

Kenyan athletes run amok

Their dominance of elite athletics is a cultural thing cultivated over years

WHEN Wilson Kipsang cruised through the Brandenburg Gates in Berlin yesterday morning, history beckoned. The Kenyan, already a decorated marathon runner, was about to become the 32nd man since World War 2 to hold one of the most prestigious marks in sport — the marathon world record.

He is also the latest in a very long line of exceptional Kenyan runners, and their extraordinary dominance of distance running triggers one of the most fascinating debates in all of sport and sports science.

How does a relatively tiny group of people — 75% of Kenya's elite runners come from a single tribe, the Kalenjin, of only around 4 million people — dominate distance running so comprehensively?

Kenyan regularly occupy between 30 and 40 of the top 50 places in the world rankings, and two years ago, the top 25 performances were all Kenyan. The rest are usually Ethiopians, and so it is East Africa that is the epicentre of distance running talent on the planet.

The question is why? The answer can take one in many directions — culture, economics, sociology, altitude, genetics, nutrition or physiology. PhD theses and books have been and will be written about each one. There's no ques-



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tion that any one cannot explain the calculated one-in-a-100-billion chance of such success for so small a group of people, and trying to reduce complex outcomes to single causes is doomed (as it always is).

For instance, if it were altitude, then athletes from Nepal and parts of South America would be challenging the Kenyans. If it were poverty, and the desire to run for prosperity, then India would produce hundreds of elite runners.

So rather, as is usually the case, it's the melting pot of all these factors. There was the catalyst in the form of the first Kenyan champions in the 1960s, who inspired other Kenyans to dream.

There is the education system, which prioritises physical education and running. There's altitude, which stresses the body to adapt and become more efficient and ef-



RECORD BREAKER: Wilson Kipsang of Kenya, right, crosses the line behind a disrupter to join an elite club of athletes when he broke the marathon world record in Berlin yesterday
Picture: TOBIAS SCHWARZ/REUTERS

fective at producing energy and supplying oxygen to the muscles.

And then there is physiology, which includes long, skinny legs and tendons, perfect for bouncing along with minimal cost and maximal speed, as well as hearts, lungs and muscles that can provide blood, oxygen and energy to power

remarkable 2hr 3min 23sec performances such as Kipsang's.

The dispute around the physiology is that many assume there is something unique in Kenyans that makes them great runners.

Science has yet to discover this unique "X-factor", though maybe in the future, it will emerge. We are in

fact about to commence a study looking at some novel physiological aspects in elite Kenyan athletes, so perhaps will discover the difference.

But our current thinking is that there is a list of physical "attributes" that are necessary for elite runners, a kind of requirement checklist in order to become elite.

What Kenyans have, in my opinion, is a greater number of athletes with these tools — per 100 people, there are more "likely candidates" in Kenya. Then, onto this rich pool of talent, you overlay economics, the running culture, coaching, desire, and suddenly, very few of those 100 fall through the cracks.

Everyone is aspiring, and those who succeed are dominant. I'm convinced that other nations in Europe, the US and even South Africa have potential elite stars too.

But they are scarcer, less aspirant (they pursue other interests or sports), and their discovery is less effective.

The result is this huge disparity in outcome vs potential input.

There's a lesson in this for all sports. Rugby in SA benefits from many of the things that make Kenya a great marathon nation, whereas transformation in sport stutters because it lacks the pathways necessary to maximise potentially limited natural resources. What Kenya shows is how sporting dominance is cultural, it takes generations to develop and is so complex that simple solutions inevitably fail.

'Not enough stars at Man U'

MANCHESTER United do not have enough world-class players to win the Champions League, manager David Moyes said as he effectively wrote off his own team's chances in Europe's elite club competition.

The English champions have made their worst league start in 24 years after Saturday's 2-1 home defeat by West Bromwich marked a third loss in their opening six Premier League matches.

Their only significant transfer-window signing was Belgium midfielder Marouane Fellaini after their pursuit of Barcelona's Cesc Fabregas failed and media reports of interest in bringing back Cristiano

Ronaldo from Real Madrid came to nothing.

"To win the Champions League, you need five or six world-class players," Moyes told British newspapers in comments published yesterday.

"Look at Bayern Munich, they have it. Look at Barcelona, who had it in the past and Real Madrid, who have maybe got it now.

"That's the level you have to be at to win it. We've not got that yet, but what we have got is experience."

United have made a bright start to their Champions League campaign, beating Bayer Leverkusen 4-2 in their Group A opener at Old Trafford earlier this month.

Their next game is a tricky trip to Ukrainian side Shakhtar Donetsk on Wednesday.

The three-times European champions have suffered disappointment in their past two continental campaigns, going out in the group stage in 2011/12 and losing in the last 16 to Real Madrid last season.

If Moyes wondered how difficult it would be to replace Alex Ferguson at United then the scale of the task was brought home by a stinging defeat to West Brom.

"You're always going to have bad results in football, it is how you deal with them," he said. — Reuters

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