

THE RUNNING KING: Is Eliud Kipchoge the greatest of all time?

It has been 11 days since Eliud Kipchoge broke the World marathon record in Berlin, Germany. We are at Eldoret Sports Club, a convoy of vehicles is assembling to take him for a grand homecoming of the running king in Eldoret town centre. Eliud is lean, sinewy and nondescript in casual clothes. He wears a dark polo shirt, running shoes and a branded cap.

He stands, a lonesome figure watching the proceedings. With the vast Eldoret Sports Club fields behind him, he is like a pensive groom psyching himself amidst the fuss at his own wedding. Eliud is not big on the fanfare. When he broke the world record, he sneaked back into Eldoret, almost unnoticed. But as the brand ambassador of Isuzu East Africa, he knows that he has to go through the paces of being a sports celebrity. Today he receives a brand new double cabin pick up. Eliud is keenly aware that he belongs to the people of Nandi, Uasin Gishu, the Kalenjin Nation, Kenya and to the world of sport.

His words are measured. His tone of voice low, and demands the rapt attention of a congregant in the presence of a respected *padre*. Sports journalists have warned of Eliud's crisp responses and his zen-like presence that deflates the exuberance of an eager interviewer seeking easy sound bites.

The previous evening at the 64 bar, Eliud had met a party of event organizers who briefed him on the next day's proceedings. 64 is a decently designed sports bar with a series of private enclosures that surround an open area with a large drop-down screens just like a sports arena. The lead organiser Dancan Muhindi had warned that Eliud is a stickler for time. We arrived 15 minutes late to find him seated alone in one of the cubicles ordering a cup of tea.

To say Eliud is humble is an understatement. The power of Eliud's humility emerges like a gust of hot air from an open sauna door, yet he is under no illusion of the weight of his celebrity. As a consummate professional, he treats all who seek his attention with a measure of respect that demands reciprocation. Dancan runs him through the elaborate programme and he raises no concerns. Caleb the PR liaison, warns him of the Kenyan media obsession with race earnings. "The

money question is going to come up because the local press have not spoken to you post-Berlin.”

He brushes off the concern as he smiles assuredly. “It is more about performance, not money”.

Eliud holds a PhD in the art of maintaining a low profile. Even in his home town Eldoret, he cuts such an ordinary presence running his errands unnoticed. When prodded by BBC journalist Lynne Wachira about the absence of any celebration after his return from Berlin, he replies nonchalantly, “ The best celebration moment was when I crossed the finish line”. 30 plus million Kenyans celebrated his win. That was enough. There was no need to stretch the festivities. He finds the razzmatazz off-putting, “Celebrations can be distracting. I try to control those thoughts so that they do not interfere with my training”.

At 10 am at the Eldoret Sports Club, Eliud hops onto the back of a screaming red Isuzu Momo pick up. With raised suspension and high profile tyres towering above the rest of the cars in the convoy, Eliud’s small frame, is akin to a man riding an elephant through the streets. A police outrider with a blue flickering light, leads the convoy as it snakes into Eldoret’s mid-morning town centre traffic.

People stop to stare at the raised car in the middle of the convoy trying to make out the fuss. A man in the lead picks up screams into his microphone like a town crier, “There he is, the one in the dark blue T-shirt, the one you have seen on your screens, the champion of the world, Honourable Eliud Kipchoge”. Crowds stare, for even in Eldoret, the land of champions, Eliud is not instantly recognizable. The car that Eliud rides atop of is initially getting more attention than the champion himself.

As the caravan enters Eldoret’s town centre, a group of women in aprons, arranging empty maize sacks burst into a spontaneous cheer. Eliud smiles brightly and gives them a thumbs up sign. Drivers and passengers lean out of their windows, trying to catch a glance of the figure causing a traffic jam. Slowly, people start to recognise him and petrol station attendants, *boda boda* riders, watchmen and market loaders, run to the edge of the street to greet the King of the road. Camera phones are trained on him, Eliud just smiles and waves gently, trying to acknowledge those who shout out his name with full eye contact. Even riding ostentatiously in a showy car, the sense of his humility is apparent.

Humility is a family trait, confirms his older brother Wilson. Eliud is only bullish during a marathon race contest where his victory is predetermined and he bursts to the front like the bossman he is, leading from gun to tape while racing against the clock.

The caravan returns to Eldoret Sports Club after about an hour of raising a ruckus in Eldoret town centre at times bringing it to a standstill. In tow, is a multitude of friends, admirers, county heads, ordinary Kenyans and a small group of street boys who ran alongside the convoy in delight all the way to the club from town, a distance of 2kms.

Eldoret Sports Club comprises a single colonial building, painted white with a streak of blue that stares out at rugby, football, volleyball and cricket pitches. The club was started in 1930 as a space for white privilege and it still stands defiant as a British colonial relic. It contains a snooker room and the sign to the toilets is still labelled 'cloakrooms'. A legacy of sports that was white as its exterior walls, has faded. Club rugby and cricket died in Eldoret by the late 90s as athletics rose like a phoenix to rule supreme.

A comedic MC keeps the gathering lively as a host of guests speakers heap praises on Eliud's accomplishments. When Eliud eventually gets up to speak, the gathering laughs as soon as he says he going to give a short speech. He is man of few words in a literal sense. His keynote address is sub 3 minutes. He is generous in his gratitude to his sponsors for the gift of a new car, to his family for their support but he laces his short speech with his now hallmark wisdom quotes.

"Champions do not become champions when they win an event".

He is sharing the moment and stage with his athletic family, those broad shoulders he stood on to reach dizzy heights. When Eliud trains, he is only one among a gang of up to 30 elite runners. There might only be room for one winner on the podium but it takes a team to produce a champion.

"100 per cent of myself is nothing compared 1 per cent of the whole team."

Over 20 Elite athletes representing three decades of distance running excellence are in attendance. A number who hail from Eliud's Nandi County. The most recognisable are Ezekiel Kemboi 3000m steeplechase Olympic gold medalist

popular for his cartoonish celebratory dance antics and Gladys Cherono, the Berlin marathon women's three-time champion. The rest of the company is also world class. They are either Olympic medalists or world marathon and cross country champions.

The achievement list of this cast could run a few pages long. Richard Limo, Valentine Kipketer, Hilary Sambu, Meshack Koech, Philemon Rono, Sally Kipyiego, Anthony Maritim, Amos Kipruto, Laban Korir, Mike Kigen, Geoffrey Kamworor, Conseslus Kipruto, Augustine Choge, Emmanuel Korir, Brimin Kipruto, Elijah Lagat and Patrick Sang. They are Eliud's extended family in more ways than one.

Seated on the high table is Eliud's coach and mentor, Patrick Sang who won silver medals in all World 3000m majors and his assistant, Coach Richard Meto who predicted Eliud breaking the World Record after his winning performance at 2017 Berlin marathon. Elijah Lagat who won the Berlin marathon in 1997 and the Boston marathon in 2000, helped Eliud get his first passport.

Augustine Choge, the 3000m Junior World Record holder describes Eliud as a fatherly figure even though he is only two years his junior. Brimin is his training partner and calls him a brother. Geoffrey Kamworor proclaims Eliud as his mentor. He wore Eliud's shoes for good luck and won the World Cross Country Half Marathon in 2017. Gladys Cherono describes Eliud as a village mate.

But it is Patrick Sang whose fate is seemingly entwined with Eliud's. Eliud's mother was Sang's nursery school teacher and they hail from the same Kapsisiywa village. Sang talks about Eliud like a proud father. He recalls Eliud's humble beginnings. He remembers a persistent young man, who would ask for his training programmes. Eliud kept returning months later after implementing the programme and demanding a new one. Sang would forget who the adamant young man was. "And who are you?" he would demand, and the polite Eliud would reply, " I am the one you gave the training programme to, and I won the nationals. Now I want you to train me. I am also your neighbour back home".

In 2002, Patrick Sang and Eliud began the journey that would lead to the world record after joining Sang at the Global Sports Management camp in Kaptagat. It is for this reason Sang describes Eliud as a visionary, a man with the uncanny ability to dream up an audacious future and put in the work to achieve his

dreams. Patrick Sang was a three-time silver medalist in world majors never winning gold. Elijah Lagat reckons that Eliud, like a good son, has become what his athletic father was meant to be.

What's in a name. Eliud's mother, Janet Rotich, gave her youngest child the name Eliud, a Christian name from the Bible, mentioned in the Gospel of Matthew. It means *God is my praise*. In the science of numerology, people named Eliud have a deep inner desire to lead. The destiny analysis of the name Eliud is packed with virtues. Wise. Firm. Destined to be rich. Resilient. Pragmatic.

The name Kipchoge among the Nandi people of Kalenjin means, of (prefix Kip) the granary (choge). Janet Rotich claims no special premonition for choosing that name. He was not named after his famous namesake who also hails from Nandi county. The illustrious Kipchoge Keino was the first of the great runners that Kenya has produced. A two-time world record holder, Kipchoge dramatically won the 1968 Mexico Olympic gold in the 1500m race leading by 20 metres. Suffering from gallstones, he ran 2 miles to the Olympic stadium after his bus got stuck in traffic, registered just in time and carried the gold. Kipchoge Keino was the greatest distance runner of his time and if truly a name contains symbolic power, the name Kipchoge could not have landed on a more appropriate heir.

In the year 1984, when Eliud was born, Steve Jones from the UK held the marathon world record at 2:08:05. In 2003 as an 18-year-old Eliud announced his presence to the athletic world in 5000m in Paris IAAF championships. He upset world champs and favourites Hicham El Guerrouj and Kenenisa Bekele. In that same year, his countryman, 34-year-old Paul Tergat broke the world marathon record in Berlin with a time of 2:04:55. Sixteen years later, Eliud Kipchoge would break this world record in Berlin also two months short of his 34th birthday.

Eliud says, "No human is limited". He should know for he has spent his career shattering the glass ceiling of limits. Conseslus Kipruto, the reigning Olympic and World champion in the steeplechase is a witness to Eliud's phenomenal spirit. "When Eliud says he will deliver, he delivers". It all depends on what you choose to believe about human limitations. Perhaps a hint on how Eliud makes the impossible a reality can be found in a quote from a book that left a lasting impression on him titled "Who moved my Cheese" by Spencer Johnson. "What would you do if you weren't afraid?"

But the motivational business fable only scratches the surface of Eliud's spirit. Maybe some clues can be found in Nelson Mandela's favourite poem *Invictus* by William Henley that ends with these powerful lines, "I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul".

Running is a mental sport, and talent is nothing without mental fortitude. Eliud knew he was going to break the world record at the 30km mark at 1:26. This is because he had run that race countless times in his mind and in training. "You can only run what you have run in training".

Eliud has been watering his tree of discipline for two decades now. I recall a quote that I had read in a feature article where he says "Discipline equals freedom." He tells me with an uncharacteristic seriousness bordering on irritation of a teacher reprimanding a student for missing the obvious truth of a repeated lesson. "It is not just discipline. It is self-discipline. That means going against your impulses. Don't be a slave to your impulses. Then you are free". That self-discipline has produced 9 marathon wins out of 10 and a world record.

What next after 2:01:39 in Berlin? Is it time for retirement like Usain Bolt? Those who know Eliud intimately like Patrick Sang and Augustine Choge state without the slightest hesitation that we are yet to see the best of him. During the Nike Sub 2 marathon attempt, he missed the mark by a mere 25 seconds. On his Facebook cover page banner is the time 1:59:59 and it stares at us like the audacity of hope.