Man on a Mission: Born to Run—The Secret of Kenyan Athletics

With Eamonn Coghlan, United Kingdom: Motive Television Ltd (2011). Full Duration: 52 minutes 04 seconds.

Reviewed by Matt Emmett, Cosumnes River College, Sacramento, CA, USA.

In this documentary former Irish endurance athlete and 5,000 m world champion Eamonn Coghlan travels to Kenya to uncover a little known story - the role of a an Irish missionary in securing Kenya’s dominance in world of athletics. On his journey, Coghlan travels to Item Tambach Town to meet Brother Colm O’Connell. Item Tambach Town has a population of just 4,000 people and has become the focal point of Kenyan distance running success. It is here that Brother Colm O’Connell, a modest Irish priest, has worked for the past 25 years. O’Connell has played a major role in fostering the success of Kenyan distance running, and is now considered one of the world’s top athletics coaches.

What makes this story truly remarkable is that O’Connell arrived in Kenya on March, 17, 1976 without any athletic experience or knowledge of high performance coaching. O’Connell explains that he never considered himself as a person with a talent for coaching – in fact the only coaching experience he had was that of an amateur soccer coach. However, he came to Kenya with a “certain openness to opportunities and new challenges”. O’Connell initially relocated to Kenya to teach at St. Patrick’s High School, and recalls the moment not long after he arrived when the head running coach, Peter Foster (brother of former British Olympic athlete, Brandan Foster) left, and O’Connell was literally “handed the stop watches” and told it’s all yours now.”

O’Connell acknowledges that St. Patrick’s High School had a long standing tradition of running excellence, but there was no guarantee that it would continue with him – a novice coach with no athletic experience – at the helm.

In the years since O’Connell’s arrival St. Patrick’s High School has become the engine room for productive many of Kenya’s world and Olympic champions. Amongst O’Connell’s long list of accomplished athletes is David Rudisha—current 800 meter world record holder and Olympic champion. Rudisha was the first person to run under 1:41.00 minutes over the 800 meter distance, and as a young boy moved to St. Patrick’s High School after O’Connell identified him as someone “with the focus, determination, and physical attributes favorable for middle distance running.” The purpose of the remainder of this review is to share insights on how O’Connell—an Irish priest, with no athletic experience or formal coach education—was able to produce such extraordinary results.

1. Learn from Your Athletes

O’Connell states that he “learned his early coaching from the athlete.” He learned to listen, and from there devised ‘trial and error’ strategies to establish what worked best for each athlete. To this day, O’Connell says he still takes this approach – listening to identify the needs of each athlete, and allowing this information to guide his coaching action. O’Connell acknowledges that he walked into a climate that was already conducive to running success, and therefore took steps to adapt to the environment. He explains, “the fundamentals were already in place, my job was to simply take from what was already within.” This illustrates O’Connell’s attentiveness as a coach; he is aware of what the athlete is bringing to him, and then coaches in direct accordance with the needs of the individual.

2. The Power of Observation

O’Connell learned that running is seen as viable way out of poverty for many Kenyans. Children from a young age are aware that success as a runner can provide a better life for their families, and therefore O’Connell thinks it is no surprise that all of Kenya’s successful runners come from rural deprived areas. O’Connell says that “hardship, struggle and discipline is built into their system from day one, and with that brings a deep burning desire to succeed” and adds “there are no secrets to Kenya’s running success, just hard work. What O’Connell has done so effectively is use the environment (in which he finds himself) to his advantage; the motivation, determination and need to succeed is evident. In O’Connell the athletes see hope - a man with the knowledge and experience to guide them toward a professional running career and in turn a better life for their families.
3. Teach for Understanding

Whereas there is a tendency for athletics coaches throughout Europe and the United States to think of running as physical exertion, O’Connell sees running as a focus and a discipline. To O’Connell running is an ‘art form’, which first requires mastery of the mind and running technique. Rather than focusing on fitness and conditioning, from a young age, O’Connell teaches his athletes to think about their running. Many of his junior training sessions—which O’Connell refers to as ‘learning sessions’—are performed at a low intensity, and the athletes learn the value of certain types of training. Central to O’Connell’s running philosophy is the ‘FAST’ principle:

- **FOCUS**: Head remains still and relaxed, with eyes parallel
- **ALIGNMENT**: Stand tall with head, shoulders, chest, arms, core, hips, knees, shins, and toes moving forward in perfect symmetry
- **STABILITY**: Run from the core. The core is an athlete’s ‘engine room’, and no matter how fatigued the body and mind becomes, athletes always run strongly and confidently from their core
- **TIMING / TEMPO**: The relationship between the striking foot and the ground; tempo should be consistent, rhythmic and steps ‘light’

O’Connell believes that instilling the fundamentals of ‘FAST’ lays the foundation for long-term running success. He believed that ‘FAST’ is something that becomes deeply ingrained in the athletes’ mind and performance, and in the tough moments of competition is something they can rely and focus upon.

4. Personal Connection

It is O’Connell’s calm demeanor, consistent approach and clear instruction that have earned him the respect of his athletes. As a result they believe in his teaching and are fully committed to his approach. O’Connell fully embraces his role as coach, teacher, mentor and father figure, and it is this person-centered approach that has enabled him to gain the trust of his athletes. Not only does this mean that O’Connell shares a deep and meaningful bond with his athletes, but this closeness provides O’Connell with a personal understanding which enables him to tailor coaching strategies to meet the specific needs of each athlete.

5. Produce Self-Directed Athletes

O’Connell strongly believes in teaching athletes to cope on their own. This process starts on day one of their athletic life and continues all the way through their professional running careers. O’Connell deliberately never travels to any of the world’s major athletic events with any of his athletes. He explains that his training “prepares the athletes not to feel like they need him, or be there when the competition comes.” This demonstrates O’Connell’s confidence in his methods, effectiveness of his teaching and complete trust in his athletes. O’Connell’s main objective – over time - is to become a redundant partner in the coach-athlete relationship: after all, coaches cannot run races, and therefore must prepare their athletes to feel confident in their own ability to make the right decisions under pressure.

6. Dare to Simplify

O’Connell and his athletes have little in the way of facilities or funding, but despite this Kenya produces more world champions than any other nation in middle-long distance running. There is no doubt that much of this success can be attributed to a perfect storm of conditions; a tradition of running excellence, altitude, diet and desire to escape poverty. These factors come together and provide athletes with the self-belief and determination to succeed, but credit must go to O’Connell for (1) not changing a ‘winning formula’ and (2) instilling a training approach which is attentive to the needs of each athlete.

7. Humility

Despite his achievements, O’Connell remains dignified and humble. It would be easy for him to be content by the successes of David Rudisha, but insists his passion still lies in working with Kenya’s junior athletes, striving daily to help them develop their talent and realize their true potential. O’Connell also insists that his high profile athletes regularly lead coaching sessions with Kenya’s promising junior athletes. Not only does this serve to inspire the future generation of Kenyan runners, but believes it helps to keep the current stars of Kenyan running ‘grounded’ – removing them from media limelight and reminding them of where they came from.

**Concluding Thoughts**

There is a perception in the world of professional sport that elite level playing experience is an essential ingredient in becoming a high performance coach. The story of Brother Colm O’Connell conclusively dispels this myth. Arrigo Sacchi, is another coach with a similar background to that of O’Connell’s, and when the media chose to scrutinize his competence in leading the Italian national soccer team, he said, “I never realized that to be a jockey you had to be a horse first” (FIFA.com, 2012). It is my belief that we, as a coaching society need to be more open to coaches from outside the traditional development background, instead of focusing so much on fast-tracking former athletes to coaching roles. In order for this to happen I believe that those who are responsible for educating and employing coaches need to develop a better understanding of what makes an effective coach. Playing experience is just one component that can aid a coach in their quest for effectiveness, but playing experience alone