

Grooming Olympic champions

Boniface Kiprop's success at the 2004 Athens Olympics has earned Bukwo natives recognition which could see the country having more Olympic and world champions.

Karl Keirstead, a Canadian, watched Kiprop on TV, made the trip to Bukwo near Kapchorwa, met Kiprop and started a training camp that is benefiting over 20 runners. DANIEL SSENFUMA caught up with him.

Who is Karl Keirstead?

I am a 40-year-old Canadian citizen and have been living in New York City since 1994. I worked for an investment bank in New York for 9 years and left to pursue other interests in 2003.

How did you come to know about Uganda?

My interest in helping Uganda came largely through the success of Boniface Kiprop as well as the strong performance of the Ugandan junior team at the World Cross-Country Championships and the achievements of Dorcus Inzikuru.

This gave me a good indication that Uganda had a tremendous athletics talent base. Yet I discovered that the international shoe companies and sports agents had invested little if anything in Uganda despite having invested millions of dollars in neighbouring Kenya.

To me, this was a perfect opportunity to step in and make a real difference. I was and remain convinced that there are 100 undiscovered Boniface Kiprops living around the hills of eastern Uganda. If I could help discover and develop them, we could create a 'running industry' in this remote region, similar to the towns of Eldoret and Iten in Kenya. This in turn could help thousands of poor Ugandans and boost the pride of your country.

When did you start the Bukwo athletics camp?

In November 2004, I visited Kampala (my first trip to Uganda) and met with Kiprop, his former high school coach Godfrey Nuwagaba as well as Beatrice Ayikoru, the general secretary of Uganda Athletics Federation (UAF).

It became apparent that the greatest need was for a permanent high-altitude training camp at which the top runners could train and live together.

By December we had found a temporary facility and by January there were 20 runners living there. In August 2005 we moved to the current and better facility. Ayikoru was incredibly supportive of our efforts.

How did you come up with the idea of starting this camp?

During my first trip to Kampala in November 2004, I simply asked Kiprop, Nuwagaba, Ayikoru and several young runners what they needed most in order to boost the performance of Ugandan athletics. All said that a training camp was the most urgent need. So I provided one.

Have you ever been an athlete too?

I began running marathons when I was 12 and growing up in Toronto, Canada.

Did you pick interest in supporting East African runners recently?

The interest came long before my visit in 2004. As a child I had posters of the great East African runners around my bedroom and since then I have always held East African athletes in the highest respect.



Karl Keirstead with two athletes and a young boy at the Standard High athletics camp in Bukwo district in 2004.

When did you first see Kiprop?

In the summer of 2004 I began thinking of ways to give back to Africa. I happened to be in Berlin, Germany watching the 2004 Athens Olympics on television in my hotel room and saw the 10,000m final won by Kenenisa Bekele of Ethiopia and dominated by East Africans where Kiprop finished 4th. It was then that I thought of helping East African athletes in particular and I quickly arranged a trip here to do some research.

How many athletes did you start the camp with?

I recall that there were about 20 athletes initially but the number is growing year after year. Kiprop, James Kibet, Nicholas Kwemoi, Doreen Chesang, Ben Siwa, Patrick Cherutwo, Nancy Chepkwemoi and Dismus Kibeke were some of the young athletes we started the camp with.

How is A Running Start related to the camp?

A Running Start is the camp sponsor. We pay for almost everything, including the monthly rent, food, furniture, generator and transportation costs to races in Kampala and in Kenya. The camp manager Nuwagaba helps with some costs and Kiprop used some of his prize money to buy furniture. Our website is (www.arunningstart.org)

Where does the money that runs the camp come from?

Until recently I funded the camp with my own money. Now, I am beginning to raise money from other donors in the United States and would like to encourage interested Ugandans to help.

How do the athletes survive?

I provide funding every 3-6 months and the camp athletes themselves are responsible for finding local food supplies and storing them if necessary. The funding pays for a local woman to act as the full-time cook and we purchased a donkey to help carry water each day. The athletes complained that they were too tired after their training runs to fetch water and our cook was so busy feeding 20 hungry young athletes that I agreed to buy them a donkey! This is quite amusing to my friends in NYC.

Which other international athletes does this organisation relate with?

We also sponsor a club in Bekoji, Ethiopia that has produced world and Olympic champions like Bekele, Tirunese Dibaba. In Kenya, we sponsor the training camp managed by Colm O'Connell at St. Patrick's High School that is widely acknowledged to be the pre-eminent camp for junior runners in Kenya, if not the world. Established in 1989 and drawing on young athletes within a 75km radius of the rural town of Iten in western Kenya, the training camp has produced two Olympic champions, six World champions, four world record holders and 12 junior World champions.

How many athletes are in the camp today?

There are about 25 runners. Besides Boniface Kiprop, we have Moses Kipsiro as well as Isaac Kiprop, the national 10,000m champion. Kipsiro is our biggest success story. He blossomed after moving into the camp and is now racing and winning throughout Europe. I am very proud of his accomplishments and Isaac Kiprop is the next in line to achieve international success.



Karl Keirstead during his visit in 2004

What other benefits do these athletes get in camp other than the training?

with a meal for athletes at the Standard High camp.

The benefits are primarily a better training environment.

However, living together also reinforces the values of teamwork and cooperation. In the future, with more funding, I'd like to offer some educational services to the runners when they are relaxing between training sessions.

Are the athletes treated in a similar way? For example Kiprop is a former world champion, does he get a similar training with the rest?

The spirit of teamwork is very strong at the camp and hence Boniface is treated the same as everyone else. Of course, he is on a slightly different training schedule but Moses and Isaac and maybe some others are now strong enough to keep up with him, even on his hard training runs. Likewise, the men are treated exactly the same as the female athletes. However, I find that the female athletes do far more work around the camp and I have told the boys many times to stop being so lazy and to help out more.

Do you hope to open other training camps in the country?

Our goal is to fill the camp with young runners who have the potential to race internationally and to make a living from the sport. If we find that there are too many athletes of this calibre and we run out of room, then yes, I will consider adding another camp. However, this could take some time, as these are still the early days of our project. Note that Beatrice is already helping to establish a second training camp near ours.

How do you manage the camp yet you are based in New York?

The camp manager Nuwagaba resides near Kampala and I communicate regularly with him via email. He is indispensable to the project and should be applauded for his tireless and entirely volunteer commitment to helping the project and assisting Uganda's gifted young runners.

In which other countries does this organisation operate?

We also have projects in Ethiopia, Kenya and Tanzania. Note that the training camp in Bukwo is our largest single project.

Who are the international coaches for these Ugandan athletes?

This in fact is our biggest need. At present we do not have a full-time coach living at the camp and assisting the athletes. Nuwagaba provides guidance when he visits the camp every two weeks, and the top runners such as Kiprop and Kipsiro provide training tips to the other runners. When and if we secure additional funding, our first task will be to hire a full-time coach.