

The Things Runners Have Built

Jackie Lebo takes us to Eldoret, Kenya where development is taking place thanks to the investment of earnings of Kenyan runners.

On this hot Saturday in early June, it seems half of Eldoret has come to shop for groceries at Tusker Mattresses Supermarket. The parking lot across the road is full. People come out, from whole families laden with paper bags branded with the supermarket logo to lone women balancing bags on their heads braving the blistering sun on their long walk home.

Tusker Mattresses Supermarket is located on two floors of the five-story Komora Centre, a large building in the middle of town that covers almost an entire city block. It is owned by Moses Kiptanui, the runner who dominated the 3000 m steeplechase races for about five years in the nineties. Kiptanui broke world records, won awards, and the only thing that eluded him was the Olympic gold, which he lost by a razor thin margin to fellow Kenyan Joseph Keter in the 1996 Atlanta games. The steeplechase is special. Even more than other middle and long distance races that have brought Kenyans fame, Kenyan steeplechasers have won all eight times they entered during the last ten Olympics. In 1976 and 1980 Kenya boycotted the Olympics. It is fitting that Kiptanui, one of Kenya's most successful athletes, is now one of the largest athlete-investors in Eldoret.



Eldoret is experiencing a property boom, with growth rates of almost 8%, three times the national average. The changing skyline shows the continuing investment of runners in commercial real estate. There is a new hotel belonging to Moses Tanui at the edge of the town. And the two adjoining buildings of Sakong House in the middle of town belong to Sammy Korir, who clocked the second fastest marathon time ever. As I tour the town with young runners who are just starting out, they point to the properties with the acute realization that if they keep at it long and hard enough, they have a chance at these things their predecessors have built.



This is why many young people with little opportunity available to them have turned to running. The barriers to entry are low. All you need is two pairs of training shoes and sports clothes, easily bought at mitumba, second hand clothing vendors that line the streets of every town and centre in Kenya. The aspiring athletes flock to numerous training camps within a 40 kilometer radius of Eldoret and begin the rigorous training regimen with hopes of earning a living from sports. Not all of them will become elite athletes, but with enough training, they stand a good chance of finding an agent and breaking into the lucrative European circuit. After four, five years on the circuit with average earnings of one million shillings a year, an athlete can build a house, buy a

farm and join the mainstay of the area – agriculture. Or they can start a business with the running winnings and, if managed properly, it can sustain them and their families for the rest of their lives.

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 prominent. One of the young runners I meet is in the process of buying a small farm, an eighth of an acre, with the winnings he earned on his first year on the European circuit. Elias Kiptum Maindi is about to begin his sophomore year on the circuit and he is already planning to dig foundations on a stone house with this year's winnings. But he is also looking for other ways to keep and grow his earnings. The word of the moment is 'investment,' and the younger athletes talk more and more of putting their earnings into shares of companies traded at the Nairobi Stock Exchange. At a recent investment forum organized by Keino Sports Marketing, a sports management company run by Martin Keino, a professional runner for ten years, Fine Touch Communications, a company run by Paul Tergat, world marathon record holder, and a facilitated by one of the biggest investment firms in Kenya, 100 runners attended to learn what they could do with their money.

At stake is the approximately 500 Million shillings a year that is earned in running prize money abroad, in Europe, Asia, America, that comes back into the local economy. The exact numbers of how the money is spent once it comes into the country are not known, but by what can be observed, a large portion goes into real estate and agriculture.



Apart from investing in farming or real estate, other athletes have invested back into running. Kip Keino's Training Center, located within of several hundred acres of farmland that Kipchoge Keino owns just outside Eldoret is setting new standards in training facilities. and The centre is listed by the IAAF (International Association of Athletic Federations) as one of seven High Performance Training Centres in the world. It represents an investment in the third and fourth generations of Kenya running. In contrast to the camps scattered around Eldoret and Iten which focus on road running, the centre focuses on developing middle and long distance track champions. Currently the athletes in the centre are preparing for the Beijing Olympics in 2008. Another notable training facility is Lornah Kiplagat's High Altitude Training Centre in Iten. It offers opportunities for aspiring women athletes to succeed by sponsoring them at the centre and providing food, accommodation and a state-of-the-art gym so the athletes can focus on training.



Kenyan running continues to evolve into an increasingly professional sport from nationalist beginnings in the 1960s. This has turned running into a viable line of work, and an alternate to the university education leading to middle-class professionalism that was desirable and for many years thought to be the surest way to achieve a successful life.