

Visiting Haile's Addis

ETHIOPIA is different. Ethiopians dress well, with grace and dignity the cornerstones of daily life.

The trip from the airport is confusing. We are, after all, in Africa. The balmy scent of the distant desert floats in the air beneath a star-laden sky. Palm trees, red dust and crickets lure me into expecting the typical African, hustle and bustle to come rushing at me around the next corner. Yet it does not.

Instead, Ethiopia has a new-found confidence in an emerging economy. But, equally, it is slow to abandon the thrift of the past which has ensured its survival.

Along with Gerard Hartmann, my colleague from Hartmann International Sports Injury Clinic at the University of Limerick, I arrived in Addis Ababa for the week preceding the Great Ethiopian Run, which was on November 22. We were guests of Haile Gebrselassie and Richard Nerurkar, the chief organiser of the event, which this year attracted 33,000 runners, making it the biggest race in Africa. We arrived at the Hilton Hotel in the centre of the city at 11 pm on Tuesday November 17 and instantly knew that Ethiopia was different.

The purpose of our visit was for Hartmann, a world renowned physical therapist, to offer education in three main areas to a selected audience of elite Ethiopian athletes, coaches and medical support personnel over a series of three workshops, lectures and practical demonstrations. These would run from November 18-20 in three-hour blocks each day with the remainder of the day devoted to clinical screening of a select number of Ethiopia's most successful athletes.



The author with the 'Emperor' Haile Gebrselassie

Gerard Hartmann recently took his famed ability as a physical therapist to the Great Ethiopian Run in Addis Ababa. Here, his colleague GER KEANE tells the story of a trip that involved Paula Radcliffe, Tirunesh Dibaba and, of course, Haile Gebrselassie



Gerard Hartmann (left) with Richard Nerurkar from the Great Ethiopian Run

The first day was busy. At 10am we met with Nerurkar. At 11am we saw Gebrselassie at his office on the first floor of his "empire" – a complex of buildings which his construction company built eight years ago and which now houses the offices for his entire organisation including gym, cinema, banks and shops. At midday we arrived at the venue for Hartmann's first lecture, which was entitled "support system for athletes

and coaches" and was attended by 90 elite Ethiopian runners and coaches.

I sat in Gebrselassie's office, situated in the penthouse suite with a picture-postcard view of the city below framed with majestic mountains and clear blue sky behind. He chatted with Hartmann about his latest building project, a new lakeside hotel called "Haile Resort" in Hawassa, Ethiopia, which is due to open this month, and naturally a race was being organised to mark the opening.

Up to six employees come in and out of his office while we talk, with questions answered or documents signed. Coffee was ordered. "You must know Ethiopian coffee is the best!" Gebrselassie says.

Earlier that day, Gebrselassie had visited a school where more than 1000 students had given him enough flowers to fill the boot of his car. Now, he sits back in his white leather chair, crosses his legs, throws his hands back and yawns.

Suddenly, I remember he was a businessman – and an athlete. Arguably the greatest athlete of our time, too. Hartmann asked: "Did you train today

Haile?" Haile's expression creased with intent. "Of course," he replied, "but today it was very early, I began at 5.30am, it was still dark."

So which Gebrselassie should I try to describe? Because both men are on a journey of success and organised achievement with big dreams driven by two words – "of course!"

Later, he sat intently beside the lecture podium as Hartmann delivered the knowledge he has accumulated over the past 20 years. In his career as a physical therapist, he has worked with a list of athletes that includes 61 Olympic medallists spanning the last five Olympics. He has also been physical therapist for three national teams – USA, Britain and Ireland.

Gebrselassie jumped up at intervals and enthusiastically translated Hartmann's views to the audience as both men passionately explained the importance of opening the minds of the audience to the necessary support systems for elite athletes and coaches to help prevent injury and increase performance. Hartmann spoke on topics such as physical therapy, biochemistry, blood profile and diet to complement the rich abundance of pure, raw talent which Ethiopian athletes already possess.

Talent, or more specifically natural talent, can sometimes retard full potential. But I found it interesting that the athlete who took the most notes during Hartmann's lecture was Gebrselassie himself.

Our second day began with the entire morning devoted to the clinical assessment screening and treatment of two of Ethiopia's most successful athletes, Tirunesh Dibaba and her husband Sileshi Sihine, who between them have won two golds, two silvers and one bronze at the Olympics and numerous world championship medals even though they are both still only in their mid-twenties.

Dibaba speaks very little English so Sihine translated. As we shook hands

to welcome them, Dibaba's palms were wet and clammy. She stood there nervously anticipating the treatment.

Hartmann set to work, listening, disarming, reassuring, and teaching. This incredible athlete had a problem. She had brought a pair of her running shoes, but two large chunks were missing from the soles of her shoes as if they had been bitten off by a dog. "How many miles have you run in these shoes?" Hartmann asks. "I have worn them just once for a 15km run," she replied.

My eyes opened in disbelief. More tests were performed partly for Hartmann's quest for diagnosis, partly for the athlete's education. "Yes I can clearly see the problem," says Hartmann.

The tests revealed the answers in a way that was clear to the athlete. We were one hour into the treatment and she had not yet spoken a word, but for the first time a smile flickered across her face as her eyes lit up.

Treatment began. Alarm and pain silently creased her face as Hartmann assuredly invaded the root of her problem. As the treatment unravelled, so too did the closed stress of the athlete. Dibaba spoke quietly for the first time and began to seek information through Sihine. Soon, they both became animated.

We had one request, that they relieve



Sole survivors: Tirunesh Dibaba's shoes



Gerard Hartmann treats distance superstar Tirunesh Dibaba



Sileshi Sihine and Tirunesh Dibaba with Ger Keane

themselves of the burden of injury and instead place it on our shoulders so the journey of healing could begin. It was going to be necessary that they come to the clinic in Ireland for intensive treatment for a week and dates were arranged. They both left in gratitude and anticipation – and Dibaba gave Hartmann her shoes as a gift and statement of intent.

Yet there was no time to reflect on this moment, because the first of the delegates for our afternoon practical workshop were coming down the stairs. And within minutes, 60-plus national coaches and athletes filled the room, eager for knowledge.

Over the next three hours, they listened intently as a volunteer translated. They lay on the floor to practise and withstood the discomfort of the exercises because of the joyful will to learn. Hartmann took them through the importance of flexibility, while I instructed on lumbo-pelvic stability. I stepped through the bodies on the floor, while they loudly counted in

unison through the repetitions.

Friday brought a new energy as runners and walkers began to converge in Addis in advance of Sunday's race. In the afternoon Hartmann gave a masterclass to physiotherapists on the techniques of diagnosis, treatment and rehabilitation, which are vital when treating an elite athlete. It was held in a dimly lit room in the basement of Gebreslassie's gym complex. With one table in the centre, Hartmann treated injuries of eight athletes.

Hartmann taught with an electric energy which succeeded in keeping the participants standing dutifully for more than four hours as those at the back stood on boxes or tip-toes so not to miss a fact-laden second. The energy from instructor to student was so charged that at the end the entire audience had gathered outside the building in an attempt to glean one last question from the "Daktari", which is the Kiswahili term for "doctor" by which Hartmann has become affectionately known in Kenya.

This Great Ethiopian Run was very special. For the first time Paula Radcliffe was the guest of honour along with Derartu Tulu, who had just won the ING New York City Marathon two weeks earlier, and Gebrselassie.

Saturday was a clinical day for Hartmann and I. Throughout the day we both worked on screening and treating specially selected athletes. Again enthusiasm, respect and gratitude filled our day as we tried to effect change where possible and route orthopedically where necessary.

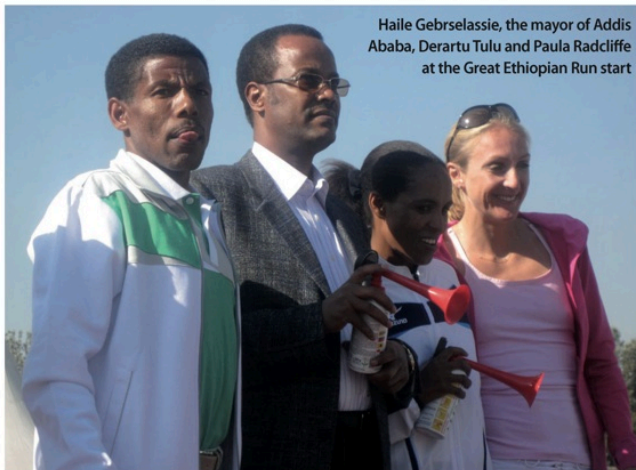
Saturday night will remain a special memory. It was spent in the company of Dibaba and Sihine, who invited us to a meal at an Abyssinian restaurant. As we shared traditional food from a common dish on the centre of a small table, we began to learn about the different regions of Ethiopia. It was interesting to hear that Tirunesh, her sister Ejegayehu and Kenenisa Bekele are from the same region of Ethiopia, where shyness is an inherent quality among those people. It was also interesting to learn that Tirunesh has a younger brother who will soon be old enough to compete internationally.

Sihine explained that his wife loves to run and that even when her career is finished she will run forever. In Ethiopia, running starts with school championships in villages up to national finals. Only the top athletes are picked to join the athletics clubs, all of which are based in Addis Ababa. But the most staggering fact of all was that there is only one all-weather track in the whole of Ethiopia and that is in the capital.

And so it came to Sunday, the day of the Great Ethiopian Run. From early morning a trickle of local runners



Stretching the point: Hartmann educates a keen audience in Addis



Haile Gebrselassie, the mayor of Addis Ababa, Derartu Tulu and Paula Radcliffe at the Great Ethiopian Run start



Green army: runners set off on their 10km journey

walked toward the start line in Meskel Square. Within an hour this became a jammed procession and everyone was wearing a green T-shirt that was the colour chosen for this year's race (each year a colour is chosen which is associated with the Ethiopian flag).

The race was to start at 9am, but by 8.15am all the streets that led to the start were absolutely jammed with competitors, who clapped, danced and sang to loud music. The army created a human starting line and, as the excitement grew, the crowd forced them to bulge with anticipation of the three foghorns, which were used to start the race, held high in the hot, sunny sky by Tulu, Radcliffe and Gebreselassie.

The race started and a sea of green flowed through the street, which on any other day was a 13-lane highway in the city centre. A total of 33,000 had signed up for the race, but so many unofficially joined in along the route that the number running was almost 40,000.

The day finished with a party at Gebrselassie's house for 200 invited guests. His house is more like a palace, with the first floor housing his museum of trophies, with medals and a pair of his first running shoes.

As the party unfolds, it seems like a who's who of athletics, from athletes, agents, ambassadors, and TV crews to his extended family. Gebrselassie himself is also as excited as a child at his own birthday party and he spontaneously dances with anyone who is willing and walks around with bottles of Ethiopian wine for his guests.

Earlier in the week we spoke with Nasim, one of his many staff. She was taking us to Haile's office at the "Alem" Building, named after the word for

"World" and after his wife. Hartmann asks: "How does he run such a powerful business empire and remain one of the most successful athletes in the world, who in a few weeks' time intends to break his own world marathon record in Dubai?" Nasim said: "Haile is very shrewd, professional and hires the best people as this allows him to delegate confidently with a minimal personal involvement."

For an Ethiopian boy from the country to move to the capital city is itself a life-wrenching move. But for this boy to use his athletics gift and talent as a vessel to learn the English language, embrace the new ideas he was experiencing in his athletic travels and to have the confidence and will to apply his new-found opportunity to his life and the lives of those whom he could influence in Ethiopia is truly a uniquely remarkable achievement.

Gebrselassie's success is not all-embracing, as some of his countrymen are intimidated by the perception of lavishness that surrounds his career. But



Haile's hospitable: Keane enjoys Ethiopia

Nasim explains that he is very proud of his achievements and wealth. People say he should give away more of his money rather than establish businesses which only serve to make him richer, but Gebrselassie's answer to this is simply "give opportunity not money".

Jiro Mochizuki, photographer and long-time friend of Gebrselassie, says: "Haile will never miss a training session no matter how busy his working day becomes and nothing stands in the way of his training."

Gebrselassie will train twice daily, starting with his morning run. He will get up at 5.30am, have a cup of coffee and a biscuit and be running by 5.45am. Then in the afternoon, maybe at 4.30pm, he will train for up to two hours in his gym, strength training for his upper and lower body followed by aerobic conditioning using a mix of stationary bike, elliptical and treadmill. These will be at a very high output.

Mochizuki adds that, as Gebrselassie gets older, he does many more of his technical runs in the gym on the treadmill. This offers a more stable surface than the morning trail runs and so helps to protect his vulnerable ankles.

"The treadmill is set at the fastest speed it can go and Haile will run anything from 40 minutes to one hour at this break-neck speed," says Mochizuki. "This allows absolute concentration on his technique and so most of his technical running is achieved in this way."

I smile to myself as I reflect on the age-old adage – "you cannot expect to achieve different results if you continue to do the same things". And Mochizuki finishes by saying: "For Haile running is a business."

Our week of education and treatment was about to come to a close in Ethiopia. As we prepared to travel to Kenya to work with the athletics structures in that equally talented nation, I reflect on the enigma that is Gebrselassie and the culture of world-beating Ethiopian athletics.

Ethiopia is deeply different to Kenya in many ways. A whole new set of cultural nuances and systems had to be learned. We were in Gebreselassie's company for much of our visit and enjoyed a rare insight into his world and workings of elite athletics in Ethiopia.

A much better work ethic, deeply patriotic, rooted in the fact that their nation had never been successfully invaded in their history. The magic of Abyssinia, which was the original name of the country, is as strong today and, if such a thing can be said, even their poverty is industrious, much to the annoyance of Gebrselassie. "You do not give money to the poor to merely lock them in their existence. Instead give them opportunity through work," he insists.

As we said our goodbyes at the party, Gebrselassie smiled and held both hands up in the air. "Hartmann, my phone has not stopped ringing since you arrived, with athletes requesting treatment, you are amazing!" he shouts.

Hartmann beamed back, saying: "Haile, will you be able to take the pain?"

"Of course!" he called, as he was ushered in front of a TV camera with a microphone pushed into his hand.

■ **PAULA RADCLIFFE can be seen with Haile Gebrselassie in Ethiopia during a short featurette at the end of the European Cross coverage – on BBC iPlayer until Saturday**