



*Mike Boit, the former Olympic 1500 metres bronze medal winner, takes a critical view of system that persuades young Kenyan athletes to interrupt their schooling and leave their homes in the pursuit of fame and glory*

# Power in the hands of the agents

By Per Vinther

A few Kenyan athletes have become millionaires through their success in big money meetings in Europe and the USA. However, it is only the best that make it this far. For each runner that makes it to the top, plenty more are living extremely poor conditions after being brought over to the west by cash-hungry agents. It is not unknown for 10 to 15 hopeful athletes to share a single apartment, sleeping on mattresses on the floor. Most will never become rich, and many will simply be abandoned to their own fate.

The story of this unpleasant "trade" in athletes was relayed to *Play the Game* by Elias Makori, Sports Editor of Nairobi's *Daily Nation*

newspaper and chairman of the Kenyan sports journalists represented at the conference. Makori is one of the few journalists to have highlighted the problem in Kenya.

»In too many cases it is the western agents who ruin the lives of the young runners,« said Makori, »They exploit them for every dollar and deutschmark they can get. Many of the agents who come to Kenya and hand pick the young runners are looking to make some fast money - nothing more. They are not the slightest bit interested in the athletes' lives or background.«

In a country with a population of 25 million, the majority of whom earn less than one dollar per day, Makori stressed that it can be highly tempting for both young athletes and their

families to sign a contract they cannot understand. He mentioned typical cases in which the unscrupulous agent enters Kenya under cover, rounds up the best runners in a rural area, then simply leaves the country with them.

## From world record holder to alcoholic

»Of course, a few runners do get rich,« he continued. »These stories spread like wildfire in Kenya. On the other hand, little is known about the much more common instances where runners arrive home broken and distraught with their dreams shattered. Many of these runners refuse to speak to the media, and journalists are reluctant to investigate such cases.«

One example that has been well publicised is that of the former world 10,000-metre record holder Richard Chelimo. After being pressed by his agent into running too many races, often while carrying injuries, he received very little of his prize money and returned home virtually penniless and an alcoholic.

Makori adds that not all agents act in this manner - some have a good reputation in Kenyan sports circles.

Another problem highlighted by Elias Makori is the fact that many western agents on the hunt for new talent have strong links with the Kenyan Athletics Association. Mike Boit, former Olympic bronze medal winner and Head of Physical Education at Kenyatta University was among the audience and commented:

»This exploitation is reprehensible, but it also presents a dilemma. Many parents are willing to send their children away while they are still far too young, in the hope that they can make all the family rich. But in all too many cases they do not think enough about the situation. All the time we are trying to explain to parents that their children should go to school first, and learn some skills to use in life. But many simply do not listen.« ♦

# Broad ranging solution

In Ghana, sport was instrumental in the reconciliation of two warring tribes after a violent orgy of burning, and looting. The was one of the stories related to *Play the Game* by Usman Yakubu, who is a co-ordinator of a number of local sports and cultural projects in his native Ghana in association with - among others - the International Sport and Culture Association.

»The best way of introducing sports activities to the population as a whole is to offer a broad range of sports,« he said. »We must inform our

political leaders that they do not need to attend the Olympics with delegates and administrators. This money could instead be used much more wisely for the benefit of the entire population instead of an elite few. It could be used at local level for sport in a very simple framework.«

Terry Monnington, Director of Physical Sport and Education at the University of Warwick, England, is also a strong advocate of the concept of "sport for all" as a framework for development in Africa.

»For many politicians, including Africans, sporting success is very important and prestigious. This is difficult to achieve for most African nations because they often have many other serious problems deal with. Many cannot even provide "bread for all" and must therefore work with realistic priorities. Sport has an unbelievably important role to play in daily life - but we should not be blind to all the facts.«

Former top Kenyan athlete Mike Boit is convinced that sport has a naturally important role to play in the development of society. »Sport creates a sense of solidarity,« he says. »All the negative attitudes and wickedness in Africa can be improved by sport, because it teaches our children character and manners.« pv

