

Canadian philanthropist donates athletic equipment to Bekoji youth project

December 24, 2005. The Ethiopian Reporter.

Karl Keirstead, a 40-year-old Canadian philanthropist living in New York, donated about 30 thousand birr worth of running equipment and money for milk to the Bekoji youth athletics project.

This is the largest donation ever passed to the small rural town in central Ethiopia from where the majority of Ethiopia's elite runners hail. Young athletes coming from the rural parts of Bekoji who are permanently based in the agrarian town train hard with the aim of becoming one of the world's famous distance runners like Kenenisa Bekele, Derartu Tulu, Tirunesh Dibaba and others.

The aspiration of these young boys and girls is accompanied with passion and commitment. Year in and year out, these zealous young people run barefoot to make a difference in their impoverished lives. Their family can barely afford to buy them school uniforms let alone equip them with complete running gear.

"I have been an athletics fan since I was a child," Keirstead said. "I ran my first marathon at the age of 12 and had pictures of famous runners like Miruts Yifter posted on my bedroom door."

Keirstead, under the umbrella of his charity organization A Running Start, founded and finances the first athletics training camp in Uganda where the world junior 10,000m record holder Boniface Kiprop trains with young athletes. He also supports an athletics camp in Kenya and has established a center for young female athletes in Tanzania where there is absence of training infrastructure. "My interest in long distance running has brought me to East Africa. After seeing the situation in the ground, I understood that my assistance is just a drop in the ocean. But, I will do my level best to enhance the support by soliciting more funds after gaining my license in USA, Canada and parts of Europe."

Life of a young athlete in Bekoji

When we arrived at the cross country training ground in Bekoji at 3:30 in the afternoon, more than one hundred young people were stretching to begin their afternoon running session. The athletes train in shifts, those who are in the morning shift at school train in the afternoon and vice versa.

Most of the athletes did not have any decent running equipment. Some run barefoot as others put on dilapidated sneakers that expose the feet for any kind of injury. "Luckily I can afford a secondhand old sneaker from the local market. But I have colleagues who run barefoot on this rough surface that has a range of piercing items on the loose," says

17 year-old Tegenu Teshome. "I have seen many athletes sustain injuries that forced them to retire early."

The situation of these young athletes is that they are not assisted by any organization or government body except their coach who tries to help them in any way he can. The Ethiopian Athletics Federation allocates an annual budget of 5,400 birr to sponsor 25 young people. However, the budget gets lost between the federation and the regional bureau before reaching the athletes.

Karl Keirstead's assistance came at the peak of these problems. Only a few of these athletes had a new brand of running shoes before. Apart from the project, Keirstead's assistance extended to other young athletes who were not included in the project. Slightly used running shoes from USA were given to winners of a competition that was held at the Bekoji stadium to decide who gets the shoes. Top 6 athletes in the women's 1,500m race and top nine finishers in the men's 5,000m race won the slightly used shoes. It was a special race for 14-year-old Haymanot Alemayehu, a third place finisher in the girls' 1,500m race who won her first pair of running shoes.

For the young athletes in Bekoji, basic running equipments like shoes, triplets, shorts and tracksuits are luxury equipment. "The government or any other concerned organization has forgotten to support these young athletes," says Coach Sintayehy Eshetu, Kenenisa Bekele and Tirunesh Dibaba's first coach. "It is in the absence of such support that Mr. Karl (Keirstead) came to our rescue. I am glad to see the athletes motivated. Small support motivates them to a greatest extent and I will be expecting some 500 runners at the training field tomorrow."