

# Chasing Greatness

**An American coach living and coaching in Kenya shares four specific training habits he's seen turn runners into champions—and helped him build a world-class fitness business.**

"I train 30 kilometers [18.6 miles] this morning," Emmanuel Kipruto said in English with his strong Kenyan accent, justifiably skeptical of my command of Swahili. It's 10 a.m., and we just sat down for some Kenyan chai tea at Iten Club, a quaint café and restaurant just outside the gate of the famous High Altitude Training Centre in rural Iten, Kenya. One of the many Kenyan runners here literally running for his life, Kipruto has run 28:02 for 10K and 1:01:22 for half-marathon—both at altitude in Kenya, where race times are significantly slower than at oxygen-rich sea level.

As an American coach living and coaching in Kenya, I see hundreds of runners like Kipruto, all training to run fast enough to race in the United States and Europe so they can have a chance to win prize money and get out of poverty.

To get faster and chase their dreams, Kenyan runners have specific training habits which, with a little adaptation, can benefit your fitness business and career, whether you are a personal trainer, gym

owner, fitness instructor or something in between. Here are four of them.

## 1. **Vikundi (Groups)**

Kenyan runners train in *vikundi*, or groups, every day, which ensures competition for the more seasoned runners looking to push the pace, while providing motivation for the lower-level runners, who practice holding on to the group pace. They often hold on for dear life, recognizing that the front-runners represent their own opportunity. If they can stick with the faster runners despite the fatigue and the pain, they believe their dream of living a life on the other side of poverty may become a reality. "Suffer for a short time, or suffer for the rest of your life," is a common mantra here. The team mentality is strong in Kenya.

**The Business Lesson:** **Harness the power of your group.** To make your business successful, bring together people with different skills (e.g., subject matter expertise, marketing, sales, finance) who can push each other daily to be successful.

If you are a business owner or manager overseeing a large



staff, try using work teams with power distributed throughout your business—an organizational structure called **holacracy**. Unlike traditional top-down management systems, holacracy gives employees freedom to manage themselves while working in groups where they share authority and responsibility. As in Kenyan training groups,





holacracy works best if your employees are self-directed; value autonomy and commitment, and seek responsibility; and where a strong leader can oversee the work.

## 2. Kasi (Speed)

During large group runs throughout Iten, a senior member of the Kenyan running group often dictates the

*kasi*, or speed, of the run. No one is allowed to pick up the pace on his or her own. The speed is controlled.

This is a difficult concept for many runners to understand. Most runners run much faster than needed to meet the purpose of the workout. And that includes easy runs. I have seen too fast of a pace countless times over my coaching career.

When I was in college, one of my cross-country teammates always had to be in front during easy runs. He would push the pace all the time because he had to always finish each run ahead of everyone else. When done right, training is about control, and lots of it.

**The Business Lesson: Control the speed of your business growth.** Like many runners,

fitness professionals often push the pace more than necessary—working themselves to the bone, trying to train as many clients or teach as many classes in a day as possible. This often means neglecting their own exercise and health in the process.

Accelerated growth can also be detrimental to a business. It can cause cash flow problems (say, if you are looking to purchase more equipment than your profits comfortably allow), and it can significantly increase the demands on employees, especially if you don't have the business structure and operations in place to support that growth.

Grow your business only as fast as your operations, management and systems will allow. To avoid getting caught up in chasing daily dollars, set specific, realistic financial goals for each month and each year, and use them to control the *kasi*.

## 3. Umbali (Distance)

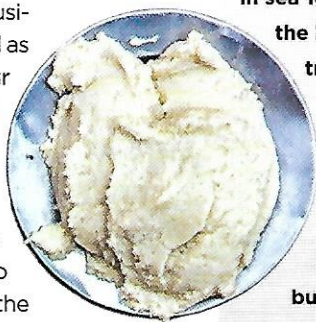
Running 100 miles per week is nothing special in Kenya. Most Kenyan runners cover a lot of *umbali*, or distance, with the marathoners running upwards of 120 miles (193 kilometers) per week and the shorter-distance (5K/10K) runners covering only slightly less ground. >>

Kenyan runners tend to race infrequently and instead focus on developing their aerobic systems to their highest potential through high mileage, running 11 times per week. This is different than pushing the pace, as it allows Kenyans time to work *on* their running in addition to *in* their running, developing a solid base before they include faster running to prepare them to race.

**The Business Lesson: Be devoted to going the distance.**

While you don't literally need to run 100 miles per week to have a successful fitness business, you do need to spend as much time working on your business as Kenyans spend working on their running. There are no shortcuts. It takes a lot of work to be successful, but building a solid base can allow you to be more successful down the road. (It took a lot of time and effort to write my books and create my run certification program, but years later, they still provide me with passive income.)

Like running high mileage, working a lot has value beyond a successful business. When you commit yourself to the work, you learn about yourself. You learn the effort it takes. You learn the grind. You learn what it means to do more, to be more. No matter the stage of your business—startup, five figures, seven figures or household name—devoting yourself to the work strips you of the unnecessary baggage that can clutter your life. The work forces you to shut up, stop complaining and stop making excuses for why you can't do it. Like Kenyan runners, you come out the other



end of the work a stronger, more confident, more capable businessperson. That alone is worth the commitment.

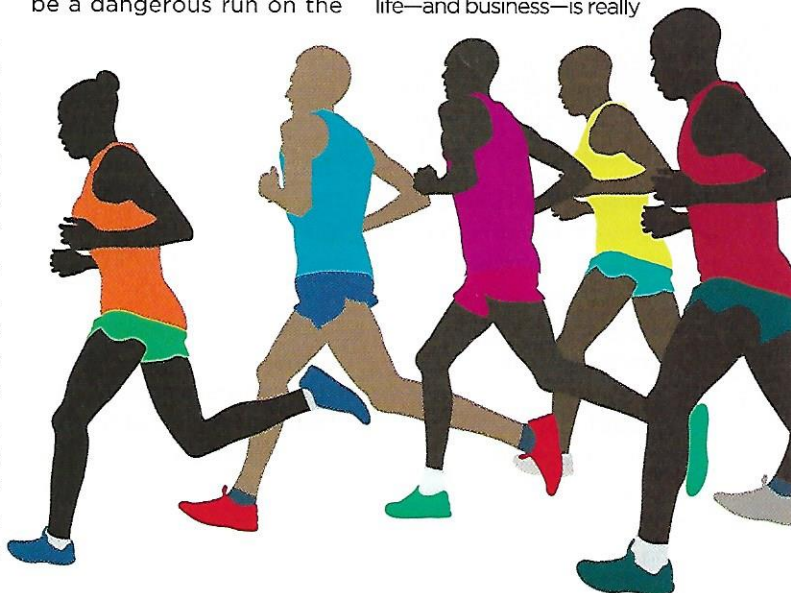
#### 4. Fartleks (Speed Play)

Every Thursday at 9 a.m. in Iten, about 200 Kenyan runners—and a few visiting *mzungu* (white) runners—collect at a trailhead at the side of the road for the famous Iten Fartlek: a 5K to 10K, alternating either 1 minute fast/1 minute slow, 2 minutes fast/1 minute slow, or 3 minutes fast/1 minute slow. The slow parts are run very slow, which enables the fast parts to be run very fast. A combination of two Swedish words, *fartlek*, or “speed play,” dates back to 1937, when it was developed by Swedish

Olympic athlete and coach Gösta Holmér, who used it as part of Sweden's military training. Kenyan runners often run fartleks for their hard workouts, turning what could be a dangerous run on the

rolling, rocky, red-dirt trails into an art form.

**The Business Lesson: Alternate between intensity and recovery.** While it is often said that life is a marathon, life—and business—is really



### 3 MYTHS ABOUT KENYAN RUNNERS

#### FAST FACTS

Over the years, many people have tried to figure out why Kenyan runners are so dominant. As a result, several myths have been assigned to Kenya's Great Rift Valley.

#### MYTH: KENYAN RUNNERS RUN BAREFOOT

**TRUTH:** The roads in Iten are too rocky for anyone to run barefoot. Moreover, Kenyan runners don't think that running barefoot makes them faster. In fact, they search daily for running shoes, and they want the most cushioned ones.

#### MYTH: ALTITUDE MAKES KENYAN RUNNERS GREAT

**TRUTH:** Although many runners and coaches attribute much of the success of Kenyan runners to their altitude birth and training, there is little evidence that training at altitude is superior to training at sea level for improvements in sea-level running performance. There's plenty of altitude in America, yet the best American distance runners have historically been born, raised and trained at sea level.

#### MYTH: UGALI GIVES KENYAN RUNNERS THEIR STRENGTH

**TRUTH:** While *ugali* (a stiff maize-flour porridge) is pure carbohydrate, and carbohydrate is the muscles' preferred fuel when running, there is no single food that will make someone a world-class runner. Kenyans love ugali, eat it all the time and think it makes them strong—but nutritionally speaking, there's nothing special about it.

more like a fartlek, with short bursts of activity interspersed with periods of recovery and strategy. Run your business like a fartlek—work intensely on a single task for a short period of time, then back off to think, plan and strategize about how to grow your business. Then work intensely again on either the same task (if it's not yet completed) or on the next task. When you try to work on multiple tasks at once, important things get sacrificed. And, just like a Kenyan runner doing *fartleks*, you can accomplish more work at a higher intensity if the work is interspersed with intervals of recovery.

## Keeping Up With Kenyans

Kenyan runners have a singular focus and a work ethic that makes them successful. If you work in *vikundi* (groups), control the *kasi* (speed), cover a large weekly *umbali* (distance), and treat your work like a *fartlek* (speed play), your business will surely succeed. Apply these principles to your workouts, too, and perhaps

you'll even be able to keep up with a Kenyan—literally!

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