries and the Kenyan athletic federation. Managers also handle air tickets, housing and local travel. The famous ‘breakdown’ is given to the athlete at the end of the competitive season, sometimes on the way to the airport. Onesmus shakes his head, “Hata hiyo chai mlitunjwa itakuwa hapo... Na wewe umekimbia race ya 20 Euro.” Even that tea you both drank will be on the list...

And yet you have run a race of 20 Euro. He tells the story of when he still new in the circuit and he kept accepting his agent’s generous offers of tea throughout the season, not knowing he was the one paying for them. It is at this time the agent calculates your net earnings, which are your winnings minus air ticket, food, accommodation, transport, incidentals, and, because it is business, his own 15% cut. Usually, the breakdown will include the mileage of the trip he has taken driving you to the airport, and the parking fee he will pay leaving the airport after you are long gone, flying over some ocean on your way back to Kenya.

Any given morning driving the 30 kilometres from Iten to Eldoret, one will encounter groups of runners training; and from Eldoret another 45 kilometres southwest to Kapsabet. For the first part of the trip Alex sits in the back row of the Toyota Townace with agent Gerard van der Veen, owner of Volare Sports of Wezep, Netherlands. The Townace *matatu* has been rented for the day and has a ‘Private’ sign on the dashboard where the destination sign ordinarily sits – we are on our way to the Nandi North track and field district competition at Kapsabet’s Kipchoge Keino stadium. Alex and Gerard map out the schedule for the day – a visit to Martin Lel’s camp before the stadium to meet athletes, meet athletes at the Kapsabet competition, on the way back, stop in Eldoret and meet some athletes, and return to Iten and meet a few more athletes before the end of the day. “Every week I get 4, 5, 6 emails from athletes asking for management. But I want to screen them. Because, of course, I am looking for the strongest athletes. Alex does the research for me and when he says ok that is a strong guy or strong lady, I try to invite them for 5 or 6 races where they earn back their ticket and make some money.” After these initial small races, Gerard will evaluate their performances and decide whether to invite them back the next season. But the athletes also have various managers to pick from. Amos Maiyo, who led the Fartlek training a few weeks before, has decided to sign up with another agent and is now racing in Brazil. For Amos the chance to race immediately, as opposed to waiting out the months till September, was the decisive factor. “He couldn’t wait,” Gerard says, shrugging his shoulders. “But there are many athletes.”
Gerard is in Kenya for a week and a half to visit the runners he represents, as well as recruit new athletes. He is animated and has a loud expansive laugh and his face tanned and red. He is dressed in track pants, a red sports shirt and has brought some Adidas goodies for everyone, because most of the Volare athletes are sponsored by Adidas. Dark running shades cover his eyes and inside a pair of prescription lenses are attached onto the frame, so that when indoors and he needs to see something he will squint then put on his shades. He started out as a footballer playing semi-pro in The Netherlands. At 32 his career was cut short by injury that left him unable to play. He had hoped to play until at least 35. In 2004, two months before the Athens Olympics, Pieter Langerhorst, a fellow Dutchman and husband to Lorna Kiplagat, asked if he was interested in taking over Pieter’s management practice, he jumped at the chance to get back into sports. At 50 he had remained around sports, helping organize an annual race in his home town, but he now worked for property management company, overseeing the rental of 10,000 homes in the northern part of the country. He still expresses a little anxiety at leaving the stability of a good steady pay for something far less certain.

“But this year I get this guy into London on my own,” Gerard says, pointing to Elias. The race will build Elias’s name among organizers and soon they will invite him as one of the elite athletes, the natural and upward progression from pacemaker. I ask if it is truly a competition if the pacemakers can’t finish the race and he tells me that along with the ‘Pace’ back tags they wear, they are usually given chest numbers so they can complete the race, but that is not in the strategy. “He will be ready for marathon next year... maybe year after,” Gerard says. Pacemakers are chosen from road racers with good 10K, 15K and half-marathon times. They have to be fast and lead the elite athletes up to contractually agreed-upon distances then they drop out, leaving one of the elite athletes to break the tape at the finish line. The elite runners are not always content to follow the ‘Pace’ jerseys and are known to put on the pressure. At Bonn, Peter Chemei would come dangerously close to overtaking the pacemakers while exclaiming, “Chunga Unga! Chunga Unga!” Guard your flour, or take care of your bread, which you will lose if I pass you. Tegla Lorupe had male pacemakers when she set the women’s marathon world record. Some race organizers protested, but when their complaints were not heard, they started to use male pacemakers in their own races. The first year London used male runners to pace the female athletes, Paula Radcliffe broke the record by more than four minutes. “I don’t care if they brought in fresh pacesetters at 15 Kilometers. As long as they did not pull her or carry her, then that is her record,” says Alex, ending that discussion for now.

We get to Martin Lel’s camp and there about twenty athletes around in that uniform I have learnt to recognize as what they wear during rest: sports shirt, jeans and clean running shoes, a different pair from the ones used in training.
Elias points to Martin’s car and Gerard responds, laughing, “Yes, you can buy
good car when you run good marathon.” Elias trained at this camp before moving
to Iten. He is eager to repay the favour by introducing Martin Le l’s runners to his
agent. “Arsenal, Oxygen!” says Gerard, shaking Martin’s hand vigorously and
pointing to his shirt. “I am sorry I couldn’t come to London. We already had four
races that day and I promised Wilfred Kigen I would go to the Hamburg
Marathon.” Gerard’s daughter accompanied Elias to London, where Martin came
in second to Felix Limo. Along with his daughter, Gerard’s son-in-law has scaled
back his work week to three days to help build the agency and accompany the
athletes when there are simultaneous races in different cities. They go to the
house and talk prospects for various runners while the young athletes from the
camp sit outside.

By the number of athletes in the 5,000 metre heats at the Nandi North district
competition, an onlooker can be forgiven for thinking it is the provincial
championships. According to the MC somewhere in the depths of the red-roofed
podium on the far side of the field, 25% of the athletes who will go on to represent
Rift Valley in the nationals will be from this district. The disembodied, amplified
voice acknowledges Gerard’s entrance into the stadium with, “Sasa hata ndio
huyo mzungu ameingia,” drawing attention to Gerard, who, since it was said in
Swahili, continues to move obliquely to the centre of the field. His purpose here
immediately recognized and a few coaches and runners approach. Gerard and
Alex are particularly interested in the 5,000 metre and 10,000 metre runners as
they have the most potential to turn into road racers. The coach talking to Gerard
has four athletes in the front. He shouts to them as they pass, “Stride! Stride!
Arms! Those are my boys,” he says pointing to them. “I tell them don’t overtake
on the straight... only on the curve.”

The flag blows in stiff intermittent breezes above the podium, which has
structural columns painted in horizontal bands of black, red, white and green.
The tamped earth track is marked with even white lanes, and the middle grassy
part has an official yelling at people crossing, unaware they might be in range of
missile shot put balls and discuses. There is a 200 meters heat with an electric
finish that has spectators standing and shouting. The races are interrupted by a
brief intense rainstorm with big raindrops that pockmark the soil on the track.
Spectators take cover in the few shelters then return to their places around the
field to cheer the 800 meters heats. The races are also interrupted by official
speeches punctuated by 1-2-3 funga fungua claps that barely register with the
spectators across the field and seem to be restricted to the podium and the
seating area immediately behind it. The MC issues an effusive invitation to the
new District Commissioner, who has popped in to watch the competition for a
few minutes. The DC looks across the field and wonders at gaps in the spectators
lining the field. He asks the local council to support the athletes, as they will
return home to invest their winnings. “Even though they invest in Eldoret... It
still helps,” he says. There is applause as more officials jockey for position and a
chance at the microphone.
The district competition is one of a series organized by Athletics Kenya (AK), formerly Kenya Amateur Athletics Association (KAAA), the body that administers athletics in Kenya is responsible for, among other things, scheduling the athletics calendar, ensuring meets are carried out according to the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) standards, protecting Kenyan athletes by vetting foreign managers and agents, and selecting and training the teams that represent the country in international events. Their headquarters is Riadha House near Nyayo Stadium, where the executive committee sits. The executive committee is replicated in each of the fifteen provincial offices made of the eight administrative provinces, the large ones broken up and entities that have historically produced talented runners in sizable numbers. They are: South Rift, North Rift, Southern (South part of Eastern province), Eastern, South Nyanza, North Nyanza, Central, Western, Nairobi, Coast, North-Eastern, Public Universities, Armed Forces, Police and Prisons. There is a concerted effort to discover talent from all over the country, and in organizations with a culture of recruiting runners and nurturing them.

There are two seasons: cross country from January to April, and track and field from early November to January. The process for organizing each season is the same. AK schedules five weekend meets during the track and field season and invites the fifteen provinces to bid for them. The provinces bid and five provinces win. These events will be held at least a week apart, sometimes as much as two weeks apart to give athletes a chance to recover. The events provide the stage for runners to show themselves and meet agents and managers. It also enables teams from different parts of the country to compete against each other and gauge their strengths and weaknesses. AK then opens the calendar for the provinces, organizations and sponsors to co-ordinate events and submit them to complete the calendar. The AK curtain raiser race is open to everyone who can afford to go. Participants have to pay their own transportation and accommodation costs. Individual runners, groups from camps, organizations and universities will all attend bringing together athletes from the breadth of the spectrum. The same applies to the other four AK events held in different provinces during the season. In between the five AK meets are events organized by corporate sponsors such as banks and telecommunications companies, usually open to all, and events restricted to geographical location and organization, that is races within the province or within the armed forces. The geographical races move from districts to provinces in a bracket that gets smaller as the best runners qualify. The armed forces and all districts will compete on the same day one week. Prisons, police and all administrative provinces will compete on one day the next week. The races are scheduled on the same day so that the same person is not running for Prisons and North Rift, giving the maximum number of people a chance to qualify. This culminates in the national championship, where the team to represent the country in international competition is selected.

AK does not run a permanent national training camp. The selected team goes on to train at a teachers college or other facility near Nairobi for two months, before they proceed to the international championships. Considering the success that
Kenyan runners have had and continue to have in the world, the gap is evident and surprising. This is a frustration expressed across the board in the running world. AK in turn points to the Ministry of Culture and Sports, and the lack of policies related to athletics. Asked about the policies in place, a former AK official laughs ruefully and looks at me, “What policies? In my day when you went to ask the Ministry for money, they say they have finished the budget... Taking choirs to sing in State House.” The appointment of officials on a political basis regardless of qualification, or more importantly interest in the field, has been cited as a problem in policy making. A former head of the Committee of Stadiums was once heard to ask, “Hiyo 800, wanapiga kiwanja mara ngapi?” That 800 [meters], how many times do they circle the track. Of AK’s nearly 90 million shilling income in 2005, 49 million was a grant from Nike, 13.6 million from the IAAF and 1.5 million from agent fees. Local grants are up with Standard Chartered Bank at 19.1 million. The Ministry of Sports contributed 3.4 million. The bulk of the money was spent on administration (19.7 million) and athletic meets (60 million). Only 6.6 million was spent on developing talent.

At the same time people complain about the lack of development resources and the athletic federation’s entrenched bureaucracy being resistant to change, they take matters into their own hands. Two places in particular, Kip Keino’s Training Center and Lorna Kiplagat’s High Altitude Training Center, are setting new standards with high-level facilities. The Kip Keino Training Centre is listed by the IAAF as one of seven High Performance Training Centres in the world. It represents an investment in the third and fourth generations of Kenya running. The centre is located on a section of several hundred acres of farmland that Kipchoge Keino owns just outside Eldoret. There is also a children’s home and a primary school on the farm. Once the home of EATEC, which used to grow wattle trees to tan leather, but has since gone out of business. The growing middle class and newly affluent, including a few runners, has bought land here. There are still ‘For Sale’ signs along the road, and tilled deep red soils and muddy roads, like elsewhere in the Uasin Ngishu plateau. Lines of wattle trees have been left on the borders of the farms to act as windbreakers. There is the vague smell of wattles in the air, not as overpowering a smell as when it was a plantation. In the distance is the old factory and small houses where plantation workers used to live.

There is a marked contrast with the athletes’ quarters in Iten, but still far from luxurious, more neat, ordered, and comfortable. The stone house with two wings feels like part of a well-run national school. The door opens into a huge lounge with a high ceiling, various books and posters on running, including a poster of Kipchoge during his competing heyday, and a long dining room with seating for thirty. “My work here is development,” says Ian Choge, director of the centre, as he looks at the gym facility. The centre favours long-term training plans and is training athletes for the 2008 Beijing Olympics, focusing on middle distances. They only train athletes who are young and do not have management yet.
The IOC sponsors athletes they pick at various meets. They pay $1200/month per person. Sometimes countries without training facilities also sponsor their athletes to train at the centre. There are athletes here from different countries from the recently completed commonwealth games, from Mauritius, Guyana and Malawi mixed in with Kenyan runners. The runners stay two to three in a room with private bathrooms in each. There is a room attendant, a cateress who is also a matron, two coaches and a physiotherapist. Progress is measured in numbers, more specifically in qualifying times. Though the centre’s specialty is middle-distance, there are also two sprinters training for 400 meters. “It takes many years to build a sprinter,” Ian says stressing something I hear when I talk to people in the athletics world. As a country, Kenya has capitalized on traditional strengths in middle and long distance running, extending to cross country and marathon, without developing new events. But there is a history of sprinting, evidenced by the gold medal win in the men’s 4 x 400 metre relay at the 1972 Olympics in Munich.

Nearby Eldoret shows in its changing skyline new ways that runners are investing: commercial real-estate. Moses Kiptanui, acknowledged locally to be one of the most successful investors, owns the large five-storey Komora Plaza that leases two floors to Tusker Mattress and the other floors to offices. There is a new hotel belonging to Moses Tanui at the edge of the town. And the two adjoining buildings of Sakong plaza in the middle of town belong to Sammy Korir. There is also the continued farming culture. Athletes can be seen at Will’s Pub on Uganda Road before buying feed for their cattle, fertilizer at the agricultural supply shop next door. People acknowledge them with a wave, but they are part of the town and not usually regarded any special attention. Eldoret was for many years a farming town and many enterprises are farming related; the feed and fertilizer shop, the seed shop, the tractor shop are common sights as you walk the streets. With the coming of Moi University, the town has seen an influx of people. In addition to the runners, the university lecturers, staff and students have brought new wealth into the town. I count five campuses: Main Campus, one just outside town for the MBA program, Chepkoilel on the road to Iten, Eldoret West near Kenya Pipeline, and the huge medical school complex in town complete with classrooms, teaching hospital and dormitories that has converted the town into the leading regional medical center.

About a year ago I was walking down a corridor of an international financial organization in Washington DC, the kind that makes headlines withholding aid to poor countries, when I got lost. At the assistants pool in the middle of the open-plan floor I stopped to ask for directions and a girl looked at me in the way Kenyans recognize each other at 500 paces when abroad then studiously ignore each other or burst into conversation. One of her co-workers was near and witnessed our conversation then remarked on my height and asked if I ran. I grudgingly admitted to erratic jogging. The Kenyan girl’s name was Njambi, so it was obvious she was from the central part of the country. She could not tell from my Christian name, so asked where I was from; and from name and place of
origin we could tell each other’s tribes without having to ask explicitly. It was also the region where a large percentage of runners come from. Njambi laughed and said to her friend, “They run, but we run the economy.”

Kenyan running is still perceived very much as Kalenjin running, yet the time we feel most Kenyan is when we see the athletes standing on the podium, sometimes on all top three places, draped in the national flag. Since the Kenya team first came out in 1954 in the Commonwealth Games in Canada and the Olympics in Melbourne two years later, the country has rallied around sporting events. By the 1968 and 1972 Olympics, Kenyan athletes had come of age, winning gold medals and cementing the reputation of Kenyan running in the world, continuing athletic dominance in the successive decades, until present day.

With all that has been made of the base advantage of Kenyan runners: high altitude, the lack of modern amenities that have them running long distances to school or to fetch water or to raid cattle, great amounts of milk drank and unprocessed foods eaten, the observable is far more awe inspiring than the mythical. Large reserves of mental strength are required to face the cold Iten mornings, along with laser-like focus to overcome the tedium of daily repetitious training sessions, and the endurance to take the punishing physicality of the sport. The question of why people excel at anything is more and more convincingly answered with the perfection of a skill through vigorous training. And not just consistent training, but training geared to specific goals. Of course some people are more athletic, but without the years spent training they would never have become the champions they are today.

On my last Sunday in Iten I go to church with Elias and Gerard. The road to the church has women with headscarves and embellished cardigans, men in jackets and little girls in frilly white dresses. Nike caps and trainers indicate the athletes. Elias stops outside to greet the priest, who is waiting at the back of a procession that spans the length of the church. We enter through the side doors, while the procession sings and dances and leads the priest into the church. The church roof is high, with high narrow windows and the fourteen stages of the way of the cross depicted on the walls. The service is in a mixture of Swahili and Kalenjin, with the priest given to bursting into popular songs and swaying. His sermon is about identifying oneself as a Christian in the world and mixes the religious, secular and political. He defines Christianity as a party just like a political party and soon has soon the congregation frantically making the sign of the cross, waving one finger, two fingers, three, and then a fist. Just outside stands St. Patrick’s Iten, the center of an athletic movement that spilled outside the school boundaries and became and integral part of the community, drawing young people to Iten as long as running is the most lucrative opportunity open to them, and the infrastructure to make their dreams a reality exists, and also because the champions winning medals, marathons and making money are not remote figures, but people they know from their villages and towns.