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**KNOWLEDGE ON THE RUN.
UNCERTAINTIES IN THE CAREERS OF
KENYAN LONG-DISTANCE RUNNERS**

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Konstantin Biehl
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EPISTEMOLOGICAL UNCERTAINTIES IN THE CAREERS
OF KENYAN LONG-DISTANCE RUNNERS

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Knowledge on the Run. Epistemological Uncertainties in the Careers of Kenyan Long-Distance Runners

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Abbreviations

AK	Athletics Kenya
FIFA	Fédération Internationale de Football Association
IAAF	International Association of Athletics Federations
IOC	International Olympic Committee
KAAA	Kenya Amateur Athletics Association
RAK	Ras Al Khaimah Half Marathon

1. Introduction

A. The Craziest Running I've Ever Seen

The Marathon is the longest distance in Olympic running and takes place on the final day of the Summer Games. At Beijing 2008, in an effort to avoid some of the smog and heat, the race started unusually early in the morning. However, at 7.30 am, the humidity was far above seventy percent, the temperature already at 21° Celsius, and the air heavily polluted. Probably nobody imagined that the 24-year Olympic Record of 2h 09m 21s, set by the Portuguese Carlos Lopes, would be shattered during this race. Olympic Marathon has no pace-setting runners, so the twenty-year-old Kenyan, Samuel Wanjiru, who finished only two 42,195km races before the Games dominated the race from the beginning. He started sensationally, running the first 5000m in 14m 52s, and the second 5000m 19 seconds faster than the first. By then the field was already dispersed, the leading group just eight athletes strong. Wanjiru slowed down just a little bit and reached the half-marathon mark in 1h 02m34s, just five seconds slower than the world record pace. Four other athletes stayed with him at first, but despite the slightly slower pace, dropped away one by one. By then the sun was shining and the temperature rose to 34° Celsius. The last five kilometres Wanjiru ran alone. As he entered the stadium, he started to celebrate, waving at the cheering spectators. He knew he has won. Finishing in 2h 06m 32s, almost three minutes faster than the old Olympic record of 1984, he was the youngest winner in the history of Olympic Marathons. Amby Burfoot, the 1968 Boston Marathon winner, proclaimed that it was “*the craziest running I've ever seen!*”¹

I have watched summaries of this race half a dozen times during the early stage of my master research and I am still fascinated by Wanjiru's performance; even more by his breach of running conventions than by his physical performance. Even today, almost every athlete and coach would plan a race following the strategy of *even splitting*—running both halves of a marathon in the same pace—or *negative split*—running the second half faster than the first. Wanjiru ran significantly faster in the first 21km and set a very high pace from the beginning. He daunted the other athletes and forced them to abandon their racing strategies. For me, this moment of running against established plans points towards the importance of knowledge in athletic performance. How did he know that his tactic was worth pursuing against all established knowledge? Especially since he had run so few marathons before and one cannot run a marathon as a test. I cannot ask Samuel Wanjiru himself, he unfortunately died in 2011; but my thesis takes this race as point of origin to ask how Kenyan runners cope with problems of uncertainty with specific practices of embodied knowledge-making.

B. The Slowest Runner in Kaptagat

My research is based on two months of participant observation in the town of Eldoret and the nearby village of Kaptagat in the Kenyan highlands. Both places are centres of running and its omnipresence allowed me easy access. After a week in Eldoret I moved to a hotel in Kaptagat,

1 Quoted from Xan Rice's great piece on Wanjiru's career in the New Yorker (Rice 2012).

which also facilitated housing for about six athletes. Close by, another ten camps were dotted in a hilly landscape of fields and forests. I encountered runners everywhere and also started to run myself. After a while I had the opportunity to join professional athletes in parts of their training. I spent time with elite athletes like Kaan Kigen, James Kipsang, and Lezan Kimutai, met superstars like Eliud Kipchoge and coach Patrick Sang², but also got to know many runners who never started at any Olympics or IAAF World Championships, but nonetheless have shown great expertise in the technique of running³.

So I ran alone and with other athletes in the forests and fields around Kaptagat. And while nobody, neither athletes, nor farmers, nor children, seemed to wonder why I came to this place for running, I draw some attention as the only White (and certainly slowest) runner in the area. I adopted the athletic style of dressing, dietary habits, and recreational activities of my running mates. The latter mostly consisted of relaxing, drinking soda, and talking about running, a practice that perfectly fitted in with my research ambition. Listening to stories of tragedy, drama, and triumph, fuelled my fascination for running as much as the experience of training myself. It further helped me to understand the challenges and the economical networks of long-distance running, a process that exceeded my fieldwork and consisted of many hours watching races live and on TV, as well as online archival research in athletic databases and sports media between early 2016 and early 2018.

C. The Economy, Stupid!

My running with the Kenyans originated from questions on bodily knowledge and techniques of the body (Mauss 1973). During my fieldwork I soon noticed that questions of knowledge and skills are highly relevant and observable in practices of structuring the training, analysis of failure, timekeeping, and testing. Yet, asking my informants on uncertainty, they almost never referred to their bodies. While knowledge produced on (and by) their bodies enabled them to confront these uncertainties, another category of uncertainty was much more obvious in their tales of athletic adventure and in their constant search for financial support, management, and chances to run races abroad. Here, the question of coping with uncertainties must move beyond focusing solely on the intimate relationship between athletes and their bodies and include uncertainties produced by the field of global competitive sport.

I will start this thesis with two preliminary chapters, which will focus on sport as a global cultural industry (Chapter 2) and the local and colonial origins of Kenyan running and its current dominance in international competition (Chapter 3).

In chapter 4 I will elaborate on the economic practices of athletes. After introducing my methodology (Section 4.A) and briefly sketching the omnipresence of athletics in Kaptagat

2 I will note some of their greatest athletics achievement as they appear in the upcoming text. Some of the international stars, however, are anonymised in my research when I present accounts of conflict, as this information is not public.

3 Women are largely absent from my research. This is not because they do not run. My presentation of the history of Kenyan running will highlight the later but as successful development of female Kenyan athletics. I focused on male runners for my research, as at the place where I lived and trained, predominantly male runners stayed at the camps I visited. I did not try to compensate this by actively engaging with female athletes, because the work of the only other anthropologist writing on athletics in my research area centres on female runners (cf. Sikes 2012; 2016; Jarvie and Sikes 2012; 2013). I present the perspective of male athletes and therefore the accounts and perceptions in this text should be read as heavily embedded in masculinity.

(Section 4.B), I will briefly discuss how running is seen as a profession by my informants (Section 4.C). Access to this career is often gained by training for a scholarship from a university in the USA (Section 4.D). Some local agencies organise running groups and provide assistance with the application and immigration process. Usually athletes who fail, do so because of problems with the organisational process and not because they didn't meet the athletic criteria. Many of those try to pursue a career in commercial sport (Section 4.E). While some athletes are immediately successful and secure sponsorships, travel the world, and compete on high levels, others must secure their financial support through regular investments by family member and friends (Sikes 2012). Their seeking for support often resembles practices of hustling employed by young urban Kenyans to get by (Thieme 2017).

But the trouble may not end after securing a sponsorship. The competition for financial security by the athletes, and the competition for talented athletes between the managers, do allow some athletes to improve their standing and open up new career opportunities (Sections 4.F and 4.G). However, many athletes are cheated by fraudulent managers (Section 4.H) and must rely on practices of charity, solidarity, and hope to secure their career (Section 4.I).

The analysis of coping with an uncertain economic future shows how sport is used in rural Kenya as a means towards a better life and how it is connected to wider debates of future-making, hope, and postcolonial critique.

D. What Can a Body Do?

Inherent in the logic of competitive sport is an urge for the enhancement of the capacity to run. Following Mauss (1973) in conceiving the body as a technical device and running as a technique, this is a problem of enhancing effectiveness (Section 5.A). Athletes are confronted with the uncertainty of bodily knowledge. Following Spinoza's (1994) and Deleuze's (1988) work on the body as an epistemological problem (Section 5.B), athletic performance is not a biological problem (What a body is), but a problem of contingency (what a body can do) that is evaluated in a multitude of practices (Section 5.B). Conceptually, bodily knowledge is twofold: it entails explicit and reflective knowledge *on* the body as well as tacit and embodied knowledge *of* the body. Both kinds of knowledge are relevant in the process of training and running (Section 5.C).

Using my own running as a method to investigate training, I explain how optimising the technique of running goes beyond the enhancement of physical capacity and must be understood as epistemic work that produces knowledge on running and the body. Yet, I found a third dimension relevant: the process of training also enhances the capacity to produce knowledge and changes the quality of the knowledge available to an athlete. Especially through the description of my own learning process and training I will illustrate how the understanding of running, and therefore the engagement with the uncertainty of bodily performance, changes (Section 5.D).

Using Ericsson's theory of *deliberate practice* (1993), I discuss how expertise in sport is a crucial factor for elite performance. Applying my observations of practices of knowledge-making among athletes, I add to this concept by showing how the structuring of the training is as relevant as the time invested in an athletic career. Furthermore, I argue that formalising and categorising collective forms of knowledge on running provide the athletes with a starting point and guidelines to confront uncertainty (Section 5.E).

In the last two sections of chapter 5 I will discuss how the athletes enhance their capacity by improving their training program. I focus on moments of failure, which explicate the problem

of knowledge (Section 5.F), and practices of testing, especially timekeeping, which are at times controversially discussed among Kenyan runners (Section 5.G).

In the conclusion I will discuss the certainty produced by competing in a race and will show how capitalist competition and the production of certainty and uncertainty in athletics are intertwined.

E. Positioning My Thesis I: Anthropology of Sport

Before I begin with the introduction of Kenyan running, I want to position my research in the field of Anthropology of Sport. While in older holistic ethnographies sport did appear as a cultural feature of the researched group (cf. Roth 1902; Kronenberg 1958), it remerged quite recently as a distinctive and defined field of anthropology. Newer research focuses on specific aspects: sport can be a catalyst for colonialism and nationalism (cf. Appadurai 1995; Darby 2000; Guinness and Besnier 2016), it can sharpen or blur conceptions of gender (cf. Archetti 1999; Hokowhitu 2004), it is a powerful process of embodied experiences and changes of both body and self (Wacquant 2004), sport is deeply embedded in the process of technological adaptation – like self-tracking – (cf. Nafus 2016), and a mighty force of globalisation and capitalisation for both athletes and spectators (cf. Besnier 2012). Anthropology’s theoretical traditions of thought concerning knowledge and the body offer a specific access to sport as a social phenomenon (cf. Besnier and Brownell 2012: 444). The participative character of sport for (amateur) athletes or spectators offers a productive field for anthropology’s participant observation (ibid.).

Globalisation (chapters 2, 3 and 4), power relations (especially sections 4.D, 4.G and 4.H), and embodiment (chapter 5) are lines of analysis that play crucial roles in my thesis. Another important aspect of the analysis of sport in social science will be absent: in anthropology (cf. Klein 1993), and even more so in cultural studies (cf. Scheller 2012, Asmuth and Binkelmann 2012), sport is used as a lens for the deconstruction of conceptions of identity, gender, and sport itself. Often these studies are conducted in settings of show-sport like body building, wrestling, or acrobatics. This critique is highly relevant, but from my perspective much more fruitful in show and non-competitive sport, than in professional sport. Institutions exist because they are acknowledged by the actions of people, yet they offer space for critique when individual experiences contradict the rules of the institution (Rottenburg 2013: 72). In the context of my research – Kenyan running – I observe that the athletes’ critique seldom challenge the essential principals of competitive sport⁴, but decisively challenges unequal power relations and injustice. To denounce the capitalist order of professional sport would put one out of business, as the competitive order provides a compulsive foundation of social (inter)action⁵.

4 See section 2.B.

5 This can be challenged of course e.g. by practices of doping, but this would render one vulnerable for legal prosecution and endanger one’s achievement. Nonetheless, doping is quite common in athletics and also documented in Kenyan running. For several reasons I won’t discuss Doping at length in my thesis: (1) as an illegal practice doping is very difficult to observe and gain access to. I encountered reports on doping several times but my observations did not provide additional insights on knowledge-producing. I argue that the testing of doping medication is not different from the testing of other potential improvements of training. (2) I reject the general suspicion that African athletes are put under at times. Western media often addresses doping in the Global south (and Russia), while ignoring how common doping is in the West, specifically in popular sport like football. In a sense my research is a dedication to the many clean and fair Kenyan athletes and I reckon that for an anthropo-

My research adds to anthropological research on sport by focussing on professional athletes' coping with uncertainty, which shows how capitalist sport aggravates challenges of uncertain futures common in a lot of settings in contemporary Africa. Yet, these practices of coping are "historically specific" (Cooper and Pratten 2015: 2) and entail a double dimension of competition, athletics, and economics. In Kenyan running, uncertainty is the engine for the production of advanced levels of expertise and specialised practices of knowledge-making.

F. (De)Constructing Kenyan Running

At this point—before it's entirely too late—I want to explain the phrase of *Kenyan running*. Counterintuitively I want to start with what it is not: a fixed entity that describes a closed running culture that includes all and only Kenyans. As a lot of my informants explained at a certain point in our conversations, Kenyan running does not include all Kenya, as in most parts of Kenya nobody runs. Sport in Kenya is often explained along ethnic lines: "*The Luos play Rugby and the Kalenjins run.*" or in the words of Eric, a young Kikuyu student at the University of Eldoret: "*If I would run, my family would think I got mad.*" These ethnical boundaries (as all others) are never strict, often blurred, and if you talk about them in detail, they vanish. Kalenjin describes a set of eight different local groups; pooled together by British Colonial researchers (cf. Lynch 2011). In the past, runners emerged from all these groups, as well as from the Kisii, Kamba, and even Kikuyu. Nowadays, most professional running takes place in the highlands around Eldoret, and in addition to Kenyans, international athletes train there temporarily. Furthermore, a lot of Kalenjin runners are not so Kenyan anymore, since they took nationalities of aspiring sport nations as Turkey, Bahrain, Azerbaijan, or the UAE, or immigrated to the USA or Europe⁶. So if Kenyan running is blurred and fayed, why do I use the phrase? The worst argument is that there is simply no other phrase that entails my field of research. A better argument is for the athletes, their friends, families, and neighbours who see it as a source of pride and respect.

So for this research, Kenyan running is a brand name that not only stands for the huge success of Kenyan athletes at international marathons, world championships, and Olympics in the last decades, but also for a certain style of running—floating, but minimalistic in gear.

G. Positioning My Thesis II: Why is Kenyan Running so Successful?

Kalenjins often refer to ethnicity when explaining their dominance: "*All Kalenjins can run. It is in our blood.*" Popular belief of sport fans worldwide attributes it to either poverty or the physical features of *Black⁷ Africans*. As shown in the edited volume *East African Running. Toward a cross-disciplinary perspective* (Pitsiladis et al 2007), life, sport, and social sciences all contribute a variety of explanations. The authors attribute the success of Kenyan running to its promise of social advancement (Jarvie 2007), to cattle raiding activities of the past (Manners 2007), to the

logical research focussing specifically on practices of doping, amateur endurance sport in the west would be the most productive field.

6 All these considerations also show how incoherent the organisation of global sport along the lines of nation states is.

7 I capitalise Black and White because I do not refer to a colour (of skin) but a racial and ethnic category.

body composition of a “*hunter-gatherer phenotype*” (Fudge et al 2007), to a specific diet (Christensen 2007), or to the genetics of “*the ‘natural’ east African athlete*” (Scott et al 2007). These Accounts – be it in common parlance or scientific expertise – often oscillate between biological determinism and racialisation on the one side, and what I term *culturalisation of poverty* on the other.

The methods of my research cannot falsify biological explanations or denounce poverty as a factor for athletic success. I actually do believe that the uncertain economic situation of young Kenyans does play a role not to be underestimated within the successful recruiting of aspiring, young athletes. To deny the importance of biological factors for athletic performance would be naïve, but biological and medical research on populations defined by old, colonial, and racial perceptions has been criticised in depth by postcolonial researchers like Fullwiley (cf. 2011)⁸. The comparison of different studies on biological features shows that they often contradict each other (cf. Epstein 2013; Mayes 2005), and the historical analysis of professional long- and middle-distance running shows that the dominance of specific nationalities is very common (Bale and Sang 1996; Bale 2004)⁹. I build on social research like this, which emphasis social and historical explanations of Kenyan running.

My own argument against the focus on biological or simplistic forms of explanation is not based on a methodological argument, but on the analysis of the figuration of localised young athletes in Kenya and a global sport industry¹⁰. I argue that the deep embeddedness of running in a local society and the resulting knowledge, high competition, and very importantly the strong network connections between the region around Eldoret and global actors like managing firms, sporting goods manufacturers, and other sponsors, are far more decisive factors of the success of Kenyan running. In the following chapters I will provide ethnographic evidence to support this hypothesis.

8 Her research on sickle-cell disease in Senegal shows how genetic science research can be biased by racial categories. A critique closer to the field of sport is provided by Ralph (2007), who uses the example of Senegalese Basketball players to show the search for perfect athletes using only physical characteristics fails to acknowledge relevant non-physical aspects of successful careers and how these practice re-invents the discourse of the ‘noble savage’.

9 The dominance of Finnish athletes in the 1930s and Swedish runners in the 1940s was also commonly explained with theories of environmental determinism (Bale and Sang 1996: 142; Bale 2004: 61fff).

10 I want to briefly present the Tarahumara, a group in Northern Mexico with maybe the most impressive long-distance running culture in the world. They practice persistence hunting of game and compete in running competition over several days and up to 400km (Balke and Snow 1965). Of course, one might say, they run barefoot and live on a high altitude of around 1,800m. And while they are the destination of a specific form of long-distance running tourism, no Tarahumara ever won a major marathon or at the Olympics. I argue that the reason behind this is because they lack the connections to the global sport industry.

2. Competitive Sport and Capitalism

In this introductory chapter I will define the conceptual, global, and capitalist features of sport with an emphasis on long-distance running. Preferably, I will use examples from athletics, but occasionally I will draw on other sports as they provide useful insights. Most competitive sports show similar basic developments in terms of globalisation and commercialisation, but the degree and the specific articulation varies substantially. Hence, my writing about marathons and the Olympic movement should not be generalised to all global sport organisations.

A. What is Sport?

I will start with a more basic definition of sport. While the historical origins of sport are unknown, early sport-like activities were connected with religion, like the ancient Olympic Games (Fry 2014: 371). Guttmann (2000) characterises modern sport with seven specific features: “*secularism, equality, rationalization, specialization, bureaucratization, quantification, and the quest for records*” (ibid.: 248). These elements are all present in competitive, professional running and this already points us to a problem of the definition of sport: is sport just physical activity and does it include physical leisure activities without competition, or should it include characteristics of a game, a contest of physical skills (Suits 2007)? Sport often accounts for activities at the nexus of pleasuring, physical exertion, social interaction with others, and aesthetic satisfaction – and while professional athletes are often associated with the competitive dimensions of sport, even they spend most of their time with non-competitive exercises (Gaffney 2015: 288). Since my investigation of Kenyan running focuses exclusively on professional and competitive sport, I will evade a categorical answer to this question.

Crucial to my thesis is the relation between sport and society. Barthes describes sport as spectacle, in a sense that sport is bound to its audience. For him, the spectator is not a passive consumer, but participates actively. During a sport meeting “*everything [that is] happening to the player also happens to the spectator*” (Barthes 2007: 59). This certainly does not mean that the bystander of a marathon experiences the pain the runner feels during the last few kilometres, but he witnesses this pain and it forms part of the drama that sport (often) is. Barthes characterisation of sport as theatre, that has an unreal quality and functions as catharsis, has its limits. As he states in his description of a bullfight¹¹, sport is a *false theatre*, because other than in a play, the result is not an act but an actuality. This is as true for the death of a bull in the arena as for the runner-up in marathon. I argue here that while sport is often *fantastic combat* for the spectator, for the professional athlete it never left the *immediate world* (ibid.: 55).

B. Uncertainty and Competition

The attraction of sport for the spectator lies partly in its competitive character. While competition is one of the most controversial features of society, in sport it is widely accepted as leading

11 For Barthes “hardly a sport” but “perhaps the model and limit of all sports” (Barthes 2007:3).

to excellence, progress, respect (Boxill 2014), and I add: suspension. For the latter, uncertainty is absolutely necessary.

“Uncertainty of outcome is a primary quality of good contests. [...] sincere doubt about the outcome was a key innovation of Olympic-style Sport in ancient Greece – one that might have inspired the advent of philosophy. Uncertainty, furthermore, is what absorbs us in sport and makes it a welcome relief from everyday predictability.” (Reid 2012:194)

These assumptions are challenged by quantitative empirical research on the attendance of football matches in the English Premier League. Cox (2018) compares the attendance of fans in the stadium with the viewing figures on TV. He finds that while TV viewers prefer uncertain games, the spectators in the stadium prefer certain results. Similar investigations do not exist for running events, but I suspect that in this regard, athletic fans’ resemble football fans. This is partially because following an event on TV is much more reduced on the sport itself: one does not feel the direct emotions which emerge from directly witnessing an event together with a mass of other people. Secondly, the expert commentary provided on TV helps the viewer to understand and follow the competition in a more analytic way. But maybe most important for long-distance races, in contrast to football games or short distance running, is that one can follow the race as a whole only on TV. As a live spectator, one only sees an incomplete little part of the race as the athletes rush by. In the cases of marathon running, the emotional involvement therefore differs from a football match where a large part of the audience supports one club; even athletic superstars rarely spark such fanatic loyalty. And while during Olympic Games or world championships, fans know the names and profiles of the main competitors, during smaller marathons most visitors never heard the names of the participating international athletes (who mainly come from Kenya and Ethiopia). Nonetheless, these athletes are important for the spectacle of the event.

But while uncertain competition is an incomplete explanation for the worldwide and enthusiastic interest in sport, it is a prerequisite for the existence of these sport events.

“There is an objective measure of success, a rival (or set of rivals) to confront, and an ineluctable logic to the confrontation: the success of one is, generally speaking, inversely related to the success of others.” (Gaffney 2015: 287)

Winning and losing provide the very basic rules for sport events. For the spectators (and sometimes even athletes) the dramatic moments during the competition, when the competitors’ skills are tested, make sport worthwhile (Delattre 1976). This approach emphasises on the spectators’ perspective. My research’s focus on athletes provides a slightly different view on sportive competition. For the athletes the actuality of competition is absolute. It is the centre of their immediate world and only success in this competition allows them long term access to the recognition and financial benefits sport can provide. In capitalist sport, competition is also multi-layered. The competition in the races is open and transparent, however not less cruel at times. It is intertwined with the capitalist market competition between the actors, which is at times invisible and follows much less defined rules.

C. Commercialised Sport

How did sport become a global industry that offers jobs and sometimes great wealth, not only to athletes, but to managers, federation officials, medical and technical staff, journalists, and more? Parallel to the accelerating socio-economic globalisation from the 19th century onwards, the global expanse of sport is linked to colonial empires. The modern Olympic movement was founded in 1894, its first games held in Athens two years later. In the following years international associations for sports like football (1904), cricket (1909), athletics (1912), and tennis (1913) were established (Horne et al 1999: 277). The organisations based in Western countries did formalise the rulesets of these sports and expanded its influence in colonial territories. Especially British sport spread around the world, was adopted by local elites, and replicated social classifications based on gender, class, and race (Miller et al 2001: 10). Although running can be considered a universal anthropological constant (Cregan-Reid 2017), the establishment of running as an athletic sport with fixed distances, rules, and regulated spaces are a result of this specific global organisation.

Sport events soon became a powerful tool for the self-representation of nation states, especially but not only for authoritarian regimes like Nazi-Germany, fascist Italy, or the Soviet Union (Miller et al 2001: 12). The establishment of a global sport audience and industry was pushed further through the technological progress in information technology and mass media. The mediatisation through TV and nowadays also the Internet led to the shift from empires' cultural exchange investment to commercialisation with financial capital at its centre, turning sport to be "*the global culture industry par excellence*" (ibid.: 13). This becomes evident in the attraction of international mass events like the Olympic Games, football championships or major marathons, in the increasing mobility of sports like tennis, golf or, again, long-distance running, and in the still increasing advertisement, marketing, and promotion of sport (ibid.). Before I discuss how these elements manifest themselves in the organisation of running as an industry, I want to stress that while the commercialisation and globalising of sport offers opportunities for athletes, unequal power relations remain. Sport brands like Adidas and Nike, and international (and sometimes astonishingly corrupt) organisations like the International Olympic Committee (IOC), the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF), and the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) are main actors in commercial sport (ibid.: 56f). They push its financialisation and through their ability to direct global capital flows, they translate the economic, juridical, and sportive rules of the games. While especially migration laws of nation states influence global sport migration, the sport organisation have codified their own laws concerning participation, recognition of athletes and teams, gender status, doping, commercialisation, and competition of companies (Nafziger 1992: 490). Sometimes they enforce them on nation states¹², sometimes nation states enforce their laws on them¹³. This shows that the global governance of sport is neither fully corporate, nor fully nationalistic (Miller et al 2001: 12).

And while the dominance of the global North (North America, Europe, and Japan) may hold for now as the expanses on telecast rights of the Sydney Olympics indicate (cf. White 1998), new emergent players arise. China and Brazil held the Olympic Games of 2008 and 2016, South

12 e. g. the rules for advertisement during the Olympics or the FIFA World Cup, when sport organisations among other things decide which brands of beer are allowed to be sold for miles around the event's location.

13 e. g. the forced resignation of FIFA president Joseph Blatter due to corruption investigations by the FBI.

Africa organised the football world cup in 2010, Brazil in 2014, and the new sport super power Qatar will host the cup in 2022. This shows that nation states still play an important role, not only as a category to structure competition, but as actors on a global market¹⁴.

D. Actors and Spaces of Competitive Long-Distance Running

In this section, I will give a brief overview of the institutional framework of the global running industry. One of the main actors here is the IAAF with its members, the 214 national athletic federations. Founded in 1912 in Stockholm as a representation of amateur athletes, this amateur status was softened in 1982 and completely dropped in 2001. The headquarters moved to Monaco in 1993. The IAAF organises several athletic events, like the world championships in Athletics, establishes and defines standards for time keeping, records, and the organisation of races. Races that apply and fit different criteria of international elite competition¹⁵, media coverage, and ecological responsibility are granted the IAAF gold label. Currently the major marathons in Berlin, London, Boston, New York, Chicago, and Tokyo, and 37 other races, mainly marathons, hold this label. Together with the world championships and the Olympics they constitute the highest level of competition. But hundreds of races exist around the globe; they all provide the main source of income for the athletes (and their agents). While established athletes are paid attendance fees for starting a race, the most profitable way to earn a living as an athlete is to finish in the top 3 of a race (or the top 10 in major races). Usually the longer the distance (up to the marathon distance), the higher the price money, which can amount to a few thousand dollars in smaller marathons like those of Kassel, Germany, or much more in greater races like those of London (\$55,000 for the winner), Boston (\$150,000), or Dubai (\$200,000). Additional bonus is paid for meeting specific times (often marathon times faster than 2h 05m 00s), or breaking course, national, continental, or world records. Another form of running jobs is pace-setting. Especially for marathon races, the organisers provide athletes who keep a steady pace, for up to 30 km, for the competitors and sometimes Western athletes pay Kenyan runners as their personal pacesetters to improve their personal best time.

Of all earnings of an athlete, be it prize money, attendance fees, or sponsor payments, a percentage goes to the athletes manager. The usual amount is 15% and while some successful athletes get better deals, others must additionally cover their travelling and accommodation with their prize money or might even be cheated outright. The quality and services of the managers differs widely and the competition to get a contract with a famous one is fierce. The most powerful managing agencies are Western companies who represent a variety of international athletes, from young talents to established stars. Companies like Global Sports Communication¹⁶ from Nijmegen, Netherlands; Volare Sports from Voorthuizen, Netherlands¹⁷; Pace

14 I refer here to the fact that most international competitions in athletics and beyond are organized for national teams and e.g. despite the immense profit of mega-sport events, only national states are able to provide and finance the needed infrastructure. This is especially true for athletics, while the totally and openly commercialised US sports Basketball, Baseball and American Football are an interesting exception from the latter.

15 See Section 4.G for the specific criteria of IAAF Gold Label Races.

16 managing Eliud Kipchoge, 2016 Olympic marathon winner and Kenenisa Bekele, three time Olympic Champion and holder of two world records (5000 m and 10,000 m)

17 managing Wilson Kipsang, former Marathon World record holder

Sports Management from Monaco¹⁸, or Rosa & Associati from Iseo, Italy¹⁹, are the most important players. They operate their own running camps in the highlands around Eldoret (and some also in Ethiopia), which provide training groups, coaches, massage therapists, housing, food, equipment, transportation, and facilities for training and recreation. Camps vary in size and the facilities they provide. Some are run by Christian development NGOs, some by senior athletes, or informally organised by the athletes themselves. In the area around Kaptagat, where I stayed during my fieldwork, I personally visited seven camps and know of at least three more. Smaller sport management firms or individual managers don't have their own camps, but finance the training in other facilities, organise the travel to competitions, and link the athletes to race organisers.

Other actors are national federations and their national teams and universities: Japanese *Ekiden* long-distance relay races with fixed teams attract young athletes from all over the world (e.g. Samuel Wanjiru started his career with the Toyota Kyūshū athletics team) and by providing scholarships for talented athletes, US universities are a main factor for athlete migration to North America.

Not only national federations and educational institutions provide an income for athletes and staff—much higher sums are provided by sponsors. While this field is dominated by large sport brands, also smaller producers of technical gear like Garmin, producers of sport foods, or even companies not related to sport at all sponsor athletes and staff. Through sponsoring, the mediatisation of racing events with the flow of money at its heart, professional and amateur running are crucially connected: the professional athletes function as marketing tools for the products of their sponsors and the consumer of these products provide the money and the attention to keep the industry rolling.

18 managing Vivian Cheruiyot, Olympic and world champion in 5000m; the marathon runner Galen Rupp from Portland, USA and sprint super star Usain Bolt

19 who managed Samuel Wanjiru

3. Short History of Kenyan Running

This chapter will provide an overview of the historical and colonial influences which shaped the economy and socio cultural features of professional running in Kenya. While some authors trace the origins of running back to ancient and pre-colonial times, I will focus on the more recent history that started with the introduction of Western competitive sport by missions, colonial administrators, and the British military.

A. Colonial and Local Origins

Some historical studies, like Manners' *Kenya's Running Tribe* (1997), describe cattle raiding as a competitive and early form of organised running of Kenyan pastoralists, before and during British Colonial rule. Stealing cattle from neighbouring groups was a common source of income and prestige for young men. The raids covered distances of up to one-hundred-sixty kilometres and the ability to drive the captured cattle to the safety of the own homestead required speed, endurance, and determination. Interestingly, Manners linked the practice of cattle raiding to colonial practices of control: while he admits that he finds little hard evidence for this hypothesis, he hints that the British Law enforcement policy severely punished Kalenjin cattle raiders if caught. They were sentenced to prison and hard labour, including building sport tracks during their captivity. Colonial records show that the British used sport as a means of social control against the Kikuyu after the Mau Mau rebellion in the 1950s. The only account of similar attempts against Kalenjin cattle raiding is a letter of a colonial officer.

He "recalled a campaign he conducted in one part of Kalenjin territory in the 1930s, promoting athletics as a surrogate for cattle raiding with a slogan that translates roughly as, <Show your valor in sports and games, not in war.>" (Manners 1997: 26)

Another more direct line can be drawn from colonial rule to professional running by the means of the British school system introduced into Kenya. In the 1950s, some schools were provided with track facilities and the often mission-based education system included physical training, games, and drilling. The earliest accounts of *sport days* in mission schools go back to 1906 and formalised in the 1920s (Bale and Sang 1996: 72).

Another organisation that promoted Western sport was the military, namely the King's African Rifles regiment. Both military and missionaries certainly used sport to provide an alternative to traditional dancing, which was considered sexually explicit, and to support the build-up of a workforce – in short: to discipline the population according to colonial and racist standards (ibid.: 75f). Much later, in the second half of the 20th century, some missionary schools also played an important role in the promotion of athletics as a chance for development. Especially notable is the St. Patrick's High School in Iten, where Brother Colm O'Connell trained several Olympic champions and promoted women's running from the 1980s on (ibid.: 117f).

At the same time organisational structures for athletics were established. The first British Sport Officer in Kenya, Arthur Evans, organised local and national athletic (track) events, which are held up until today (Amin and Moll 1972: 16). He further started record keeping in Kenya and co-initiated the founding of the Kenya Amateur Athletics Association (KAAA)

with its first chairman, Derek Erskine, in 1951²⁰. KAAA's formation was a requirement for the participation in and hosting of international athletic events. KAAA hosted the first East African Territorial Athletics Championships in 1952, with participants from Kenya, the Uganda Protectorate and the Tanganyika Territory. Later that year, at the Indian Ocean Games in Madagascar, Nyandika Maiyoro became the first KAAA athlete to win an international race²¹. In 1954, Kenyan athletes participated outside of Africa for the first time at the British Empire Commonwealth Games in Vancouver, Canada²² (Bale and Sang 1996: 95).

B. After Independence: Scholarships and Commercialisation

After Kenya's independence in 1964, the US Department of State and the US Information Agency expanded their programs for the development of sport infrastructure and importantly started to provide US university scholarships to aspiring athletes. The first Kenya inspired running guide book, *Learning to run* by Mal Whitefield²³, was published in 1967 in Nairobi and might be seen as a result of the author's seventeen years of engagement as a coordinator of the US development programs. Today, the chance of being awarded an academic scholarship in the USA is the first motivation for many young Kenyans to start professional running. Of those successful in obtaining such a scholarship, many pursue an academic career, become naturalised US citizens, and therefore use running as a mean for migration. Others, like Bernard Lagat, Michael Kosgei, and Henry Rono, competed in college sport during their studies in the USA and continue their career as professional athletes afterwards (Chepyator-Thomson and Ariyo 2016: 1838)²⁴.

The commercialisation of Kenyan running entails two trends. Firstly, athlete funding organised by Athletics Kenya (AK) and special jobs at the Kenyan army, police, and prison services provided by the state allows a concentration on training and a career in sport. Here, sport is used as a force in creating national unity and presenting the nation as successful. This approach was actively employed by the postcolonial Kenyan state (Bale and Sang 1996: 42). The medals the national team won and the successful breaking of the athletic dominance of Europe and the USA, were and are a source of international prestige, national self-confidence, diplomatic standing, and probably political stability (ibid.: 42; Njororai 2016: 125f).

Secondly, international managers scout and recruit Kenyan talents. This was made possible by the Kenya's Sport Commissioner in 1992, by the means of abolishing several restrictions on athletes travel and agent representation (Mayes 2005: 20). German media portrays Volker Wagner, a German manager, as a pioneer in this field, as he managed the first African Berlin Marathon winner, Tanzania's Suleiman Nyambui, from 1987 onwards. He later also successfully expanded his business into Kenya²⁵. Many other managers and their companies, including the biggest four (Global Sports Communication, Volare Sports, Pace Sports Management and, Rosa

20 www.athleticskenya.or.ke/about-us/history

21 He accidentally missed the start of the race and had to run with a 100 m residue. Having no time to change outfits, he ran in his ordinary shoes and clothes.

22 Kenyan athletes did not win any medals yet.

23 Winner of three Olympic gold medals in 400 m and 800 m.

24 More on the application process from an athletes perspective in section 4.D.

25 Among his Kenyan(-born) runners were Lornah Kiplagat, who won the 2007 half-marathon world championships for the Netherlands in Udine, Tegla Loroupe, three times half-marathon world champion and two times holder of the marathon world record, and more recently Eliud Kiptanui, winner of the 2017 Ottawa Marathon. See also www.tagesspiegel.de/sport/afrika-in-detmold/404280.html

& Associati), started their engagement in Kenya in the 1990s. This commercialisation raised interest in marathon (and other commercial long-distance) events. While Kenyan Athletes today are most famous for dominating on this distance, this is only recent development.

“Before 1998, no more than three Kenyan marathoners ranked in the top ten [...] In 2002, six of the top ten marathon runners were Kenyan [...] In 2003, Kenyans Paul Tergat and Sammy Korir broke the world record and became the first to run sub-2:05 marathons.”
(Mayes 2005: 22)

The reasons for that shift are certainly the financial incentives of marathon running (ibid.: 20f) and the increasing engagement of Western sport managers who link the athletes to the most (financially) lucrative running events.

Where the two trends contradict, conflicts between the AK, national coaches, athletes, and managers arise. In 2003, AK officials considered the results of Kenya’s national team at the world championships in Paris as merely mediocre. Kenya won 4 medals, two of them gold²⁶. National coach Mike Kosgei even demanded a ban of managers interfering with his work, by the means of giving instructions to their athletes that would set them for a commercial career. This included the neglect of track distances in favour of marathon events and absence from national championships (ibid.: 27). On the other hand, athletes claim that the support and incentives given by the AK and the national team are not appropriate in regards to the level of pressure and competition experienced in qualification for the team (ibid.: 28f), leading to the athletes’ acquirement of citizenship of Western and Middle Eastern countries that offer higher compensation and support.

Nevertheless, these two trends set the trajectory for the dominance of Kenyan runners, which I illustrate in the following section.²⁷

C. Road to Dominance

The success story of Kenyan athletes on a global stage started with the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, when Kipchoge Keino defeated the world record holder, Jim Ryun, in the 1500 m final. It was the first time the now independent country participated in the Olympics and Keino became the first international recognised Kenyan athlete. While Olympic success was halted when Kenya boycotted the 1976 and 1980 Games, Henry Rono challenged (North) European track and road racing dominance in 1978 by breaking the world records in 3000 m, 3000 m steeplechase, 5000 m, and 10,000 m.

These successes put Kenya on the map of world sport. However, the first time Kenya truly dominated a (men’s) sport was at the 1986 World Cross Country Championships, when its athletes won both first and third individual places and the gold medal in the team competition. From then till today, Kenyans have won the team competition 24 times and the individual competition 16 times.

Concerning road and track competitions prior to the de-regulation of 1992, the national team and US colleges were a bottleneck, which limited the numbers of athletes who could compete internationally. When athletes could seek their own agents, the number of internation-

26 Eliud Kipchoge in the men’s 5000 m and Catherine Ndereba in women’s marathon.

27 For a more detailed description: Mayes (2005)

ally competing runners skyrocketed, as did the number of Kenyan racing victories. At the 1987 IAAF World Championships in Rome they won 3 medals (all gold), at Tokyo 1991 eight medals, at Osaka 2007 13 medals, and since then always more than ten, culminating in the win of the medal table at Beijing 2015 with seven gold, six silver, and three bronze medals.

I already sketched the late turn of Kenyan athletics to marathon, with Paul Tergat setting the world record in 2003 as a starting point. Since then, Kenyan runners became paragons for marathon winners. The last three male world record holders have been Kenyan: Patrick Makau, Wilson Kipsang, and Dennis Kimetto. Tegla Loroupe, Catherine Ndereba, and Mary Keitany held the women's world record four times. The fastest marathon runner (under artificial, not record-worthy conditions) is Kenyan Eliud Kipchoge, who ran 2h 00m 25s at the Monza speed track in 2017. The World Marathon Majors Series had been held eleven times since 2006, with Kenyan men winning ten times and Kenyan women seven times. And to conclude, of the 46 world records in long- and middle-distance running, twenty-two are held by men and women from Kenya²⁸.

D. A Note on Women's Running

My research took place almost exclusively among male athletes and discusses the male version of Kenyan running. This is also true for most of the historical accounts in this chapter. The history of successful female Kenyan runners started in the late 1980s, almost twenty years after their male colleagues. In 1993, the number of internationally ranked female athletes in Kenya was as high as half of the male athletes (per capita). This is attributed to several social factors, like cultural reservations against female participations in sport, economic marginalisation, and social control by male relatives, but also by institutional access barriers abroad, for example in international athletic federations (Sikes 2016).

Today women compete in the same distances and are as dominant as the men. Sometimes even more: in the 2017 World Cross Country Championships in Kampala, the six Kenyan participants of the women's race took the first six places, with Irene Chepet Cheptai finishing first. The seventh and ninth places were taken by Ruth Jebet and Rose Chelimo, starting for Bahrain, but originally from Kenya (where they also train). But, following Sikes (ibid.), perceptions of running are still dominated by notions of masculinity. Female runners are often positioned outside of established female gender roles and seen as *like men*²⁹, while at the same time challenging gender concepts and improving the livelihood and freedom of all women, running or not (Sikes 2013).

28 Including one held by Ruth Jebet, a Kenya-born Bahraini (in 3000 m steeplechase).

29 This can be read in line with masculine ideas on the position of women in society. In general, I observed respectful behaviour by male athletes towards female athletes. Women were celebrated for their success and considered worthy athletes, who trained and invested as much as men. Still, however, weak performance and shape were at times described as woman-like. This is not referring to women running slower in general, but to the performance gap between male and female elite athletes. Cooperation is not uncommon; in some training groups, men and women ran partially together and male athletes were commonly used as pace setters by more successful women. The interaction with women outside of sport was different. A relationship was part of the representation of a successful athlete. My running mate Kevin criticised Patrick, his flat mate, for not being married. He considered this a sign of greed, because Patrick was not sharing his prize money with a family. At the same time Kevin proudly presented photos of his wife, two daughters, his two-floor villa and his imposing, second, SUV (cf. Drummond 2002 for a discussion on the meaning of relationships for professional athletes). Other athletes described women as a threat for an athlete. Noah explained: "Women are danger. They seduce you and take your money. Women are with the devil! [...] You see, this athlete, Sammy Wanjiru he fell because of a woman."

4. Economy

While the introductory chapters summarised features of a globalised sport industry and the historical background of running in Kenya, on the following pages I will describe the role running plays for the people in the highlands around Eldoret, how uncertainty is a driving force of running and how people engage with it through a variety of practises.

A. Stories of Running

In late March 2017 I watched the World Cross Country Championships, held in Kampala, Uganda, in a large hotel in Eldoret and first-hand witnessed some of the intensive feelings an athletic race could evoke. First, the women of Kenya's national team dominated their race. Then later, the young Ugandan, Joshua Cheptegei, rushed off and left defending champion Geoffrey Kamworor behind in the senior men's race. And while I could hear the crowd on the TV celebrate, the people around me fell into silence. The camera focused on the leading athlete. Kamworor was *"just off the screen"*, as the reporter said. My neighbour cursed quietly. However, in the final lap, uncatchable a head of the other runners under normal circumstances, Cheptegei almost came to a halt. Just a few hundred metres to the finish line, he almost stopped, his energy completely spent and his legs rubbery. Kamworor rushed past him and screams of excitement and relief erupted around me. An old man in front of me jumped around and then started to dance in front of the TV, a young woman yelled into her cellphone, the three men behind me leaped up from their seats, and the waiters celebrated behind the bar. *"It's like a football match back home"*, I thought.

This detailed account of watching a race is a critical part of my research. My methodology not only entails my own running and different observations, but also many *stories* about running. These stories were told by my informants, who talked about races, programs, and experiences of other athletes when we met during the long phases of free time between the morning and afternoon training. These stories were told when retired athletes met for tea and recalled their careers in front of me and their friends who joined us. Often, our conversations strayed from my initial questions on performance evaluation and training mistakes, to the global stage of running. We discussed Samuel Wanjiru's race in Beijing, Kamworor's victory at the World Cross Country Championships, Wilson Kipsang's race against Ethiopia's Kenenisa Bekele in Berlin 2016, the upcoming competition of Bekele against Daniel Wanjiru in London 2017, and Eliud Kipchoge's attempt to run the marathon distance in sub two hours in an artificial marketing race organised by Nike³⁰.

30 Kipchoge ran 2h 00m 25s over 42,195 km at the automobile raceway in Monza in May 2017. While I personally think that this is a great athletic achievement, I do not consider it a marathon. The IAAF does not recognise it as a marathon world record, as it was not a real race, the pacesetters were changed every round, and Kipchoge used additional clothes to be more aerodynamic. Also, no spectators were allowed. I think this event stripped the marathon of some of its most important features: competition between athletes and a crowd along the route. Sport journalist and marathon runner, Justin Lagat, told me the following regarding Kipchoge's run/race: *"He gets a lot of money for the advertisement [allegedly \$1mio. KB], but I would prefer to run some nice course, or even win NYC in 2:05. Instead of running 1:59 in something nobody understands. It is an artificial race trying to market Nike shoes and that is why it is not even athletics."*

These tales of great races were often used to explain certain features of running. In this chapter, I will show how these stories are a medium for knowledge about the running-body. Stories mediate information on the socio-economic organisation of running in the highlands and the personal experiences of life as professional athletes. Often, the stories initially appear as tragedies of loss and fraud when young hopeful runners are cheated by fraudulent agents, yet, later the tales become rephrased as statements of hope and almost fatalistic resilience. Others are told as tales of adventure, in which the athlete wins not only through his physical strength, but with boldness and wits.

In the realm of story-telling, Kretchmar points towards a strong connection between fiction and sport and claims semantic, structural, and cultural kinship between those two cultural spheres (2017: 56). To explain the importance of narrative in sport, he refers to the evolutionary psychological theories of Gottschall (2012). Both authors attribute a “*weird and witchy power*” to the stories of victory, comeback, failure, and tragedy that sport produces (Kretchmar 2017:57).

“The reach and influence of these two domains, their capacity to capture our attention, their ability to evoke both celebrations and tears, joy and despair, satisfaction and anger, seem to outdistance their credentials. This is so because both of them, from most objective perspectives, appear to be unimportant.” (ibid.:58)

Where does this immense attention come from? Kretchmar places uncertainty in the centre of this fascination. He claims that “*athletes are people with problems*” (2017:61) and that their uncertain struggles to overcome these problems are what fascinates us. Earlier, I discussed the limitations of uncertainty in the explanation of the success of sport³¹. Here, I want to distinguish between the *problems of athletes*, which I will describe later in this chapter, and the problems told by the mediatised tales of sport. The latter are challenges to overcome during the race and they follow tropes like *the underdog*, *the comeback*, *the champion*, or *head-to-head race*. They are used globally alike when sport is the topic of conversation, just the same in a German sports bar as in a hotel in Eldoret. But the problems I discuss are different. Fraud, the trouble of finding a sponsor, or running for a scholarship are rarely shown by sport journalists. Yet, in the accounts of my informants, these are the most pressing issues. On the one hand, the struggle for money, and on the other hand, the fascination for a global world of sport—this ambivalence inherent to capitalist sport defines this chapter.

Focusing on the stories that sport shapes and is reshaped by, offers explanations on how sport became such an important leisure activity and cultural industry. My research demonstrates that the enthusiasm for running is not only rooted in hopes of an economic way up, but in a more general fascination about sport. In the words of Lezan, a veteran athlete who ended his career in late 2017: “*Running is not easy. You have to like it... And you need something extra pushing you. Just money is not enough.*”

This fascination which I experienced throughout my fieldwork certainly became such a central topic in my work, as I am quite a sport enthusiast myself. While the most important part of my research was taking place in Eldoret and Kaptagat between the end of January and early April 2017, my own process of understanding running started earlier and ended later than this specific period of fieldwork. The relevant practices of research, which inform this chapter, entail the following of sport journalism, watching marathons and other running events on TV,

31 See chapter 2.

and reading several sport news websites. Therefore, I feature several vignettes based on media-tised sport events and my own consumption of it in this thesis. This media consumption is an important part of sport, especially when investigating processes of knowledge-making. Rather invisible in this thesis, my research also included internet-based archival works on websites of management firms, racing and finishers lists of major and minor marathons, the IAAF athlete profile databases³², sport blogs, and the database of the Association of Road Racing Statisticians (ARRS)³³. The latter provides the most comprehensive, but still rather incomplete, public database about paid prize money.

B. Runners Everywhere

After having discussed global sport media, I will now get back to the Kenyan village of Kaptagat, where the daily connection between the villagers and running is much more immediate. In mid-February 2017 I sat in a minibus on the way to Kaptagat in order to meet some friends for an easy training run. It was half past six in the morning and still dark. The bus was full of athletes. Some slept, some stared, and a few were joking quietly. Then someone signalled the driver, the minibus stopped and some runners jumped out and greeted their awaiting training group. Then, the bus drove on and occasionally had to switch to the middle of the road, as athletes in loud neon greens, yellows and reds emerged from the darkness in front of the vehicle. After thirty minutes I arrived at my destiny, almost late. My running mates, Kevin and Patrick, were already waiting. We immediately started with a slow pace of 7.00 min / km and passed by some wooden houses and small plots of maize and cattle pastures. We came along a lone runner in red. It was the holder of the European marathon record holder, Kaan Kigen Özbilen, born ten kilometres up in the hills, but running for Turkey since 2015. We greeted each other and jogged on. Hardly a kilometre further we reached a village and passed by churches, a large school compound, and a few shops. Coming from the opposite direction, a large group of men and women in mostly blue and black running gear ran passed us. Suddenly, I recognised the face of Eliud Kipchoge, my favourite runner and the winner of the 2016 Olympic marathon. Sometime later kids cheered us on and joined for a few metres. I laughed along with them, but one of the other runners waved harshly and instructed them to go away. He explained to me:

“They should not do this. We are all the same. Why do they bother you? Running is a serious business.” I replied: “If to anyone, they should cheer to all the world or Olympic champions that run here, not to a slow White guy, who hardly knows how to run.” Patrick laughed: “But champions you can see here every day! A running muzungu³⁴ is a rarity!”

Over time we slightly increased our pace to 6.00 min / km. I could still keep up, but after 9 km, at the last hill, the others started to run faster and faster and I had to let them go. They were going down to a pace of 3.00 min / km and I thought by myself: *“That’s the real marathon pace.”* In mere seconds, they were kilometres away. At least this was how it felt to me, fighting the last hundreds of metres, heavily panting. When I arrived, I felt totally exhausted, but the others

32 www.iaaf.org/athletes

33 <https://more.arrs.run>

34 Kiswahili slang for a White person.

walked to their compound without any sign of exhaustion. I wanted to join them, but got interrupted by cheering children. I tried to hide my exhaustion while I waved back at them. The smaller kids cheerfully jumped up and down, but the oldest kid, a nine or ten year old girl, eyed me suspiciously. I walked closer, said hello and looked into the girl's incredibly serious face. She pressed her hands on her hips, compensating our difference in height by standing on the acclivity. "How many marathons have you won?" she asked me. "None," I reply. "So why are you running?" she asked, even more sceptically than before. I tried to explain to her that I wanted to learn about running for my studies and that I was running for fun and fitness, rather than being a professional athlete. The girl shook her head in disbelief and proclaimed: "I will be a great champion when I grow up!"

Earlier, Justin, a runner and sport journalist³⁵, told me about his earliest memories of running:

"Running was our most popular game when we were children. You say: 'Let's run from here to there. Let's see who is the fastest!' and after we felt like 'I want to be like Ezekiel Kemboi'³⁶! I want to be like Moses Tanui'³⁷! These dreams inspire the young athletes."

Lezan also recalls running to and from school. Nobody in his family was running, but he too wanted to be like Moses Tanui. And when he took part in the frequent and already competitive races in primary school, his friends cheered him on and supported him: "And so I learned that I can run." These races in primary school are maybe the most competitive, explains Justin. The young children are running a lot, in school and in their free time, and every child is participating. The large amount of runners makes it difficult to qualify for county or regional competitions, as only the top three runners go through to the next round. Timekeeping does not play a role in qualifying. This manner of ranking athletes is also used in the senior national races and also in qualification for the national team, e.g. for the World Cross Country Championships. These examples illustrate that young Kenyans experience competitive running from early on and connect these experiences to their local role models, the successful athletes.

C. Running as Profession: Socio-economic Uncertainty

The great competition among athletes is certainly one of the factors for the high quality of running in the highlands. Yet, it makes the pursuit of a career in sport very uncertain. So why are so many young athletes investing and risking time and money in the risky dream of a career in sport? Whyte (1997) shows that uncertainty can be a common condition of life in Eastern Africa, where the levels of insurance and social security are low. It can be pragmatically engaged—doubting, experimenting with, and questioning life are part of the culture of the Nyole in eastern Uganda, Whyte's ethnographic case. She describes how uncertainty opens a "subjunctive mode", a mode of living open to possibility³⁸ (ibid.: 24). For the Nyole, certainty can even be a condition of despair which they try to avoid. An example for this is a positive HIV test. In the face of the HIV epidemic, uncertainty can open a space for hope (ibid.)³⁹. Uncertainty

35 See his blog: www.kenyanathlete.com

36 Four times world- and two times Olympic champion in steeplechase.

37 World champion in half- and full marathon, the first star of Kenyan athletics.

38 Practices I compare with the urban mode of hustling I describe in section 4.E follow the same principal.

39 For athletes the certainty inscribed in the result of a race cannot be avoided, see section 6.A.

can be the starting point for exploration and curiosity, as well as plans aiming for change of both the socio-economic situation and the self (Whyte 2009: 213f).

Furthermore, uncertainty is a common condition for most (young) people in the Kenyan highlands, even if they do not engage in running. It is necessary to recall the “*persistent risks and challenges faced by Kenyan youth, which include: unemployment, marginalisation, harassment by the police, and impediments in accessing essential facilities and services such as education and healthcare*” (Hope 2012: 221). Earning money (Jarvie and Sikes 2012) and appreciation through sport can be an attractive way to escape these threats, at least partially. Engagement in elite sport is partly an attempt to advance one’s livelihood or career. Typically, this includes migration, but not necessarily on the colonial routes to the Global North, as the example of Eastern African footballers playing in South-East Asia shows (Chepyator-Thomson 2016). The lack of prospering local sport industries, as well as “*globalization, money, and ease of travel are factors that motivate African sport athletes to leave their home continent*” (ibid. 1829). In the context of Kenyan athletics, typical migration routes are leading to US universities, which grant sport scholarships and recruit young Africans since the 1970s (Njororai 2010), and more recently also to Japan, as it has a well-funded running league.

Lezan, now in his early forties, recalls the difference between his own experiences and the chances and opportunities his son, Victor, has today:

“My son runs like you. [...] Better believe me. He is really slow. But how could he have learnt to run? I was poor and never got a proper education. Running was my only chance. Victor [his son] went to a private school, where they don’t care about athletics. I drove him to school with my car! He really never had the chance to learn running. But he is smart. He studies chemistry and even had the chance to go to the United States on a [non-sport] scholarship.”

Interestingly, most retired athletes, like Lezan, want to send their children to private schools and prepare them for academic careers. This seems to follow a promise of African higher education in which graduating from a public university incorporates the student in the national elite and provides a life of wealth and recognition in the employment of the state (Behrends and Lentz 2012). But my impression of a contemporary Kenya with high unemployment rates among graduates and numerous, often dubious, private colleges and universities, suggests that this promise is obsolete. Recent World Bank reports seem to confirm this view. Especially in urban settings and in the well paid wage sector, jobs are lacking and urban unemployment affects 20% of the active population. Young people are at an even higher risk: “*45 percent of young men (15-24) versus 31 percent of young women are employed [...], set against nearly 70 and 50 percent of the total adult population*” (World Bank 2016: 9). Other studies also criticise the Kenyan education system for its failure to teach the students necessary skills for the job market. This includes a focus on the very small formal sector and also a lack of investment in the particular skills that the growing economies need. Hence investment in education does not pay off for all students (World Bank 2017: 49ff). So it does not come as a surprise that fathers like Lezan prefer to send their children to universities abroad, because their trust in the Kenyan education system is even lower than that of the World Bank. Similarities to the risk of investing in a running career are obvious and often discussed by my informants. Eliud and Noah are both young runners:

Eliud:

“...of course the risk is high. You can get an injury and then it ends your career. But education is different. You go to class and your future is bright.”

Noah:

“But now technology is taking over! Robots will come! Maybe they get all the jobs! [...] You learn, you get your degree and then robots will take over! [laughing] So you see... the only field that is now fair is athletics. Education?!? People are now at home, sleeping with their degrees, looking for a job and crying every day! But in athletics, you train every day. You may not go out there [abroad], but you can go to Kass [marathon in Eldoret], win [KSH] 25 million⁴⁰, and with that money you take a step and help your family.”

Eliud:

“But a regular job is somehow still better. It gives you a steady income and stability. As an athlete you may not earn anything for months, even a year.”

Noah:

“Education doesn’t guarantee you a job!”

Here, I will not dwell on the obvious differences between those two fields, like access based on secondary school graduation and the length of careers in sport and education. Yet, an interesting argument in favour of sport, argued by Noah and other informants alike, was the quality of life a running career provides: an athlete invests solely two hours a day in training and can hang around with his friends for the rest of the day. In the words of Noah:

“Only two hours! And I shake the hand of Donald Trump! It’s not like education. Someone would have to study for five years to shake that hand! For me it’s only two hours of [work each day]. An engineering course takes six years and then it takes a lot of time to invent something!”

However, investments and risk of failure are only parts of the equation; the other part is the expected reward. Here, more promising (and realistic) than shaking hands with the US president, is winning money.

D. Running and Education: Scholarship Athletes

For young secondary school graduates and their families, the choice between an investment in education or in an athletic career is not mutually exclusive. When visiting Chepkoilel athletic field on Tuesdays, I could observe how those athletes arriving early in the morning, trained differently from those starting their exercises in the late morning. While the professional groups trained very early, often starting at 6 am, the late comers were large groups of very young people who trained much less focussed. Soon, I learned that they represented a special

⁴⁰ He is clearly over exaggerating. KSH25,000,000 is over €200,000 and the prize money in Kenya is not at all so high.

class of runners: scholarship athletes. These men and women prepared for test races organised by US universities to recruit promising athletes and grant them scholarships. They joined the training groups of a few specialised agencies in Eldoret, or in a village close by, and were not only supported in training, but also in the application process.

Geoffrey, like all Kenyan coaches, was an athlete himself. He taught a group of scholarship athletes at Strobag Centre, a local commercial hotspot close to Kaptagat. We occasionally met for lunch and he put in great effort to teach me basic principles and tricks of training. It was easy to grasp how avid he was to coach young athletes. In the light of this, I was quite surprised when he disclosed that most of his students were neither especially motivated, nor talented. Actually, his account gave rise to doubts about the story that *all Kalenjins can run!* For Geoffrey they often lack the right attitude. Some of his students are complaining about the intensity of the training, the food, and the living conditions. To him this is often caused by external pressure, from parents or guardians, to run. Others are physically not fit:

“They are fat. 75kilos. They don’t know how to run because their thighs are too fat. First they must reduce their weight, then they can run. They have power, but their weight reduces their potential.”

Based on their performance, Geoffrey divides his athletes into three groups. Despite the talent a newcomer might have, he or she first trains for several weeks in the third group before progressing to the second group. Here, the training intensifies, but it is still by far less than what professional athletes run. Only the best athletes are sent to the first group and they perform on a level, that according to Geoffrey, would qualify them for a running career. However, some talented runners stay in the second group, as they do not wish to train harder, while others fail to improve while training in the last group:

“I’m stressed sometimes, because I train them and they don’t perform. Some train for one or two years in the camp. They need to pay me, the house, the food and many, many other things. So at times, when someone does not perform for two years, we have to meet the parents or the guardian. [...] We make a meeting and look for another place for him, like a college, or he goes home and does something else. But it is painful.”

Even those who perform well, Geoffrey explains, initially saw running foremost as a way to receive a scholarship and enrol at an US university. Moses, one of he’s former students, who joined us for lunch, laughed: *“Yes, I used to skip the morning runs frequently. I didn’t really take it serious back then.”* Geoffrey laughs, too: *“Yes, I bet you thought I wouldn’t notice. But I knew. But it makes no sense to force anyone to train. The motivation must come from the athlete.”* Moses agrees: *“Yeah, but the [running] times for the scholarship are easy to pass. There was no reason to train harder.”* Geoffrey then told me that eventually almost everyone, even most of his semi-ambitious runners, meet the criteria. This was confirmed by other athletes, who all claimed to have easily passed the running criteria for the scholarships. But to get a scholarship, other criteria may be important too, especially secondary school marks. So it is possible that athletes from the second group can get a scholarship, sometimes even injured athletes get one. In the same time, talented runners from the first group may not be accepted.

Moses was among the lucky who got one and so I wondered why he was still in Kenya. He explained that getting the scholarship was not the problem. The challenge was getting a visa from the US embassy in Nairobi. *“But you got a sport scholarship? Your expenses are covered?”*

Why shouldn't they approve your application?" I asked naively. He explained that two of his brothers studied in the US and stayed there. Moses got a scholarship himself, but his visa applications were declined four times without a proper explanation. Later, I personally checked the US embassy's homepage to look for some answers, but just learned that they offer individual and general counselling sessions for scholarship applicants, with no information on specific requirements for sport scholarship holders. Geoffrey made it very clear that the whole bureaucratic process was a mystery to him anyway and he claimed to have no specific knowledge of this procedure: *"At times the embassy offers ten or even fifty visas on one day and at times they deny everyone. So denial at the embassy is normal."* He recommended me to his boss, Evans, who was responsible for assisting the young men and women with their paperwork. But on the question of visas, his explanations were rather vague: *"Sometimes papers like bank statements are missing and sometimes no reasons are given. Often we just don't know why they reject the visas."* Regrettably, I never had the chance to interview him properly in order to further investigate his perspective.

Nevertheless, I learned that it's rather common that study stays in the USA fall flat for the reason that the US embassy denies the visas⁴¹. This represents a case, in which the body is controllable and can easily accomplish the needed criteria for a scholarship, but the US immigration bureaucracy is not controllable. And while my informants felt like they could influence their bodily performance, they didn't know how to influence a foreign embassy. They could easily describe the problems, mistakes, and failures of their bodies, but mostly lacked the ability to define why their visas failed. These cases impressively show how bodily performance can be a very certain issue, while state bureaucracy can be an enigma that produces high uncertainties for the people interacting with it (cf. Drotbohm 2017).

E. Running and Hustling: Commercial Athletes

After his fourth attempt to gain a scholarship, Moses gave up and joined a training group financed by Complete Sports, a Christian NGO from Germany, which sponsors young athletes for one year and supports them in their search for a proper agent. The lazy scholarship athlete Moses became an ambitious commercial athlete who doesn't skip training sessions anymore, and started to participate in regional and national competitions races up to 10 km. Complete Sports provided him with a coach, a training group, food, accommodation, and spiritual counselling by a pastor. This service places him in a privileged position and provides economic security for the time span of one year. Other young athletes, without such support or a management covering their expenses, are in a more precarious situation – their living costs are often covered by networks based on family, friends, and other social institutions (Sikes 2012:14).

Despite family support, athletes might still struggle. Sammy, son of the late Samson Kitur, grew up in an athletic family⁴². However, his parents never planned a career in sport for their son. He only started running in his late teens, as therapy for his asthma. He was later granted a sport scholarship for Wichita State University in Kansas, USA, but also his visa application

41 In this regard my research is biased. While I heard stories of successful athletes, my informants all failed their visa applications. Many Kenyans go to US universities (cf. Mwaniki 2017, Njororai 2010, Mayes 2005). However quantitative data on the ratio of failed and successful applications is not available.

42 At the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona, his father won bronze in the 400m with a time of 44s18, which is still the Kenyan record. Two of Sammy's uncles were also successful athletes.

was declined. Sammy then ran as a professional athlete for a short while, participating in local races and at least once internationally, in Johannesburg, South Africa. Yet, after this episode, he abandoned athletics and went to Nairobi to study forensic criminology. After finishing his BA degree and failing to find a job, he started running again, supported by one of his uncles who held a high position in the military. While this secured his daily meals for the immediate future, he constantly had to re-organise his trainings groups, keep an eye open for potential sponsors, and work on a reliable plan for his own future. He trained for 10 km and half marathon races, but also competed in local races over shorter distances in the hope of attracting an international agent. This included some work, as for example, a relay team had to be recruited among his friends, or transportation to the next race had to be organised – this might mean a four-hour-drive to Kisumu. Furthermore, the travel expenses had to be collected by asking friends, family, or the church community for support. The chances to find a sponsor at these races are low and the possibility to earn money even lower.

Hence, Sammy also actively works on a greater plan. He showed me a picture of one of his friends and former training partners on his cellphone. It shows a Black man in thick running gear standing in front of a snow-covered athletic field: “*That’s Leonard. He’s in Finland now.*” Sammy explained that his friend went to Europe for a race several years ago, then destroyed his passport and applied for asylum there. He now has Finnish citizenship and regularly runs races there. When I argue that this trick is quite known in Europe and might not work anymore, he replies that he doesn’t plan to leave Kenya permanently, but that Leonard might invite him over, so that he can run a few races there. Soon, this plan took a different direction when Sammy teamed up with a young runner from the USA who came to Eldoret for training. Abraham, originally a refugee from South Sudan, promised to invite Sammy to Pennsylvania as a sign of gratitude for their joint training. Sammy now had to organise a passport for himself. He asked me for support, and with the money others and I provided, he went to Kisumu to apply for a passport and bribe an official for fast issuance. Back in Eldoret, he again started to collect money in order to go to Nairobi to get a visa for the USA—he asked me to borrow him a rather large amount of money that he promised to pay back after he run his races. This time, I could not help him, as I just lost my credit card due to a burglary at my hotel. But I started to wonder anyway: was I now included in the investment networks of runners⁴³? I tried to understand the logic of this economic interaction.

As Sikes (2012) writes that the financial support is not only based on the prospect of success, but also on bonds of solidarity, like kin- and friendship. Sammy asked not only me, but also other friends, his family, and his church community. But in my opinion, his plan had a certain flaw. Here, I don’t refer so much to the risk of failure, but to his strategy: he started with small investments (for his passport) which, in case of success, implied larger investments. After the passport, a visa application followed (which certainly demands a high safety deposit, which was never mentioned), but even with a visa, he still had to pay for a flight to the USA (and back). The way Sammy presented it to me, he made it look as if each immediate following step’s investment is the decisive one, and each further step as easier than the one just ahead. I do not wish to denounce this approach as naïve, as he neither fooled himself nor his financiers. I rather argue that it is a strategy that concentrates on the immediate challenge ahead and is ignoring

43 Occasionally also other athletes (or their families) asked me to support them, both short term and long term. I rarely agreed to this deals and just got one loan back, but this was rather a short time borrowing among friends then an investment in an athlete. Although the boundaries are not always clear.

potential threads in the possible future of the process. In any case, his application failed yet again and in the meantime he also looked for opportunities to finance a return to college – to get an MA degree and thereby improve his chances on the job market.

His strategy of seeking opportunities resembles the *hustle* strategies of urban Nairobi youth (Thieme 2017). Under living conditions characterised by precarity, uncertainty, and marginalisation, hustling includes activities in a range from ensuring one’s daily survival, to seizing chances to improve one’s own social welfare, and that of the neighbourhood (ibid.). There are also differences, as the urban youth’s daily program consists of waiting; the athletes’ days are structured by training. So the opportunities that these two groups seize are often, but not exclusively, small and common, while the opportunity to find a sponsor or organise an invitation to an international race at least feels like a complete game changer for a young athlete. The aura of illegality and dirty work that surrounds hustling is also absent in a running career. But hustle as “a constant pragmatic search for alternative structures of opportunity outside formal education, employment, and service provision” (ibid.: 9) is a mode to cope with uncertainty that shares many aspects of the struggle I observed. It entails “a continuous management of risk” (ibid.: 9), creative adaptivity, and the entanglement of “youth, informality and precarity” (ibid.: 10). These specific aspects also distinguish the young athletes from entrepreneur-like older runners, who invest their prize money in shops and enterprises and are relatively well-provided for. The latter use their ability to create opportunities for their investments and draw on a certain bravery which is needed to make a career in the uncertain conditions of sport and capitalist economy (cf. Rösenthaller and Schulz 2016).

But even when you have managed to get a manager, hustling does not necessarily stop. A few years before I met Patrick, with whom I occasionally trained together in Kaptagat, he ran a three months long season in Germany. On a weekly basis, his German manager, Alexander Hempel, organised races throughout central Europe for him, including several marathons⁴⁴. Patrick ran a 10 km race at the Slovakian-Polish border and a half-marathon in Dresden that he still remembers for its horrible heat. Furthermore, he ran as a private pacesetter for a German runner at the Kassel Marathon and took part in several other local races in Frankfurt, Darmstadt, and elsewhere—he could not remember all the names of the cities he ran in. Attendance fees, some prize money, and a salary for pace-setting earned him quite a sum of money that he still lived off when I met him. But for Patrick, Germany seemed like a land of opportunity far beyond running: he and some fellow athletes once collected all the energy drink cans lying around at the finishing zone of the Kassel marathon: “You know how much one can is worth? 25 cents! Pfand!⁴⁵ This was the only time when money was literally lying on the streets in Germany!” he joked, “But you know what! My manager had to drive us to the supermarket and he claimed a share of our Pfand. Can you believe this?” Another source of joy for Patrick was the fact that people threw away their old but perfectly fine clothes. He met an old man in Frankfurt who lost his wife a short time ago and was in the process of getting rid of her belongings. Patrick immediately offered to take all the clothes – so he went home to Kenya with most of his allowed luggage weight consisting of used women’s clothing. Even years later, he would complain about the strict weight limitations on international flights, which restricted him from taking even more goods to distribute in his home village. While this could be read as a vivid account of

44 In the eyes of many athletes, this may not be considered a sustainable career, but it fitted in Patrick’s plan to earn as much money as possible.

45 He uses the German word for bottle deposit.

differences in wealth between Germany and Kenya, for my thesis another point is relevant: not all Kenyan athletes are collecting old clothes and bottles, especially not when they have a good manager and pursue a sustainable career. But Patrick⁴⁶ struggled to find a second class agent and knew that such a trip might be his only chance to participate in international races. So he jumped at the chances in which he could earn some extra money.

F. Successful Careers and Networking

The athletes seize these chances not necessarily spontaneous or precarious. In the case of Lezan, it was a choice for his late career that demanded some preparation. After leaving his manager at Global Sports when his times got slower in his early thirties, he continued to organise a career for himself. He ran the Dublin Marathon twelve times between 2001 and 2014, always finishing in the top15 and winning in 2004. These frequent visits to Ireland resulted in a close friendship with an Irish race organiser, who continued to invite Lezan to Ireland after his management contract with Global Sports ended. Through this friend he also got the idea and opportunity to run ultramarathons⁴⁷. Lezan openly admitted: *“If someone told me a few years ago that I will run 100k, I would have thought he is foolish.”* He finished 9th in his first 56 km race, the Old Mutual Two Oceans Race in Cape Town, South Africa, and earned \$ 1,500. He proclaimed to me that he is convinced that he could have won the race, but that he lost due to the fact that the distance was new to him:

“I finished in 3h12m58s. It was raining all the time and I was too careful and started slowly. But some forerunners went fast from the beginning. It was a group and I had to chase them the whole race. The winner ran 3h09, but I almost got him.”

So he continued to run and won some ultramarathons, especially in Ireland. When I assumed that these very long distances must be extremely demanding, he only laughed:

“Ultra-marathon is very easy. The speed is not as fast as in a marathon and the competition is much less. You only focus on the distance, not the speed. It is so easy. I really enjoyed it, especially in the hills of Connemara. I can run and enjoy the beautiful landscape. One time, I even sat down and drank a cup of tea in the middle of the race and a journalist yelled at me: ‘Are you an athlete or a sightseer?’ I just said ‘relax’ and continued to win the race.”

So far I mainly described running as a risky business and emphasised the precarious aspects of a running career. But the last story already challenged this one-sided narrative. Actually, if you have a good manager, or if you developed a strong profile and made good contacts as a senior athlete, life looks quite bright.

46 Patrick never asked me for support, but frequently tried to convince me to start a management firm, with him as my first athlete.

47 Races longer than 42,195 km. Ultramarathon events offer less prize money than other road races, which might be a reason why almost no Kenyan has discovered it as an opportunity yet.

When I met James, he was a senior athlete at the end of his career. He got recruited after Gabriele Rosa took notice of him at a road race in 2002 and immediately got sent to Italy to successfully run 10 km- and half-marathon races. Soon after, when James turned 21, Rosa wanted him to shift to marathons. But despite good performance in training, James was unable to finish three important marathons: Hamburg 2004, Amsterdam 2004, and Chicago 2005. Despite these incidents, Rosa continued to support James and Rosa's staff tried to find the reasons behind James' breakdowns. They finally figured out that he had low blood sugar and provided him with dietary supplements. He shook his head while he told me his story: *"Nowadays I am not even sure if it really helped or if the supplements were just a placebo which gave me the confidence to finish a race."* Rosa let him run at a smaller marathon in Brescia, which Rosa has organised himself. James won this race in 2 h 10 m 20 s and later successfully finished in top positions in several major marathons, like New York and Boston. In Berlin in September 2008, Haile Gebrselassie ran a new world record of 2 h 03 m 59 s and James finished second in 2 h 05 m 36 s. In the next season, he broke the course record in Rotterdam⁴⁸. He then got slower, as he experienced some problems with his training, and from 2012 onwards he focussed on marathons in South Korea. He explains:

"I tried to win races. Because when you are young you run for time to get invited to better events and too build your profile. But when you're older you run to win races. You want to win and also earn some prize money."

James' career is close to an end and he already started to train younger athletes at Rosa & Associati's Camp in Kaptagat. And while a running career will end after a certain time, usually in the mid-thirties of an athlete, there are several professions which recruit exclusively from the ranks of former runners. One option is to start working as a coach, other involve becoming massage therapists or unofficial managers⁴⁹, like Lezan and his two friends, Phillip and Barnabas⁵⁰. When I met them for lunch at a business restaurant in Eldoret, Barnabas remembered how he became a manager by chance:

"I met this lady. She was a nurse who came to Kenya as a volunteer. [...] She asked me: 'Are you running? What is your time?' So she invited me and she introduced me to a local coach. [...] the next year I came again, but I said, 'I won't stay in Germany for three months alone.' It's boring without any Kenyans around. Everybody [the Germans] is busy. So I took one athlete, the third year I took three. Then I said [to the German coach], 'We start something professional! [...] But] after some time AK came and said you have to register to get the clearances. You have to pay 2,000€. For what? Corruption and Corruption... So the clearances became a problem'⁵¹. [...] So they [the German partners]

48 Together with his friend Duncan Kibet, who finished just a hand's width before him in 2 h 04 m 27 s. It was the second fastest marathon of the world at that time.

49 I use this term here for agents, who assist athletes with their contacts and link them to race organisers but are not registered with their national athletic federation. This means they cannot officially represent their athletes and not sign any contracts.

50 Besides his activities as manager and coach Lezan also does some farming, owns a printing shop in Eldoret and built a second house from his prize money to rent it to expats. Philip works full-time as a manager in a national bus company. The profession of Barnabas I do not know, but he also has another job.

51 The athletes must be registered with AK, so they can start in a race abroad.

said, ‘No! We are doing it for free. We are not professionals. We are doing it to help the Kenyans. [...] But we cannot pay for Athletics Kenya. So it ended recently in 2012. But it was a good thing.’

Lezan describes similar activities, but on a smaller scale: he was sending one woman to run in Belfast and organised that the accommodation and transportation was covered by the race organisers. He also advised her on how to find other races while in Ireland, to earn additional money: *“You know, in Germany there are many Africans now. But in Ireland it is different. There are just a few, so you can run two races in one week and there’s not much competition.”*

These activities show the blurry line between charity work, unofficial local managers, and professional managers from Germany⁵², who use a similar mode of letting the athletes run many races in the short time that their visas are valid. But local managers, like Lezan or Barnabas, usually don’t expect money, although grateful athletes might share some prize money with them after a race. But for the former athletes it is not only about creating chances, but also about sharing knowledge about the business. All three agree that for a sustainable career, slow progression is the key. Young athletes should start with track races of 1500 m, 5000 m, and 10,000 m, and then slowly move to road races further than 10 km and half-marathons. Running full marathons comes only later in the career and requires consistent training and preparations for three or even four years (which of course can be used to participate in shorter races).

Lezan’s critique on the career planning of younger athletes is deeply moral:

“The young people today want to make money fast. They want to run marathons by the age of 20! [...] It’s the job of a good manager to stop them, but nowadays they won’t listen. [...] But for a long successful career, you must be patient. [...] For a while you can’t run more than two or three marathons. Some of these young athletes may win, but after one or two years their bodies can’t keep up.”

I confronted them with Samuel Wanjiru’s successes. They answer with laughter and Barnabas first objection is that *“You don’t know if this was his real age!”* Then they explain, more seriously, that of course you can win some marathons even at a young age—but the athletes will vanish after a while, as they won’t be able to perform on that level over a long period. Sadly, this was also true in Wanjiru’s case. Lezan added: *“Most of the athletes want to go abroad. They think the money is lying on the street abroad. [...] But you should be friendly to your body first.”*

G. Successful Careers and Escaping Race

The next vignette demonstrates how successful athletes practise agency by changing management and sponsorship. Kevin, one of my running mates in Kaptagat, started his career shortly after finishing secondary school in 2005 and initially specialised in 5000 m and 10,000 m races. In 2006, he won Silver in both distances at the African Championships in Bambous, Mauritius, and also in the 5,000 m at the IAAF World Cup in Athens, Greece. He got selected to participate in the World Cross Country Championships, finished fifth in the long race of 12 km, and won gold in the team competition as a member of the Kenyan national team. Later that same year,

52 See next section.

he won the Kenyan championship in the 5,000 m. At this time in his career he was managed by the prestigious UK management firm, Pace, and trained at their camp in Kaptagat. After a serious knee injury in November 2006, he had to pause for several months. After recovery he successfully competed in a variety of races, but could not repeat his outstanding positions of the summer of 2006. In 2010, Kevin changed his focus from track races to road races while still competing in cross country events pre- and after season. Up until today, he won more than 20 races in cross country and in distances up to 10 km. But despite winning several international cross events and without further explanation, he was not considered for the National Cross Country Team anymore. In 2011, he ran his first half-marathon in Lisbon, Portugal, finishing 5th with a time of 1 h 00 m 49 s. In 2013, he ran his first marathon in Dubai, UAE, and came in 8th with a time of 2 h 08 m 24 s. His best position in a marathon was a 2nd place in Frankfurt (Main), Germany, in 2014. As Kevin explained to me, he always followed a thorough career plan:

“You must adapt your plans for a season when you are injured, of course, but the long term is clear: track, then road races, then half marathon, and finally full marathon. You see, I’m 31 and better than ever.”

In 2015, dissatisfied with his chances in the Kenyan national team, he reached out to the national coach of the Azerbaijani Athletic Federation via Paul, a friend of his whom already acquired Azerbaijani citizenship. In October that same year, Kevin started to run for Azerbaijan under a new name. When his manager disapproved this decision, Kevin switched management and left the Pace training camp. He rented a house in Kaptagat and basically opened his own little training camp. He told me that in addition, he also had to defend his decision among friends and relatives: *“But you know, it is my live, my decision. I make my own choices. It’s my career!”* His new citizenship allowed him to start at European and World championships⁵³. In 2017, he finished 4th in the Taipei marathon—and with a time of 2 h 06 m 38 s, he broke the record of his new home continent.

Citizenship switches are not uncommon in professional sport. Countries like Bahrain, UAE, Qatar, Turkey, and Azerbaijan are at times aggressively recruiting East African athletes to increase their national sportive prestige⁵⁴. This sort of migration is supported by the high concentration of talents who want to improve their international profile, by the scarcity of elite athletes in the target countries, and by the aim of especially oil-rich Middle Eastern countries to improve their international recognition through sport (Njororai 2010). Interestingly, as opposed to athletic/educational immigration to the USA, or sport migration in for example, football, almost all of these athletes continued to live and train in Kenya. Often, this practice is denounced as financially-motivated. Kevin’s example proves that ambition and tactical evaluation of chances also play a role. He saw starting for another country as a chance to enhance his athletic prospects. Kevin enjoyed participating in mega sport events like the 2016 Olympics—in the end he finished 17th, but he still talked about the atmosphere, the respect, and appreciation the athletes enjoyed. He also proudly showed off the running gear that he was given at the Nike Olympic flagship store.

53 He finished 14th in London, UK in 2017.

54 The IAAF banned nationality swaps in February 2017 till at least the end of last year, ending this practice at least temporarily.

Kevin's original plan for 2017 was to start at the Taipei Marathon on March 11th, and several months later at the IAAF World Championships in London. But in the first week of March, he slipped on muddy ground during a slow training run and injured a lower back muscle. While he initially insisted to still run in Taipei, even on painkillers, he quickly changed his mind when his back problems did not heal after a few days. Finally, he decided to withdraw from the race. But the Taiwanese race organisers did not accept this decision. Taipei is an IAAF Gold Label Race, a category which requires that elite runners from at least five nations, with times faster than the IAAF guidelines, must participate. Having no backup for Kevin, the only Azerbaijani athlete signed for the race, they offered him a signing fee of \$4,000 just to start the race and drop out after a few kilometres, if necessary. Usually a signing fee is paid only if the athlete finishes at least half of the distance (50% payment) or completes the full marathon (100% payment). However, Kevin angrily refused. After the phone call with his manager he told me: "*I'm not running for the money! I'm running to win! I'm not a tourist to drop out after 3k.*" But the race organisers, afraid to lose their label, increased the pressure on Kevin and threatened to blacklist him for not only their own events, but also for all other events they cooperate with. His manager tried to convince him to at least start the race and not lose the sympathies of the marathon organisers.

Here the linkage between sport events and power relations in capitalist sport becomes obvious. The Black athlete is commodified and considered an economic resource by the organisers. Here, economic and racial discrimination is intertwined (Birrell and MacDonald 2000: 5). But there is space for resistance. Kevin counselled with his contacts from the Azerbaijani National team, who supported his decision to skip Taipei and not endanger his participation in the World championships later that year. This contact also created backup plans for a potential blacklisting and discussed a potential start at the Islamic Games in Baku⁵⁵. The end of this conflict was surprisingly unspectacular: Kevin had to produce an official doctor's certificate, Taipei accepted his withdrawal, and kept their label.

This vignette illustrates how (successful) athletes are able to face potential threats, hold their ground against unjust treatment by managers or race organisers, and even alleviate the consequences of injuries. Economic independence and financial protection function as a means of social security and the political freedom of two passports provides protection against corrupt career threats. Finally, athletic success enables runners to reach for the promises of economic and social progress.

As in Kevin's case, creating a network, which enables an athlete to resist pressure, is not the only premise for resilience against the control over an athlete by race organisers or agents. It also requires a *decolonised mind*. This term was established by Kenyan novelist and post-colonial theorist, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, in an essay on African Literature (1986). He proclaimed a turn away from the English language as medium for African fiction and promoted the practice of writing in indigenous languages. Although I do not refer to the level of language, I will borrow the term *decolonised mind* to describe a similar process: the self-establishment of African athletes as confident and independent subjects, who do not follow the logic of Western institutions unconsciously. Kevin's career challenges the established order of Western sport. He resists the race organiser's claim to his body if it risks his health, he actively makes career decisions against his manager, and furthermore, he leaves the boundary of his home nation to enhance his chances. His mind-set includes mistrust against Western and athletic institutions

55 He eventually won the silver medal over 10,000 m.

and confidence in his own ability and his rights to freedom. I point towards Mbembe's elaborations on Blackness to explain my claim that Kevin *decolonised his mind*. Mbembe draws a line from the condition of Blackness to "beings-taken-by-others", who were later segregated and eventually secluded by the expanse of a global market economy to the irrelevant fringes of a globalised society in the 20th century (Mbembe 2017: 2ff). This idea does not (seem to) fit to athletes at the central stage of an important cultural industry. However, many athletes, even successful ones, are still used as controllable and eventual disposable workers lacking basic rights, as the stories from this chapter show⁵⁶. Mbembe describes the exploitation by capital as "yesterday's drama" (Mbembe 2017:3) which is replaced by "*the tragedy of the multitude today [which] is that they are unable to be exploited at all. They are abandoned subjects [...]. Capital hardly needs them any more to function*" (ibid.: 11). I suggest that athletes work in a niche, where the old modes of exploitation are still functional. Mbembe's critique aims at an incomplete rebellion, which opposes not "*the idea that Blacks constitute a distinct race but [...] the prejudice of inferiority attached to the race.*" He describes how Blackness is defined by the memory of the colony and the structures of inequality and discrimination it produced (ibid.: 103). Part of his project concerning decolonisation is recollection and acknowledgment of the historical memory of Blackness (like Thiong'o does). Additionally, Mbembe adds a claim of universality that goes beyond the Western idea of objective reason: he denounces the notions of relativistic difference and the claim to seek the value of Blackness in the system of White logic. Kevin neither engaged in postcolonial critique of Western sport, nor tried to reinvent an indigenous African concept of running. Yet, he claimed a status as an athlete beyond race, while he continued to practise Kenyan running, even under a different nationality. He demanded universal rights of health and self-determination, challenged differences between White and Black athletes, and became powerful enough to resist others' attempts to control his career.

H. Fraud

Despite the privileged position of the, often White and almost exclusively male, managers with Western passports, their positions are not protected from failure. In fact, they might even have less negotiation power than their successful athletes. Volker Wagner, the protagonist of Sager's documentary, *'The Long Distance'* (2015), has been a sport agent since the early 1980s. While he was highly successful in the 1990s, he later struggled to compete with rising sport agencies from the Netherlands and East Asia to which he lost many famous athletes, like Lornah Kiplagat or Sammy Kitwara⁵⁷. Several informants told me that he had a bad record for cheating athletes in the more recent years. He accumulated an alleged debt of more than €100,000 in his later career and filled for personal insolvency in 2014. In 2017, he was managing just one athlete, Eliud Kiptanui⁵⁸.

At this point, I want to highlight some risks for both athletes and managers. The success of athletes and managers are closely entangled. As long as an athlete is winning races, both

56 "They are using us like horses." claims Noah, as he links his own status to the life of racing horses, owned and bred by rich White people.

57 This forced him to invite less promising athletes and send them to smaller races in Europe, sometimes losing them directly after they had international success, like in the case of Felix Keny's fourth place in Seoul Marathon 2012.

58 Winner of the Ottawa marathon in 2017.

sides profit. Yet, especially in cases of overdue success, conflict is common as managers usually upfront training, visa, and travelling costs and an unsuccessful athlete means financial loss for the investor. While this leads to a layoff of the athletes, which is justifiable to all parties, the situation of semi-successful athletes is more confrontational. Since the manager deducts his share and all accrued costs from the athlete's prize money, often athletes feel cheated—despite earning prize money, they come home with very little earnings. During a joint lunch break in Eldoret, Barnabas remembers his first German manager:

“With this [guy], you know, it doesn't make any difference if you win or lose. [...] There were twenty athletes in [Paul's] house [in Cologne]. Every athlete who ran for him left Germany with €50. That was the maximum you could get. You live in Germany for three months and if you run very good it's the same, if you run very bad it's the same. €50! Go home: €50!”

At least theoretically, this seems like a problem, because in cases of success and failure, an athlete would expect different outcomes. Battling with the question of why this does not discourage athletes, I confronted the veteran athletes Phillip and Lezan. The latter suggested that both sides have an interest in signing a management deal. The manager has stakes in enlisting a talent and a potential winner, the athlete in turn seeks to boost his career and race abroad. As a consequence, neither side is interested in discussing the problematic parts of their agreement. He adds that in some cases, both the managers and the athletes may lack sufficient skills in English: *“You know they understand just what they want to hear. This prevents disappointments. It really helps.”* This tactic of concentrating on potential success and ignoring potential conflict is a pattern that emerges at several points of my research.

In the accounts of my informants, especially China and Germany were pictured as hotspots for fraud. I already described the management practice of Patrick's manager, Alexander Hempel, and the athletes' critique of this model. Athletes like Patrick, who wants to earn a lot of money on the short run and do not seek athletic merits, appreciate this style of management. However, athletes on this level are in a weak position to negotiate with their managers, as they can easily be replaced. This leads to a manifold of irritations, some of which are definitely fraud. Patrick has an ironic style in telling anecdotes from his travels in Europe: in one of his stories, some fellow athletes had to hide from the conductor, in the train toilets, as the race organisers, who invited them, didn't pay for the tickets from Frankfurt to Freiburg. He enthusiastically imitates how the conductor throbs against the door and how the athletes rush past him on their way out. While most of his stories sounded hilarious, the common threat of fraud by managers is anything but funny. Alexander Hempel was featured in the ARD documentary *“Geheimsache Doping: Wie Afrikas Sporthelden verkauft werden”* (2017) as an especially fraudulent manager, who not only frequently withheld signing fees, but was also accommodating the athletes under horrible conditions in the cellar of his house in Schöneck⁵⁹. There, the athletes had to live in worse conditions than the asylum seekers he accommodated upstairs, whose lodging required some low legal standards. However, Patrick bemoaned that Hempel also still owed him money:

59 After the ARD documentary the local building authority intervened and prohibited the accommodation of athletes in the cellar.

“He plays hide and seek with me. He still owes me €2,000 signing fee from a race in Slovakia. He claims the race organisers never paid him, but I don’t believe him. I’m looking for another sponsor now.”

Most accounts of fraud end like this: the athlete is back in Kenya and tries to reach a manager, who never picks up his phone. Rarely athletes tell stories of how they managed to trick fraudulent agents – often by solidary action. Lezan smiles when he tells the story of an adventurous stunt he pulled off in China in 2006. He was finishing fourth in a marathon and was paid by the race organisers. However, their unofficial agents⁶⁰ claimed fifty percent of the money. Lezan offered fifteen percent, the usual manager share. The problem was that the Chinese agents had the passports of all the Kenyan athletes in Lezan’s group and refused to give them back. After spending a night without sleeping to protect their winnings, they went to the airport. Thirty minutes before the flight they still had no agreement with their agents, who waited outside the airport, watching them. So they faked a hostage situation with a Chinese friend and tried to provoke the police to intervene. This caused an agent to panic and he rushed inside to hand over the passports. In this case, fraud got prevented through a combination of boldness and solidarity among the athletes. Athletes like Lezan often stress that while fraud can happen everywhere, it is important to support each other, even when they might compete against each other in races. After finishing his story, Lezan just shook his head: *“What has become of athletics?”*, and his friend Phillip added: *“It’s a mafia now.”*

I. Hope

These experiences of fraud, failure, and stagnation raise the questions: why do athletes keep on running? How are they confronting the despair caused by frequent experiences of failure and fraud? Hope is a practise that engages the tension between the dreams and the capacity to design projects, and the actual ability to accomplish them (Narozky and Besnier 2014, S4). Hope links past experiences of adversity with personal expectations of a brighter future. Maybe the most powerful story of hope is the recurring motive of the winning athlete, who was initially running barefoot. I met Justin, a sport journalist and athlete, for the first time in early February 2017 at a coffee shop in Eldoret. He greeted me with a reference to the race of the day before:

“Did you see Peres Jepchirchir running a world record at the RAK [Ras Al Khaimah half marathon in the UAE]? I saw her running at the Cross County Nationals in 2014. She came in second and she was barefoot!”

These stories inspire the hopes of many young athletes, in that they need nothing but hard training and confidence to be successful.

Jarvie and Sikes stress that the hopes of financial success go beyond the individual athlete and entail the hope for social change of the whole region (2012: 639). Winning athletes pay back investments from their family and friends, start businesses, invest in younger family members, and therefore improve the economic situation of their home area (ibid.: 637f). Well established

60 They were not members of Athletic China and did not represent Lezan or any of his friends. They just wrote the invitation for the visa application and made contact with the race organisers, but did not pay for flights or visas.

sport with a regional infrastructure and international connections can help to reduce poverty. But *“the scale of poverty and inequality in many places is deep-rooted and on its own, sport will not fundamentally change this”* (ibid.: 637). Accordingly, hope of economic progress based solely on athletic achievement and without supporting state policies will be dashed.

In this section I will focus on the more personal practice of the individual athlete. When discussing the role of hope as a specific work of anticipation, Clarke states: *“Hope can no longer pretend to be naïve”* (2005: 89). Acknowledging the widespread and well-known risks of failure and fraud, it seems clear to me, that this is especially valid for athletes.

After just being cheated by his Chinese manager, Eliud still evokes a brighter future that will compensate him for his suffering: *“There will be a time for revenge. I can get another great manager and I’ll tell him: it’s this way now! You got my money, but that’s not the end of life. You haven’t cut off my legs.”*⁶¹

In his work on Japanese stock traders, Miyazaki offers a reading of hope, which take failure into account without denouncing continued hope as irrational. He denies a moral justification of the future. Rather, he conceptualises hope as *“a reorientation of knowledge”* (Miyazaki 2006: 151). In his fieldwork, individual hopes emerged from neoliberal ideas and economic reforms and it did not vanish when this ideas and tools failed repeatedly (ibid.: 150f). Therefore, hope is a method that changes the temporality. It points into the future so that one can escape a difficult, uncertain, or unjust present and regain one’s agency. Its production is rooted in a discourse that uses temporal reorientations to claim agency and draw a logical directionality (Miyazaki 2004). To investigate how this works in a runner’s case, I will return to the example of Sammy. His dreams of winning a race are fuelled by the victories of the athletes and prevalent tales of social climbing. His personal failure to start a successful career does not discourage him. Rather, he tells me about his successful training and how he is faster than other athletes who also train at Chepkoilel stadium. In our conversations he compares himself to Gideon, a former U-18 world champion in the 1500 m, and claims to be much faster these days. Then, he switches to the races in the USA and how he plans to win them. The problematic parts concerning a visa, financial cost, or the chance for failure are left out of his narrative—he occurs as an independent athlete who is able to act independently. I argue that this hope is a method to keep going in the face of uncertain probabilities of success and economic and bureaucratic obstacles. For many young Kenyans, this is the only way to engage in the double competition of global sport. The fragile and strong sportive competition between the athletes in the very moment of races is framed by an economic competition for sponsoring, placement in races, and talents. Many struggle, but this entanglement also offers (successful) athletes a space for self-paced navigation and a better life.

In this chapter I discussed several practices of how socio-economic uncertainty and the deep embeddedness of running in the society of the highlands, pull young athletes into the world of competitive sport. The life as an athlete is however not free of fraud, failure, or uncertainty. The latter is a condition that should not easily be dismissed as risky and dangerous. Uncertainty can offer the possibility of socio-economic change and athletes have a variety of practises, like hustling, networking, and hoping at their disposal to engage in their uncertain futures.

61 Roughly at that time, the laptop with my research data was stolen in a hotel burglary and I experienced myself the advantages of hope as a method to engage the future.

5. Training

In this chapter, I will return to the question of bodily knowledge—the very question which initially triggered my interest in running. I will discuss how athletes learn to run and how they utilise different kinds of knowledge to enhance their capacities of running and knowledge-making.

A. Running as Technique of the Body

There is no natural way of doing anything. Even in the case of simple motor activities, like walking and running, or marching in Mauss' case, humans learn through and with their social surroundings (Mauss 1973: 70f). For Mauss, the body is "*man's first and most natural technical object*" (Mauss 1973: 75) and its use is structured by techniques of the body, which are in turn defined by tradition and effectiveness (ibid.). This becomes clear when referring to a rather simple technique, like walking, which becomes problematic or different when a small technical object is added—Mauss writes about walking in high heels in particular (ibid.: 83). Yet, this example of walking with a technical object differs substantially from my actual example of running. Most people know how to run, in one way or another at least. And those who do not know how to, are usually limited by physical limitations and not by the lack of technical skill. Mauss recalls meeting a protesting chief of the Fire Fraternity of the Hopi Indians in Washington: "*He was certainly the best runner in the world. He had run 250 miles without stopping. All the Pueblos are accustomed to prodigious physical feats of all kinds*" (Mauss 1973: 82). However, this encounter primarily refers to the difference in the capacity to run. Again, I will quote Mauss to clarify how this capacity is related to the body as technical instrument that is used in a culturally specific way:

"Imagine, my gymnastics teacher, one of the top graduates of Joinville around 1860, taught me to run with my fists close to my chest: a movement completely contradictory to all running movements; I had to see the professional runners of 1890 before I realised the necessity of running in a different fashion." (Mauss 1973: 73)

His example shows how different styles of running can improve its effectiveness. Following this example, a relevant enquiry would be: does Kenyan Running have such a specific form of movement? I am quite reluctant to provide a categorical answer. Often, sport fans and journalists from around the world claim that African runners have a specific way of running. They describe how the athletes' arms swing closer to their bodies, or how thin their bodies are. Furthermore, there are references to their fluid and elegant strides and to the almost uniform sound of the steps when a group of runners pass by. I absolutely share the admiration of the aesthetics, but I doubt the exceptionality: professional long-distance runners always have thin physiques, no matter where they come from or where they train, and groups running at the same pace tend to produce synchronic steps. In my introduction, I already mentioned how relative the perception of elegance can be. How about the way arms swing? When I observed the Tuesday sprint training at Chepkoilel stadium, I saw dozens of different ways to swing the arms while running. Geoffrey, the coach for scholarship athletes, explained:

“It differs very much. Some run carefully, others run careless. You can swing your arms a lot or keep them in front of your body. There are also differences between men and women—women have to swing more, because they have to compensate for the breasts. [...] But what is important: You must be relaxed. No tension in the shoulders.”

Hence, there are large individual differences – categorisation of running styles by nationality is doubtful at least.

Yet, there is a specific way of running long distances which is practised all over the world by ambitious and professional runners. When running at a certain pace, the strides are longer and the degree of the bend of the knees is bigger, the steps are less flat and only the forefoot touch the ground, every step push the athlete a little bit away from the ground to maintain a fast pace and save energy. “If you use physics to run, you win easy,” Geoffrey laughs. There is the physical dimension as well: training shapes the body and develops the right muscles at the right place. A runner loses weight and his lung volume increases. He breathes unconstrained even after 30 km and then, from a distance, it seems like he is flying over the ground.

Having provided a glimpse on the aesthetics of running, I will now turn to the main topic of this chapter, namely the process of learning how to run. Thereby I will focus on different epistemic practices of accessing bodily knowledge.

When and where do the athletes learn to run? My informants all remarked that they used to competed against each other in foot races as children. The children who accompanied me for parts of my personal training also “played running.” One day in a hotel in Kaptagat, I sat with John, an engineer from Nairobi, we watched a family of Danish tourists. A Danish child played ball with a boy from the neighbourhood, and as we observed them, John commented: “*You see, there starts your problem! You see how the White boy handles the ball? The Kenyan child has no idea how to interact with it!*” He was right: the Kenyan child rarely managed to catch the ball and even when it laid on the ground, he only approached it cautiously. Of course, balls are not unknown in Kenya. However, especially in rural settings, balls are still rare and I never saw small children play football outside of school. Instead, they ran, and so they learned to run.

“The child, [...] imitates actions which have succeeded and which he has seen successfully performed by people in whom he has confidence and who have authority over him. The action is imposed from without, from above, even if it is an exclusively biological action, involving his body. The individual borrows the series of movements which constitute it from the action executed in front of him or with him by others” (Mauss 1973: 73).

Van der Niet describes a similar process in Sierra Leone: the children, usually in small groups of three or four, learn how to carry buckets of water on their heads by trial, error, and repetition. They imitate their elder siblings, who occasionally intervene to help them, but the instructions are hardly ever verbal and parents are not involved (Van der Niet 2010: 14). Here, encouragement and pressure to learn are entangled and influence the amount of practice, the speed, and the final level of the specific motor skill (ibid.) Learning to run functions similarly and when the children go to primary school, where an institutionalised mode of sport teaching starts, they are already equipped with advanced motor skills.

Other cultural and environmental factors also play a role: many Kenyan Running observers consider the fact that children run barefoot for a long time as an important factor for the development of successful athletes (e.g. Finn 2012). The environment and the infrastructure are

often overlooked factors: the highlands are full of soft, sandy paths and most training—and playing—happens on these trails. For constant and intensive training on asphalt roads, good impact-damping shoes are necessary—the reason why the veteran runners I spent my fieldwork with never ran without shoes. To them, good running shoes are a sign of status and pride. However, the best shoes are only used for speed training and in races. For most of my interlocutors, the thought of running barefoot in a race was absurd and a sign of poverty.

In the following chapter I will investigate the practices of these older, professional athletes. I will describe how the technique of running is improved in a professional context and how the uncertainty of bodily knowledge is engaged.

B. The Uncertainty of Bodily Knowledge

The underlying theoretical problem of this thesis is the uncertainty of bodily performance. It originates in Baruch Spinoza's claims: "*that no one knows how or by what means the mind moves the body, nor how many various degrees of motion it can impart to the body, nor how quickly it can move it*" (Spinoza 1994: 156), or in short: "*consciousness [...] does not [...] know what a body can do*" (Deleuze 1988: 60)⁶². Spinoza argues against a Cartesian dualism that distinguishes mind and body as separate entities. Instead, he conceptualises the body as knowledge (Buchanan 1997, 76). He identifies our epistemological access to the body as problematic, as it "*condemns us to have only inadequate ideas*" (Deleuze, 1988: 18). In these concepts, the body is neither naturally given nor a purely cultural object in which our beliefs and ideas can be freely inscribed. Rather, it is an *assemblage of capacities* (Buchanan 1997, 74f).

Following these ideas, athletic performance is less a biological problem (what a body is) than it is a problem of contingency (what a body can do). For professional athletes the production and evaluation of their bodily knowledge is a crucial factor for their success or their failure. To perform better than their competitors, they must improve the effectiveness of their running. This compulsion is prewritten in the social structure of competitive sport and its capitalist economical mode.

The athlete's epistemological challenge is the inexact and therefore inadequate knowledge at hand. The problem is manifold: only in retro perspective can an athlete be sure of his exact time in a race. Based on past performances, his performance in a future completion can be anticipated. However, it can never be certain since too many factors are uncontrollable: weather, competitors, injuries, tactical mistakes, or, in the worst case, wrong route guidance by the race organisers. For marathon runners, the inability to test their racing distance further complicates the practice of anticipation⁶³. Also, in the context of training, knowledge coming from various contexts, such as life sciences or sport sciences, or stemming from the experiences of coaches and other runners, must be translated for application in an individual training program. However, more knowledge does not solve the epistemological problem defined by Spinoza:

'Paradoxically, since closer attention has been paid to bodily representation, the body has become more elusive, fluid, and uncontrollable. Many researchers who have attempted to

62 The undoubtable great progress in the biological understanding of body functions may have provided us with statistical approximate values, but has not solved this riddle, if anyone ever will.

63 See Chapter 5.G

theorize and grapple with epistemology have become progressively eclectic in their efforts to portray the body in its infinite complexity while becoming increasingly aware that the “problem” of the body will not be settled.’ (Lock 1993: 134)

Also, to a certain degree, the body remains a black box to the athletes: the effects of specific practices and technologies (like new running shoes, diets, massages, etc.) are hardly isolatable and bodily knowledge always remains uncertain, contradicting, and unstable.

Spinoza’s claim that bodily knowledge is uncertain does not neglect our abilities to produce knowledge of our body; however, it highlights its limits. His three kinds of knowledge explain this notion (Spinoza 1994: 115-151) and I will use the example of movement to elaborate. The first kind of knowledge is the lowest or most inadequate kind and rather a simple acknowledgment: we can move, but we have no concept of it or control over it. The second kind moves away from simple imagination to active and reflexive rational evaluation. We can have this even at the level of personal experience of movement: we can control it and know how we move effectively. The third degree of knowledge provides liberating insights into God’s order – it is deeply embodiment and impossible to achieve. It is absolute knowledge about the world and provides certainty. The uncertainty discussed, refers primarily to the third level while especially professional athletes show how they can master the second degree of knowledge through years of intensive training.

C. Two Kinds of Bodily Knowledge

Training includes two inseparable processes: it works the body to change and prepare it for the decisive practice of running, which is racing. Additionally, and less obvious, it is an epistemological process that produces knowledge on the body as well as knowledge of the body (Keller and Meuser 2011)⁶⁴. Knowledge on the body is explicit and manifest knowledge. It can take the form of biological descriptions of the body, medical statistics, or racing results as representations of bodily performance. It is often established by institutionalised scientific practice and theory. Examples of this form of knowledge in the context of athletics are measurements of the heart rate during a race, theories on the influence of specific genes on athletic performance, training guidelines, or roadwork manuals on Youtube⁶⁵. Knowledge on the body can also be grounded in personal experience: I can check my pulse, know how my body reacts to specific food, and a previous race reminds me that I once could run 5 km in 19m37s. Knowledge on the body is reflexive – it is an external description and communicable. It is also exchangeable without the concerned bodies being present.

For athletes, theoretical and scientific knowledge could be important, but has to be translated and adopted for personal use. Many athletes have limited (biological) knowledge on the functions of their body. One informant referred to doping medication, like Erythropoetin (Epo),⁶⁶ as multivitamins and was unaware that this medication is illegal in sport. Others sorted the nutritional value of fruit by their colours. In general, knowledge on relevant biological

64 Both on a similar level as Spinoza’s second kind of knowledge.

65 Kenyans athletes do not watch this kind of videos. However, they consume videos of races.

66 Erythropoetin is a glycoprotein cytokine (hormone) secreted by the kidney in response to cellular hypoxia. It is a growth factor, which stimulates red blood cell production in the bone marrow. Artificially produced variants are widespread doping medication in endurance sport.

issues, like oxygen utilisation or muscle structure, seemed poor and inconsistent. Nonetheless, those athletes perform extraordinarily in races. At times, experts like trainers, doctors, and other professionals translate this knowledge into training practice. More often than not, established collective knowledge on running already exists in their network and can be adapted for personal use. Accounts of personal performance allow for the evaluation and comparisons of one's capability. As already discussed, this knowledge does not compensate for the basic level of uncertainty of athletic performance, as experiences of injury remind us, but they provide us with access points for our struggle with uncertainty.

Besides knowledge on the body, training practice also provides knowledge of the body. That the body itself embodies knowledge becomes clear in basic techniques of the body, such as walking, grabbing, and running. It can take the form of reflexes: breathing, changes in the size of the pupils in changing light, swinging the arms when running, or breaking one's fall with the hands⁶⁷. It is also visible in more complex activities like sprinting at the end of a race, walking on high heels, or performing complex exercises to train specific muscles. It is tacit knowledge, bound to the body, and occurs in a specific materialised form. It can be reflected upon, but often it eludes the description, meaning the translation into language. Hence, the actor never knows exactly what she is doing; there is more sense in her action than she is aware of (Bourdieu 1987: 127). This practical sense connects habitus and field. For Bourdieu, this allows for an evaluation of a sportive situation and enhances the decision if an object or an aspect is relevant (ibid.: 122, 148). Using the example of boxing, he describes how movements and gestures of an opponent are understood practically (and not on an analytical or rational level) and entail hints for the actions in being. A boxer can read his opponent and anticipate if he will strike first. This sense is developed socially and sharpened by training (ibid.). The practical sense can be understood as tacit knowledge (Gugutzer 2015: 123) or, using the concepts employed in this thesis, as knowledge of the body.

My research confronted me with the question of how to make the production of this knowledge observable. Alkemeyer offers the option of failure. He refers to Polanyi, who states that we know more than we are able to articulate (Polanyi 2009), and explains that this *more* can be best grasped in its negativity (Alkemeyer 2003: 336). In Chapter 5.F I will describe how athletes explain their progress in training using moments of failure and by pointing at mistakes they made during their careers. In Chapter 5.G I will discuss how categories of time and regimes of testing are actively used to establish a relationship between both kinds of knowledge. My research shows that, while both kinds of knowledge can be easily separated analytically, they are deeply entangled in the practice of training

D. Training as Epistemic Work and Running as Method

In this section I will build on the categories of knowledge that were established in the previous section and discuss how these categories are interconnected and shaped during the process of training. In order to do so, I will use ethnographic material which refers to my own training during my fieldwork: both my complete ignorance and my initial poor level of training help to exemplify how both modes of knowing relate to each other.

67 Knowing that one shouldn't participate in easy runs in the morning, as concentration will diminish and the likelihood of slipping is greater. On the other hand, there is knowledge on the body.

I arrived in Eldoret in early February 2017. While I was reaching out to sport journalists and runners, I also started to run again—at first just by myself. My only guideline was a 10 km-in-under-50-minutes-in-six-weeks-plan that I got from online running websites, as it was the first time since secondary school that I was seriously training for running again. However, as I sat in my hotel room I realised that it would be difficult to follow this program, as it defined the daily workout by mileage, average pace, and maximum heart rate. I lacked the means to follow these specifications as I had only a simple watch to measure time and no idea where I could run a nice 7.2 km course nearby. I tried to orientate myself on Google Maps and wished for a GPS-watch to measure my pace more accurately. I did not even start to run yet and I was stressed out already. Finally, I gave up on the preparation and just started to jog around in the area a little bit. I started slowly and as I felt surprisingly good, unintentionally ran faster. Certainly, I was not really fast by any criteria but my own untrained condition. But fast I felt. I still felt good, took a few corners, passed an empty market area and was back at the hotel in less than 15 min. I felt happy, took a shower, and wrote some notes on the first page of the notebook I specifically bought to use as a running diary. I had read an interview with Eliud Kipchoge in which he claimed to document his training program meticulously since he started to train professionally. He claimed that one could ask him how he felt after a run in 2003 and that he could then check his notes and answer directly. While I knew that this level of record keeping is not common among Kenyan athletes, I thought that it would fit my own epistemological endeavour. So I wrote: Thursday, 9 February, 15 min morning run (maybe too fast). In my research diary I added some notes on how good I felt during the training. I was so enthusiastic that I ran again that evening, longer this time, 24 min, Google Maps showed that I covered 3,8 km. Later I noted that I felt exhausted towards the end of the distance. The next day I could barely walk, my lower legs and thighs ached, and I felt a nasty pain when I touched my ribs. Of course, I scrubbed training and fished for some tips when I met Justin, a sport journalist and athlete. First, he shrugged his shoulders and said that he never feels pain after training, maybe only after a marathon race. I suspected that the advice of a trained marathon runner is probably hardly applicable for someone on his second day of training. But then he told me:

“Knowing the body comes with experience. It is a question of balancing your performance. If you push too much, and try to keep up with better trained athletes, you will get weaker and maybe even injured. Don’t push during your first week of training. You may only go for one run in the morning, then next week you go for 1 h 40 in the morning, 1 h in the evening. And even later you start long runs and speed work. You have to get used to running first.”

I smiled as I heard that he expected me to already run longer than one hour by next week and listened to the advice that seemed viable to me: start easy! However, later back in my hotel room, I started to search the internet for information on running with muscle ache. I ended up on Runner’s World⁶⁸ online forum and spent hours reading about how German amateur runners fiercely discussed the right limit of training. It did not help me at all, as I could not judge which of the contradicting advices would be of any help to me.

Clearly, I was lacking knowledge of my body as well as knowledge on the body. I tried to look up the latter on the internet, in training guides, and by asking my new contacts — but soon

68 <http://forum.runnersworld.de>

I noticed that I struggle to make use of all the received information and tips and to translate them into my personal program. In retrospect, Justin's advice to "start easy" and the dictum of Patrick Sang⁶⁹, coach for Global Sports, that "*Running comes naturally*", proved to be the most useful for my orientation in the world of running.

Soon I moved to Kaptagat and ran forest trails every day. While on the first day I took the wrong turn and ended up running 20 km, I mostly covered moderate mileage and could feel how I progressed. My runs got longer and further and I used a fixed course to evaluate my pace. I started to join athletes in their easy runs and also started to do speed training⁷⁰. Although the training was not so easy for me at the time, I started to understand what defines an easy run. Of course I could have theoretically learned that an easy run is a run at a pace of 6:00 min/km, which by explanation is the basic element of every program. However, my body's personal experiences changed my perception of running.

I remembered how Justin joked by saying that "*You, Europeans, make a science out of sport!*" when I asked him about the use of medical analysis and time keeping. I will ignore the moral dimension of this accusation⁷¹ and treat it as a representation similar to "*Running comes naturally*." This narrative was quite common among my informants, who tended to downplay the reflexive part of their training and stressed the importance of repetition and following a program. I do not want to denounce this as false or simplistic, as it clearly is true that the body improves its running skill by training, as the knowledge of the body increases – not only in a physical way, but also on an epistemological level.

I argue that while knowledge on the body plays an important part in the reflection and improvement of a program, it often functions as a substitute for the lack of embodied knowledge on running—this is clearly demonstrated by my own perplexity at the beginning of my fieldwork. After some weeks of training I no longer checked online forums for advice on muscle ache, as I did not have any anymore. My questions about running started to change. Building on my new knowledge, I could observe and join professional athletes in their training practice, how they engaged with each other, and how someone could run easily without measuring his pace. This process of understanding running – by actually running – sounds mundane at first. But the point I want to stress, is how embodied knowledge (or Bourdieu's practical sense) shapes our adaptations and translations of reflexive, external knowledge and sometimes makes the latter seem uninteresting and irrelevant. To complete the circle of reciprocal interaction, knowledge on the body structures how we train and acquire knowledge of the body.

Fieldwork on Foot by Lee and Ingold (2006) served as an inspiration for my own running as an ethnographic method. Walking (and running) neither embody experiences of sociality nor does it function as a technique of participation (ibid.: 67), yet it offers three access point for my research: (1) In the Kenyan highlands, running (with others) means sharing certain circumstances with the other people and offers an *attunement* (ibid.). This links to the social dimension connected to my running, as I socialised with my running mates, asked questions, and learned about their perception of training. This is also true for other people that I met, for example

69 Silver medal winner in the 3000 m steeplechase at the 1991 and 1993 world championships, as well as at the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona. He is head coach for Global Sports and trains Eliud Kipchoge among others.

For details on the different elements of training see the next section

70 For details on the different elements of training see the next section.

71 The mistrust in some Western representations of (Kenyan) Running is not unfounded. At another meeting Justin joked about companies in Europe and North America which promote an allegedly natural barefoot style of running as a secret of African Running to sell barefoot running shoes.

my neighbours and the children I mentioned earlier on in my thesis. (2) Running allows for a specific form of perceiving the self (as my reflection on pain shows; *ibid.*: 69) and (3) experiencing the environment. Running gave me access to the forests and trails around Eldoret and I could observe how training created a specific place of and for running (*ibid.*: 79). My senses for proper documentation of the feelings and experiences of running were sharpened by the *Run and Become* project by the Department of Anthropology at the University of Sussex (Mitchell 2010). Two students' marathon training documentation, their accounts thereof, and notes were of use to me in writing about my own experiences of pain, new shoes, loneliness, improvement, and motivation.

My personal problem in regards to knowledge is overly clearer and simpler compared to those of my informants. I entered the field with the intention to reflect on my own running – my low level of training and knowledge made it easy to observe improvement. Yet, the epistemic work of professional runners works similarly, but accompanied with less pain and no internet research.

Towards the end of my fieldwork I invited the young athlete Sammy for lunch and asked him about his training progress since we met in early February. He explained that he was not in good shape when I saw him running at Chepkoilel stadium for the first time. His endurance was good, but he lacked speed. As a consequence, he tried to improve this aspect by applying a program he learned from another athlete who was faster than him:

“This guy has a personal best over 1500 m of 3 m 34s. My best is 3 m 42s. And he had a specific training program when he ran this time. He is not following it anymore and I don't know why, but he is also not attaining his personal best anymore.”

Sammy changed some of his easy runs to specific interval training. On three evenings each week (Monday, Wednesday, and Friday) he started with a slow 30 min jog and then alternated between 30 s slow running and 30 s fast running, while at the same time trying to concentrate on long strides. This optimised his style of running and allowed him to continuously run his 400 m sprint rounds in 1 m 02 s during his normal sprint training at the track. He stated that the new exercises caused him pain at first, but that his movements soon became more swift and his strides generally longer. Also, he stated that the additional training has made him more comfortable in training, even during hard training. However, he did not only rely on the knowledge he produced with his own body, but reflected on his performance in comparison with others:

“My friend travelled yesterday to the United States for a 10k race. He already competed at the same race [last year] and he took 2nd place in 27m36s. This year I have asked him: How is your shape in this year compared to last year and he said: ‘This year I am in perfect shape.’ So I said to myself, ‘I have to reach his level because then I can compete with a top athlete in speed and endurance.’ and you know? When I compare us in training, I can say I can compete with him. So I say I'm in good shape.”

Hence, straining enhanced Sammy's running, as a technique of the body, in three regards: (1) the physical capacity of the body to run fast over a longer time increased; (2) his knowledge on his own capacity to run both tacitly and explicitly rose; (3) his skill to produce this utilisable bodily knowledge was sharpened. So while I am stressing the moments of bodily uncertainty, Sammy feels quite certain about his athletic capacity. Accordingly, Alkemeyer describes *“athletes as practical experts for the overcoming of uncertainty”* (Alkemeyer 2012: 109). This builds

on the embodied forms of knowledge and a perfected knowing of how (ibid.: 113) to perform the sport. In this sense, running a race in front of an astonished audience is also a performance of an athlete's knowledge on the run (ibid.). Yet, even the best athletes cannot know the future and foresee the unexpected. A core of uncertainty always remains in training and racing. These problems of uncertainty will be the focus of the next sections.

E. Structuring Training

One basic problem for many athletes seems to be “how does one train to win?” It is a more serious variant of my own helplessness from when I started to train. Yet, for the right program, a multitude of variables must be considered: level of fitness, distance and time of the race, the place of training, different skills that need improvement, future opponents, and the implementation of a mechanism of control⁷². So in the beginning of the training program, only the goal seems clear.

Mauss describes training as a search for (human) efficiency, which is voluntarily applied to humans and their children (1973: 77). At least ideationally, building on the assumptions of a technicisation of the body, a prominent theory of the development of expertise in sport is Ericsson's concept of *deliberate practice*. He argues that expert performance has a different quality than lay performance and stresses that this difference is not grounded in talent but is a result of methodical effort and practice (Ericsson et al 1993: 399f). In empirical research, the application of this approach in the training practice for ultra-endurance triathlons produced mixed results. In regards to time and quality, the quality of expert's training was greater than in normal training, but the relationship between performance and time spent on training was not linear. Baker et al. emphasise how experts follow a more systematic and progressive approach to training and try to balance their efforts. Their training is not monolithic like Ericsson suggests, but alternates exercises of high training stress with periods of low stress. This highlights the importance of training structures (Baker et al. 2005: 69 and 76).

In this section, I will present the set of categories the athletes I encountered used to structure their training. The program, usually given by a coach, has some fixed elements but is also individualised to fit the personal level of training, the time and distance of races, overarching career plans, personal experiences, and some other factors. This meta-program uses specific categories and classifications of training practices like muscle building, sprint training (track and fartlek⁷³), endurance training (long run), basic training (slow run), and one day of rest per week. Its short version covers a week, while the coach usually has a long plan covering the three months before an important race and even longer plans for the career development of an athlete⁷⁴. While the short version is fixed and should not be altered, the long version can be slightly modified according to training progress and evaluation. The training program connects collective as well as individual knowledge on the run in a specific form. If followed, this formalisation promises athletic success, although this promise will not be fulfilled for every single athlete.

72 For the last point see sections 5.F and especially 5.G.

73 Fartlek is Swedish for speed play and was developed by the Swedish coach Gösta Holmér in 1937, when Scandinavian long-distance runners were as dominant as East Africans are today (Bale 2004: 62).

74 I already discussed these long term assumptions on an athletic career in Chapter 4.F and 4.G.

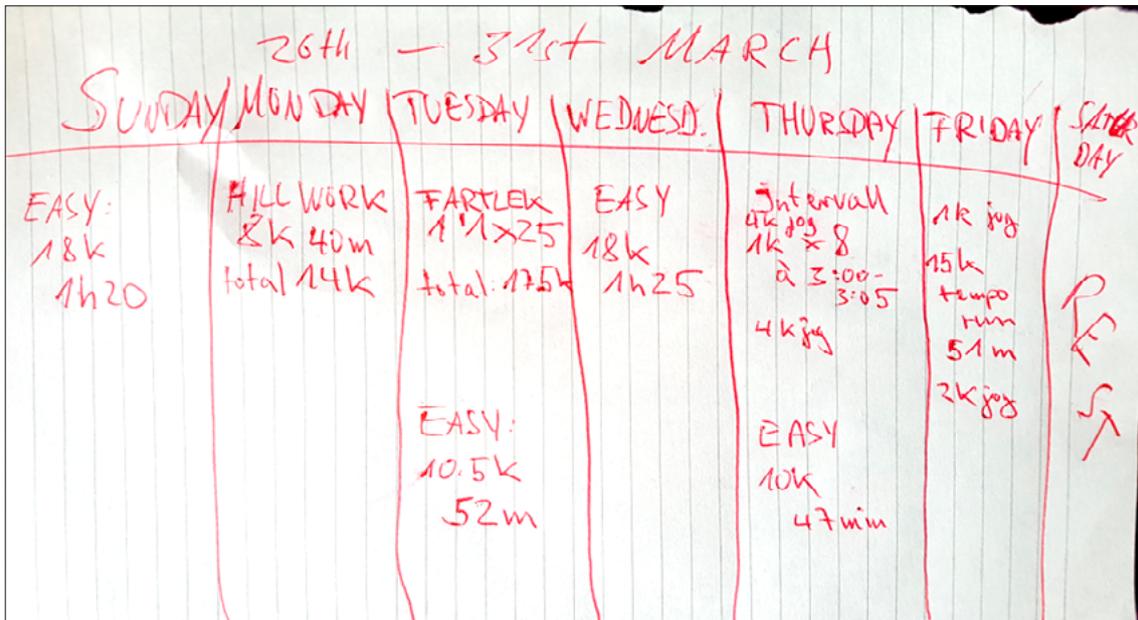


Figure 1: Program for a week of marathon training.

Coach Geoffrey defines five skills that an athlete should improve during his training: (1) clearance or acceleration describes the ability to start the race and pick up one's pace, (2) maintenance or endurance affects how one can run for a long period of time, (3) velocity represents the capacity to reach and maintain a high pace (4) finish enables an athlete to evaluate the remaining distance and his own energy reserves. Yet, for him the most decisive category is (5) the mindset: "[t]he motivation to run and win. It is also the ability to endure the exertion. Power comes from your mind." Building on his own experiences as a runner and inspired by the training of other athletes and coaches, Geoffrey developed his program for marathon preparation. But all the scholarship athletes he trains also run shorter distances, thus he must modify the plans accordingly. These skills define how an athlete should and can improve and are connected to specific categories of exercises, which I will describe in this section.

To give some examples of training programs: I already referred to Kipchoge's documentation of training⁷⁵, Justin presented his program on his blog, and other athletes frequently discussed programs when they met. Programs can be private or public records, communicated in language, and at times they materialise in the form of small sheets of papers handed to the athletes by their coaches (See Figure1). On the picture we can see the most important categories and how they are arranged over the course of a week. I will limit my description of the categories on marathon training, as they cover the widest range of exercises. Most elements are all also present in short distance training, but the focus is different.

The basic exercises are easy (or slow) runs (on the figure: Sundays, Thursday, Wednesday, and Thursday). They can be run alone or in a group at a slow pace. Some athletes run 6:00 min/km, others only 7:00 min/km. Often the pace is increased in 30s-steps over a total distance of nine to up to twenty kilometres. An easy run may end with a pace of 5:00 min/km or an athlete may decide to speed up and run the last kilometre in a pace of 3:00 min/km. I joined athletes for these easy runs, but to me they were anything but easy. I used it as normal exercise, while

75 See Section 5.D

the professionals used it as recovery. It is placed between harder exercises and produce a basic endurance without exerting the body too much.

Long runs are fast and over 30 km, usually with 80%–90% of racing pace, and faster than 3:30 min/km. It is run only once a week or less, and gets skipped in the last week before a race as they are too exhausting. Long runs improve endurance and allow for anticipation of one's performance in a marathon race. Yet, the athletes do not test in full racing speed over the complete marathon distance. This is considered to be exhausting and harmful to the built-up of good shape for the racing day. Sammy explains:

“During a Marathon, the last 5–10km are only pain. Considering that you trained your body well and your perseverance is fine... You still must withstand the pain. The last part of a race is only pain. This you can't train. You must endure the pain.”

This stress peak is mostly avoided in training. Tempo runs (Friday) are shorter versions of long runs. They also train velocity at a high pace, but are less exhausting as they cover less mileage.

Sprint training comes in many variants. Under the umbrella of speed work, athletes train clearance, velocity, and finish. These three basic categories can be separated, but the exact implementation differs widely by time, distance, iterations, and speed. Interval training (Thursday) consists of a number of sprint runs over a fixed distance and slower phases of slight (but incomplete) recovery in between. In the example the athlete runs a course of 1 km, eight times, with a steady pace of slightly over 3:00 min/km. Fartlek is a similar exercise in which the intervals are not defined by distance, but by time. This makes the exercises easier in the fields and forests where most athletes train, as there one does not know the distances and only needs a simple watch as technical device. These forms of training are individualised easily. Sammy advised me to switch between intervals of 1 minute fast and 1 minute slow (1–1) to longer sprint intervals: *“Forget 1–1! You must train at least 3–2. That's not hard! 3–1 is hard. But, Man! You will be fast! Kipchoge even trains 5–2.”*

The only exercise that is neither run on country lanes nor asphalt roads, is track training. Once a week marathon runners train at the running track. They wear the best and lightest shoes they own—the athletes that own some racing flats for real races also wear these. The advantage of the track is that it is a fixed distance. Athletes can check how fast they really are and compare their personal assessment with a quantified evaluation of the effectiveness of their running. Marathon runners usually train several repetitions of 400 m, 800 m, 1200 m, and rarely also 1600 m, so that they train their maximum pace and velocity.

The last category is hill work (Tuesday). It is trained on acclivities as steep as possible. Two, a coach in Kaptagat, explains: *“Have you seen the hill where Eliud [Kipchoge] does hillwork? It's so steep, you can't drive up with a 4x4! Only donkey carts get up there. Donkeys and Eliud!”* This exercise is often disliked by the athletes and has an astonishing simple setup: one runs up the hill in a fast speed and recovers on the way down. Then one runs up again. Hill work serves the build-up of thigh muscles and prepares for hilly races. Acclivities are often decisive points in races as they allow to attack and distance oneself from one's opponents⁷⁶.

While one can train alone doing hill work and easy and occasional tempo runs, the athletes form groups of up to twenty athletes for sprint training. This allows comparison with others, incitement, and pace-setting.

76 See also Section 6.B

The way the different exercises are arranged during the week, depends on many factors. Members of a training group must agree on a day for joint speed work and other elements can be determined by personal preference or by the coach. The famous Patrick Sang, coach for Global Sports, allows his athletes in Kaptagat great freedom with their program: while long runs, speed work, and hill work are mandatory in the mornings, the runners are free to decide on their own easy runs in the afternoons. Depending on the congregation an athlete belongs to, they will usually either have their (very important) rest day on Sundays or Saturdays. Lezan and Geoffrey are Seventh-day Adventist and go to Mess on Saturdays, while Sammy is Catholic and therefore does not train on Sundays.

I argue that this widespread and established categorisation provides an understanding on how athletes effectively structure their training and balance effort and capacity enhancement. It explains how social categories and individual experience come to play in the process Ericsson describes as methodical effort and practice. Categories linked with specific goals and skills allow the balancing of exhaustion and recovery, which is crucial for professional endurance training (Baker et al. 2005).

In addition, I argue that structuring the training also provides a way to cope with uncertainty. A process of formalisation (Thévenot 1984) takes place that allows the actors to use and ignore available knowledge according to their goals. This becomes clear in my encounter with the world of confusing and contradicting advice on running that dwells in online forums. Runners in the Kenyan highlands can ignore these global discourses on running and are offered an easy starting point of training. They do not have to study a multitude of scientific studies to find an efficient way to train. They can rely on a credible set of categories and focus on the running itself. Calkins (2016) uses Thévenot's concept of *investment in forms* to explain how gold diggers in Sudan cope with the multitude of uncertainties surrounding their work. They train different skills to be able to handle the uncertainty of toxic hazards, finding gold, and prosecution by the police. Spatial structuring of the area, development of safety procedures for gold washing with mercury, and training with metal detectors are formalisations that confront uncertainty (ibid.: 129). Similarly, the investment of the athletes in their bodies (the training) must be structured by a form (the program) to successfully improve the athletic capability of the body.

F. Failure and Improvement

The initial story of Samuel Wanjiru's race in Beijing exemplifies how changes in established patterns can enable one to win races. I do not know if Wanjiru developed his tactic because of a mistake, a specific advantage in racing analysis, or maybe just because he was very confident in his capacity to perform. In this section I will show how athletes and coaches use moments of failure to improve their program⁷⁷.

The structuring of training does not only provide a guideline for improvement of athletic capacity, but also functions as a tool to discipline an athlete and baffle his enthusiasm. The most common mistake described by my informants, is training too much and exhausting oneself before a race. Two, a coach in Kaptagat, said the most remarkable mistake he made was running a long run in the week before his first race: "*I was so enthusiastic I couldn't stop myself. I just*

⁷⁷ I briefly explained at the end of section 5.C why tacit knowledge can best be observed in its negativity, meaning failure.

wanted to run. But oh! In the race I couldn't run. I felt totally spent. I hardly finished." He added that too much enthusiasm is a bigger problem than laziness:

"Most professional athletes want to run. But you know Brown? This guy, he just can't control himself. If he's doing an easy run and he sees someone racing, he immediately starts to chase them. He enjoys running too much and always wants to prove himself. But he doesn't improve. He is wasting his talent."

Two did not know that Brown was one of my running mates. Kevin, another running mate in our group, also often complained about Brown's speeding. However, Kevin himself was not safe from the temptation of running, either. He told me about a slow run during which he met some friends and wanted to show them his fine shape:

"I killed them! I destroyed them! They had no Chance. Dschoom—I was past them... But then I slipped. This is where the pain comes from. At least I was around a corner, so they didn't see me."

Veteran athlete and local agent, Lezan, just shook his head when we talked about such mistakes:

"There is no use in running these runs faster. You don't improve your speed during easy runs. I was never the fastest during training. But in the races I could surprise everyone. You win nothing in training."

Still, most of my informants described mistakes as common features in their careers. Elijah, coach at the Complete Sports camp in Kaptagat, laughs hearty when I ask him if he ever made a training mistake:

"Everyone does mistakes. [...] the athletes always make mistakes. And me as a coach, I also make mistakes. That's why we rectify ourselves, we are learning from our errors. In this world you have to do a lot of mistakes to know what's good for you."

Even grave mistakes in races are considered a source of improvement. In the beginning of my thesis, I discussed the story of the Ugandan runner who almost broke down in the final lap of the World Cross Country Championships while being uncatchable in front⁷⁸. When some running friends and I sat together, someone joked about the failure of this young athlete. Kevin stopped the laughter and declared:

"This guy was pushed by the fans. They forced him to run. He could have stayed with Kamworor und finish second. But similar to Bekele in Mombasa 2007, he made a mistake. But he will be a champion. He will never make this mistake again."

Mistakes make knowledge observable as a problem and offer the opportunity for improvement. Yet, the certainty presented in these accounts of failure is present in the assessment of the past. The knowledge provided must be translated for future training. Another temporal challenge is

78 See beginning of section 4A.

linked to a specific characteristic of the training program: All my informants stated the importance of staying with a program for the complete three-month preparation. Small injuries and variations in personal form can be compensated by small changes in training. Meanwhile, the basic structure of the program must not be altered.

That can be problematic when athletes are told to train in a harmful way and have to oppose this advice. The coach at Rosa camp, James, remembers his Italian coach in 2009:

“Our program was strong. It was different from what we used before and Claudio [the coach] let us run a terrible time in the long run. [...] I remembered that in 2007 we trained differently than in between 2009 and 2011. I said to myself you’re doing an extra job. It was too much. And my coach always said: Push! Push! Push!”

James noticed this mistake in two instances. He claimed he had immediately noticed that the intensified training was burning his energy too much. He did not have the position to oppose his coach and in the following marathons he finished, but did not improve his personal best time anymore. He also felt very tired during the race. As a consequence, he started to fall behind in his training and silently opposed the program given to him:

“It brought me back. [...] I ran in March in Seoul in 2h 06m and finished 2nd. So when I came back I knew I could make it now. In November 2012 I went back to Korea to a Race called Joongang Seoul Marathon and I broke the course record and won.”

This suggests a circle of reflection surrounding training and races. After a race, athletes discuss their performance with their coaches, agents, and also their running friends. They evaluate the last program and use the results to prepare for the next race.

G. Testing and Timekeeping

Specifically created situations of evaluation are also embedded in training. These *tests* are creating knowledge on the current capacity to perform and on the effectivity of the program. Elijah describes testing as one of the most important parts of training:

“You are supposed to test yourself, so you know where you are. That is the secret thing, because how will an athlete know if he is in shape or not? And how will I as a coach know? [...] Tests are moments of truth.”

Which practices of testing do the athletes use? When I first arrived, my first question was usually about timekeeping, but already in my first proper interview Justin told me: *“Forget about time! Time is not important!”* He explained that the comparison with other runners during the difficult and exhausting exercises, like tempo runs or speed work, are the best way to evaluate one’s capacity (cf. Howe 2004: 154). And later James elaborated on the same issue:

“We don’t want the young athletes to run by time [with watches], because they don’t know anything. He [the young athlete] doesn’t know a thing about running. So I, as a coach, tell the kids [...] just run. Even I don’t take the time. There are other things much

more important. You have to see if they can run [...] when you are young you need to get a feeling.”

James further explains that he sometimes needs more than three months to really evaluate the potential of a new athlete. The personal bests an athlete may provide on arrival do not help him in his evaluation, as he does not know the extent and quality of the athlete’s training so far. He first has to see the athlete’s process of training and then only when the athlete is in full training, he keeps the time.

Despite this cautiousness towards the information-content timekeeping produces, Justin and James talked a lot about time. Justin diligently recorded the time and pace of his exercises and James not only had the progression of his own personal best in marathon on his mind, but also the key races and training times of his athletes. While time is not the only way to evaluate progress in training, it is clearly the most comparable. The simplest form of testing is to regularly run a fixed course and comparing the times over the course of a month or a year.

The critical part is measuring the time. In professional sport, timekeeping is often a sophisticated endeavour and involves different technical devices. Timekeeping practices vary widely different between different sports (Woodward 2013: 49f). In Germany, running a race as an amateur, means running with a chip⁷⁹. It signals a sensor when crossing the start and finish line and provides records of the temporal dimension of one’s performance. Timekeeping in the context of my research is about the challenge to connect a specific distance with an exact time. If you possess a GPS-watch, this problem is solved easily and one can measure any distance, time, or pace. However, those watches are expensive and not widely available⁸⁰. Athletes get them from sponsors and managers, or bought them when they stayed abroad for a race. The other runners use fixed distances, e. g. during speed work at the running track,⁸¹ and a simple wristwatch with a stopping function. In principle, any fixed distance can do and provide an athlete with the means to track his progress in training. However, while watches are common, not every runner owns one. Often a group shares one watch, so someone must set the pace for the rest. This requires the skill of reaching and maintaining a certain pace. Untrained runners cannot perform this task, and even among the athletes, I observed that the effectiveness of their pacesetting varied widely⁸². Another form of testing is conducting time trials (seldom called test runs). Elijah has institutionalised those for all his athletes:

“I keep a record for every individual athlete. Every month we have a time trial to test the athlete; to test his time. An 800m athlete will run 800m. A 1500m athlete will run his distance. It is more like a race; also for 5k and 10k. Only marathon is different. We test them over 10k. It’s already long-distance. Real tests. That is what we are doing.”

These *real* tests resemble field experiments. They are not conducted in a laboratory setting in which single variables can be tested in isolation (Potthast 2012: 553), but in the *real* world (Pinch

79 Either in the paper with the starting number or a separate advice attached to arms or legs.

80 Prices start at approximately €100 in Germany.

81 Still the validity of the results can be relative. Justin joked about his first test runs: “We went for track when we were younger. We still believed the track is really 400m. In Kenya they are usually a little bit longer. But that’s also advantage when you run at a real 400m track in Europe.”

82 See also Sammy’s account of his progress in training in section 5D.

1993: 31). In this context, it means that the tests are taking place at the locations where the runners are training anyway. The protocol of sport already established a basic standardisation for these tests, like the fixed course or time in itself. Beyond these basic forms, standardisation is not desirable, as the athletes need specific results tailored to their individual problems of performance evaluation (Potthast 2012: 553). *“In many circumstances, test data represent a final check on whether the expert’s conception of reality conforms to the physical world at hand”* (Pinch 1993: 26). In the context in which I encountered testing, I found modes of „*prospective and current testing*”—the techniques were proved during utilisation (ibid.: 27f). The tester had not necessarily formalised expectations, but definitely has some tangible ideas (ibid.: 26). Sammy and Two explained that they adopted programs of other athletes, not their current programs, but the ones they used when they ran their personal best times. They expected to achieve similar times when they followed the training program.

The athletes do not need to produce biochemical or scientific knowledge; they rather specialise in the evaluation of a new feature in training with regards to the effect on their capacity to perform (Bette 2006: 123).

So not “all elite sporting participants have a detailed understanding of exercise physiology, but rather [...] they have an inherent perception of how the body functions, because their performances in training and competition continually test the body’s physical limits.” (Howe 2004: 109)

The data that tests produce must be useable in the context of Kenyan running. As shown in the previous sections, performance can be linked to many aspects of an athletes’ body, like training density and composition. Nutrition and bodily indicators, like heartbeat frequency and haemoglobin levels, are often used to monitor and explain athletic performance in institutionalised settings, like at the Nike training camp in Oregon or among professional teams in Europe. Occasionally, managers try to introduce these training practices to their Kenyans athletes. James explains a common resistance against dietary changes:

“We eat the fruits. It’s okay. We don’t care [...]. But to anything special: We say no! You have to stay who you are. You cannot balance anything [referring to diet. KB]. You eat rice and Ugali and it’s okay. There is no problem.”

My notebooks also contain many stories about specific shops in Europe where one can buy proper maize flour to make Ugali, or how athletes bring their own flour when racing abroad. Other athletes told me about bad experiences with energy gels or energy drinks, as they were not used to these products. This being familiar with a specific food, its handling, and knowing the effects of it on your body, is not unlike the utilisation of information. Tests just produce data. Contextualisation in a system of categories shows the information the data may produce. For a Kenyan athlete the data of a heart beat sensor or one’s haemoglobin level does not provide information per se. James explains that a previous coach frequently tested the athletes for their haemoglobin levels: *“This guy studied sport science, that’s why he wanted to do the tests. We don’t do it for a long time anymore.”* There is simply no one working in Rosa Camp who is interested in the information haemoglobin level testing may provide.

The testing used by the athletes I encountered is a different mode compared to these medical tests. Neither is necessarily privileged. Both lay and scientific modes of knowledge production are heavily contextualised by a surrounding system. The difference is not described by the

concept of knowledge of and on the body introduced at the beginning of this chapter. Neither is the difference simply qualitative versus quantitative. On the one hand, sport scientists and Western coaches do use qualitative methods, and on the other hand, Kenyan athletes produce quantitative data, for example when time keeping is used. The difference lays in the different materiality of the infrastructures that needs to be tested (Potthast 2012).

After I returned to Germany, I bought a GPS-watch and suddenly had the technical capacity to measure my heart beat. What does that even mean, heart beat? For me it was just numbers in the online running programs and it did not bear any specific meaning. Allegedly the heart beat frequency should tell the optimal intensity for training. I tried to measure it for one run, but instantly got annoyed. I checked the number, but I had already forgotten what the correct frequency range was. Back home I deactivated the function just like all the Kenyan athletes I have met⁸³. I continued to follow the method of evaluating training intensity that I learned in Kenya: breathe easy and if you could talk while running, you are doing it right. I felt some pride when I noticed that I embodied an element of Kenyan running. In just a few days, another mode of training evaluation that I established in Kenya got replaced by the record keeping capacity of my GPS-watch. I previously had no means to check the distance I ran, so I kept no information about it. I kept a comprehensive and qualitative running diary in which I noted my feelings, form, and the time. My new watch noted my exact time, the mileage, the exact pace for any given moment of the training, and even some more information. But the app in which I saved my records lacked a simple field in which I could note the qualitative data I used to produce. So the materiality of my new device and the connected app changed the way I documented my running. It is this dimension of knowledge production which I will use to summarise the findings of this chapter.

The most important device to produce knowledge on the body, is the body itself. In this chapter, I elaborated how the basal uncertainty of bodily performance causes a three-dimensionality of training as capacity-enhancement, epistemic work, and as a process that enhances the capability to produce knowledge. To enhance the effectiveness of all these dimensions, most athletes structure their training and optimise its process by testing and evaluation. As I showed by using the example of my GPS-watch, the quantity and quality of the knowledge produced and the capacity to produce knowledge can be additionally altered by technical devices. Also, the last section demonstrates the difficulty of incorporating new modes of knowledge production in an existing and working framework.

83 Another common scepticism against GPS-watches was their ability to synchronise with satellites and computers. Some athletes told me they refrain from the use of GPS-watches because they did not want to give their (Western) managers access to an exact documentation of their training and instead retain autonomy.

6. Conclusion

In my thesis I discussed how Kenyan athletes successfully cope with bodily uncertainty and how they engage with the economic hazards threatening their careers. In the conclusion I will summarise my findings and highlight aspects of running and athletic life that are stripped off most of their uncertain conditions.

A. Racing Results as Certainty

Races present a build-in protocol in competitive athletics, which test performance and produce certainty on the capacity to run. This does not come as a surprise, since sport has always been a system, specialised on the comparison and quantification of performance (Werron 2005: 201)⁸⁴.

When sport journalist Justin criticises the focus on time in Western athletics, he points to an important feature of running: “*It’s whoever crosses the finish line first, who wins!*” Races are situations of fixed and, from an athlete’s perspective, absolute rules. Of course one can argue against the totality of this argument, as timekeeping plays an important role in training and testing, prize money is paid for course and other records, and the qualification for e.g. the Olympics is partly determined by time. Also, people will compare the results of different races by time and not by position. Those offer potentially infinite possibilities for comparisons between past races. The capacity of an athlete to make sense of this data is highly useful in anticipating a competitor’s performance. Yet, the race itself is a “*lokale, präsente Sinninsel*”, (Werron 2005: 230) whose understanding is based on cognition. Joining me for lunch, Lezan recalls how Bekele raced against Kipsang in the Berlin marathon of 2016:

Bekele is an experienced runner. He knows how to run. [...] So Kipsang feared him. [They] knew each other. They watched each other’s races all the time. But you don’t know how strong you are in the end and Bekele knew all of Kipsang’s tactics. When Kipsang pushed, Bekele maintained his pace. Kipsang pushed again, Bekele maintained again. Bekele ran 2:55 [pace: in min/km], again and again. But Kipsang ran 2:48, 2:49. He got away and when everybody was so tired; Bekele still ran 2:55. After 40km Bekele decided to go and Kipsang could not keep up, because he burnt all his energy trying to get away from Bekele. Kipsang now ran 2:57 and could not catch him. So sometimes when you’re running, use all your experiences. You have to listen to your body and when you’re feeling so strong [like Kipsang], be careful!”

The race is the final test and again the capacity to perform physically cannot be separated from the utilisation of knowledge. The race clearly shows whether or not an athlete trained successfully. One might explain failure with a wrong tactic, bad luck, an injury, or a lack of preparations, and some explanations can be rendered productive for future training programs. Still, the

⁸⁴ There is another dimension to this numbers as representation of time and the process of quantification in athletics: the times run in a race.

result of the race cannot be changed⁸⁵. Alkemeyer points out that the process of understanding the world is accompanied by the recognition of the rule sets of social fields, which offer actors the space for agency (2003: 336f). The athletes are formed by the social conditions of competitive sport and at the same time are their co-constructors (Gebauer 1997: 512). Social structure is embodied in movement and action and only exists in practice: *“Die Akteure bringen hervor, was sie hervorbringt (zumindest in der Tendenz, in Wirklichkeit bleiben stets Differenzen)”* (Alkemeyer 2003: 336f).

The return of uncertainty lies in a temporal dimension of difference. One race follows on another race and the performance will differ, even if hypothetically all runners would start again. It is impossible to anticipate both your own and your opponents' capacity to run, as well as all the potential situations in a race⁸⁶. The data produced by the practices of knowledge-making and testing encountered in chapter 5 do not allow for an exact anticipation of performance in a race. *“Races are different,”* said Sammy, adding: *“All marathoners train the same. During speed work and long runs they perform the same. But in a race some may run a 2h 06m 00s and others only 2h 12m 00s. Why? Nobody knows.”* It is exactly this uncertainty that enables athletic competition and produces the fascinating suspension that is typical of sport.

B. Coping with Uncertainty

So while it has its limits in racing, I definitely acknowledge the skill to cope with uncertainty that the athletes develop in training. By applying a set of categories and thereby structuring their training effort, athletes successfully cope with uncertainty. In this context, bodily uncertainty does not appear as crisis (Vigh 2006). It could be observed in the accounts of confidence my informants presented. These accounts also entail an epistemological risk. If one athlete follows a training program and compares himself to other athletes from the same group, he might consider himself as well prepared. Enhancement may appear not as a problem, but as a process of certain progress⁸⁷. Practices of testing are working against exactly this false certainty of bodily performance. In professional sport, where small differences decide over victory or failure, this is especially important. However, uncertainty can become *“the basis of curiosity and exploration; it can call forth considered action to change both the situation and the self”* (Whyte 2009: 213f). Engaged with a well specified strategy, like the training program and the practices of testing the runners have at hand, uncertainty can be productive.

In the economic dimension of running, different tactics of coping are applying. Uncertainty can become a crisis in the case of fraud or the loss of financial support. Athletes try to switch nationalities, hustle, expand their networks of potential sponsors, deepen the contacts to Western agents, invest their earnings in a wide range of businesses, or just hope to cope with

85 An exception is disqualification because of doping. I will disregard it here in my argumentation as it operates on another level and generally only leads to betterment in rank if another athlete is disqualified. None of my informants ever explained his failure with the doping used by his competitors.

86 The mutual observation of athletes allows deception. Daniel Wanjiru was considered one of the favourites for the London Marathon 2017, but then he finished 12th at the RAK half marathon one month before London. Kevin commented: *“Don't be fooled. This guy just tries to deceive the other athletes. He is in good shape.”* And indeed, in London, Wanjiru beat Bekele and won.

87 This happened to Justin, when he trained for the Ottawa Marathon 2017. He trained with athletes, who had personal bests of 2h 06m 00s and anticipated running the same time because he could keep up with them in training. In the race he ran 2h 26m 48s and finished 27th.

these threats. Whyte (2005) explains that this is not routed in personal characteristics but in a mood of action. Yet, not only the starting point of these actions is uncertain, but so are their effects. It is a disposition of doubt, hope, caution, and testing. For many runners, uncertainty entails the possibility (or even promise) of upward social mobility.

C. Bodies in Capitalism

So far, I discussed the two kinds of uncertainties as distinctive problems. The linkage between both, the athletic and capitalist competition, is the body. My thesis explores how competition as the basic impetus of improvement and enhancement is embodied by athletes. Often their training is a collective, cooperative endeavour, but the constant evaluation and comparison anticipates and prepares for the confrontation in the race. Viewed with the cold lens of capitalist ideology, those are competitions of productivity.

The productivity of running builds on the cultural and social capital of the runners (cf. Bourdieu 1986). While the latter consist of the networks and relations I especially described in chapter 4, cultural capital is embodied in the body of the athlete: accumulated through enhancement of body techniques, it resembles a form of cultivation – Bourdieu uses the term *Bildung* (ibid.: 245) – that comes at a personal cost.

By attaining control over the bearer and its biological capacity, cultural capital can be bought and concentrated (ibid.) and this is exactly how global capitalist sport works. Athletes and their agents try to accumulate capital in the bodies of the athletes and use this capital to win races and acquire return on investment. The framework to put the capital to work consists of athletic competitions and their uncertain outcome. The capacity to successfully perform under uncertainty constitutes an important part of the cultural capital of the athletes. Therefore, coping successfully with athletic and bodily uncertainty is a prerequisite to prevail in capitalist sport.

Uncertainty of bodily performance enables sport as a competitive system and economic uncertainty renders sport a contingency for athletes to win a better life. Hence, a successful athlete must use a variety of practices to cope with these uncertainties. That includes epistemic work like structuring his training and testing, as well as economic practises like hustling, networking, and hoping.

D. Knowledge, Dominance and Fascination

Understanding this process of the accumulation of cultural capital provides an answer to the question of how Kenyan running achieved such dominance in the recent decades.

The omnipresence of running in the Kenyan highlands is pivotal: small children run, runners and fans are talking about and watching races, running is everywhere. This familiarity with running produces knowledge and shapes dreams of better lives. These are the starting points of careers, no matter if the runner imagines being rich like Samuel Wanjiru, earning some money like my running mate Patrick, running the world record like Wilson Kipsang, or being famous like Eliud Kipchoge.

And these dreams are not just pipe dreams – the global network of running makes them contingencies. Running is a widely accepted profession and people, schools, universities, companies, and states are willing to invest in promising athletes. Talents are recruited and further trained by international agents and AK's national coaches. As I illustrated, training and

running is highly epistemic work. The aforementioned institutions provide infrastructures with the means to improve one's bodily knowledge and one's capacity of knowledge-making. In this process, uncertainties function as constitutive prerequisites of competitive sport and offer the possibility of enhancement and success. Competition is a feature of this sport that leads the athletes to excellence (Boxill 2014: 343) in running or to failure in the cases of those beaten by a (another) Kenyan athlete. This possibility of success and failure makes "*Running [a] serious business*," as the young athlete Noah claimed.

In conclusion, I want to point to another important element which runs like a golden thread through this thesis: the deep fascination elicited by sport. It is this fascination that creates and is created by stories of running, like those narratives told by my interlocutors and like the story which is my thesis itself. It provides an answer to Bourdieu's question *How can one be a sports fan?* (1999). It is this powerful ability of sport, the emotional involvement of spectators and athletes, that often proves stronger than the cruelty of class, race, and exploitation embodied by and through sport.

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