



# The Ethiopian Women's Edge

By Margaret Webb

IT'S 6:30 A.M., and I'm wedged beside two wiry male runners in the backseat of a new Suzuki SUV, driving towards the outskirts of Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia. The four-lane highway, leading out of the city of 3.5 million, is already snarled with vehicles belching exhaust. Tin-shack slums line the highway. Untethered cattle and goats walk along the shoulder, oblivious to the traffic just centimetres away. The driver honks at slower vehicles to let him pass as well as pedestrians trying to cross the highway. Then he veers to miss a car that has flipped over onto its roof to sit, seemingly abandoned, in the outside lane. We don't stop. Instead, the driver leans half way around to talk to me in the back seat.

"Do you know who this is?" he asks, jamming a thumb towards the person beside him. The figure is so tiny, I can't see anything but the passenger seat. I don't know who the driver is either.



About 15 minutes earlier, Haji Adilo, head coach for Elite Sports Management International's (ESMI) stable of Ethiopian distance runners, had called to tell me one of his runners would pick me up to take me to that morning's workout. I reached the hotel lobby just as security was scanning the driver for weapons, standard practice here for anyone (except white tourists) entering hotels, banks and upscale shops. Even if you're a professional runner, you're frisked, in a country where running is the only sport that matters.

Now the driver is thrusting a picture into my hands. It's a female runner, arms raised triumphantly. "World record holder," he pronounces proudly.

The tiny figure beside him peeks around the seat and flashes me a shy smile. It's Dire Tune, winner of the 2008 Boston Marathon, and, as I would learn later, also married to the driver, Kelil Aman, a middling half-marathoner. Her world record is for running 18.517K in one hour, an obscure event anywhere else, but here it has put her name alongside one of the greatest distance runners of all time, Ethiopia's Haile Gebrselassie, who holds the men's one-hour record, among his 15 world records and two Olympic gold medals.

There is so much I want to ask her. While men may want to run like a Kenyan, women marathoners would do better to look to the Ethiopians for inspiration and that's why I've come here – to explore their running culture and find out why the Ethiopians are gaining an edge when they share so much in common with the Kenyans. In 2009, Ethiopian women dominated the top 10 times in the marathon and half-marathon. In 2010, six of the top 10 women marathoners in the world were Ethiopian, while



just two were Kenyan. In the half-marathon that year, five Ethiopian women were among the world's fastest, compared to four Kenyans. The Kenyans bounced back in 2011, setting the stage for a fierce battle at the London Olympics. Tune wants nothing less than to win that marathon and maybe set a world record while she's at it. And she's not even Ethiopia's best female marathoner, yet.

At our first meeting, Tune and I just grin blankly at each other. She knows only a few words of English and I don't know a word of Amharic, Ethiopia's official language. Tune is also fluent in Oromo, spoken in the Arsi region – where Tune grew up – which borders on northern Kenya, the territory that produces so many of the great Ethiopian and Kenyan runners.

## COACH HAJI'S GIRLS

ABOUT 60 RUNNERS have gathered around Adilo by the time we arrive. Adilo is raving about the weather. "It's perfect for running," he says. "It's like this the whole year."

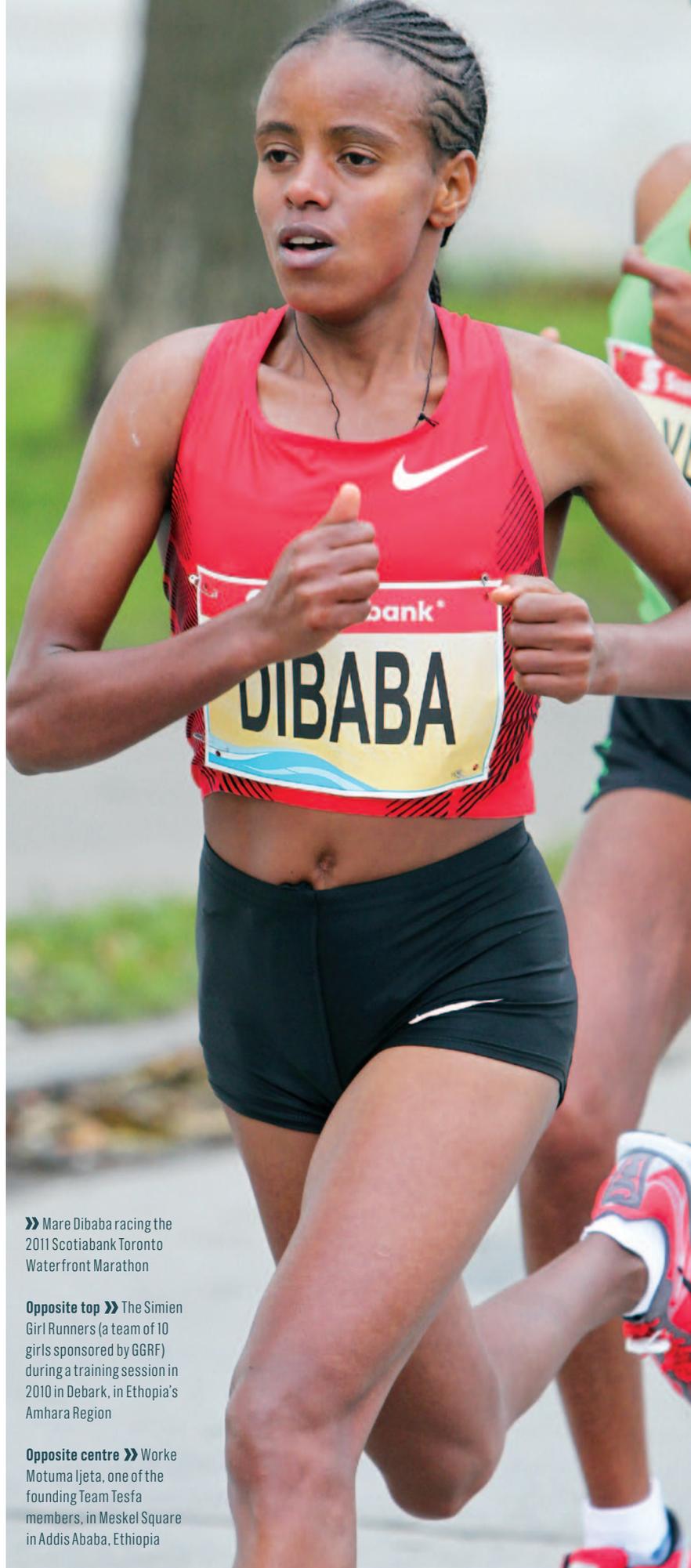
In many ways, Addis Ababa is a runner's paradise. Situated just north of the equator at 2,300 m above sea level, it's the third highest capital in the world. The elevation not only provides aerobic benefits, it also makes for crisp nights that keep mornings cool and afternoons pleasant – perfect for long morning runs and lighter afternoon sessions, the staple schedule of Adilo's runners.

What's not ideal are the horrendous traffic and terrible emission standards that clog the city with pollution. Adilo holds group workouts three or four mornings a week at locations outside the city – the Entoto Mountains for hills, the Suluta plains for speed work – but runners have to travel up to an hour to get to these sessions. Other times, runners train together in Addis Ababa, but there are only three tracks in the entire city. Adilo dreams of building a facility where international athletes and running tourists can train with his stars. He says he could lower my personal best of 3:49 to three hours in just three months – even though I'm 49 and he has yet to see me run.

The former 2:12 marathoner, who grew up in the same village as Gebrselassie, emerged as a top coach after he retired from competition in 2003. Ten of the country's top 12 women marathoners train with him. ESMI gave him a car, a U.S.-dollar salary and a bus to transport his runners.

He says his top female stars – with a win at one of the big five marathons, appearance fees and sponsorship – can make about \$300,000 a year, which converts to about 5.1 million Ethiopian birr. Even scraping up prize money from smaller races can provide a decent living here, while elite women can live like millionaires, though they mostly don't. "Runners live modestly," says Adilo. They send money to support their families and help other runners trying to make it big. "We're in it together," says Adilo. "In North America, people pay for themselves. Here, the richest person pays for everything. We share meals, we share incomes. Here, we don't have much but everyone is happy. In North America, no one seems happy."

Adilo looks like he's having the time of his life this morning, peppering his instructions with jokes that crack the runners up. The men, more comfortable showing each other affection than women, drape their arms over each other's shoulders and even hold hands. The women, a smaller group, are clumped together, more subdued and serious. And then, after only a few words from Adilo, the women suddenly take off, following their male pacers on a "light" workout to recover from a weekend race: four times



» Mare Dibaba racing the 2011 Scotiabank Toronto Waterfront Marathon

Opposite top » The Simien Girl Runners (a team of 10 girls sponsored by GGRF) during a training session in 2010 in Debarq, in Ethiopia's Amhara Region

Opposite centre » Worke Motuma Ijeta, one of the founding Team Tesfa members, in Meskel Square in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia



**Left** » Dinknesh Mekash Tefera, in her first race outside Ethiopia, wins the 2010 Baxters Loch Ness Marathon, Scotland, in a new course record.

**Centre** » Girls race in a competition organized to distribute running shoes donated through the Girls Gotta Run Foundation in 2011 in Debarq, Amhara Region.

**Bottom** » Dire Tune after winning the 2008 Boston Marathon



around a 5K dirt loop at a 4:23-per-kilometre pace that will get faster with every lap.

Adilo talks to the men for another five minutes, then the men are off, with Adilo yelling “Kenyan, Kenyan” at the lead runner, in an attempt to slow the pace. (Ethiopians joke that Kenyans like to lead the race while Ethiopians like to lead at the finish.) As the lead men go by, faster than the assigned pace, Adilo shrugs disapprovingly. His female runners listen better, he says. “Women accept coaching faster.”

We take up a spot by the road to watch along with Yerefu Berhanu, an injured marathoner who’s helping Adilo. Berhanu says Ethiopian women are gaining an edge over the Kenyans because men here are more supportive of women in training, echoing a sentiment expressed by ESMI manager Hussein Makke. In Kenyan running camps, the women, after a hard day’s training, may be stuck doing laundry and cooking for their male peers. “You’ll see,” Makke says. “The Ethiopian women are very independent.”

Adilo has a more pragmatic take on why Ethiopian women are pulling ahead: Inspired by stars such as Tune, young girls see running as their ticket out of grinding poverty and are flocking to the sport, deepening the talent base. “In 1996, people saw the women runners getting strong. So the question became, why not run? If you have a plan and some talent, everything is possible.”

After decades of losing to the Kenyans in the distance events, Ethiopian runners, particularly the women, have emerged as world powers in the past 15 years. The motivation to stay on top, and ahead of their rivals, seems stronger than ever. Ethiopia also has a logistical advantage with its running base located near the capital, as opposed to Kenya’s top training centres, which are more remote.

## GIRLS SEE RUNNING AS BEST OPTION

IN ADDIS ABABA, runners hoping to become professionals train in Meskel Square, an outdoor amphitheatre with wide, uneven dirt seating rising up about 50 levels. The morning I ran to the square, six teenaged girls were training together, repeating 1K laps – up 50 steps, across the back row past homeless people sleeping in cardboard boxes, down the other side, along the front row of seating through clouds of exhaust from the city’s main intersection, all keeping in perfect rhythm with each other.

*Washington Post* correspondent Emily Wax first wrote about renegade female runners in 2005. The running infrastructure in Ethiopia is centralized in Addis Ababa, forcing many girls to run away from their families in the countryside to train in the square, hoping to get noticed by a coach or running team. Often, they’re fleeing horrific situations – desperately poor parents may marry daughters off as young as age 12. According to UNICEF, Ethiopian



Photos: Loch Ness Marathon, Marco Degasper, www.photorun.NET



»» Haji Adilo with Ethiopian elite runner Firehiwot Dado, the women's winner of the 2011 New York City Marathon. Firehiwot was the fifth fastest woman at the 2010 Scotiabank Toronto Waterfront Marathon in 2:26:40.

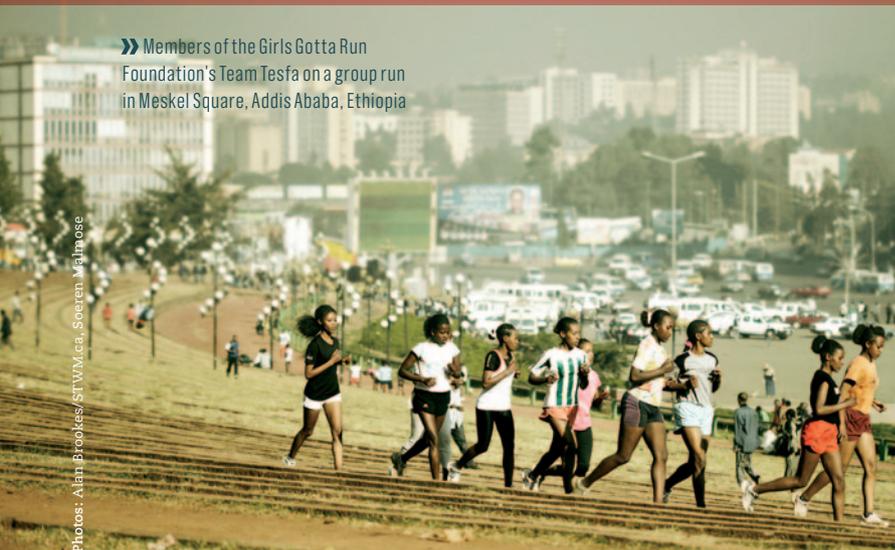
“Here, we don't have much but everyone is happy. In North America, no one seems happy.” – Haji Adilo, coach of Ethiopia's top female marathoners

women and girls are more likely to die in childbirth than reach Grade 6. The country also has one of Africa's highest rates of AIDS, and girls are expected to quit school to care for sick family members. Many girls throw themselves into training, believing that becoming a professional runner will allow them to escape early marriage, stay in school and control their own fate. But their dreams don't always work out – many end up living on the streets or get pushed into the sex trade.

When retired university women's studies professor Pat Ortman read the *Washington Post* article, she started the non-profit Girls Gotta Run Foundation (GGRF), a United States-based charity that raises funds for coaching, shoes, racing expenses and food to help the girls train. The goal is not necessarily to produce professional runners but to use the discipline of training to help girls stay in school and pursue careers to become economically self-sufficient. “These are leaders in the making,” Ortman says. “If we support these girls, they'll make a living and support so many more people than young girls having babies. They will drag the rest of the country into the future.”

Mersha Asarat coaches GGRF athletes as well as male runners sponsored by Running Across Borders (RAB), a similar U.S.-based charity. At a bare-bones RAB house on the outskirts of Addis Ababa, Asarat mentors 11 athletes, including Dinknesh Mekash Tefera. Like many of the Ethiopian greats, she grew up in the Arsi region and built her strength doing farm work and running long distances to school. She convinced her parents to let her move to Addis Ababa to train. She won the first marathon she entered, setting a new course record at the Loch Ness event in Scotland in 2:46:39 and lowered her time by 12 minutes in her second marathon in Rome.

Running is about achieving respect first, she says, then earning money to send back to her family and repaying GGRF by helping other athletes, possibly by becoming a coach. “People don't view men and women at the same level here,” Tefera says. “Women have to show their strength and make an effort to become equal, to rise up. When I train, I change not only my body but my mind. What I have learned from



»» Members of the Girls Gotta Run Foundation's Team Tesfa on a group run in Meskel Square, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Photos: Alan Brookes/STVMA.ca, Soeren Melanose

"I don't think North Americans train as hard. They have all the technology and support there. I want to know why they can't run like us?" – Dire Tune, 2008 Boston Marathon winner



» A member of Girls Gotta Run Foundation's Team Tesfa in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Opposite » Joseph Kibur (left) with Haile Gebrselassie on the track at Yaya Village

Photo: Soeren Malinowski



## Former Canadian champion builds runner's paradise in Ethiopia

**J**oseph Kibur never gave up on his dream of helping runners in his Ethiopian homeland achieve greatness. Although he was born in Ethiopia, Kibur came of age as a competitive runner in Canada. He won the Ontario high school 1500m championship in 1987 and took the national cross-country title in 1993, the highlight of his career. Shortly after that, injuries forced him to give up serious running, and he turned his attention to his web hosting business, Net Nation.

Kibur worked relentlessly for a few years to build the company's worth, and eventually sold it, allowing him to pursue other dreams. In 2007, he returned to Ethiopia to focus on helping others in his birthplace.

His initial project established a charity to help HIV/AIDS orphans. Then he looked for a way to support the vast pool of untapped running talent in Ethiopia. He selected 12 homeless runners (both men and women) who had the ability and desire to excel. He provided them with housing, running shoes and a small salary for food and other basics. Within two years, several of the athletes were self-sufficient; one young woman ran a 2:33 marathon at age 19.

After this pilot project, Kibur came up with a much more ambitious plan. In Kenya, there are dozens of running camps for local and international runners, but such a facility didn't exist in Ethiopia. He combined his knowledge of runners' needs with his business skills, building a world-class, high-altitude training facility for endurance athletes near the capital, Addis Ababa. It's called "Yaya Village."

Kibur started building the facility in 2009 with the support of legendary runner Haile Gebrselassie, who has been not only a shareholder but also a keen ambassador for the project since its inception. Kibur's dream became a reality last year, with the completion of the luxurious 30-bed complex and its many athletic facilities. In December, the first local and European athletes began arriving. Kibur says their reaction has been overwhelmingly positive, with many calling it "a runner's paradise."

Yaya Village is set in the lush, rolling Ethiopian countryside at an altitude of 2,500 m. Athletes can chase new PBs as they take advantage of the extensive training and recreational facilities, which include:

- ▶ A 400m sand track, a 1,000m measured trail, unlimited miles of trails through the countryside and paved roads
- ▶ Fully-equipped indoor gym; outdoor area set up for military-style drills and plyometrics
- ▶ Sauna/steam room
- ▶ Beach volleyball and tennis courts, soccer/football field
- ▶ Horseback riding
- ▶ Massage and physiotherapy for a minimal fee
- ▶ Free personalized coaching and running guides

The modest daily rates at Yaya Village include three full meals in the restaurant. The international menu offers optimal meals for endurance athletes, and the chef uses ingredients from the on-site organic garden. The facility is open to runners of all levels. Children and non-athletes are welcome too, Kibur adds. Children have their own playground and anyone can enjoy the tranquil setting, in the village, just 11 km from Addis Ababa.

Kibur's "runner's paradise" also supports the local community and environment. The village is now offering scholarships for young Ethiopian women to encourage more of them to give serious running a try. Visit [yayavillage.com](http://yayavillage.com) for more information or to book a stay there. —Nancy Tinari

running is to work hard, be patient and responsible."

Back at Adilo's workout, after the session was over, the coach translated as I spoke with two of the group's stars, Tune, 27, and Mare Dibaba, 23, who finished second at last year's Scotiabank Toronto Waterfront Marathon. As you might expect, these elite marathoners are rail thin and far from imposing. Their personalities seem to match their physique. Shy as she is, Tune is the more outgoing of the two. When I suggest that Ethiopian women may get more support than Kenyan women, Tune laughs out loud. "I hire a housekeeper," Tune says. Then she grows serious. "You have to understand, life is very different here. Things have improved in the last 15 or 20 years, but still hasn't reached the balance of Europe. Men still hold the power."

While women runners here appear to get more support from male runners and coaches than their running sisters in Kenya, Tune and Dibaba are reluctant to offer a singular reason why the Ethiopians have pulled ahead, other than winning makes women believe they can be successful, inspiring more girls to chase their dreams. They attribute their own accomplishments to hard work. They log up to 200K per week, running twice daily, and also put in 1.5-hour sessions at the gym a couple of times a week. They devote the rest of their time to resting and eating, so they can train harder. "I don't think North Americans train as hard," Dibaba says. "They have all the technology and support there. I want to know why they can't run like us?"

Tune, a role model to young runners here, says when she speaks to them, she shares her story, encouraging them to try harder. "I like running, but it's also my life." Married since she was 19, she wants to have children after the 2012 Olympics – two in two years, so she can get back to the track quickly. A runner only has so many high-earning years, and she's sending money back to her family as well as supporting her own household. She refuses to even think about retirement.

Tune, whose resumé includes prestigious wins at the Boston Marathon and the Ottawa Race Weekend 10K, has fans around the world. "When I go to places like Ottawa, people want to know what motivates me, but it's so hard to explain myself in another language. I want to say, thanks for cheering me on to run faster." **R**

Margaret Webb is a writer and author based in Toronto. Her website is [margaretwebb.com](http://margaretwebb.com).

# Marathoners Roar on Safari Course



## Wild, endangered animals roam next to the dirt trail

By Margaret Webb

TWO HELICOPTERS AND A SPOTTER PLANE spent the early morning scaring lions and other wildlife from the race course. Still, the start was delayed 15 minutes while armed rangers frantically tried to dissuade one elephant from crashing the start line. The Safaricom Marathon and Half-Marathon in Kenya is considered one of the world's most unique races, winding through the 18,200-hectare Lewa Wildlife Conservancy on the slopes of Mt. Kenya. It's the only place you can run across the savannah as our ancient ancestors did, in the same territory as endangered Grévy's zebras and black rhinos, gazelles, antelope and some very big cats such as leopards and cheetahs.

I flew in the day before the race on a 13-seat Safarilink flight from Nairobi, landing on a dirt runway alongside giraffes grazing on the long yellow grass. Land Rovers taxied runners to one of three camping areas set up in the conservancy for the event – the Maridadi Camp had luxury carpeted tents. The Safaricom Village is essentially a series of M.A.S.H.-style tents supplied by the British army. There are outdoor kitchens with picnic tables at each site, allowing runners to meet over meals. The race is capped at 1,100 runners.

To check out the course, I took a safari through the conservancy with a team of young bank executives who had trained for their first half while raising funds for Tusk Trust, which organizes the race. Tusk invites teams to come early to visit the community development projects their fundraising has helped. Our guide told us that a lion had wandered into a water station during last year's race, chasing the crew under a car.



**DESTINATION**  
**LEWA WILDLIFE**  
**CONSERVANCY, KENYA**



### Race Stats

- When:** June 30, 2012  
Book early as the event is capped at 1,100 runners and sells out early.
- Flights:** To fly into Lewa visit Safarilink: [flysafarilink.com](http://flysafarilink.com)
- Stay:** You can register for camping options at Lewa when you register for the race. You can also book a marathon package tour through Marathon Tours: [marathontour.com](http://marathontour.com)
- Website:** [lewa.org/support-lewa/safaricom-marathon](http://lewa.org/support-lewa/safaricom-marathon)

Photos: Courtesy of [www.sokomoto.com](http://www.sokomoto.com)



We saw giraffes, zebras, antelope and monkeys from the course.

**Left, above and below »**  
The Safaricom Marathon at the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy, 140 miles north of Nairobi

**Opposite bottom »**  
The start of the 2011 Safaricom Marathon at the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy

The course is a 21.1K undulating dirt trail that the marathoners do twice. Though the line of runners snaking through the conservancy looked like a wildebeest migration, we saw nothing scarier than giraffes, zebras, antelope and monkeys. It's the high altitude, heat and a challenging hill two-thirds of the way through the loop that make it a tough race. Many participants ran marathons up to an hour slower than usual.

My half-marathon time was brutal but I ran this for pure joy. I visited with spectators racing between lookout points in Range Rovers. I stopped to meet Massai warriors manning the water stations and

chatted with lots of other Canadians on the course, including a team from the Canadian embassy in Nairobi. I figured getting in good with them would be good for a little diplomatic immunity after the post-race party that locals attend. Going slow meant that the top marathoners caught me on the second loop and I ran with them into 4,000 delirious fans who were cheering their Kenyan heroes into the finish. **R**

*Margaret Webb is a writer and author based in Toronto. Her website is [margaretwebb.com](http://margaretwebb.com).*

