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feature distance running



Will Cockerell, a 2:27 British marathoner, got a wake-up call when he visited the nation expected to dominate the World Cross

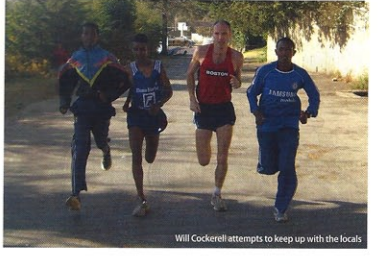
## Rich memories of Addis

I HAVE recently returned from a week on the outskirts of Addis Ababa which provided me with an illuminating snapshot of life in this inimitable African capital. In brief: I trained as hard (and suffered as much) as I ever have; met and befriended several perfect training partners; had a pistols-at-dawn 10k-shoot-out with the Bellhop of my hotel; met one of the top five greatest female distance runners in the world; received an icy verbal blast from another distance legend; interviewed an all-time British great; gained access into some homes in the Addis backstreets; created a near-riot when I drew my wallet in said ghettos; observed a startling rate of adoption at my hotel by jubilant American families; saw garrotted canines lying on the sidewalks, nooses still in tact; witnessed our cameraman weather diabolical food poisoning (never accept an apple from your taxi driver - you'll have live maggots crawling out of your nostrils in no time); and saw one of the most spell-binding pieces of athletics I can ever recall.

purpose of my trip. I was there to act as a consultant and training partner to the controversial documentary maker Alexander Vero, who has created a few ripplers with his project entitled "The Road to Beijing". His original synopsis, which led to widespread derision, was to see how close a 17-stone, heavy drinker could get to the British team for the Beijing Olympic marathon, given two years of hard training. The answer? You don't need me to tell you: not very

close. But Vero's project is evolving well, and his interest in our sport, and desire to give it more mainstream exposure can only be applauded. Look at the coverage the leading British marathoners get in the Flora London Marathon. For one day each year perhaps we deserve a few minutes of TV limelight for our 3500-plus miles of annual slog. But no, it's either the lead pack, or Coco the Clown and some Rhino talking to a fawning Hazel Irvine.

Vero is fascinated with the art, mechanics and sacrifice of distance running, but far from him belittling the achievements of the leading runners in the country, he is to highlight how good they really are. If, at the London Marathon, he is an hour off his original 2:15 target, it'll show just how difficult what we do is. If he's 15 minutes off, then kudos to Alex, and it'll have been a very interesting experiment; and if, as is most likely, he runs about 2:45, then there'll be some credit to Alex for running a respectable time, but he'll still have highlighted how difficult it is to reach the elite. Our mission to Ethiopia was to examine the Ethiopian distance running set-up, and how and why they produce such vast swathes of world-class runners.



Will Cockerell attempts to keep up with the locals

24 athleticsweekly.com

feature distance running



Two runners, two worlds: Alex Vero and his Ethiopian training partner Mengistu

everyone has their stables of runners, and the competition is fierce."

"So in a way we blundered straight into her office, which so happened to be the side of the highway?" I ask.

"Correct." But then the cabbie brightens. "But you are happy to meet Defar, right?"

"That was Defar?"

"Yeeees! Defar - Mese! Defar! The other woman you met? You did not recognise her?"

To this I can only hang my head in shame, that one of the greatest athletes in history, she of the outstanding world 5000m record of 14:16.63, and the reigning Olympic and world champion, can go straight over my head. Why is this? Why is it that an athletics fan like me is unable to identify one of the luminaries of the sport when presented face to face? I would recognise Maria Sharapova for sure, or a Williams or a Henin. What does tennis do so right that athletics doesn't? On Wikipedia, the online encyclopaedia, the tennis players' entries are all some 10 times longer than Defar's, whose size of entry is on a par with for instance Kathleen Cavendish (a socialite sister of JFK); David Bairstow (an England wicket-keeper with four caps); and, er, my dad (a political hack).

On nearly every training run in Addis, a different youngster would bound out from behind a tree, and join me. By the end of the trip, I had four regular training partners. One of them, Fraser, 17, was a sublime runner. At the end of our first run, we arrived at the foot of a particularly steep ascent, which I had attacked a few times already and was more than 600 metres in length. "Okay, we run up the hill to the very top," I announced. "Yes!" he beamed with delight. "We run fast!"

"Yes!" "We race!" I commanded. "Good!" Fraser's eyes dancing with anticipation, I set us off, and he was gone, with an electrifying turn of speed. I was left in awe and a tad depressed as I trudged up the hill in 2:26, while Fraser returned a 2:08. I'd love to track how his career progresses, but it could be opening the floodgates to get in touch. I fielded long, detailed letters from several of my chums upon departure, asking for my aid.

Away from running, I investigated a

few of the housing developments on the outskirts of Addis. I was curious to see the inside of the corrugated iron shacks, and it took a little courage to gain entry. The image below is of one of the typical living rooms I found, and I think you'll agree, not too bad. I did, though, attract swarms of kids chanting "money, money, money" at me, and after my "recco", I was happy to oblige. I produced a seven pence coin (worth about a wad of one birr) notes (worth about a wad of one birr) and was quickly caught up in an unwieldy melee. So I plonked the lot into one of the hands, imploring "share!" Fat chance. The kid made a dash for it, pursued by his apoplectic chums. They were all fast runners and for all I know the chase is still on.



A typical home in Addis Ababa

To summarise: yes, the distance-running set-up in Addis is pretty awesome. However, in riposte to Nerurkar's statement that the Brits don't stand a chance, I would suggest when one measures the standard in terms of "depth" of quality, this is correct; but for one-off events like the Olympics, where anything can happen then of course we stand a chance and must never forget it. Consider this: the leading Briton has finished ahead of the leading Ethiopian in five of the last eight Olympic marathons.

26 athleticsweekly.com

"I sometimes go to this large, idyllic green valley which is perfect for training, and you see them, dozens and dozens of athletes, in groups of about 30, so slowly limbering up, to hit the session really hard, and I just think to myself, the Brits don't stand a chance



Will Cockerell with documentary maker Alex Vero (left) and 2:08 marathoner Richard Nerurkar (centre), who organises the Great Ethiopian Run

RICHARD NERURKAR on training in Ethiopia

furniture, beds, dining room and such are all due a major makeover, and the four stars the hotel has would be closer to one star in the Western world, but I was happy there, and it did the job.

The very first person we met at the Ararat was our friendly bellhop Mengistu, himself a runner, surprise surprise, a runner. "How fast do you run?" asked Alex. "Sixty-four minutes for half-marathon?" "2:10?" "2:10?" "Yes 2:10"

Right there we had found the finest bellhopping marathoner in the world - in history perhaps. And of course it wasn't quite the truth. Meng has never run a marathon. 2:10 is what he'd like to run one day. But the 64 is believable - my friend.

We spent a very interesting hour with Richard Nerurkar, the British 2:08 marathoner, who organises the successful Great Ethiopian run and many other regional races. He points to the altitude factor as a key reason for the athletes' edge, over, say, Great

Britain; but more important, it is their determination and dream to emulate their fabled heroes. Running is envied by so many as the path to a better life. Richard notes: "I sometimes go to this large, idyllic green valley which is perfect for training, and you see them, dozens and dozens of athletes, in groups of about 30, so slowly limbering up, to hit the session really hard, and I just think to myself, the Brits don't stand a chance."

Vero and his cameraman were interested to see how I would fare against my bellhop buddy Mengistu. So we drove up into the mountains at 3000m altitude at 6am for a 10km time trial (Meng had got off duty at 1am, and was on again at 8am). Somewhat naively, given that I had hit the last five days of training extremely hard and was still not fully acclimatised, I only requested a two minute 15 second handicap over Meng. Well, it is no surprise I held him off for less than 6km and by then I was something of a wreck and tying up badly. When Meng passed me, he didn't look so hot himself, as the glide had completely gone from his stride. I had to walk three times during the second half, and Meng himself produced a positive split of around 1:35, for a time of 34:15. I recorded about 40:20 - some nine minutes off my PB. I wasn't quite sure what to make of Meng's achievement. If it was worth around two minutes better at sea level, plus another 45 seconds for the hills, it

still wasn't a time to have our leading men quaking in their boots. Meng's problem is that he doesn't belong to a club, has no training partners, or any real structure to his athletics. Imagine, though, if he did. The plan is to get him over to the London Marathon to see what he could do.

On our way back from the race, we drove past a tall, striking looking lady in a white pinstripe suit, standing on the roadside, looking somewhat out of place with either athletes or farmers in proximity. "Whoaaa, famous, very famous," says our taxi driver. "Adere - Berhane Adere." I commanded him to pull over. We passed a couple of athletes milling around on our way over to Berhane, one of whom bounded up to me with a beaming face and shook my hand. How delightful - my confidence grew. Here's how my conversation with Adere went:

"It is an honour to meet you; I know you have won medals at the major championships..." (I'm fishing slightly here, it's either Olympic or World, and in the 10km, methinks. And the colours...?) Adere nods slowly and suspiciously. I continue: "You have a medal at the Olympics?" "No!" she barks angrily.

"The Worlds?" "Yes!" (I'm drowning here) "And the colour is..."

"Gold!" she scolds, barely keeping a lid on her fury.

"In the 10,000m..." "Yes!" (Phew, nailed something for once.)

"And the city was..." (Edmonton, Paris or Helsinki; I know it's not Osaka. I have a 33 per cent chance at redemption. It's actually all three, but the gold is Paris.)

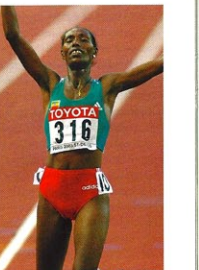
But before I make my choice, Berhane absconds me severely:

"You talk to me? You wanna talk to me? No! You make appointment! You must not talk to me. Go, Go!"

As we shuffle as a group dejectedly back to the taxi, the cabbie explains: "I'm so sorry - I am ashamed you had to see that. She has misjudged what you wanted, she thinks you are there to either buy or sell runners, she does not understand you are just there to meet her as a fan. It is the way it works here,



Mengistu - hotel porter and 64-minute half-marathon runner



Champion's fury: Berhane Adere