

When the British runner Roger Bannister became, to worldwide acclaim, the first human to run a mile in less than four minutes some four decades ago, Europeans were unquestionably the greatest middle and distance runners in the world. Kenyans were still lowly British subjects, for whom running was still a primary means of transportation.

So highly regarded was Bannister's breakthrough that the fateful day, May 6, 1954, has been described by white commentators as "probably the greatest day in track and field." Yet in 1997, when 21-year-old Kenyan David Komen became the first person to run two miles in less than eight minutes, the world took little note of this extraordinary feat, except as the latest example of black African dominance of middle and distance running—a dominance that has created both awe and consternation among white runners and commentators. Having long ago ceded superiority in sprinting and jumping to blacks of West African origin, whites are understandably disturbed at this new African onslaught and its implications.

During one astonishing eleven-day period in August of 1997, Africans launched an unprecedented attack on world distance-running records, setting seven records in the 800 meters, 3000-meter steeplechase, and the 5,000 and 10,000 meters. As each record brought what the *New York Times* described as "breathless wonder at what seemed to be astonishing breakthroughs," experts struggled to explain what was happening. Frank Shorter, a marathon gold medallist in the 1972 Munich Olympics, appeared to cede inherent superiority to the Africans. Shorter pointed out that "the record-holders used to be athletes from industrialized nations, who had access to technology and financial incentives," but that as more Kenyans and Ethiopians could go to Europe and achieve the same access to agents, money, and a lucrative running career, the balance of power changed. "The Africans finally got a level playing field. Then the game was over."

While Algeria, Burundi, Morocco, Ethiopia, and South Africa have all contributed to the growing African dominance of distance running, the Kenyans have been particularly impressive. Although not quite as dominant in distance running as their cousins from the opposite side of the continent are in sprinting and jumping, the Kenyans are clearly the greatest distance runners in the world. Kenya did not win its first Olympic medal until 1968 in Mexico City, when Kip Keino, a 28-year-old uncoached Naudi tribesman, defeated Jim Ryun of the United States in the 1500 meters. Although Ryun was the world record holder at 880 yards and 1500 meters, and although Keino had expended tremendous amounts of energy to place second in the 5000 meters four days earlier, the result was not even close. Throwing caution to the wind, the little-known Kenyan set a torrid pace from the start and held on to win by twenty meters, the largest victory margin in Olympic 1500 meters history, setting a new Olympic record of 3:34.9.

Keino's example must have inspired his countrymen. Although as late as the early 1970s there was only one regulation-size running track in the entire country, Kenya continued to produce world-class runners at a prolific rate. The most notable in the 1970s was, Henry Rono, who not only won a National Collegiate Athletic Association title as a student at Washington State, but also set four world distance records. During that incredible eleven-day period in August of 1997, Kenyans set world records in the 800 meters, 5000 meters, 10,000 meters, and 3,000 meters steeplechase. One of the Kenyans, Paul Tergat, set records in both the 5,000, and 10,000 meters, and his 10,000 meters record of 26: 27. 85,' was more than seventy seconds faster than the world mark of 27:38.4, set by the great Finnish runner, Lasse Viren, at the Munich Olympics.

