

In October 1968, the newspapers and radio lit up with the news that we were among the medals at the Olympic Games in Mexico City. I was nine years old. It was exciting. First, gold in the 10,000 metres. Then gold and silver in the 3,000 metres steeplechase. Silver and bronze in the five thousand. The third gold was the best of all: victory by three seconds in the 1,500 metres against the American favourite and world record holder, Jim Ryun.

At Kilimani Primary School in the suburbs of Nairobi, suddenly the 28-year-old Kipchoge Keino's name was on everybody's lips. Our parents might have come from Gujarat, Glasgow or just up the road in Gitaru, but as we dashed around our dusty playground, black, brown and white, we were Kenyans.

Mexico marked the moment when African athletics first grabbed the world's attention. In Kenya, the achievements of Keino and his team mates, five years after independence, reinforced the belief that the country could actually be greater than the sum of its disparate parts. At some level, we nine-year-olds all seemed to understand.

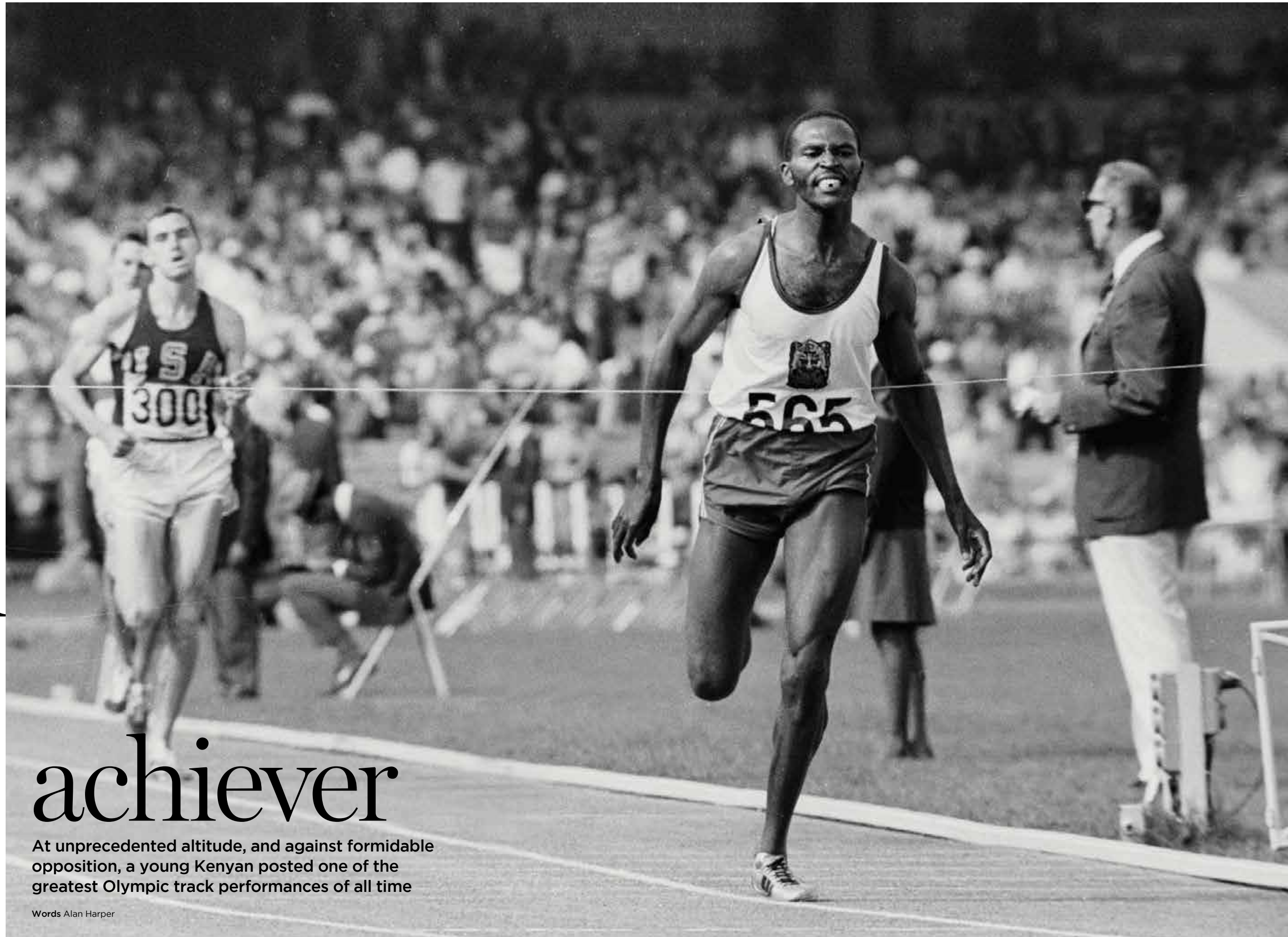
High

The heroes you make when young never completely lose their lustre. Nearly 50 years later, re-arranging the furniture in a Monaco hotel suite as I waited for the now 77-year-old Keino to keep his interview appointment, I realised I was more on edge than I probably needed to be. The principality was hosting a charity awards dinner, and the hotel corridors were busy with journalists and sporting celebrities. A television crew had been allotted the interview slot after me. As they took over the room setting up their tripod, camera, microphones and wires, I staked out my territory on the coffee table with a pocket tape recorder and sat down to consult my notes. ►

achiever

At unprecedented altitude, and against formidable opposition, a young Kenyan posted one of the greatest Olympic track performances of all time

Words Alan Harper



Keino had already begun to make his mark on international athletics by the time he got to Mexico, and those in the know were watching. He set a 5,000 metres world record in Auckland in 1965, and the following year at the Commonwealth Games in Jamaica set new games records in the Mile and Three Mile events, claiming the scalp of the great Australian Ron Clarke in the longer race.

Against Jim Ryun, Keino had been less successful. The 21-year-old American was an athletics prodigy who ran a sub-four-minute mile while still in high school, and when he arrived in Mexico City he had not been beaten over 1,500 metres for three years. His world record was set in Los Angeles in 1967, when he beat Keino resoundingly into second place with a blistering last 200 metres. Later that season at the White City stadium in London, the Kenyan could make no impression on Ryun's finishing speed. Raw talent was not enough to beat this man. Aggressive tactics would be needed.

Looking out into the crowded corridor in search of my subject I stepped back as Michael Johnson squeezed past, head down, on his way to another interview room. A few paces behind him came another American track deity, the great hurdler Edwin Moses. He wasn't too busy to answer a couple of questions, and he knew his Olympic history. "In 1968 you saw some really good performances by Kenya, I think that was the first time they won gold and silver," he said. "I've known Kip Keino for as long as I can remember in track and field." And how was the Kenyan regarded by Moses and his American peers? "As an icon."

Another young athlete who watched Keino's Mexican triumph was Brendan Foster, the British middle-distance runner. "I remember watching him on TV in a student flat in Brighton and thinking how I could run such a 1,500 metres in the future, and

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making plans to do this," Foster told me. "Kip Keino burst on to the athletics scene with a front-running tactical approach for any distance from 1,500 metres to 10,000 metres. His style was unique and his technique revolutionary. When you saw him in action you could tell how effective his tactical running was – massive gaps would appear, and he ran at speeds no man had run before."

The Mexico 1,500 metres final was, in Foster's estimation, "one of the most significant races of front running ever seen in athletics."

At the 1968 Olympics Keino entered three events, the 10,000, 5,000 and 1,500 metres. An altitude of more than 7,000ft (2,250m) made Mexico City a challenging arena for the distance runners, although less so for Keino and his Kenyan colleagues, born and brought up in the country's western highlands.

Keino accepts the 1,500m gold medal on the podium at Mexico. Jim Ryun got silver. Right: on the home straight.



Nevertheless the event schedule for Keino made a daunting prospect: six races in eight days, beginning with the 10,000 metres on 13 October, followed by two heats, a semi-final and, if all went well, two finals.

It started badly. After collapsing during Sunday's 10,000 metres – Naftali Temu went on to win Kenya's first ever gold – doctors diagnosed gallstones and advised Keino not to run in his other events. He ignored them. In the 5,000 metres final on the Thursday he was beaten to the gold medal by less than two-tenths of a second. Friday was his 1,500 metres heat, Saturday the semi-final. On Sunday morning, the day of the final, the Mexico City traffic was so bad he had to abandon the bus and jog to the stadium, arriving with twenty minutes to spare.

Keino had thought about how to beat Ryun's incredible finishing speed. From the gun his fellow Kenyan Ben Jipcho set a fast pace, and by the end of the first lap Keino had positioned himself a close third, while Ryun, unprepared for front-running tactics in Mexico City's thin air, found himself well towards the back with the other two American runners. At this altitude, none of them believed that such a pace could last. But Jipcho continued at a punishing rate while Keino kept in close touch. The leading group of four, the two Kenyans and two West Germans, swept through the first 800 metres in one minute and 55 seconds.

As Jipcho eased off, spent, Keino ramped up the aggression. He leapt to the front and accelerated into the bend, quickly drawing out a ten-metre lead over Tümmeler of West Germany. Twenty metres behind Tümmeler, Ryun began to realise the tactical danger he was in. The tall American kicked and began to ►



move through the field on the back straight. As he stepped up his pace, Keino stepped up his. Ryun made no impression on the Kenyan's lead.

At the bell, Keino was still ten metres clear of the chasing West Germans, with Ryun powering to catch them on the back straight. Still the diminutive Kenyan accelerated, his pace matching all the efforts of the world record holder, who made one last kick on the final bend. Too late – much too late. Keino crossed the line in a new Olympic record time, and the margin of his victory over Ryun – 2.98 seconds – remains the biggest in the history of the event.

Voices and bustle in the corridor, and the television crew filed outside. When they had gone, Kipchoge Keino was standing in the doorway. A compact figure, no longer quite the slim and weightless runner of old but still, clearly, fit and well. "I used to run for my life, now I jog for my life," he smiled.

He sat down in my carefully positioned chair and awaited my questions with a steady gaze. "I knew it was going to be very tough," he said. He had met Ryun six times on the track before their momentous Olympic final: "Most of those he won. He was very good. I had to plan, and three-quarters of my planning is mental," said Keino. "Also speed work on the bend, in the last 200 metres, because he was so fast on the straight."

Born in 1940 in the highlands of Nandi, he lost his mother at the age of three, and used to run miles to school every day. Keino joined the Kenya Police aged seventeen, not just as an adornment to their athletics team but as a foot soldier in a colonial force run by British officers. As a member of the paramilitary General Service Unit he found himself involved as a

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peacekeeper in the Zanzibar revolution, and in an actual shooting war on the Somali border. "We used to move almost everywhere," Keino said. "When anything happened we had to be taken there."

He grew up hundreds of miles from these conflict zones on the opposite side of the country, looked after by his father and grandmother and tasked in turn, even as a young boy, with looking after the family's sheep and goats. "We had a very challenging time," he said. "And the area was very rough, almost in the forest – we had a lot of wildlife. I had to know how to save myself and save the animals."

Wildlife, it seemed, did not have quite the same meaning to the nine-year-old me in the Nairobi suburbs as it did to a barefoot boy trying to keep track of his family's sheep and goats. For me, wildlife represented one of the many wonders of growing up in Kenya. We spent days in the game parks, scanning the savannah through the dusty windows of the car. For Keino, wildlife was another word for vermin. "One time we had a big cheetah, or whatever it is, coming in," he remembered. I was puzzled. As a schoolboy I knew there were no cheetahs in the Nandi Hills. Cheetahs live on the plains and chase down their prey at 60 miles an hour. Then I realised that it was not the big cat he was having trouble remembering, but its English name. It wasn't a cheetah. The predator that came out of the forest to steal the Keino family goats was, he acknowledged, a leopard.

"One day," Keino continued, "a leopard took one of our goats. So I hold a leg, and he was pulling." Moving quickly, which would surely be the only way to survive a tug of war with a leopard, he whipped his blanket from around his shoulders and threw it at the head of the big cat, which grabbed at it, distracted, dropping its prey. The boy drew his "sharp knife" – a panga, the ubiquitous, curved machete of East Africa – and brought it down on the leopard's neck.

"I killed it," said Keino. "My safety was the small blanket. When he came to me I throw it – shoosh!"

The elderly athlete hooked his fingers like claws as he told the story, his face enacting the leopard's snarl. I stared at him, incredulous – perhaps a 30-yard victory in the 1,500 metres in Mexico City was only the second most impressive thing this man had achieved. How old was he when he killed a leopard with his panga?

Keino looked at me, as if surprised by my interest. "I was nine years old," he said. ■

