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Better than Gold

By: Steve Lawrence

It was difficult for me to cheer for Kip Keino in 1968, when he was going for Olympic gold in Mexico City. Jim Ryun, the American running icon, was chasing that same medal in the 1500 meter race, and let's face it - most Americans want to see the red, white and blue atop the medal stand. Keino prevailed, winning the first of his two Olympic golds (the second came in Munich four years later), and was well on his way to worldwide fame and acclaim.

Twenty-eight years later, I met Kip Keino here in Ithaca, and it was difficult not to cheer for him. The man is regarded as a hero in his home country - the father of Kenyan long-distance running supremacy - and he could have used that immense, worldwide fame to shape his life in any way he chose. So what did this humble, unassuming two-time Olympic gold medal winner do? He set about the task of setting up orphanages, developing educational opportunities and advocating for the advancement of sustainable agriculture in Africa. He has housed, educated, trained and fed those in need throughout his adult life; and along the way, he shared the 1987 Sports Illustrated Sportsman of the Year award for his efforts. In 1996, Keino was inducted into the World Sports Humanitarian Hall of Fame.



Three years ago, Kevin and Michelle Thompson of Ithaca were visiting Kenya, and Kevin (the founder of the Ithaca United Track Club) made it a point to visit Keino, one of his lifelong heroes. The Thompsons embraced Keino's humanitarian mission, and Michelle's brother, T. Chad Montgomery, recently signed on to be Keino's agent in the U.S. In an effort to get a broader understanding of Keino's work, "Chad" spent 7 weeks in Kenya. Upon his recent return, he told me, "I am definitely a changed person." He added, "When I accepted the Directorship of the Kip Keino Foundation, I wanted to take a look at its different entities, like the hospitals and the high school that is under construction. I saw many of the needs and opportunities, and I'm very proud to showcase, and proud to enhance, these efforts." I asked Chad - half jokingly - if saving the world was the ultimate goal, and he offered, "We just want to try to do our part. If you can help a few kids, help a few athletes and help a few farmers, maybe you can make a difference."

Montgomery spoke proudly of the multi-dimensional vision of the Foundation. "We're creating jobs, supporting the sustainable agriculture component, and teaching farmers some new techniques to better feed their families," he said. Chad's Directorship is, at this point "a pro bono effort," but all involved parties are hoping the Foundation's resources will enable him to continue.

The experience has been "incredibly humbling," for Montgomery, and he says, "When you're around someone like Kip, and the Olympic persona fades away, and it's just friends having tea together, it's amazing. You hear him speak about taking responsibility, about leaving something behind in this life. You see Kip load 22 farm workers into the back of his pickup and drive them to their jobs, and you realize that what you want and what you need are sometimes two very different things."

On Saturday and Sunday, May 11 and 12, Ithacans will have an opportunity to take part in this grand effort. On Saturday, The Kip Keino High Performance Training Center and Borg Warner health and Fitness Expo will be held at the Hilton Garden Inn from 11 am to 4 pm.

On Sunday, The Kip Keino Fun and Fitness Mile will be held at the Ithaca High track. Both events will feature appearances by elite runners (Anthony Famigletti - a 3:55 miler and 2004 Olympian and Carrie Tollefson 5-time NCAA champ and 2004 Olympian), both of whom will be available for photos and autographs. Kip Keino will be there as well, and will happily sign and pose. Tickets for the Expo are \$5 and the registration fee for the race is \$25. The race will feature several categories (Open, Masters, runners with disabilities, and the Elites). For more information on this great event, visit www.kipkeinostraining.org, or email raceinfo@kipfound.org.

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