

Run like an Ethiopian

Many of the world's top endurance athletes come from Ethiopia. At last year's World Athletics Championships their women were particularly successful over 1500m and the marathon and had a clean sweep in the 5000m. Genzebe Dibaba was stand out performer with gold in the 1,500m and bronze in the 5,000m. *Outdoor Fitness* sent our own female runner Helen Croydon to Ethiopia to train with its countrymen and women to see what she could learn and whether she could keep up.

I'M PUFFING MY way along a dusty, rocky track, gasping for air despite running at a pace of only nine-minute miles. Ahead of me is 10km British Olympian Julia Bleasdale and alongside her is former Olympian Richard Nerurkar whilst tagging along for the ride is a 19-year old Ethiopian girl who came sixth in the World Cross Country Championships last year.

It doesn't look like the training ground for elite athletes. Along our dusty track are shacks held together with corrugated iron sheets and piles of rubbish. But then the track opens out into a stunning grassy plain with views over rolling highlands.

Everywhere I look there are groups of young Ethiopian athletes, powering over the rough ground in long, orderly single-file lines.

I am at one of the world's most popular running training grounds - the mountains of Sululta, 15 miles north of Ethiopia's capital Addis Ababa and 2,500m above sea level. I've made the journey with six other running fans to live and train like Ethiopian athletes for 10 days.

ETHIOPIAN LEGACY

Ethiopian and Kenyan runners have dominated middle and long-distance athletic events and international cross-country racing over the last fifty years. Why? No one really knows. Some say it's down to genetics. Some theorise that it's favourable skeletal muscle fibre composition. Others speculate that living and training at altitude builds oxygen efficiency that we British mortals can only dream of. Then there's the "they-want-it-more" camp. Running in Ethiopia carries the sort of celebrity kudos as being a pop star does in this country. So they simply push more.

Whatever it is, more and more western runners are travelling to the mountains of this emerging African economy to emulate their training. Athlete villages are common, where local youngsters live and train under sponsorship schemes, offered by large Ethiopian companies. In the last decade foreigner-friendly resorts have popped up with on-site gyms, massage facilities and expert coaches. They attract both elite runners like Bleasdale and recreational ones like me. I joined a ten-day all-inclusive tour organised

by the athlete management agency Run-Fast.

A WEEK AS AN ATHLETE

For seven days, our group stayed at YaYa Village, a small and friendly complex owned by none other than the great Haile Gebrselassie, a marathon world record holder several times over. He's the man that many running aficionados will put on top of their "greatest distance runner of all-time" lists. Each morning, we rolled out of bed to join the young local athletes training at 7am. These runners don't stay at YaYa Village but they do use it as a base for training. The early session is always before breakfast, so after almost dying on day one I make a note to smuggle some bananas into my room for pre-run fuelling. We run around dawn most days and at that hour the mountain air is freezing, but within an hour the sun comes up and it's boiling.

Morning sessions are the big ones - it's either a tempo run, hill session, long run (two hours), fartlek, track or a mix of those. This is usually followed by an hour in the gym, with a focus on legs, core and stretching. During the afternoons most Ethiopian athletes are nowhere to be seen. Most sleep and recover, but some earn extra money by giving massages to the guests. By 5pm they are back at the YaYa complex for their "easy run" of around 45 minutes.

As mentioned it is typical in Ethiopia for large companies to run sponsorship schemes. They usually provide food and accommodation for a select team of youngsters in an area like Sululta, pay their race entry fees, and provide up to \$50 spending money per month. Competition for such schemes is fierce. Without them most aspiring athletes would be unable to afford to train and enter races. And with no chance to race, there's no hope of them being spotted by talent scouts for big agencies. This is their only chance of "making it".

My group did as many or as little of the sessions as we chose. We ran at our own pace because trying to keep up with the locals for even five minutes would be suicide. Not that the Ethiopian runners know their paces or threshold zones and they've never heard of a satellite watch. Here, I discovered, there are four speeds - easy, medium, hard or very hard. But they all know their best 5km, 10km, half marathon and marathon times, and they will not be shy of



TIPS FROM AN ETHIOPIAN COACH

Ayene Zergaw coaches the athletes at Yaya Village. Here are his key training rules:

- Do: High load, low intensity work - lots of easy running and only two high effort sessions per week
- Do: 1 x endurance run at a medium pace
- Do: 1 x long tempo run (or hard pace)
- Do: 1 x speed session (intervals or track)
- Do: 4 x easy runs
- Do: 3 x gym sessions, with a focus on legs, core and stretching
- Do: Hills every 10 days
- Take: 1 x recovery day each week

TRAIN RUN LIKE AN ETHIOPIAN



asking yours.

Our guide for the 10 days was Hannah Walker, a 24-year-old semi-pro runner with Run-Fast. She's part Ethiopian herself. After our morning run, while the local athletes were in the gym, Hannah took us through optional running drills. Once the neatly minutes of altitude training hell was over, a huge buffet breakfast awaited with fresh fruit, porridge, eggs, pickles and traditional injera bread, made from the native teff grain (see *CF* issue 38).

In the afternoons we could go on sightseeing tours to local beauty spots such as the rocky mountains of Debre Libanos and a visit to a local orphanage was also arranged.

ALTITUDE TRAINING

The benefits of altitude training came to light around the time of the 1968 Mexico City Olympics held at 2,200m. Coaches sent their athletes to high altitude locations to acclimatise and found it made them perform better when they returned.

Oxygen is the primary source of cellular energy so when levels are low, it puts a strain on the body (hypoxia). In this oxygen-deprived state, our "clever" bodies adapt by getting more efficient at transporting and using oxygen. Key to this process is a protein called Hypoxia Inducible Factor (HIF-1), which sets off a host of reactions which help to build stronger respiratory muscles and more red blood cells.

If, like me, you've never run at altitude before, allow me to enlighten you: it's like going for a run after a night of tequila. I now know how it feels to start to run from scratch... I may as well have taken a "walk-to-5k" audio download with me because every few minutes I was walking. To a maverick like me, this was infuriating.

For the first three days I beat myself up, trying to force myself into a decent pace, only to fall off into a panting heap. Maybe I'm coming down with something? Maybe it's jet lag? Maybe I've got yellow fever? It wasn't just running. Every activity was burdened by lethargy. Even walking up the gentle hill from our complex to the local fruit stalls, felt like I should be wearing my heart rate monitor.

But by day three, I stopped fighting and accepted that this week was going to be all about gentle jogging. I turned off my Garmin, ignored my pace, enjoyed the scenery and let the altitude do whatever magic it's supposed to do. To my delight I managed a two-hour continual jog,

through beautiful forests and over rock faces.

And I'm glad I did because this run, in the region of Entoto another 500m up, turned out to be the most memorable run of my life. As I passed a local shanty village, I tripped over a rock, fell flat on my face and out my knee open (be warned, almost every Westerner there had a grazed knee from doing exactly the same). Two local children, aged nine and 11 ran to my aid and brushed the dirt off me. I smiled and gave them a little hug and that was it, except from that moment on they appointed themselves my chaperones and ran by my side, giggling and shouting, for two hours.

They were in school uniforms, one wore flip-flops, the other wellies. On and on we went, up and up, over rocks and through forests yet they didn't tire and they didn't slip. Whenever we reached a rocky bit, the girl took my hand to guide me, clearly concerned that the clumsy blonde foreigner would fall over again.

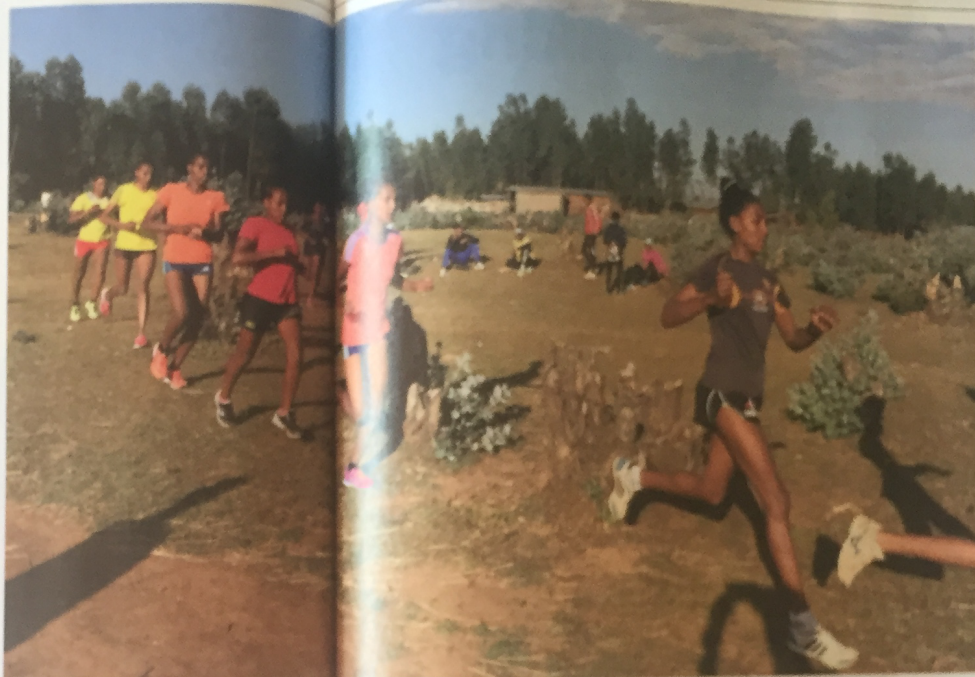
Only after two hours did they start to walk. I slowed with them and gave them my water and walked them back to where they'd parked me. They yelled something and ran off giggling, which another local told me was something about being two hours late for school!

GREAT ETHIOPIA RUN

After a week at Yalla Village, we stayed for three nights in Addis Ababa, where we rounded off our trip with The Great Ethiopian Run – the world's highest altitude 10km race. If this race isn't on your bucket list I suggest you add it. Don't expect a good time though as there are so many competitors that the first kilometre will be a walk. But at this altitude, I was perfectly happy with that. Every competitor wears a green branded T-shirt, creating the visual spectacle of green snaking streets, for which the race is known.

So did my week as an athlete in Ethiopia transform me? I did a track session three days after returning home and my lap times were 2 seconds quicker. Whether this was down to the benefits of altitude or the positivity of a holiday is up for debate. But I do now add teff flour to my porridge and I've tried to emulate the Ethiopian enthusiasm for the gym at the end of a long run. Honest, I have.

■ Package by Run-Fast-Tours.net, priced from £1,450 including flights



ETHIOPIAN TRAINING DIARIES

CASE STUDY 1

DAGMAWIT KIBRU, 18, Female

Sponsor: Federal Police Sports Club

Key achievements: Junior Cross Country World Championships, Suiyang, China 6th, Junior Ethiopian Cross-Country Championships 2015 2nd

Goal: 5000m track, cross-country, half-marathon

WEEKLY TRAINING PLAN

Monday

Morning: 3hr 20min run at medium pace

Evening: 40min easy run

Tuesday

Morning: Intervals – 7min x 6 very hard, 60sec rest, 2hrs gym

Evening: 40min easy run

Wednesday

Morning: 3hr 20min at hard pace

Evening: 50min easy run

Thursday

Morning: Hills – 200m x 15, 300m x 5

Evening: 3hr easy run

Friday

Morning: 50min at hard pace, 3hr gym

Evening: 40min easy run

Saturday

Morning: Track – 3km x 6, 400m x 1, 300m x 1, 250m x 3, 3hr gym

Evening: 40min easy run

Sunday rest

CASE STUDY 2

CHALA DERESA, 19, Male

Key achievements: Local races 5k, 3km, 10k, 20min, 15k, 40min
Goal: 10km track, half-marathon, marathon

WEEKLY TRAINING PLAN

Monday

Morning: Hills – 2hr mixed intervals, 2hr gym

Evening: 40min easy run

Tuesday

Morning: 80min medium pace on the rocky trails of Entoto

Evening: 40min easy run

Wednesday

Morning: 90min hard pace, 1 hour gym

Evening: 40min easy run

Thursday

Morning: 80min medium pace through forest, 1 hour gym

Evening: 40min easy run

Friday

Morning: 20km hard pace, 3hr gym

Evening: 40min easy run

Saturday

90min easy run

Sunday rest