

HIGHS AND LOWS OF TRAINING WITH THE Simba, silence and

ADRIAN MARRIOTT, 30, likes to call himself an adventurer. Next month, he is planning to make his marathon debut in Amsterdam and to prepare, he is training with some of the world's best athletes in Kenya. He is staying in a hotel that costs £2 a day and here provides a fascinating insight to a day with some of the greats of distance running

PERCHED 8000 feet up on the eastern escarpment of Kenya's Rift Valley, Nyahururu is an unlikely sporting mecca. A far cry from its more illustrious rival, Eldoret, on the opposite side of the great rift. Nyahururu is a small, dusty market town and home to some of the world's fastest long distance runners. It is here that the best of the Kikuyu runners mix with the fabled Kalenjin to produce a fearsome production line of stars under the expert eye of Jimmy 'Simba' Beuttah.

Reference to the Kalenjin as Kenya's great running tribe is a common misnomer in the West. In fact, the term Kalenjin is a fiction invented by the colonial rulers and applied to the seven Nandi-speaking tribes of the Rift Valley in an attempt to create a single identity to rival the political and economic dominance of the Kikuyu of central Kenya and the Luo from the shores of Lake Nyanza (Victoria).

I'm here preparing for the Amsterdam Marathon on October 19, subjecting myself to the tortures of the Kenyan training camp. Many non-runners ask me why?

The best analogy I can come up with is that of a semi-pro footballer being offered the chance to join Manchester United for a season. You couldn't say no! Our day begins at 5.30am. No alarm clocks needed because the town's *mata-*



John Yuda, who occasionally trains at Nyahururu, leads Kenenisa Bekele in Dublin

tus (minibus taxis) rouse themselves and honk their way through town drumming up business. At this time of year the previous afternoon's rains still lie on the ground in dark brown puddles as the runners shuffle their way through the dark back streets of town to their rendezvous at the Puma training camp for the day's first workout.

By 6am, some 50 runners have assembled and a senior athlete reads out Simba's instructions for the day. On this morning it is one hour 'easy' then hills at ten o'clock. Silence from those assembled, it is going to be a tough day.

'THE ROAD TURNS TO MUD AND A FIRST HILL BECKONS'

Moving out of town as a pack our pace is slow. Stiff limbs from yesterday's training slowly loosen up but the normally talkative Kenyans move in stoney silence – this is business now. After a couple of kilometres, the potholed tarmac road turns to thick red mud and the first hill beckons. A wannabee decides to test the established stars with a surge of pace and the race is on. So much for the 'easy' run. The weak and the wise hang back and let the alpha males slap down the young pretenders. But just as with the lions on the plains below, one day their powers will wane and a new order will be established.

An enduring pleasure of these early morning runs occurs as we turn the corner at the aptly named 'Sunset Hotel'. As we do so, on the horizon, the dawn sun illuminates the peaks of Kirinyaga (Mt Kenya) in a glow of crimson sunlight.

Some mornings it is the only prospect that can get my aching limbs out of bed. With 16km in the bank and cob-

WORLD'S BEST ON THEIR HOME PATCH

the Sunset Hotel

webs blown away, it is time to stretch and breakfast on tea, bread and bananas before heading back to bed. By 10am the equatorial sun has breathed life into Nyahururu. Muddy tracks dry out and the athletes gather three km out of town at 'the hill'. Approaching the World Championship in Paris many of the A list stars like Charles Kamathi, Sammy Kipketer, John Kibowen and Tanzanian John Yuda had been in Europe earning big bucks.

Today they're back in town en route to the pre-worlds training camp in Nairobi and will lead the training session. The hill is a steep, dirt track that takes about a minute to ascend. Today we will run up it 20 times, a tough session at the best of times but add in rarefied air at 8000ft and the effects of the early morning run, and you have a lung-bursting workout that will exhaust the legs.

The first few ascents are a cavalry charge before the pace settles and some

African sunrise: worth getting up for



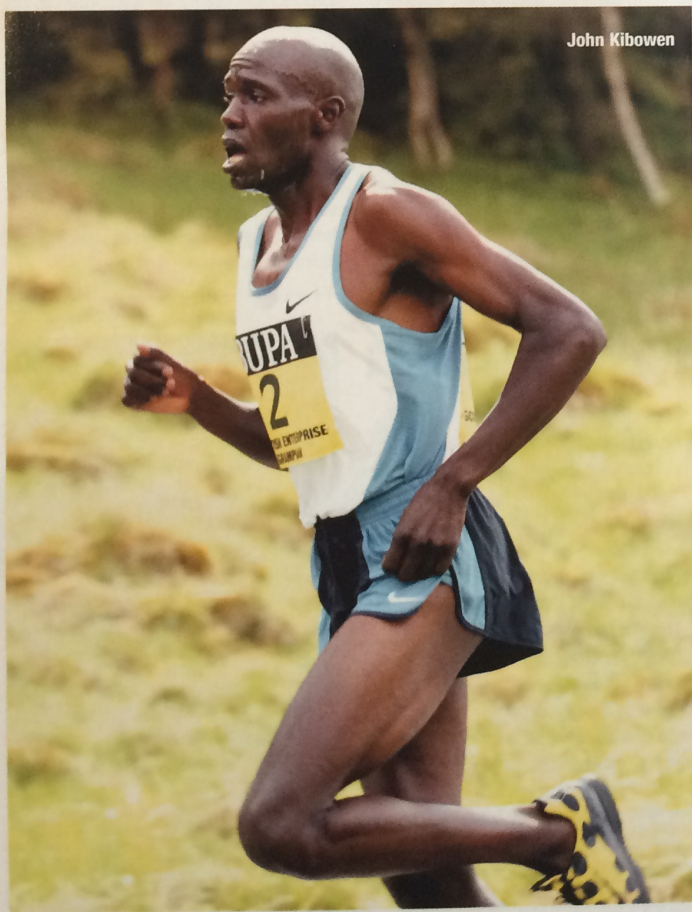
order is established among the 70 athletes taking part. By halfway the young guns from this morning are paying the price as their legs flood with lactate. Jimmy stands at the bottom of the hill. No doubts about the speed of efforts,

he is more concerned that corners are not cut at the bottom. With bodies scattered across the hillside, it's time to head home for more stretching and a good feed with the knowledge that another building block for Amsterdam is in place.

I'm happy with my form and looking forward to the race. The only certainty being that it is going to hurt. For many of the athletes here the motivation to train hard is escaping the poverty trap. One of the athletes has been racing the roads in Europe for the last three years. After the costs of each trip she has enough left over from her winnings to pay the school fees for her brothers and sisters and top up her mother's meagre income from the family *shamba* (small holding).

As the family's main breadwinner, the pressure is huge. They are a ruptured Achilles away from poverty again. Only the lucky few will make the fortune to set them up for life – and most of those who do are hopelessly ill-equipped to deal with such wealth. The result is that it is often squandered. Against this backdrop, it is perhaps surprising to be welcomed by all the athletes without reservations. The stars are on hand to pass on tips while the others are always willing to share tea or a plate of *ugali* with the *mzungu*.

But strip away the African hospitality and the veneer created by the Kenyans' enthusiasm for running and you find a professional sport at its most brutal. A daily fight for survival, fierce competition, with low rewards and a high price of failure.



John Kibowen