

Charity Far From Home

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by [John Manners](#)

When the counting is done, last Sunday's ING New York City Marathon is expected to have raised about \$4 million for the organizers' two official charities, the New York Road Runners Foundation Team for Kids, which supports running-based fitness programs in local schools, and Fred's Team, which contributes to cancer research. Four million is quite a sum, and will doubtless do a great deal of good, but remarkably enough, it will come to less than 1% of the total raised for charity this year by runners and walkers around the country. (USA Track & Field puts the 2004 total at \$575 million.)

The ongoing running boom has been a boon to US charitable giving. Half a billion dollars a year that might have gone elsewhere is now supporting deserving American non-profits, an indisputably worthy accomplishment. But I've often wondered what kind of impact even a small portion of that money might have if it were directed not to the richest country in the world but to one of the poorest--one that happens to produce about half the world's best distance runners (52 of this year's top 100 male marathoners, for example).

That's right, Kenya, home of the new New York City champion Paul Tergat. Kenya's per capita income is \$1000 a year--\$3 a day--or about 1/40th that of the United States. Four million dollars or even \$4,000 would go a long way there. To be sure, some of the more than \$200,000 collected in New York by Tergat, Susan Chepkemei and their compatriots will trickle down to their fellow citizens. But when a country is as dominant in any field as Kenya is in distance running, you figure there ought to be a way for that dominance, that resource, to generate truly significant earnings.

This was the thinking behind a new charitable venture, A Running Start, founded by a young Canadian investment analyst named Karl Keirstead. He grew up idolizing East African runners like Henry Rono and Mirutz Yifter, and after making a bundle as a tech stock expert for Lehman Brothers during the 1990s boom, he began thinking about ways to help the athletes he admired and the desperately poor countries they came from. "I could imagine," he says, "how the earnings a successful runner brought home might affect his family and his village. I wanted to find a way to build on that."

Fifteen months ago he began searching the internet for promising running projects in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. (Full disclosure: Karl consulted me in his search, and I have been somewhat involved in his charitable efforts.) Last November he flew to East Africa and found several deserving recipients for his largesse. He helped set up a series of seven road races in rural Tanzania that have a dual purpose: discover talent and spread AIDS awareness. He contributed to established efforts headed by two well-known Kenyan running mentors--Brother Colm O'Connell, whose training camps for high school students have developed scores of world class runners, and Peter Rono, the 1988 Olympic gold medalist at 1500m, whose Nandi Education and Training Centre has helped more than 200 young Kenyans secure athletic scholarships at US universities. And he set up Uganda's first-ever elite athletes' training camp, whose leading light is the multiple world junior champion Boniface Kiprop.

And now he's expanding his efforts to include new recipients--and new donors. Last

Friday before the marathon, Keirstead gave a fundraising party at a gallery in New York's club district, inviting his Wall Street friends and their chic hangers on. There was wine and hors d'oeuvres and a brief presentation of half a dozen Kenyan marathoners, and when it was over, A Running Start had collected \$15,000. Not much compared to the marathon's \$4 million, but in East Africa \$15,000 goes a long way.

John Manners has been writing about African runners since the 1970s and heads the IAAF's Focus on Africans project.