

Endurance running in Europe: Decline and fall?

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By Pat Butcher

It is fashionable to blame the rise of African runners for the decline of endurance running in Europe but, in fact, there are a number of reasons for the fall off that are more local in nature. Drawing on personal experience and conversations with several successful coaches, the author identifies possibilities from both the British and European perspectives. The modern lifestyle of young Europeans, a decline in schools athletics, changes in the training of grass roots athletes following the running boom of the 1980s and a reduction in the exchange of ideas between coaches are among the ideas explored. Turning to ways to address the situation, he examines the approach of rising star Mohammed (Mo) Farah (GBR) and examples of best practice from the USA, where a resurgence in the level of performance has included medals in both men's and women's marathons at the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens.

ABSTRACT

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tance events among Europeans; and it is worth rehearsing those reasons. If we don't understand how and why a decline has taken place, how can we fix it? And once we do understand, what options do national federations and others who are interested have to reverse the current trend?

Looking for reasons

The situation in Britain is best known to this writer, but Luciano Gigliotti – coach to 2004 Olympic marathon champion, Stefano Baldini of Italy – agrees that the symptoms are similar in countries throughout Europe. Gigliotti says change in youngsters' 'lifestyle' is the principal reason. "Our guys are sedentary nowadays," says Gigliotti, "they have computers, video games, play station, cell phones, cars. They do not want to work hard. I talk to many coaches around Europe about this, for example, Dieter Baumann (1992 Olympic 5000m champion) says it is the same in Germany".

It is fashionable to blame the rise of the African runners, particularly Kenyans and Ethiopians, and to a lesser extent Moroccans (and lately, Ugandans, Tanzanians and Eritreans), for the decline of endurance running in Europe. But there are many reasons for the fall of both in results and interest in middle- and long-dis-

Other important factors that have to be taken into consideration include a diminished interest in schools athletics, in part provoked by the selling-off of sports fields in the UK under the Thatcher government; the decline of the club system and the massive increase in leisure options, most importantly activities that do not require the extremely hard work entailed in being even a good runner, let alone an elite performer.

Interestingly, one of the contradictions of the current situation is the rise of fun-running in first-world nations. One would think that more runners equals more competition equals better performance. In fact, the fun running movement has adversely affected performance levels in elite running. Alan Storey, the UK High Performance Manager for Endurance Events, points out that nowadays "the average age of finishers in road races is over 40". The implication is obvious, these are not people who are ever going to be elite runners. Moreover, the influx of new (fun) runners in the early 1980s masked for a long time a fall-off in the number of youngsters serious about the sport and willing to train hard enough to be elite performers. "Numbers in road races didn't drop," says Storey, "so alarm bells didn't ring".

My own experience in this domain is salutary. Thirty-five years ago, I was just one of hundreds, if not thousands, of club runners between the ages of 18 and 30 (the catchment for elite performers) in the UK, who trained every night of the week, while holding a full-time job. It was not unusual for us to run 20km a day, sometimes more. Most of us were not international athletes, yet we trained as if we were. Nowadays, not only are there far fewer runners in British clubs but I get the impression that even the best of those do not work anywhere near as hard as we did. Added to which, the older members and officials in clubs are people who joined as fun-runners (or even started fun-running clubs!). How can these people encourage and coach potential elite runners, if they have no idea what is has been like to train hard themselves?

This is not to say that a good coach has to have been a good runner, far from it. But the prevailing atmosphere is that running is for fun only and the hard part can be left out. That will rarely, if ever, produce an elite performer who can even hope to compete against Africans, who are not just hungry for success, they might have been literally hungry. Achieving top performances for them might be a matter of life or death for some members of their family.

The rise of the Africans happened at more or less the same time as the decline in interest in Europe, i.e. the early 1980s. Government restrictions on travel in both Kenya and Ethiopia were relaxed, probably due to a recognition that, in a new professional athletics world, runners were some of the best natural resources that those countries had, and could bring back much needed foreign currency.

And that is exactly what has happened. Gigliotti says, "Twenty years ago, there were maybe ten or twelve good African runners. Now, there are hundreds and most come to Europe. It is impossible for an Italian to finish in the top ten in any (open) road race in Italy".

Gigliotti makes the additional point that the recent vogue for Gulf nations to 'buy' Kenyans and Moroccans for their teams means that competition at world and Olympic level is even harder. And, as Storey says, "It's a hard sell (to youngsters). When the best British runner is over a minute behind the Africans at 10,000m, and no Brit can win an Olympic medal, how can you convince someone to dedicate ten years of their life to training hard?"

The situation is worse in men's running, and that has something to do with the (second class citizen) role of African women in their own societies. Storey says, "Africans are not nearly as successful in women's endurance, there is nowhere near the domination in the women's events as there is in the men's events. Fortunately, in Britain

we've been able to retain the role models in women's distance running that we have lost among the men. It's been so long since we've had successful male athlete in the distances; you ask a lad in the street, he wouldn't be able to name one. But, Paula (Radcliffe) is someone to aspire to, as was Kelly (Holmes), even Jo (Pavey)".

There is yet another important factor - the role of the media. The demise of running in Europe has been accompanied by a massive marketing exercise by Premiership football inside and outside the United Kingdom, and the concurrent rise in interest in the Champions' League. This is not confined to Europe, incidentally. As someone who travels extensively, I can see English and European matches almost every evening in virtually any part of the world, including Africa, North and South America, and Asia. Young, talented male athletes are more likely to be attracted by the attention (and money) of football than a sport that does not touch them through their TV set, computer screen or newspaper.

A combination of all of the above factors has contributed to a larger or smaller extent in the fall-off in elite endurance running in Europe. But that is not the end of it. Recently Colin Jackson, not of course a distance runner, but a former world record holder in the 110m hurdles, has identified another possible contributory factor: coaching.

"I think everything changed in athletics when they got rid of the summer schools for coaches (in the UK) around 1996-97," he says. "It used to be that coaches from around the world would come to us. When we stopped these schools, our coaches stopped learning from the rest of the world. And that's exactly when British athletics started to fall apart. We sat on the fact that we had great coaches, we became complacent and stopped looking out for new techniques".

Perhaps this can be easily rectified, by reintroducing those 'summer schools'. But getting results takes much longer. As Storey

says, "There's no quick fix, it's going to take somewhere between five and ten years to reverse the trend. It may even get worse before it gets better".

Hope on the European horizon?

At an individual level, the British international runner, Mohammed (Mo) Farah has shown his contemporaries the way to face up and address the situation. Farah, now 23, and current European cross country champion, was an excellent junior runner, with five English Schools titles, both in track and cross country to his credit. But like many talented youngsters, he found the transition to senior ranks, with its attendant distractions, very difficult. "I was living the student life, going to lots of clubs at night," says Farah. "I had lots of mates outside running. Inside running, I was known as a bit of a 'party animal'."

After a series of poor performances, Farah accepted an offer from his management to go and live in a house with a group of elite Kenyans who train in London. "It was amazing," recalls Farah, describing a collection of athletes including Olympic and world champions. "But they're humble people, they don't pretend to be anything good. Living with them, learning from them, that's what did it (for me). It was a big shock but I learned that athletes live differently from normal people - they have to eat, sleep, train and rest. At the start, the Kenyan's weren't sure of me. Now they see me as one of them, because I work as hard as them. They say I run like a Kenyan.

I also learned a lot when I went out to Australia before the Commonwealth Games (early 2006), and trained with Craig Mottram (world 5000m bronze medallist). Just seeing what he does blew my mind. I said to myself, 'I don't train as hard as this. How can I compete against these guys?' If I want to be as good as him, I've got to do this and more".

Within a year, Farah brought his 5000m best down to 13.09, won silver in the Euro-

pean Athletics Championships in Göteborg, beat middle distance specialist Ivan Heshko in a mile, won the Dunquerque Cross against one of his Kenyan friends Micah Kogo, the fastest 10,000m man of 2006, and took the men's title at the SPAR European Cross Country Championships. Then after a steady start, earlier this year he finished 11th in the torrid heat of the World Cross in Mombassa.

Farah is also part of wider, institutional effort to resurrect elite distance running in Britain. UK Athletics has combined with the London Marathon and St Mary's College in west London to dedicate a house near the college where potential elite athletes can live and train, which Farah is now using as his base.

St Mary's is one of three centres – the others are Loughborough University, where Sebastian Coe studied and developed; and Birmingham University – designated as High Performance Centres. Storey explains, "UKA is trying with the High Performance Centres to get as many athletes training with good coaches as possible, to get the highest percentage of youngsters through the system, and provide good training environments. St Mary's, Loughborough and Birmingham are the principal centres, and there are other smaller groups around the country. We need more, we need the widest spread of academic opportunities, so more people can go there.

"Athletes can train right out of the door, with top-class medical facilities on hand. The idea is we move coaches to these centres, not athletes. The athletes don't need to be students, incidentally. We are encouraging as many people to go to the High Performance centres as possible. But it'll take time to turn things around, between six and ten years".

Spain has had such a centre for decades: the national sports institute, INEF, which is located in Madrid. Young athletes with potential are invited there as soon as they show promise. This is undoubtedly one of the reasons that Spanish athletes, as Gigliotti

underlines, have 'carried the flag' for Europe in long distance in recent years.

It helps that Madrid is on Spain's central plateau, at close to 1000m altitude, and, of course, training at much higher altitudes – locations in Kenya and Ethiopia range from 1500m to well over 3000m above sea-level – is indispensable for success at long distance running.

It is no coincidence that Farah, Radcliffe and Pavey, Britain's most successful distance runners, regularly spend time training at altitude. Indeed, Radcliffe, who has successive European gold medals at 10,000m and the marathon (as well as the marathon world record) has long owned a house at the French high-altitude training venue at Font Romeu in the Pyrennees. Following that example, UK Athletics is instituting a regular high-altitude training camp for British athletes in South Africa, which is due to begin in winter 2007.

Searching further afield

One example that Europe nations, either individually or collectively might fruitfully study is that of the America. Ten years ago, the USA was in a similar situation, with declining numbers of elite long distance runners. But such was the turnaround that in the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens the USA had a full complement of competitors – three men and three women – in every event, from 800m to the marathon. There were as many US finalists in the 10,000m races as the whole of Europe together, and US runners won two medals in the marathons. By the standards of all but the East African nations, this was a huge success.

Add to which, Ryan Hall went under the hour for the half-marathon earlier this year then had his debut marathon in London 2007 in just over 2:08. Even better, the annual 10,000m at Stanford University in California last May produced a race with no fewer than six American runners under 28 minutes! There were four more under 28:10.

With four others who did not compete that evening also under 28 minutes it makes for a very healthy picture for US distance running, one that any European nation, even Spain, should envy. We can even compare the current situation in the USA to all of Europe, where our equivalent of the Stanford race, the European Cup 10,000m in Ferrara, Italy, last June had no finisher under 28 minutes and just 6 under 29:00.

The success of the USA in track and field athletics in general – and no nation is better supplied with sprinters, jumpers and hurdlers – is due largely the burgeoning university/college system, and the competition, both inside the individual colleges, and the inter-varsity matches and championships. The system is a veritable hot house of talent, as Colin Jackson recognises.

“It’s all about the collegiate system in the States (USA). It costs money to go to university, but if you get a sporting scholarship you go for free - that is a huge motivating factor for any youngster, because without an education you’re not getting a good job in America. If you’ve got any sporting talent you’ll use it to the max[imum]. They’ve got millions of people going through a system like that and they only need to provide a team of 200. It gives kids a purpose. You ask a 16-year-old in Britain why they are doing sport and they say: ‘I don’t know.’ In America it’s: ‘If I don’t keep up my studies and perform someone else will take my place’.”

Jim Harvey, a former British club member has been living and coaching in the USA at Providence, Rhode Island, for over 20 years. His most successful athlete has been Mark Carroll of Ireland, multiple national record holder and a former European indoor 3000m champion. Harvey attributes the resurgence in US distance running to a reintroduction of high volume training by college coaches after decades of concentrating on shorter workouts.

“The pendulum has swung back to greater mileage (kilometres) combined with higher

volume in individual workouts. Typical and most successful examples of this would be University of Colorado under coach Mark Wetmore (Adam Goucher, the Torres brothers, Dathan Ritzenheim), and University of Wisconsin coach Jerry Schumacher (Matt Tegenkamp). One of the other major influences in the US revival has been former Stanford coach Vin Lannana, who has just taken over at the University of Oregon (brought in by Nike money).”

In the USA, the problem for athletes has always been survival post-university. When athletics was amateur, athletes often retired in their early twenties. Perhaps as a cause and perhaps as a result, a club system, as recognised in western Europe, hardly existed. Even in the current professional era, such a system has not fully developed. But in the last five years, several high-altitude training camps have been set up, with the help of shoe/apparel companies. One of these camps, at Mammoth Lakes, California, was the centre for the two marathon medallists in Athens – Meb Keflizighi, silver in the men’s, and Deena Kastor, bronze in the women’s.

Harvey also points to another (individual) initiative. “The Hanson Brothers group in Michigan have an interesting concept. They take distance runners, who are not good enough to get a shoe contract, and nurture them in a team, to give them time to develop. They provide food and housing, and give them part-time jobs in their sporting goods retail business”.

Harvey ends by saying, “In 2006, the US produced 17 sub-3.40 1500m runners, 17 sub-8.40 steeplechasers, and in the 5000m three runners under 13.10, seven under 13.20, and 20 under 13.40. This kind of depth provides a good platform for athletes to make a breakthrough to international level”.

The systems that have created this depth should provide interesting reading for coaches and federations throughout Europe looking to buck the trend we currently face.