

Mind on the Marathon

Wilson Kipsang talks about training, running and winning the race...

BY STUART WEIR

When Wilson Kipsang won the 2014 London Marathon in a time of 2:04:29 it surprised no-one. He had previously won the 2012 London Marathon, was the world record holder and had also won the Frankfurt Marathon (2010 and 2011), the Otsu Marathon (2011) and the Honolulu Marathon (2012). On top of all that he also won the Great North Run in 2012 in 59:06. The 2015 Virgin Money London Marathon comes just a month after his 33rd birthday.

His full name is Wilson Kiprotich Kipsang, which explains why his vest often reads "Kiprotich". He grew up in the Keiyo district of Kenya and joined the police force. He announced himself by finishing second in the Tegla Loroupe Peace Race (10K) and became a professional athlete in 2007.

His first marathon was in Paris in 2010 when he finished third but won a marathon for the first time in Frankfurt later that year. His illustrious career had begun in earnest.

He gave this insight into marathon running: "The most challenging thing about the marathon is the distance. If you are used to running 5K or 10K then a race of 42k is very long! So you're just thinking about finishing and about the time. It is psychological. And if you are used to running shorter distances faster, you need to understand that in the marathon you're not supposed to run fast but to keep running.

"To run a fast time, you need to have speed and to have saved energy and to be mentally strong. Sometimes you reach the end of the race and you will really want to sprint but your body cannot and you have to let it go. But if you feel strong then you can really push it hard."

Arguably his greatest achievement was breaking the world record in Berlin in September 2013. He had been targeting fellow Kenyan, Patrick Macau's, world record of 2:03:38 for some time. In Frankfurt 2011 he ran a bold race, really attacking over the last 5K but finished in 2:03:42, four seconds outside the record.

Next time Kipsang left nothing to chance: "You have to focus and plan for a long time if you wish to get the world record. On the one hand world records fall when you least expect them to fall. On the other hand, you have to set a goal and you have to be prepared to make changes and go for it. After Patrick Makau got



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the world record of 2:03:38, I knew I had to change my preparations. I wanted to be faster in the last part of the marathon. You need long runs in the hills of Kenya to be faster in the end.

You need a higher pace as well. And you need the right people to train with. So I asked many of the fastest people on this planet to train with me: Geoffrey Mutai, Dennis Kimetto, Vincent Kipruto and Wilson Chebet. All of them are winners of great marathons. These are the best guys to train with."

Kipsang took control of the Berlin race in the final 10km, breaking away from the leading pack. He said afterwards: "Getting the world record has always been my dream since I saw Paul Tergat get the record more than a decade ago. When you feel strong in a race and have been preparing well, you have to push and go for it. I attacked at 35 km, not only because I felt good, but also because the pace was slowing down a bit. I needed the higher pace for the world record. I had plenty left in the last 7 kilometres and felt confident to win. I did speed up but not by much because of the long distance. You need to calculate very well because if you go too fast you just kill yourself. I did speed up a lot but just in the last 3 km."

His first port of call when he returned to Kenya was AIC (Africa Inland Church) Mindililwo Community Church, where he arrived by police helicopter. "There is a →



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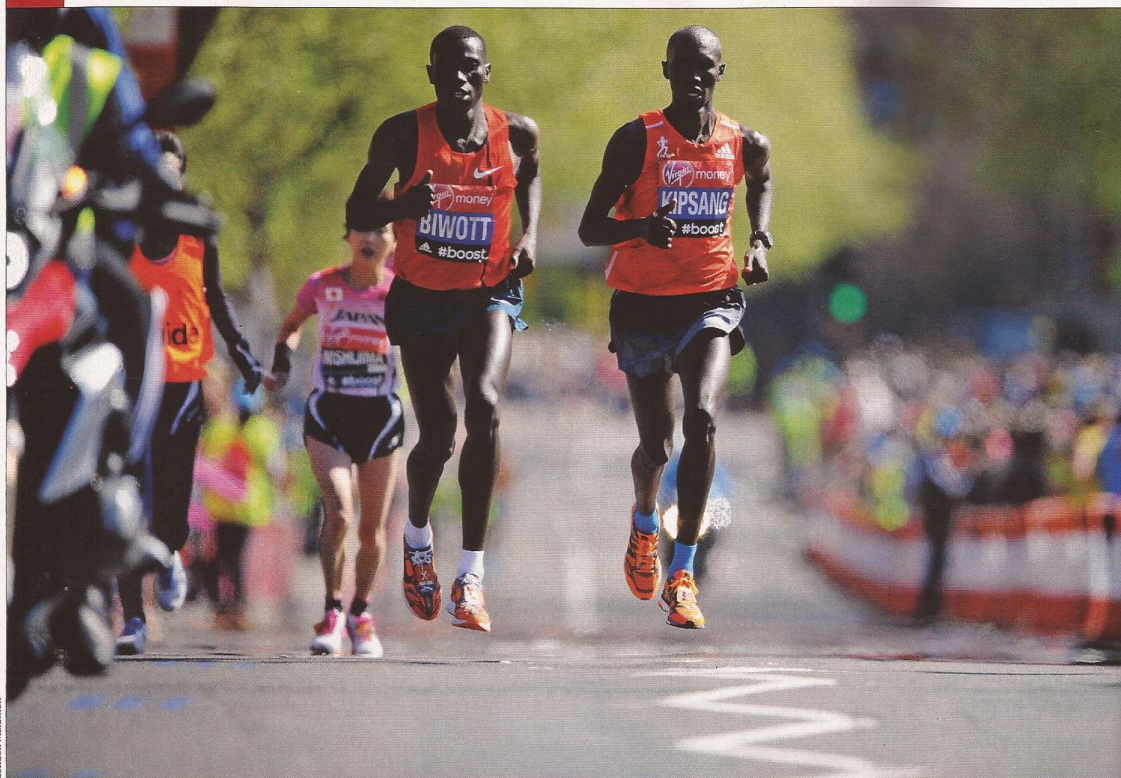
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small church in my village, where I usually fellowship. Before I have a race I pray in the church and during the service before Berlin we asked God to give me the world record by seven seconds. I had trained well and had the faith that it would happen. Now, the world record went by 15 seconds and that is why I'm back here to give thanks and praise. I said to people I need to go back to the same place and say thank you to God and then afterwards we can have other celebrations."

Sadly for Wilson the world record only lasted a year as fellow Kenyan, Dennis Kipruto Kimetto, won the 2014 Berlin Marathon in 2:02:57.

Kipsang entered the London 2012 Olympic marathon as a firm favourite but could only finish third. He took the lead in the 12th kilometre establishing a 15 second lead. At the midway point Kipsang was 16 seconds ahead but then his lead began to dwindle and by 27K had disappeared with Uganda's Stephen Kiprotich and fellow Kenyan Abel Kirui joining him. With about 5K to go, Stephen Kiprotich sprinted to the front, looking relaxed and fully in control. Kirui and Kipsang simply couldn't respond as the Ugandan began gradually to add to his lead. Afterwards Kipsang said: "To my friend, Stephen, 'Congratulations'. It was he who won today because in each competition it is the best one that day who wins." Kipsang had no regrets about his own tactics: "It was right for me to push because of the other athletes in the competition," he said. "If the pace had been slower we could have had a problem at the end, so I knew I had to push."

As a Christian, Kipsang is quick to acknowledge God as his source of strength.

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"My faith in God makes a very big difference. I have faith that in all the hard work God is there with me and whatever the outcome, God is in control. And because of that you worry less, which gives you a big push.

"Believing in God helps me so much. When I read the Bible, especially Philippians 4:13 'I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me'... Just reading that word and believing that it is the truth helps me. So when it comes to training or running a race, I believe I can do all things – not through my power – but through Christ who strengthens me. And that is something that gives me a positive feeling that I can do something through Christ who strengthens me – it's wonderful. So faith has helped me so much and when it comes to social life and knowing how to live with people, how to make peace with everyone and to relate to everyone because I know that really pleases God.

"And when I make my request to God I know he will always hear. I know I don't do it myself

but he is always with me. There are things that people take for granted, but I always pray for good health. God has given me a good body and I have to be grateful.

Kipsang followed his success in London by winning the New York Marathon in late 2014. High winds at the start, and for much of the first 15 miles, put a stop to Kipsang's original plan of attacking the course record. He stayed in a large leading group of runners until past the 22-mile mark, as the runners came down 5th Avenue back into Manhattan, before joining Lelisa Desisa of Ethiopia to break away from the pack.

Desisa and Kipsang ran together through Central Park and across Central Park South, Kipsang leading and Desisa shadowing, both clearly conserving energy for the closing sprint. Towards the end Kipsang ran away from his rival to win. He said afterwards: "Lelisa was very close to me, but I conserved energy for the final sprint. In the last 200 metres it was all me." The win in New York City put Kipsang one point ahead of Dennis Kimetto, the new world record holder, in the 2013-2014 World Marathon Majors series, netting him an additional USD \$500,000.

Wilson Kipsang has achieved a great deal on the roads but he is not satisfied. He wants an Olympic gold in Rio 2016. Then there is the world record: "I want to get my own world record to a safe place. Under 2:03 is a place which is difficult to reach for other athletes." And who would bet against him achieving it? ■

Article based on personal interviews with Wilson Kipsang in London and Manchester last year.