

AN AFRICAN DREAM

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It was a day in July and the sun was a blazing accessory in the sky. Suleiman Kangangi stood at the start-line of the Tour of Poyang Lake. There was sweat on his eyebrows. Around him was a modern metropolis that had been a swamp just two decades ago. The heat gave the peloton a febrile energy, and it took physical form in the shimmering air over the distant horizon.

He had grown up in a slum in Kenya, where there were no days like this, and no bicycle races like this. He had traveled the world and he had come to this city, with the sweat on his face, because he was looking for something and he thought he had found it, but he would need to earn it with a victory. Around him were other cyclists, and he and one other teammate were the only black faces in a sea of European and Chinese faces.

"I have only dreamed of this," Suleiman said, "but I never saw a path. I'm here because I always knew I could ride a bike, and these races are my chance to make something of my life."

The Kenyan Riders, which Suleiman is a member of, is built on the premise that Kenyans, the best endurance athletes on the planet, would excel in the Tour de France if only they

were given the opportunity to race professionally. The men who built the project were sustained by a faith that the best investment one can make is in human capital.

At the heart of the project is a philosophical query on what constitutes a valuable resource. Pre-Industrial Age, the oil of Saudi Arabia was a pungent black liquid beneath the feet of the wandering Bedouin, seemingly of no utility. It took the invention of the internal combustion engine to make crude oil the most valuable commodity of the 20th century.

Similarly, swift bipedal locomotion over vast distances in Africa seemed to have become a relic in the age of the automobile, but the modern marathon has made human endurance a viable financial resource again. Until the 1980s, the winner of a marathon won a trophy and a handshake. With the professionalisation of the sport, and the proliferation of both marathons and prize money in almost every major city, the Kenyans arrived, armed with a kitbag of talent and a hardness forged from poverty. A little town in Kenya—Iten—would go on to win 70% of all races globally. The prize money has flowed from the runners to the local community through channels as labyrinthian as an anthill sprawling deep underground, with elaborate passageways to thousands of lives which none of the race organisers knew existed. As all systems of economic empowerment should be.

Obscured in the Kenyan marathon success is the fact that the Tour de France remains the jewel in the crown of all endurance sports. The reality of the business of cycling—with its unique administrative, logistic and equipment demands—makes a path to even entering the sport impossible for a poor Kenyan boy.

Yet there was a time when a path to running success seemed an equally remote possibility.

Brother Colm O'Connell was born in Cork County, Ireland in 1947. He joined the religious order of The Brothers of St. Patrick's when he was 14. In 1976, as a young missionary, he was dispatched by the Catholic Church to Iten, to teach geography at St. Patrick's School. He expected to stay just three months, but turns of fate have seen him remain to this day. Brother Colm is now an old man, having crossed his seventieth year on Earth. Besides teaching generations of Kenyan schoolchildren, he has trained 25 World and 4 Olympic champions, and unwittingly started a whole industry in his little corner of Kenya. And here, really, you have it: the best case for investing in human capital is written quite clearly in the lines and squiggles of Brother Colm's electro-cardiography chart, and in the town of Iten itself.

The human potential that Brother Colm stumbled upon is rooted in a magnificent physiology. And from that, the buildings and farms and tractors have been paid for with prize money from distant foot races.

The Kenyan Riders are pioneers, like the unshod boys Brother Colm taught and coached 40 years ago. His achievements, rather than being an anomaly, serve as the template and inspiration for others to follow. Today, it is the runners, and tomorrow, it will be the cyclists.

Every one of them has stories to tell—of herding cattle for \$12 a month, or of an indestructible aunt, rewarded for a lifetime of toil with an agonising death in a desolate mud hut, abandoned by the 8 children she raised. It is a life of depredation, but with it comes a fearlessness, because whatever life brings must simply be borne, and in this perverse way, the suffering on a bicycle comes almost as a relief.

Fatalism in Africa is an indispensable quality for enduring hardship. Most Africans are agile and perhaps wishful interpreters of the slings and arrows of life on an uncertain continent; whatever happens, good or ill, is God's will, and all will be righted eventually, even if it is beyond this life.

As a boy, Suleiman witnessed men escape this unrelenting misery, fleeing to the needle or the bottle; the wages of sin were in every urine-stenched alleyway and brothel. He looked into the mirror and saw a face like everyone's around him—black, poor, hopeless and undifferentiated—but he knew, deep inside, that he was different, and that the world he wanted to be in was just an inch away.

Kenyan Riders has been that inch. It had led him to that morning at Poyang Lake, with the sweat on his brow, and he found part of the answer he was looking for. He made the podium, and his team won the race outright. He returned to Kenya with a tidy sum of money, and bought his mother a plot of land. And, should he win again, *inshallah*, a house will be built in time. And in that simplicity, one sees life in the round. His dreams, and those of a generation after him, meander quietly through the world of professional cycling, and for now they sustain him, entirely.