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Taking It In Stride: From Kenya to LU, NCAA Division I champ lets his legs do the talking

April 01, 2010 | Sarah Funderburke

Although few people in the realm of college athletics have more to brag about, Liberty University's Sam Chelanga is a fairly quiet guy. Luckily, after winning the 2009 NCAA Division I Cross Country Championships in November, no words were necessary his smile said it all. The now six-time All-American finished the 10K race in 28:41, setting a course record by 22 seconds and beating runner-up David McNeill of Northern Arizona by 25 seconds.

"Nationals was exciting because no one has done anything like that in a long time," said Chelanga, a junior. "It feels good."

The accolades he's received since his win have been almost as impressive, with the U.S. Track & Field and Cross Country Coaches Association naming him the 2009 Division I Cross Country Athlete of the Year, and the same organization naming him a potential candidate for the 2010 Bowerman award. While such accomplishments are highly coveted and are awarded to only one talented male runner in the NCAA per year, Chelanga is still relatively a new kid in the world of running. In fact, until he left his home in Kenya and entered the U.S. in 2006, he had never competed in a formal race at all.

"He has not yet run 50 races in his career," said Brant Tolsma, Liberty's head cross country and track & field coach. "Some kids run 50 races in their first year of high school if they do cross

country and indoor and outdoor track."

Chelanga's road to the top started in Ngong Hills, Kenya, a suburb of the capital Nairobi, where he grew up as the youngest of 11 brothers and sisters. Although he admits they grew up poor, Chelanga's childhood does not fit into the stereotypical view of an African lifestyle. Ngong Hills' close proximity to Nairobi meant that the area was not teeming with lions, giraffes and African elephants; instead the area was largely populated by typical farm animals — cows, goats, and chickens. He did not get his start in cross country by running miles to and from a rural school house every day; instead he was within walking distance of his high school, which had a population of more than 900 students. For his physical education requirement he opted to take pingpong instead of running because it was "easier," he said. His foray into running only happened after a family member encouraged him to start planning for his future after graduation.



"If he wasn't here running in this country right now he would probably be farming in Kenya on his brother's farm," Tolsma said. "He realizes how close it could have been to not all happening."

Unlike many athletes of his caliber, Chelanga doesn't pretend he was born with running shoes on in fact he openly admits that his first distance runs were painful and difficult.

"You can't enjoy it when you are out of shape," Chelanga said. "But I trained with good runners, and they give you hope."

Those "good runners" were older brother Joshua, a professional runner sponsored by Adidas, two-time Kenyan Olympic medalist Paul Tergat and a large group of other hopeful Kenyan runners. Chelanga trained with this group for more than a year before he was finally able to keep up with the front-runners and garner the interest of Fairleigh Dickinson University, an NCAA Division I school in New Jersey that he attended for a year before transferring to LU in 2007.

"I don't call myself a natural runner," Chelanga said. "I work hard and people have helped me."

A statement like this is hard to believe coming from the NCAA 10,000-meter record holder, however Chelanga believes that his life would have been vastly different had he not been able to run for an American university.

"When I was in Kenya there were limited opportunities for everything and I didn't know I could be a good runner," he said. "I feel like if I didn't come to America and develop, no one would have ever known I had any talent." For this reason he is in the process of pursuing citizenship in America and hopes to someday represent the USA in the Olympics.

"It's not good to go somewhere and get good and then leave," he said, adding that, "I think [Kenya] already has enough runners."

Although his talent became apparent quickly after his debut on the NCAA cross country scene, since winning the national title last year, Chelanga has received corporate attention for his running accomplishments. Many days when he logs into his Facebook account, messages from sports agents sit waiting in his inbox. Although he never responds to these enticements to turn pro, or the emails he also receives from agents, Chelanga does plan to run professionally after he graduates next year.

"There are a few things that Liberty still needs me to do," Chelanga said. "I feel like if I left this year Liberty would not get the chance to go to [cross country] nationals as a team for a while."

He also has his eye on an individual national title in men's indoor and outdoor track this spring. Last year he placed second in the 5,000-meter race at the indoor nationals meet and third in the 10,000 at outdoor nationals.

"Aerobically he is an amazing athlete," Tolsma said. "When Josh McDougal [Liberty's 2007 national cross country champion] first met Sam, he made the statement that he is probably the most talented distance runner in college right now, because his background is so limited and yet he is doing so well."

Tolsma said Chelanga has three factors that help set him above the competition: "He's gifted, he's light and he has a naturally fluid running style that is very efficient."

Chelanga, who weighs in around 120 pounds, does not follow a strict diet or take nutritional supplements or scarf down protein shakes. He doesn't have a certain style of running shoe that he swears by, and he doesn't claim to have a higher threshold for pain tolerance than the average individual. He simply trains as his coach tells him to and runs as fast as possible in his races.

"He does not eat, sleep and breathe running," Tolsma said. "He's got lots of concerns in his life and other things he thinks about. Most runners at that level they just live it, but he kind of assigns it to the time that he has to do it.""

Running is not Chelanga's sole purpose for being at LU, as he appreciates the importance of having a diploma in his pocket and the cross on his mind. Although he knows many Christian runners in the NCAA, Chelanga said the spiritual atmosphere at Liberty sets the school apart from other colleges and universities.

"At Liberty people are more outspoken about their faith than in the outside world," Chelanga said. "That is a really good thing."

He has almost completed all the credits needed for a degree in government and a minor in international relations. His background in these two areas has inspired him to look for ways to help improve the economic situation in Kenya and other African nations.

"The main cause of poverty in Africa is poor management," Chelanga said. "You can keep feeding the people, but that doesn't close the income gap. If we pay more attention to the government policies, they could actually improve their economies and it would eventually trickle down to all the people."

Chelanga believes that better state educational policies and a good criminal justice system could drastically change Kenya's overall economy for the better. Although he does not have any interest in becoming a politician, he said he is interested in either creating a non-profit charitable foundation or working with a non-profit charitable foundation to achieve these goals.

"He realizes that God has blessed him with not only talent but also opportunity," Tolsma said.

Follow Chelanga's quest for another national title on www.libertyflames.com.