

Physical therapists Gerard Hartmann and Ger Keane visited Kenya on the eve of the Beijing Olympics to work with Lornah Kiplagat. This is their fascinating story

Words: Ger Keane

July 20, 2008

6.05am: Virgin Atlantic flight 671 touches down on Nairobi soil. It is dark and still. We should not wake this country while it rests before a new day of survival.

6.20am: We stand at the visa desk seeking permission to intrude. Two officials, two pens, three untidy piles; money, passports, visa forms and one cup of coffee. No communication and, after six minutes of discreet symbiosis, one stamps the approval and the other gently utters "welcome to Kenya".

6.30am: We wait by the luggage carousel. It creaks to a grinding halt four times under the weight of the invading luggage. Porters busily pull the luggage in piles on the floor, circus-like.

6.45am: Our luggage appears as they knew it would – "Hakuna Matata" ("no worries").

6.50am: We emerge through the portal doors in the airport into Kenya. There to greet us is the enormous smiling welcome of Douglas Wakiihuri, 1987 world marathon champion and 1988 Olympic silver medallist. "Daktari Gerard! Hello Keane!" We are both embraced within an inch of our lives, and so began my trip into Kenya with Gerard Hartmann and into the love that exists between him and a nation of athletes who refer to him simply as "Daktari", the kiswahili word for doctor. The purpose of our visit is to work specifically with Lornah Kiplagat and her

Lornah Kiplagat heads the field at the World Half-marathon Championships in Rio in October, where she defended her title four months after treatment from Gerard Hartmann in Kenya



Into Africa

coach and husband, Pieter Langerhorst, in their run-up to the Olympic 10,000m final in Beijing, three weeks from our arrival date. Lornah, the 2007 world cross-country champion, was born in Kenya but represents Netherlands since marrying Dutchman Pieter.

Lornah and Pieter are based at their own altitude training camp in Iten, on the edge of the Rift Valley, 8000ft above sea level. The camp is named "The University of Champions". I did not realise how deep the meaning of this title was until later in my stay.

We have no time to waste, Douglas informs us. "Simba has booked your flight to Eldoret at 1pm from Wilson Airport". In Kenya, Lornah Kiplagat is lovingly called "Simba", or "lion".

8am: We are guests at the home of Douglas, his wife Anne and his two daughters Angel, aged nine, and Tameka, six. It is a humble, small house full of love and full of extended family, such as Anne's sister and her husband, who is blind, and Anne's brother. Downstairs there is a small toilet, living room, kitchen and recording studio. I learn that Douglas had a No.1 selling single in the Japanese music charts.

Douglas goes upstairs and brings down his Olympic silver medal still in its case, now dusty with time, its proud ribbon frayed, and an award from the IAAF for his outstanding contribution to world marathon running. I glance at a cabinet that holds the household plates and cups. On top is a collection

of trophies, cups and medals, as you would find in any country house with a sporting past. On closer inspection, I see world championship medals, victory trophies from London, Boston and Japan and others I could not begin to inspect due to the depth of achievements. Sadly, the glorious tales these once glittering representations of pride and strength had to tell did not seem as important now as the need to survive, so they sit up high as dimming reminders of a talented heart who has no more starting lines to stand at.

9.30am: Douglas, with his three friends for safety and acceptance, take Gerard and me into the biggest slum in Africa – Kibera – home to almost two million people living in an area of



Gerard Hartmann with a few of the many athletes at Iten



Brother Colm O'Connell shows Hartmann his memorabilia



Kamariny Stadium in Iten – the launchpad of champions



Lornah Kiplagat and her physiotherapist, Gerard Hartmann



The town of Iten is home to some of the world's best runners



Swarms of elite athletes and 'wannabies' take over the track



The visitors saw Lornah Kiplagat's incredible training regime



Gerard Hartmann on the inside lane of Iten's overgrown track



Trees are planted at St Patrick's College by former star students

approximately two square miles. We can walk from Douglas's house to Kibera in six minutes. We pay one schilling for the use of a wooden "bridge" which crosses a river of sewage so toxic it bubbles in the heat and then we are in Kibera – lane upon lane of mud, streams of waste, rubbish, tin shacks, schools, a gym, shops, everything made from mud, built on mud and cooked on stoves standing on mud. There are people everywhere – young, old, infants, clean, dignified, humble, respectful, utterly poor, friendly.

With Douglas we feel safe. He explains with conviction: "You must understand the people in here are sentenced to a life they cannot begin to rise out of. They stay here because here they know they can afford to survive (they pay rent, affordable rent) so we must not be afraid to go into them, and hope to show them that there may be a way out." Douglas still has so much to say, with the same heart that stunned sporting audiences all over the world but now the race is finished with nobody left to listen.

After a meal of chicken, beef, rice and salad at his home, Douglas drops us at the airport. We arrive in Eldoret at 2.30pm, greeted by Lornah and Pieter. On the journey to their training camp, they point out the evidence of the war-like destruction that happened last January in the conflict due to the elections. Whole towns are burned out,

wooden stalls and tented compounds the only evidence of re-growth. Village after village was dragged to its knees. Pieter and Lornah joke with Gerard, "You were lucky last time! Four hours later and you would not have made it, it was a war". Gerard had visited Kenya with his wife Diane in December 2007. He was working with Lornah after her half-marathon global best at the IAAF World Half-marathon Championships two months earlier. Lornah had to open Eldoret Airport and charter a special flight in order to get Diane and Gerard out in time.

The sign which stands at the entrance reads "The University of Champions, Iten" and we enter a world of excellence that I would learn goes far beyond athletics.

Training begins

Immediately to work, that is the way Gerard likes it. He coaches me on a few points and we carry out treatment for the next 90 minutes. Then we go into their 25m swimming pool, which they only installed in March. At 7pm we all sit down to a meal which was fully grown, picked, prepared and cooked within the training camp.

Over hot chocolate, we talk about past visits to Limerick over the year and how the plan was unfolding for the final run-in to the Olympics. An air of gladness is in Lornah's voice as she jokes about the timing of our visit. "I thanked

God for sending me my two angels this important week," she says.

Lornah was to run three track sessions that week – her last training on Kenyan soil at altitude before flying into the Olympic holding camp in Fukuoka, Japan.

At breakfast, I meet some local teenagers aged 17-18. They were part of "The Foundation". Next month they would travel to the USA to take their place in colleges such as Harvard, Columbia, MIT and Vermont. Their role today was to help with the orientation of the new boys and girls who had just entered the foundation along with American lecturers from the various colleges who would guide these talented youngsters from bush life to leaders in their country's economic, legal and legislative future.

Later, Gerard and I walked into the town of Iten. Pieter and Lornah had told us that more than 500 athletes lived there. The much-respected Brother Colm O'Connell is based in St Patrick's College, Iten, famed for the number of world and Olympic champions who have sat in the classrooms. The air was alive, leaders from the heady heights of world athletics running through streets of survival with wits the only currency known.

After lunch we were to watch Lornah's first track session of the week. Lornah ran to the track to warm up and collect her training partner on the way.

As we drove, Pieter pointed to a school on which they have promised to put a new roof before it opens in September. "Who will fund it?" Gerard enquired. "We will, through the foundation," he answered. "It will cost \$15,000."

The track was silent but screamed of history and achievement, quite literally perched on the edge of a plateau overlooking the Rift Valley 8000 glorious feet up in the sky. The "stadium" was wooden and broken. The track was dried mud. Lane one was covered in grass. No one uses that. Lane two had a worn ridge the entire way around so people must train in lane three. The grass in the centre was home to grazing sheep, goats and cows and two goal posts broken and repaired several times over. "Pieter, how many champions have come from here?" "Every year in the history of athletics," was the reply.

"You should come here tomorrow morning, there will be 180 athletes training." He was right. We saw it with our own eyes – six or seven groups of 20-25 athletes. The only sound to be heard was that of breathing, footfall and bleating sheep. Gerard advised me to concentrate on one athlete to appreciate his body make-up as you are overloading on excellence here. This was the essence of the sport happening before my eyes. This track at home would not be deemed fit for a school sports fun day. There people would look at it in disdain, but here it was the home of champions.



Gerard Hartmann with the next generation of running stars?



'Simba', as she is known, near her base in the Rift Valley



Lornah Kiplagat making her final preparations for Beijing

Here, it was the venue for an athlete three weeks away from an Olympic final.

The track session began with some gentle plyometrics, stretches and strides, a cloud of red dust greeting every step. In the dry season, the dust becomes so bad you cannot see athletes on the other side of the track.

The session included 4x800m, 3x1000m, 2x2000m, 3x1000m and 4x800m.

The recovery was minimal. Pieter quietly reminded Lornah to slow down for the first 200m as the session progressed.

We watched Lornah and her training-partner perform in silence with soft and gentle encouragement from Pieter as he recorded lap after lap. Everything was calm and synchronised. Even the sheep that strayed on the track seemed to know when she was due such as her timing. For a brief second I transposed the heavenly scene before me into the screaming cauldron of the Olympic Stadium and I realised here also was a special person living at the edge of two very different worlds.

At the end of the session, we sat in the infield of the track, picnic-like, talking through the performance and laughing a lot. Lornah likes to laugh and enjoy herself. Pieter says, "What's the point if you do not?"

More than athletics

Back at the camp, after a two-hour treatment and a 40-minute pool session, we chat over dinner. Athletics does not take over. In fact, the conversation turns to the wonderful work of the Foundation and the University of Champions. They milk their own cows, pasteurise it and use the butter for cooking. The entire gas system for cooking is produced from animal waste, with the end product used for fertiliser.

Lornah becomes animated when she speaks of the foundation. "We wanted this to be here before Beijing because, if a day comes that I cannot run, I still

want to be involved!" I get a sense that the word "involved" for Lornah will have a much more profound meaning as she points to a table of eight to 10 Kenyan students sitting behind us. "Take a look over there. Sitting at that table might be the president of Kenya in 30 years' time – a person who will understand how to give the power of progress through guided education to his people." Part of the promise is that all these students will come back at some stage to set up similar foundations in their own districts and become role models for that community. "But I do not want them to come back too soon," she says. "They must first gather the knowledge and experience."

One of the American lecturers fills in Lornah on the students' progress. Lornah gives the advice sought. I must remind myself that before me is a lady who will most probably be battling down the home straight for an Olympic medal in a little over three weeks' time.

Above all else, Lornah is a happy person. Happiness is in abundance in Iten. The previous day, as Gerard and I returned from our trip to Iten, we photographed a group of majestic athletes running down the hill into town. Pieter lovingly referred to them as gazelles. They wildly shook their hands in the air, shouting: "No photo! No photo!" Then one in the group stopped abruptly and danced in the air. "Daktari Gerard! Daktari Gerard!" Gerard had in the past treated him, along with two others in the group. "This is our brother Gerard," they exclaimed to the group. Many photos later they were on their way with promises that we would visit.

Later that night, after a two-and-a-half-hour treatment, Gerard and I were guests at Lornah and Pieter's house. The occasion is to watch the Golden League meeting in Stockholm on television. "I really love this stadium," Lornah tells us. "You know, right outside the stadium,

the warm-up track is in a beautiful forest. I ran my PB for 5000m on this track and, look, the sky is always this blue." As Pieter cooks us an Indonesian meal, Lornah smiles that "everything you are going to eat was growing in the garden today".

Their house is perched on a hill on the edge of the Rift valley. They designed, planned and built it with local people. It took two years to complete and is entirely self-sufficient. In their garden they grow kale, spinach, maize, kidney beans, courgettes, broccoli, white corn maize, millet, passion fruit, lots of bananas, mangoes, pineapple, papaya and oranges. They fertilise the crops with green manure, which also acts as a pest controller, and so they never use pesticides.

The green manure is a by-product of the manure collected from their 15 Friesian cows. It is first put into a pit and left to ferment. This creates a product called bio-gas, which with solar power serves almost 80 per cent of their electrical needs.

Lornah's diet consists of porridge mixed with millet, some brown beans and tiny little fish, which she dries out in the sun. Her protein comes from a fish called tilapia and beef from her herd and her favourite food is undoubtedly ugali. "Even if I get pasta or rice, I say 'yes', but please a little ugali also," she explains. The rest comes from the abundant fresh vegetables and fruit in the garden.

As we shared the meal with our plates on our laps, Lornah and Pieter tell us that in Iten there are 500–600 elite athletes and up to 1000 "wannabees". Half the Kenyan team going to the Olympics in Beijing are based in Iten. It must be explained that Iten is no more than a one-street, large village with a church, a school, the district police station, the district electoral centre and, perhaps most famously, St Patrick's College for Boys.

"Just think of this," Lornah explained,

"the World Cross Country two years ago was held in Fukuoka, Japan, and, of the 18 medals given out that day, half of them came back to Iten."

Wednesday was an important day as it was the second of Lornah's three track sessions to be performed this week. Its outcome would set the tone for the remainder of our week and more importantly bring Lornah one step closer to the end of her key remaining sessions before tapering commenced on the final run-in to the Games.

This track session would comprise of 12x1000m at 3:00-3:05 pace with a one-minute jog recovery between reps. Lornah would lead out for one, her training partner lead out the other. Her warm-up and warm-down were both 40-minute gentle runs.

Gerard and I spend some time in the early morning with Brother Colm O'Connell at St Patrick's College. We walk in as he is listening to *Morning Ireland News* on RTE Radio One, which he can pick up each day for two hours. "Good morning, Gerard, I heard you were in town. You just caught me in time. I have a school meeting at 10am," he said (It was then 10.45am). "Ah," he said, "Europeans have the watches, but the Kenyans have the time."

Gerard and Brother Colm have great respect for each other and it took no time for them to pick up the strands and weave the tapestry of compared notes on the Olympic-bound athletes, who were under Brother's care, or as he puts it himself, have come through his system. The common bond between him and Gerard is that they both understand the human frailty of elite athletes and how injury can reduce the most talented people in the world to zero.

As we walked through the college grounds and classrooms, I felt I was at the heartbeat of athletics. Trees had been planted by students who were Olympians and world champions

with little hand-painted wooden signs underneath which read like an athletics roll of honour:

- Benson Koech: world junior 800m champion 1992.
- Peter Chumba: world junior 5000m and 10,000m champion 1986.
- Cornelius Chirchir: 1500m world youth 1999 and junior champion 2000, world junior record-setter.
- William Chirchir: world junior 800m champion 1998, world junior 1500m record-setter.
- Wilberforce Talel: 10,000m Commonwealth champion 2002, world cross bronze 2001.
- David Kiptoo: 800m Olympian 1996.
- Bernard Kaptingei: 800m world youth silver 2004.
- Mike Kosgei: national coach 1986-1995, 1999-2001.
- Sammy Biwott: 400m hurdles world junior silver 1992.
- Wilson Kipketer: 800m world champion 1995, 1997, 1999, world 800m record-holder, Olympic silver 2000, bronze 2004.
- Mathew Birir: 3000m steeplechase Olympic champion 1992, world junior champion 1990
- Peter Rono: 1500m Olympic champion 1988.
- Wilson K Boit: 3000m steeplechase world champion 1997, Olympic medallist 2000, world record-holder 1997.
- Ibrahim Hussein: marathon winner New York – once, Boston – three times, Honolulu – three times.

This was only the beginning. As we entered the dining hall, which feeds 700 students each day, one entire wall housed photos and lists that hung as dusty reminders of historic achievements.

Brother Colm pointed to the college's first phone, which hung in a hall. This, he laughed, caused consternation when it first came. "If it rang, the boys would

gather around it in amazement. When they got the courage to pick it up, they thought it wonderful that this machine could speak their language."

Further on, he pointed to a statue of St Patrick, which he had shipped over from Ireland. He once asked a little boy who was a new first year who he thought it was and he replied: "Ah yes, I have been told that this was the first student in the college, Brother".

Before we went to the track for Lornah's session, we first had to take a call from Irish journalist Tom Humphries, who wanted to speak to Gerard about his "Kenyan connection" for an Olympic supplement that was to appear in the *Irish Times* newspaper. We both sat in a cornfield surrounded by cows and children as the stories were relayed. The interview had to be concluded as we walked towards Lornah and Pieter, who were at the Jeep ready to go. Tom got to have a few words with Lornah. She joked in the car: "He asked me why the older Kenyan female athletes were able to stay at the top so much longer than their male counterparts. It's simple – the women are just more wise."

Gerard turned to me in the middle of the unfolding track session and said: "Keano, you have never seen anything like this before, have you? You are most probably looking at an Olympic medallist out there, and if she does not win a medal in Beijing, the work she has done here will have her in peak form for the World Half-marathon in Rio, where she will surely win her third world half title".

Gerard believes in the next four years that Lornah will become a global marathon star. He points out her forte is not track as she has a long-standing problem wearing spikes with a chronic calf problem, from which she suffers when doing track training and races. "Lornah's forte is road-running," he says. Lornah's session was going to

perfection. She smiled as she entered the last quarter. She ran with beauty and strength only comparable to the most graceful animal in full flight. Medal or not, I knew I was watching somebody unique to this world and I found myself saying a quiet "thank you" to Simba.

Friday's track session was pure speed, again, the regular 40-minute warm-up and warm-down run and drills all preparation for a controlled and clinical execution of 20x400m in 62-68 seconds per lap and 30x200m at 28-32 seconds, all with a 30-second recovery.

Minimal recovery and disciplined execution of planned lap times, points which are compromised so often in the comforts of the Western world, were key elements of all three track sessions.

Sleep was very important to Lornah. Often she would have 10-12 hours per night. She regularly began and ended each day with a 30-minute spin on a bike she has installed in her sauna.

Her recovery runs are exactly that. The day we arrived, she had returned from a recovery run of 80 minutes at eight-minute mile pace as she knew she had such a demanding schedule ahead in the days that followed.

As a back-drop to all this, it should be pointed out that Lornah had an untimely illness in May 2008 which necessitated four weeks without running when she was hospitalised with mastitis. She lost five kilograms in weight and it took another four to six weeks for her strength to return.

At the end of her track session, an excited gathering of Kenyan Paralympians, who were preparing for their own destiny, chatted with Lornah. They were training under the tutelage of the Kip Keino group of athletes. The bond was beautiful and the mutual respect was palpable.

The week was successful. All targets had been achieved, but more

importantly the physical and emotional benefits to both Lornah and Pieter were animated in the synergy that existed between all four of us. In treating the body, Gerard also cleanses the blackboard of the mind and gives ownership of the most powerful platform of healing to the athlete. This is his gift.

We spent two days among the animals on the plains of the Masai Mara and witnessed the rawness of the Wildebeest migration as thousands crossed the Mara River.

Lornah received her last treatment in Nairobi, four hours before she left for Japan for the Dutch training camp. We had a wonderful meal together with Douglas Wakiuhuri also in our company. The night was speckled with the beginnings of Olympic anticipation.

The next morning at 6am we were unexpectedly met by Douglas at the airport as we were due to depart. Saying goodbye, he handed Gerard a small packet and asked him not to open it until we arrived in Ireland.

It was opened as we waited at the luggage carousel in Cork Airport. It was a dusty, blue velvet box. Inside was Douglas's Olympic silver medal, which he had won in the 1988 Seoul Olympic marathon, his most prized possession in life.

His wish read: "Daktari Gerard, every medal has a bright shiny side, which everybody sees, but also a dark side which lies in its shadow. I want to give you this medal now to put in your clinic so that everybody who sees it may be inspired and touched by its success and so allowing it to shine brightly once again – Wakiuhuri".

■ **Postscript**
LORNAH KIPLAGAT led most of the Olympic 10,000m final before fading to finish eighth in 30:40.27. In October, though, she took gold in the IAAF World Half-marathon in Rio in 68:37



Gerard Hartmann with Brother O'Connell at St Patrick's College



Seeds of greatness are sown at St Patrick's College in Iten



Lornah Kiplagat's recoveries are done at eight-minute miling