



Eliud Kipchoge and the Transcendent Power of Sports

By Dancan Muhindi



Once every few decades comes a sports hero, a legend, who transforms and ignites their discipline far beyond its traditional boundaries to inspire millions of people who would otherwise have little interest in that sport.

In football, we had the remarkable Edson Arantes do Nascimento, also known as Pele, and the mercurial Diego Maradona. In boxing, we had the poetic Muhammad Ali and the rage of “Iron” Mike Tyson. In basketball, we had the versatile Michael Jordan. In athletics, we had the exciting sprinter Usain Bolt. In golf, the resilient Tiger Woods. In tennis, the dominant sisters Venus and Serena Williams. In the marathon, we now have the philosophical Eliud Kipchoge.

12th October 2019. The time is 8am, the temperature is 9 degrees centigrade at the Reichsbrücke (German for *Imperial Bridge*) in Vienna, Austria. Eliud and seven members of his elite team of pacemakers jog up and down a 50-meter stretch behind the starting point of the INEOS 1:59 Challenge Race on the gentle slope of the bridge. To their left, the 119-year old St. Francis of Assisi Church can barely be seen through the mist lifting slowly from Europe’s second-longest river, the Danube.

Hundreds of excited fans make their way through the grey chilly morning to the bridge. Thousands

more line up the race route on both sides of the iconic Hauptallee in the Prater park, known to local runners as “the green lung of Vienna” due to the fresh air from the trees along the 4.3 km straight avenue. The anticipation among the fans is palpable as they seek vantage positions before the start of the race.

Many are convinced that they are on the verge of witnessing a once in a lifetime sporting spectacle. Among them are scores of Kenyans who have travelled from neighboring countries and others all the way from Kenya, eager to cheer their national legend.

Eliud Kipchoge, the world marathon record holder is once more set to make athletic history. At precisely 15 minutes past 8am, the announcer counts down the clock by 15 seconds. The crowds cheer, and the race is on.

One hour, 59 minutes and 40 seconds later, Eliud spectacularly sprints through the finish line at the Prater park becoming the first man in history to run a marathon in under two hours. The watching world collectively bursts out in celebration peppered with a sense of relief. Athletics’ last great barrier has been shattered, paving the way into a new frontier no one can quite define.

For several months, the event organizers have rallied behind Eliud’s personal philosophy that “no human is limited” to galvanize the world around a profound idea, an experiment in stretching the capabilities of the human body. The one thing that was never in doubt among supporters and cynics was that if there was anyone capable of running a marathon in under two hours, it had to be Eliud Kipchoge.

Sir Jim Ratcliffe, Britain’s richest man and founder of INEOS, expressed his confidence and trust in Eliud’s ability to run a sub-two marathon right from the announcement of the 1:59 Challenge Race in May 2019.

“Eliud is the best marathoner there’s ever been, and he’s still getting better. He’s the only man currently who can break the 2-hour barrier,” Sir Ratcliffe said.

During the same occasion, Eliud had no hesitation in saying that he was equal to the task. “My mind is saying that I’m going to do it. So my heart and mind is on 1:59. The secret is believing and trusting in my capabilities that I can do it,” he explained.

In writing himself into the history books, Eliud ran an average speed of two minutes and fifty seconds every kilometer across the entire 42-kilometer course. That this feat that would commence at the Reichsbrücke was even more fascinating for someone described by sports commentators as the greatest marathoner of all time.

On 1st October 1976 shortly before five in the morning, the imposing bridge, one of the most trafficked in Vienna, unexpectedly collapsed into the river Danube killing one person. The main reason given for the collapse was structural failure in the bearings, which was not spotted during inspection due to the massive granite mantle that surrounded them. A new bridge was re-designed and formally opened on 8th November, 1980. It remains an impressive structure used by 50,000 vehicles each day with six lanes of traffic, U-Bahn tracks, two footpaths, two-cycle paths and two utility tunnels.

Eliud’s stellar athletic career faced a near collapse in 2012, when he incredibly failed to qualify for the London Olympics as an accomplished 5,000-meter runner. In a radical decision that would prove to be a game-changer, he switched to road running that same year starting out in the half marathon before winning the 2013 Hamburg Marathon in a course record time. From that win, Eliud’s

marathon career took off into the stratospheres.

He has won 10 of the 11 marathons that he has participated in. In 2016 he took the Olympic gold in Rio de Janeiro in a race where he was seemingly under no threat from the competition. He currently holds the official world record of 2:01:39, set at the 2018 Berlin Marathon.

In contemplating Eliud's extraordinary triumphs over the last six years, it's clear that the world of sports has once more produced an iconic figure, transcending cultures, race and languages to redefine the boundaries of human achievements and inspire billions across the globe. Only a few personalities come to mind when one reflects on the scale of what this means. We may even have to look outside the arena of sports to find such inspiring individuals.

The world of music carries a comparable transcendent power to sports, and it therefore provides a notable personality we can briefly examine to comprehend Eliud's influence on millions across the globe. The late pop-musician Michael Jackson immediately stands out.

His musical talent and genius were undeniable, enriching the global music industry for decades during his lifetime. Through his music, Michael Jackson managed to transcend racial barriers to inspire millions of adoring fans across different cultures and different generations. Shortly after his death in June 2009, American evangelist Al Sharpton described him as a truly historic figure.

It may be too early to make lofty comparisons between Eliud Kipchoge and the late King of pop, but the greatest marathoner in modern times does provide some profound and inspiring insights from his athletic achievements. To truly understand the driving force behind this fascinating man, we need to go back and examine a few of his past philosophical thoughts and musings.

We need to appreciate the motivations that compelled him to take on the challenge of running a marathon in under two hours, succeeding on the second attempt two years after the Nike Breaking2 project where he fell short by just 25 seconds. Immediately following that pioneering event of May 2017, the philosopher king of the marathon simply quipped: "The world is just 26 seconds away."

At a press briefing hosted by his local sponsors Isuzu East Africa on 4th September, 2019 in Nairobi, Eliud powerfully explained why he was going to Vienna to make athletic history.

"I am going to Vienna to inspire a whole generation. I am going to Vienna to sell the idea that no human is limited. I am going to Vienna to inspire the human family. I want to inspire that journalist, lawyer, engineer, teacher, driver that when they wake up they can do more. It's not about setting a world record but it's about making history and inspiring the human race."

The world of business can certainly learn a great deal from this excellent athlete's training methodology, personal discipline and winning mindset. Take for instance his radical decision to switch from his favorite track event the 5,000M to the marathon. Jim Collins in his best-selling book *Good to Great, Why Some Companies Make The Leap*, provides two compelling approaches practiced by these successful companies that one can discern in Eliud's career.

First, Jim Collins asserts that companies that made the shift from being good to later become great institutions, started by developing within their organizations the ability to confront the 'brutal facts'. They created a climate or environment where employees were consistently encouraged to speak up and share truth in their day to day operations, no matter how unpalatable it was to their leaders.

Secondly, in that bold process, these companies came to the realization that if their core business did not propel them to be the best in their sectors, then they needed to change to what they could be best at, not what they were competent to do. Finally, the companies needed to build an absolute

belief in their ranks that they could become the very best in their business. They nurtured an unflinching faith, an iron-willed self-belief that they could achieve their goals no matter how ambitious, insurmountable or wild they at first appeared to be.

In failing to qualify for the 2012 London Olympics, Eliud had to confront the brutal reality that he was not the best in the 5,000M track discipline. While he was competent in the event, having won Olympic medals and a world championship in his career, he was yet to realize his full athletic potential. He had to make a choice between continuing in an event where he would likely not rise to dominance, or courageously try out something new where he had a chance of truly excelling. The switch to the marathon resulted in a stunning change of fortunes for Eliud which culminated in the enthralling sub two-hour performance in Vienna.

In the lead up to this memorable event, Eliud once more clarified his intentions for taking on an epic race challenge that he well knew would not be recognized as an official marathon record.

“I want to be able to show the world that when you focus on your goal, when you work hard, and when you believe in yourself, anything is possible,” he said.

The element of self-belief came out consistently in Eliud’s statements when confronted with the epic 1:59 Challenge Race. From the moment he announced to the world his intention to mirror what British athlete Roger Banister had achieved in 1954 running the mile in under four minutes, Eliud’s simple conviction regarding what a human being could achieve with the right mindset was amazing.

“Any human being can go beyond their thoughts, but self-belief is crucial. I totally believe in myself, and in my team-mates and my training,” he said.

Indeed, no other human endeavor demonstrates the power and benefits of teamwork as well as sports does. One of Eliud’s most cherished training principles is anchored around his team-mates and what they have enabled him to achieve.

“You cannot train alone and expect to run a fast time. 100 per cent of me is nothing compared to one percent of the team,” he often asserts.

Eliud Kipchoge has eloquently shown the world once more how transcendent sports can be in the lives of people without regard to their circumstances. His marathon achievement on 12th October 2019 displayed the unifying power of sports across the world as millions of watching fans cheered his triumph as their own victory.

In Kenya, Eldoret was the epicenter of excitement with ripples of celebration going right across the country. For one tantalizing day, we forgot our petty differences as we applauded our gallant son for making history and swelling our hearts with national pride.

It would be no exaggeration to suggest that Eliud’s achievement that Saturday morning inspired the thrilling performances of Lawrence Cherono and Brigid Kosgei the following day at the Chicago Marathon. They were the male and female winners of the race with Brigid winning in a world record time of 2:14:04, shattering Paula Radcliffe’s 16-year old record of 2:15:25.

Without a doubt, there is no better case for increasing our national sports budgets, county budgets and corporate sponsorships to deliberately invest in our rich sporting talents across the country. Building on the lessons from our successful track athletes, we have in recent times also seen the immense potential in our football, rugby sevens and women’s volleyball teams. We stand to gain immeasurably as a nation from this untapped goldmine that can radically transform the fortunes of our young people. As Eliud has shown us, there are no limits to what we can achieve as Kenyans if

we set our minds to this noble undertaking.

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