In 1956, five years after the foundation of the Kenyan Athletics Federation (K.A.A.A.), Kenyan athletes participated for the first time at the Olympic Games. Twelve years later, in Mexico City, Kenya celebrated its first Olympic Champion when Naftali Temu won the 10,000m. In the same Games Kipchoge Keino, today the chairman of the National Olympic Committee and a member of the International Olympic Committee, won his first of two gold medals.

Although the Olympic boycotts of 1976 and 1980 were a major setback for Kenyan sport, the country's athletes now dominate all the running events for men from 800m to the marathon. In the year 2005, there were 66 Kenyans among the first 100 in the world, in the half-marathon but only ten Ethiopians. Since 1960, Ethiopians have won 31 Olympic medals, Kenyans have won 54.

In this book, it is shown how Kenya became the world’s No. 1 running nation within a generation. The reader gets to know the people who took part in waking up this sleeping giant and the ones who are still involved. The training programmes of former and current stars are presented. While Kip Keino, who was at the top almost 40 years ago, had to rely on his memories, because nobody kept a diary at the time he was a champion, the programmes of runners such as Yobes Ondieki, Daniel Komen, Tegla Lourope, Paul Tergat or Saif Saaed Shaheen, a.k.a. Stephen Cherono, are taken from the authentic transcrips of their training diaries.

But the topic of this book is not just the Kenyan runners’ training, it also covers their socio-cultural background as well as the newest scientific findings about the physiological and anthropometric advantages they have over European and American athletes.
Especially important in this context are the findings of a group of researchers led by Bengt Saltin at the Muscle Research Center in Copenhagen, which are presented and discussed in Part 1 of the book, “Facts and Figures.”

Comparisons of lactate levels have suggested to this research group that Kenyan runners squeeze about 10 percent more mileage than Europeans from the same oxygen intake.

Just as more aerodynamic cars get better gas mileage, the Kenyans’ physiology helps explain their fuel efficiency. Kenyan runners possess birdlike legs, which are thin and long. Compared with Danes, the thinner calves of Kenyans have, on average, 400 grams or 12 percent less flesh in each lower leg. This explains why the Kenyan runners’ running economy was found to be 10 percent better than that of Danish runners. Apart from this fact, the Kenyans have relatively longer legs (5 percent), which is probably a result of the nomadic life these people and generations of living at high altitude. To be able to move over great distances with low energy expenditure has been essential for survival.

Thinner legs mean fewer muscles and this means less oxygen for the muscles. The farther a weight is from the centre of gravity, the more energy it takes to move it. Fifty grams added to the ankle will increase oxygen consumption by 1 percent. For the Kenyan runners with their light limbs that translates into an 8 percent energy savings to run a kilometer. In other words, Kenyans are more efficient because it takes them less energy to swing their limbs.

However, none of the data from the various studies negate the importance of cultural habits and training. The Kenyans train harder and more than other runners – also their bodies can bear more than those of most of the athletes in the Western world. Paul Tergat, for example, did not have an injury for twelve years, and he is not an exception.

Further reasons for the superiority of the Kenyan runners are put forward by Mike Kosgei, national coach from 1985-1995 and from 2001-2004, in Part 2 of the book (“The men who made Kenyans run”). Kosgei says that the main difference between athletes from Europe and the USA and the ones from Kenya is that in the Western world people cannot survive without work. In Kenya, on the other hand, most of the athletes have a lot of time. They can train three times a day, maybe six hours altogether. And they are hungry in the real sense of the word. For Europeans and Americans running is a serious matter, almost like work. Africans start running, mostly slowly, and then they accelerate. For them, it is a kind of a game. They enjoy their training and challenge each other. After having a bad workout, says Kosgei, a European might think about it for many days. It can really affect him, and he might lose days of good training. A Kenyan, on the other hand, will forget about such a bad session immediately. Kenyans have transferred this philosophy to the track. When their opponent breaks a world record, they will say, okay, tomorrow it is my turn. A European would in such a case tend to give up. For Africans, on the other hand, the challenge is in their blood.

Although very interesting, the possible explanations of the Kenyan’s success in running do not form the core of the book, whose greatest part deals with the coaches responsible for the Kenyans’ running success and with the training of Kenyan runners. The training plans presented in Part 3 (“How they trained in the early days and how they train now”) are very detailed and therefore extremely informative for both coaches and runners.

Part 4 of the book is a statistical overview of Kenya’s medal winners, Kenyan World Record holders, Kenya compared with Ethiopia, and Africa’s best performers from 1965 to 2005.

To sum it up, for readers who are interested in background and detailed training information about Kenyan runners, this book by the journalist Jürg Wirz, who has been based in Eldoret, Kenya, since 1999, is very enlightening reading and can be thoroughly recommended.

Reviewed by Jürgen Schiffer