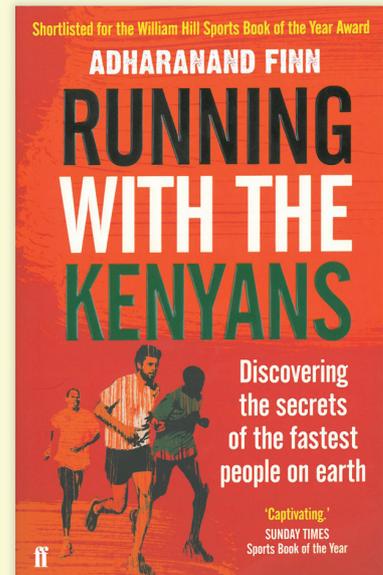




BOOK REVIEW

RUNNING WITH THE KENYANS
BY ADHARANAND FINN



Recently I read “Running with The Kenyans” by journalist and runner Adharanand Finn. As an average club runner for 15 years doing middle to long distance road and off road races I, like Finn, was keen to grasp any little shred of insight that might help me to improve my times by maybe getting just 1% closer to running like a Kenyan. I also had a more academic interest. As a lifelong athletics fan, I had grown up watching British stars like Ron Hill, David Bedford, Ian Thompson and Brendan Foster winning medals and breaking world records. So it was no surprise when we dominated world middle and long distance running for at least a decade with Coe, Cram and Ovett on the track, plus Jones, Gratton and Spedding winning the London Marathon for four consecutive years in the 1980s. So what happened next? How did we get reduced (pre-Farah) to making up the numbers, thinking it was amazing if a British runner made a world final or managed the top 10 in the London Marathon? And how did the Kenyans not just take over top spot but go on to dominate middle and long distance running much more than we, or any other nation, had ever done before?

And I had a more practical, business-focused interest. How does anyone, any organisation, any nation, raise themselves to world class performance? Plus I like reading books. Especially if they have a good story. And this one certainly starts off as a story rather than a book about running faster or achieving world class performance.

A good story

You don't have to be a runner to enjoy this book. For a start, Finn is a very good writer. As a news editor at the Guardian he ought to be, but it is quite unusual to find a running book authored by someone who can write good English. But this isn't just a running book. Part of it is a serious analysis of Kenyans' running, part appealingly self-deprecating descriptions of Finn's running all inter-woven with quite a gripping story of the family's experiences and observations of rural Kenya. You could think of him as a more likeable version of Peter Mayle.

The story starts with a bit of agonising about how he had abandoned running and fitness after a promising start as a county-level schoolboy cross country runner. (The answer of course is the same as the rest of us. There are more interesting things to do at university, then life takes over, unnoticed). But now, in his mid thirties, Finn was on a quest to re-vitalise his running and discover how good he could have been. He could have joined a running club. He could have entered the London Marathon. And, of course there was a third choice. He could go and live, run and race with the Kenyans. And take his whole family including three young children to live for six months in a very small, very remote, very basic town called Iten in the Rift Valley. Here they live in very basic accommodation, eat local food, try the local school, make friends and occasionally travel to running events. But if you're going to run like the Kenyans your life has to revolve around running and resting.

Why are Kenyan runners so good?

Amby Burfoot of Runner's World, calculated that the odds of Kenya achieving the success they did at the 1988 Olympics were less than 1:160 billion. So they must be good and we do know that Kenyan runners are good, but most people, even quite serious club runners, don't realise how good. As Finn says in his article earlier in this magazine, every single one of the top 25 ranked marathon runners in 2011 was from Kenya. If that's not dominance, what is? In his article, Finn summarises all the theories that have been advanced over the last decade or more to try and explain the Kenyans' success. Some, like genetics and altitude can be dismissed quite easily since many others have those advantages without achieving the same success. The interesting thing about the Kenyans' success is that it's not really the Kenyans. It's only a small part of them – the Kalenjin tribe, whose population numbers only five million.



Is their superb running technique down to running barefoot to school every day as children? Much has been written recently about the advantages of the barefoot running style, although most of it seems geared to selling runners a different style of minimalist running shoes rather than seriously suggesting that Westerners who've been running and walking about fully shod all their lives should suddenly become Zola Budd. And guess what? The only thing that stops Kenyan runners wearing shoes is having enough money to pay for them. Kenyans will run incredibly fast over long distances in ill-fitting borrowed shoes rather than run barefoot.

Perhaps it's the hard endurance lifestyle they've taken for granted for many generations. Hunting, herding cattle, farming, fetching water. But that's hardly unique to one small area of the Rift Valley. And what about their high carbohydrate low fat diet? Their favourite food is 'ugali', which seems to be a grain that produces a kind of semolina style gruel that is often eaten on its own or perhaps with a few vegetables thrown in. Finn describes a visit to one of the houses in South London occupied by a group of Kenyans who had based themselves here for the lucrative track and road running season. They had sacks of the stuff in the house and it still formed their staple diet. Apparently they get quite upset if they're travelling and have to eat something else. There's little doubt that this is good distance running food. But this type of diet is far from unique in less developed rural economies.

In Iten they get up at 5am and are running at 6, before sunrise. Sometimes they have an afternoon session too. And they work very, very hard. But when they're not running they're resting, helped by the fact that there isn't much else to do. And we do know that the combination of very hard work and plenty of rest is a good recipe for athletic success.

So whilst there isn't one secret, all these things add up. From Kip Keino in 1968, Kenyan distance running has become stronger and stronger. And if there is one determining factor we're now getting closer to it. When the first Kenyan runners

achieved success on the global stage they were made for life. In a country with very little previous sporting success, they were famous. Heroes. They came back, bought a farm, bought a car and, in the eyes of Kenyans if not ours, lived like kings. They were role models. In London's East End in the 1930s, if you wanted a better life than your parents you probably joined the local boxing gym. In Manchester you played football. Bjorn Borg spawned a generation of top tennis players and there's now an upsurge of cycling in the UK with Hoy, Wiggins, Pendleton and Cooke as role models. In Kenya the role models are distance runners. You go to Iten, train very hard every day, rest and eat ugali. If you're very good you'll do well in a local race and get picked up by an agent who will fund a trip to the European or North American circuit.

And the lessons for business are similar. Despite what some 'experts' would tell you, there isn't a magic formula. It's all the little things that combine to produce results. It's getting all the basics right. It's having the right role models for your people to emulate. So if you want to be a customer focused business make sure your middle and senior managers really walk that talk. Promote people you want others to copy. If you promote assertive, overtly ambitious managers, don't be surprised if teamwork suffers. And, like Irish Life and Jurys earlier in this magazine, reward, promote and celebrate desirable behaviours from across the workforce. Especially when they benefit customers. 



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