

## Wesley Korir running for a cause -- and eventually president of Kenya

By Katya Cengel, Special to SI.com

When documentarian Michael Del Monte says Boston was something, he isn't talking about the bombings near the finish line. He isn't talking about the winner of the 2013 Boston Marathon either. He is talking about the guy who finished fifth, Wesley Korir, a siney 30-year-old with a mischievous grin.

In the wake of the bombings that killed three people and injured more than 260, the stories of the race's elite runners were lost -- and for good reason. Compared to death and-life changing injuries, the results of a race seem insignificant.

Korir understands this better than most. In 2007 he was trapped in the midst of tribal violence in his native Kenya following a controversial election. He watched as three of his friends were killed by a machete-wielding mob. This March, he became the first independent to win a seat in the Kenyan Parliament. On April 15, he entered the Boston Marathon as the defending champion.

The first half of the race he was out in front, but at around mile 20 he started to fade. He was 200 meters back and looked like he was done. Then, all of a sudden, an hour and 55 minutes into the race, he started to surge. He caught the leaders and charged to the front of the race. He wasn't able to keep the lead, but he finished in the top five.

It was a remarkable accomplishment given that Korir's election campaign schedule had left him little time for training. He was lucky if he covered 50 miles a week, less than half of what other elites were doing. He ran on talent and a faith that at times appeared delusional.

You have to be a little delusional to run 26.2 miles at a sub-five-minute-mile pace, especially after foregoing training sessions in order to run for office. You have to be even more delusional to believe you can change a country in which 70 percent of those surveyed recently by Transparency International admitted having paid a bribe in the previous 12 months. Korir has seen the statistics, the vast sums of money that enter Kenya through aid and mission work. And he has seen the poverty that remains. He has experienced enough injustice and violence to become jaded, but somehow has retained the optimism of a child.

"I want to use my life experience of how I moved from poverty to prosperity," he said, "and I want to use the same thing -- education and talent, empowerment, talent development -- to make people really use what they have, what God has given them, to better themselves."

Korir will use the same determination on Sunday as he competes in the the New York City Marathon.

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Korir had never seen a computer when he started emailing the track coach at Murray State University in Kentucky after finishing high school. He didn't know how to type or what a mouse was. He got to an Internet cafe to email the coach the same way he got everywhere else in Kenya when he was young, by running.

### VIDEO: Trailer of a documentary featuring Wesley Korir

He ran at first to avoid punishment. He was always sleeping in and the only way to reach school on time in his rural village in the Rift Valley was to run. It was also the only way to bring his mother the items she wanted when she wanted them.

Later he ran because he was fast -- and because there was nothing else to do. A Kenyan running coach put him in touch with a coach at Murray State, in Kentucky. The courtship lasted two years. The coach would tell Korir the steps he needed to take to come to America on an athletic scholarship, and Korir would get bogged down in the details. There were tests that required payment by debit or credit card. No one Korir knew had access to plastic. Instead they told him, "You can't make it. You don't have money. Your parents are not rich."

It was the same message he heard as a young child when villagers saw him running. They would tell him he was wasting his time, to do something else with his life. He ran away from them, from the alcoholism and unemployment, from the poverty.

On the way to America he got confused on an escalator in a French airport. It was the first escalator he had ever seen and he rode it up and down for so long he missed his connecting flight. He arrived in Kentucky in the middle of winter with no luggage. A few days later he was ruled athletically ineligible due to a bureaucratic snafu.

His meal card was taken away and he was told not to show up for class. It was several weeks before he was cleared. He managed to run for two months before budget cuts did away with the men's running program. He was tempted to give up, go back to Kenya, but his faith kept him going, kept him believing that things would get better.

More than half a dozen schools approached Korir with offers. He chose the University of Louisville even though coach Ron Mann was so new to town that he didn't have an office and got lost taking Korir back to the Greyhound station. But for two people from two different parts of the world, they had a lot in common.

"We both love people. We both love to help people. We both love to win," said Mann, who has remained Korir's coach after college.

At Louisville, Korir twice set the school record in the 5,000 meters and helped lead the men's team to its first Big East title. In 2007, the year before he graduated, he returned to Kenya for a visit and got swept up in the violence that killed around 1,200 and displaced several hundred thousand. Fred Whitehouse, his student-employment supervisor, spoke with him morning and night.

Another American friend, Linda Stiles, remembers praying with Korir on the phone. Korir remembers watching his friends die. It wasn't the first time he lost someone close. As a child his younger brother, Eliud, died on the 20-mile trek to the hospital after being bitten by a snake.

It would have been easy for Korir to stay away from Kenya. In 2008 he ran the Chicago Marathon and finished fourth despite having started with the masses. He ran another marathon and another, winning L.A. in 2009 and 2010. He married his college sweetheart, fellow U of L runner Tarah McKay, of Canada. They named their daughter McKayla, a combination of McKay and L.A.

But even before Korir was winning marathons, when he was working a maintenance job and attending Louisville, he had plans for Kenya. Whitehouse remembers Korir declaring on an afternoon when he was particularly down, his head in his hands, "One day I am going to be president of Kenya."

Whitehouse replied, "And one day I am going to be 105 pounds."

The day after he won a seat in parliament Korir called Whitehouse and said, "I told you."

In 2010 Korir and his wife began Kenyan Kids Foundation, a non-profit that helped 100 students attend school last year. They also constructed a hospital and brought in a medical team that served thousands last summer. In 2011 Korir helped bring Kenyan runner Pius Nyantika to America, where he stayed with Korir's friend Beau Hollis. Nyantika used his race winnings to buy stock for his family farm in Kenya and medicine for his sick father.

"I feel like God has given me this talent for a reason," said Korir. "Money wouldn't have gotten me to America, money wouldn't have got me where I am, not riches, just God."

In Kenya people line up outside Korir's home whenever he is in town. His wife jokingly refers to the spot under the trees where they congregate as his office. Now he has a real office in Nairobi from which he hopes to "bring some sanity to our leadership in Africa."

A month before the election, Korir was running out of money. He had seen the corruption and the depths of problems in Kenya and wanted out. In Del Monte's documentary there is a scene in which you can hear hundreds of people outside Korir's home reciting their problems to Korir's campaign team. It is morning and Korir has hidden himself in his room. The lights are off and he's trying to drink his tea and eat his chapattis. He speaks to the camera: "This is what it's come to. I have to eat in secrecy."

Then he does what he always does and goes out and greets the people. On occasion, during the campaign, he was able to sneak out before people saw him and get in a run. He pounded the miles fast and then came back, dressed and went to work. No recovery, just get it done and get on with it. Korir finished the electoral race like he has finished every marathon he has ever started. Toward the end, when the votes were coming in and it was clear he was going to win, he became giddy like a child, kicking and screaming, "I'm going to win. I'm going to win."

No one who knew Korir was surprised. "When Wesley decides to do something, whether win a marathon or run for parliament, don't get in his way because he's gonna do it," said Mann.

In Boston this past April, Korir had just gotten out of the shower after the race when the bombs went off. He watched the blasts from his hotel window. "It was tough because it was the same thing of people just wanting to kill other people, it was like that during the 2007 chaos in Kenya," he said.

After locating his family, he attempted to track down the other Kenyan runners to make sure they were safe. He realized there was no organized government system for keeping track of them. Back in Kenya, parents started to approach him asking for help finding children who had gone to compete abroad and never returned. In June Korir sponsored a motion for the government to find a way to keep track of Kenyan athletes competing abroad. It is a small thing, but it is a start, and Korir quickly realized that, like marathon running, politics requires patience.

"You cannot sprint," said Korir. "I thought maybe when I come in the beginning I will change everything as soon as I get here. But I realize it will take years and years and years of hard work and patience and focus and determination to be able to change things."

Some things have already changed. The boy who had only seen an airplane in the sky and thought people had to lie on top of each other in order to fit inside now flies between homes in Canada, Kenya and the United States. The child who ran barefoot on dirt roads now runs with a bodyguard and a car trailing behind. He is called honorable and his toddler daughter chants the praise songs his supporters sang during his campaign.

Korir's last race will be the 2016 Olympics representing Kenya, the year before he will run for re-election. One day he believes he will be president of Kenya.

"I always tell people aim for the moon," he said, "you miss it, you land at the stars."

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