

# Flags of convenience

Opinion

## Kenneth Lloyd looks at the modern-day trade in athletic performance.

Leonard Muchera suddenly became his old self when he won the Tiberias Marathon in Israel on 4 January. Back in 2004 he had relinquished his Kenyan identity and become an athletic hireling, by the name of Musher Salem Jawher, for the state of Bahrain. But with his win came rejection from his adopted nation. At the race press conference he had said that the Bahraini Government had “no problem” with his participation in the event. But within 24 hours they had stripped him of his Bahraini citizenship for having entered Israel illegally on his old Kenyan passport.

Athletes are a lucrative commodity, as any athlete manager knows, but trading athletic prowess for dinars by changing national identity is a relatively new, extreme manifestation of this. Athletes have migrated and adopted new nationalities for years, but in a way in which their athletic abilities were outwardly incidental. Cuban and Nigerian athletes have married Spaniards, for example, and settled in Europe. Others just migrated, as so many of their compatriots had done before them, whether they were doctors, engineers, nurses or care workers. Athletes were just one of any number of professionals seeking opportunities overseas.

Changing nationality is hardly new either; Ethiopians have previously claimed political asylum in countries where they were competing. Kenyans also migrated, as Wilson Kipketer had done, or married out - as Lornah Kiplagat did, taking her husband's nationality. It is estimated that 40 Kenyan athletes have changed nationality to date.

Athletes taking alternative nationalities while remaining based in their country of birth is different. It is a calculation of mutual benefits that may result, rather than the life commitment made by Kipketer or Kiplagat. Among the first to switch was Stephen Cherono, gold medallist in the 3000m steeplechase at the 2002 Commonwealth Games. A year later he won gold at the World Championships in Paris as a Qatari, by the name of Saif Saeed Shaheen.

He allegedly received \$1million for his win, with a monthly stipend of \$1,000 for life in return for assuming Qatari nationality. Albert Chepkurui, the 5000m runner who later joined him in Qatar under the new *nom de course* of Abdullah Ahmed Hassan, explained the obvious:



The athlete formerly known as Yatch: Mbarek Hassan Shami

changes these athletes are recognisably Kenyan. When they win, is it a victory for Bahrain and a loss for Kenya, or does it remain essentially a win for Kenya, paid for by Bahrain?

Take Muchera, or Jahwer as he is known in his Bahraini guise. He became Bahraini by contract. That this happens so openly perhaps suggests that no one really cares. The East African domination of distance running has always been a hot topic. This has now extended to the Asian Games and IAAF Asia region competitions. The Kenyan squad, especially for the World Cross Country Championships, has always been one of the hardest in the world for which to qualify. The Gulf teams represent extra places for Kenyans (and to a lesser extent Ethiopians) to participate in events they may not have otherwise had the chance to run in. This may be good for Kenyans, but it also works against the team size regulations and in more idealistic terms, against the whole concept of representative international competition.

Athletics Kenya has outwardly shown fierce opposition to the exodus of high-profile athletes. Sports Minister Ochillo Ayacko made his position clear in 2005:

“The defectors and those who help them have interests which are hostile to Kenya...They will now get very limited visas to visit Kenya and they will not be permitted to train in Kenya.” (quoted in Daily Nation).

In fact many ex-Kenyans continue to live and train in Kenya yet still represent other nations. How could

they do otherwise, unless they want to see their form evaporate in the fierce heat of the Arabian Gulf? The Chairman of Athletics Kenya, Isaiah Kiplagat, has said that provided the athletes had the correct visas the actions proposed by Minister Ayacko would be unfair.

IAAF rules prescribe that athletes cannot represent their new country for three years from the date of their last appearance for their former country. With the agreement of both parties this reduces to one year. Shaheen's seamless transition from one nationality to the other would suggest that he did not face any serious obstruction. Quite the reverse: a new athletics stadium was built at Eldoret, near to the Kerio View Resort where the Qatari athletes come to train. Kenya offers an ideal training habitat, and runners from all over the world flock to training camps there, providing a valuable contribution to the local economy.

The economics make obvious sense, but is patriotism dead in athletics? The Kenyan media might like to think not, seeing betrayal – “sportsmen willing to sell their birth rights to the power of the dinar” – where others see only a contract.

But Muchera's adventure along the shores of the Sea of Galilee showed up the fragility of the arrangement. Bahrain relented and forgave him his trespasses after he made the right noises in obeisance, but the partnership remains uneasy, without the empathy that is a normal part of athletic endeavour. The interests of the respective players are only resolved only by a cash compromise written into a contract.

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“Athletics is a short career and I went there looking for a better life and better prospects...It's not that I don't like Kenya, I love it.”

Qatar and Bahrain have emerged as the key buyers of talented Kenyans. The scale and scope of this grey market in running prowess is unknown as many of the athletes scouted have never represented Kenya. Unknown outside the country, they assume new identities with the thoroughness of a witness protection programme. This distinguishes the Gulf States' policy of talent appropriation from defections to other countries.

Qatari and Bahraini sports bodies, blessed with oil riches but cursed with a climate wholly unsuited to distance running for most of the year, have had to outsource for a chance at international glory. Despite the name and biographical