

Keirstead's athletics plan

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BUKWO

UGANDA is set to revive her reputation at both the World Cross-Country and other major International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) permit meets thanks to a permanent high-altitude training camp in Bukwo that was started in 2004 by a Canadian Karl Keirstead, 40.

Uganda had won five consecutive team bronze medals at the world cross-country but failed to maintain her reputation in 2005 in Saint Etienne, France where both the junior and senior teams finished in sixth positions.

Boniface Kiprop, a key member in some of the team bronze medals had graduated into the senior category and Uganda's junior team had runners like Moses Kipsiro, Geoffrey Kusuro and Isaac Kiprop, all of whom didn't perform to their expectation. Kiprop won a bronze medal in 2002 in Dublin, Ireland, silver in Lausanne, Switzerland in 2003 and wrapped up his junior cross-country participation with silver in 2004 in Brussels, Belgium. It was due to the bronze medal in Ireland that Kiprop earned himself a contract with sportware house Puma who have sponsored him until today. However, this sponsorship wasn't enough to meet the athlete's demands because he needed high altitude training before heading for competition in Europe.

It was because of these prior performances by Kiprop, who won individual medals at the world cross-country, that Keirstead decided to make his first trip to Uganda in 2004 to meet the star athlete.

Kiprop connected his Bukwo natives during the 2004 Olympics held in Athens, Greece where Keirstead saw him on TV tussling it out with the Ethiopians Kenenisa Bekele, Haile Gebrselassie and Sihine Sileshi.

"This gave me a good indication that Uganda had a tremendous athletics talent base and 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," said Keirstead.

The Canadian then made his first trip to Uganda in 2004, purposely to meet Kiprop and discuss with him his future athletics plan.

"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 Kiprop's 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," he added.

Keirstead met Kiprop and his manager Godfrey Nuwagaba in Bukwo. They told the Canadian that Uganda's major task was possession of a permanent high altitude camp from which these athletes could train ahead of their races.

In December 2004, Keirstead located a temporary facility for the camp and in January 2005, there were 20 runners living there who included Kiprop, James Kibet, Nicholas Kwemoi, Timothy Toroitich, Nancy Chepkwemoi, Patrick Cherotwo and Ben Siwa.

In August 2005, the camp was relocated to a better place in Amanang, 3km away from Kapkoros. The number of athletes increased from the original one and two of the best picks were Isaac Kiprop and Moses Kipsiro, who Keirstead believes will carry the next generation of Uganda's track and field burden.



CHAMPIONS: Yiga, Kiprop, Malinga and Toroitich

Kipsiro qualified for last year's world championships in Helsinki, Finland as well as winning a few races in Europe this year.

Kibet, a member of the 2003 world junior cross-country team and 2004 world half marathon team is the captain of the camp.

"I wake up the athletes every day at 5:45am and we run to the slopes of Mt. Elgon and later do some stretching in the evening," said Kibet.

The athletes in the camp use programs designed by international coaches which Kiproop brings during his stay at the camp.

Keirstead runs a non-profit organisation based in the New York, USA called A Running Start, which is the camp sponsor.

"We pay for almost everything, including the monthly rent, the food, the furniture, the generator and transportation costs to races in Kampala and in Kenya. The camp manager Nuwagaba helps with some costs while Kiproop used some of his prize money to buy furniture. Our website is (www.arunningstart.org), which people can visit and help in athletics building in Uganda," he said.

The overall mission of A Running Start is to empower talented young runners, so that they can race on the international circuit and succeed financially. That way, they can use their prize money to support their family and also give back to the community so as to help the talented few.

Bukwo is Keirstead's largest single project but his organisation also runs projects in Ethiopia, Kenya and Tanzania. The Canadian's other step in ensuring consistency in Bukwo is to organise an annual road race. Isaac Kiproop from the Bukwo camp has won both editions of the men's race. Keirstead's interest in assisting young East African runners came long before his visit to Uganda 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," he said. Keirstead intends to hire a full time coach when the Bukwo camp secures additional funding from well-wishers to achieve his dream in Eastern Uganda.



CAMP LEADER: James Kibet