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Running With The Kenyans



Synopsis

After years of watching Kenyan athletes win the world's biggest races, Adharanand Finn set out to discover just what it was that made them so fast - and to see if he could keep up. Packing up his life he moved from Devon to Iten, in Kenya, to eat with, interview, sleep beside and - most importantly - run with, some of the greatest runners in the world. In the distance rests his dream, to join the best of the Kenyan athletes in an epic first marathon across the Kenyan plains.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Or, more accurately, it's everything and nothing. If you're reading this book hoping to discover a magic elixir that will dramatically improve your marathon time, it's not here. I was hoping to find some magic formula, as I am training for a marathon, but...Kenyans are fast for any number of reasons. Adharanand Finn seized the opportunity to run with Kenyans for 6 months, hoping to become as fast as a Kenyan. He was a fairly fast runner already (38 minutes for a 10K) and he did get faster. He and a group of Kenyans decide they will train for a marathon in Lewa. Through the book, we follow Adharanand as he trains with a group of Kenyan runners. He does get faster (and lighter) but the highlight of the book is getting to know a select group of Kenyans and learning about their culture. The book culminates in the running of the Lewa marathon, which is fitting, as by the end of the book we have gotten to know many runners and are sitting on the edge of our seats, wondering how they do. As a runner, I thought all the factors that went in to the Kenyan dominance in long-distance running were interesting--alas, most can not be replicated in America. Still, it was an inspiring and humbling book.

To me, a great running book is not one that focuses on technique, training plans, diet, and form. A great running book is one that entertains me and makes me want to get out and run! Adharanand Finn has done just that with his new book, *Running with the Kenyans: Passion, Adventure, and the Secrets of the Fastest People on Earth*. Finn, a British journalist and a pretty good runner, moved to Kenya for several months (with his patient wife and flexible children). They lived in the Rift Valley town of Iten, one of the central training grounds for Kenyan runners. Finn jumped right into the running culture of Iten. To hear him tell it, there are runners everywhere. The roads get clogged with groups of runners, and there are numerous training camps. Virtually everyone Finn is introduced to has some kind of running credential: placed in a major marathon, world record holder for this distance, medalist in that Olympic Games, etc. That high concentration of success and speed is pretty intimidating, but Finn does his best to keep up. He even puts together a team to train for an upcoming marathon. Over the course of the book, Finn entertains us with the idiosyncrasies of life in rural Kenya (I loved his observation, which drew little comment, of the shepherd who delivered his charges one at a time in the basket of his bicycle. I wish Finn would have taken pictures. . . .) as well as with his reports of running with these world-class athletes (he often runs with the women. . . .). All the while, he asks the question that prompted his visit to Iten: why are the Kenyans so fast, dominating road racing the world over in recent years? My favorite explanation is tied to the tradition of cattle rustling. Slow Kalenjins (the ethnic group from which most of the fast Kenyans come) would get caught or killed rustling cattle. The fast ones end up with more cattle, and in a polygamous society, that means more wives. So slow Kalenjins are removed from the gene pool, while the fast ones spread their genes more prodigiously. Even though it's a good story, that's probably not the reason Finn says, "It's just how they live. Simply through growing up on the slopes of the Rift Valley, far from cities and the technologies that the West has invented to make life more comfortable, they have found themselves excelling at the world's most natural sport." So it's a wide variety of factors. "The puzzle of why Kenyans are such good runners. . . . was too complex, yet too simple [to be reduced to an] elixir, a running gene, [a] training secret that you could neatly package up. . . . It was everything, and nothing. . . .: the tough, active childhood, the barefoot running, the altitude, the diet, the role models, the simple approach to training, the running camps, the focus and dedication, the desire to succeed, to change their lives, the expectation that they can win, the mental toughness, the lack of alternatives, the abundance of trails to train on, the time spent resting, the running to school, the all-pervasive running culture, the reverence for running." I know that if I, like Finn, spent several months in Iten, I might make some progress. I would certainly lose some weight, and

probably would get faster. But I'm sure I'll never run like a Kenyan. Nevertheless, Running with the Kenyans does make me want to get out and run!

Not too long ago, after a half-year of steady training for a 10K run, I started experiencing runner's knee, a painful condition often thought to result from bad running form or poor equipment (shoes). My doctor asked about my shoes, and when I told him I didn't wear any while running, he said simply, "You know, you're not a 110-pound Kenyan." My doctor, who is also a runner, was right of course, but I wish I had this book at the time, as it goes a long way to dispel some of the myths and misconceptions around running in general and barefoot running in specific. That said, let me add that you don't have to be a runner to enjoy Adharanand Finn's "Running with the Kenyans". (Notice how the "the" suggests the selectivity of just who Finn is going to be running with - not just any Kenyans, the Kenyans.) It combines a bit of memoir, with a bit of journalism, a dash of travelogue, and a lot of running, making for a diverse and divergent read. (It reminded me a bit of *Boozehound: On the Trail of the Rare, the Obscure, and the Overrated in Spirits* in that respect.) Of course, if you are a runner, or more so, one of the growing legion of barefoot or minimal shoe runners (like me), I think you will find this book both challenging and enlightening. Enlightening for obvious reasons, challenging as I will explain below. The author is a British journalist and running magazine writer whose family reached a crossroads at the same time as his running career/hobby did. Given an opportunity to live, work and train in Kenya for a year, his family takes advantage of the opportunity, ships off to Africa, and starts experiencing and living in an alien (to them) culture, while dad/husband/author seeks out expert coaches and runners to help him run longer and faster by sharing with him the knowledge and experience of the long-distance Kenyan running elite. There are many races and many more unusual experiences. The author learns his share of running "secrets": barefoot running, running in flats, eating local carbohydrate rich foods and vegetables, training, growing up running, living in training communes, genetics, hydration, running to escape poverty, running to escape boredom, running for no reason other than to run. He shares all of these secrets with the reader, in the process not only explaining a lot about running, but also revealing that (spoiler alert) there really are no secrets. After all, the author mentions the training philosophies of numerous multi-decade running coaches, gold-medal Olympians, and marathon world record holders, even going so far as referencing authoritative resources like *Lore of Running, 4th Edition*. Many ideas, theories, and philosophies of running are discussed, but due to the idiosyncratic nature of running, few conclusions are drawn. Not surprisingly, this book is at its best when it is about running or when the author is relating his own experience and thoughts while trying to validate or

refute the "secrets" he is learning. It all becomes a little more challenging to read when the memoir portions wander into the story. Although I wouldn't say they were distracting, I would say some of the anecdotes, like how everyone wants to buy his brother-in-law's white Toyota, or the odd things that happen to his daughters at school or the beauty parlor, don't serve the overall story very well. These episodes do, however, change the pace of the book (not unlike running). I would have preferred to have them tied more closely to the Kenyan running theme, or at least, to the author's actual running experience, but other than making your reading time a little longer than planned, they don't adversely affect this book. When the author reached the end of his year in Kenya and I reached the end of his book, I realized I had gained a lot more from RWTK than I expected, and having never read *Born to Run: A Hidden Tribe, Superathletes, and the Greatest Race the World Has Never Seen* (Vintage), I especially enjoyed reading about barefoot running (a topic largely skipped over in Noakes' 1000-page *Lore*). This is a well-written book set in exotic locales with unusual, unfamiliar, and unexpected circumstances, all revolving around an everyman's sport. It may not be a proven formula for a readable, likable, and informative book, but that is the end result. I recommend it to everyone, but especially to any runner. It probably won't make you run faster or cure your runner's knee, but it might give you (and maybe your doctor) some things to think about.

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