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Julien Wanders: an African running style for a world record performance

After his European record-breaking 10 kilometre run in Durban at the end of 2018, Julien Wanders entered the ranks of the world's top long-distance runners. Originally from Geneva, the young athlete now lives and trains in Kenya, a country famed for its runners. A portrait of an exceptionally modest sportsman.

STÉPHANE HERZOG

Born into a middle-class family in Geneva, Julien Wanders discovered a passion for competition early on in life. "I always wanted to be good, whether it was at tennis, football or athletics," he explains over the phone from the small Kenyan town of Iten, where he has been training for four years. During his adolescence, as his sporting performance improved, Wanders decided to dedicate himself to running, a discipline he considered to be 'easy'. "What struck me about him was that at just 15 years old, he had such a clear and ambitious outlook. He wanted to go to the top of his sport and you could tell he was serious about it," recalls his coach, Marco Jäger. After eight years of working together, Jäger considers Wanders to be practically part of his family.

Julien Wanders first stepped into the media limelight on 14 October 2018 when he broke the European 10 km road record previously set in 1984. With a time of 27.32 minutes, the 22-year-old Swiss athlete finished second in the race behind Uganda's world 10,000 m silver medallist, Joshua Cheptegei, whose running was a source of inspiration. "I could try to beat him in a few years," says the Geneva long-distance runner. But for

Wanders, experience is crucial; he knows that "there is no point in getting ahead of yourself".

The choice of simple surroundings

Records aside, Julien Wanders has attracted attention with his original and ascetic approach to running. It has brought him to Iten at 2,400 m above sea level, the African mecca for runners and an ideal location where he can train with and against the runners from East Africa who monopolise world records. The move to Kenya has also allowed Wanders to live in simple surroundings, and thereby focus on his work. "We come to enjoy the basic things in life here. For example, I really appreciate it when I have electricity and water! It encourages me to train because you only really learn to fight when you are in a difficult situation. Some Kenyans who have become millionaires through their success in competitions still decide to come back to the village to reconnect with this simple way of life because a luxurious lifestyle just does not work for a runner."

The town of Iten attracts hundreds of runners from both Africa and the West. Although Marco Jäger ad-



mits to a certain concern for the less beneficial aspects of this sporting haven, such as the quality of care in the event of injury and the country's political instability, he still sees it as the perfect environment for running. "The runners are always at a high altitude. The climate is comfortable, with temperatures ranging between 15 and 25 degrees and a rainy season, but never any snow. Julien is always surrounded by a group of professional Kenyan runners for whom running equates to economic survival," explains the Swiss trainer. Jäger follows Wanders' progress through telephone conversations and videos that the athlete sends to him, with which he can analyse his stride.

Running to survive

Julien Wanders has created a little cocoon for himself in Iten. It is simple but conducive to performance. He shares his life with his Kenyan girlfriend and runs with other athletes, some of whom have become friends.

But the Geneva-born athlete has never forgotten his roots. "We aren't from the same world. I know that I have more than them and they never let me forget it. But I live like them and I try to help them in the course of my training programme." For example, the Swiss runner regularly invites his Kenyan contemporaries to Europe so that they can earn money from participating in competitions like the Escalade race in Geneva. Wanders has participated in this race since he was 5 years old and finished first in 2017 and in 2018.

The African attitude towards racing is also different from that of western athletes. "The runners don't set themselves mental time limits. They don't use heart rate monitors and they manage to run further as a result. Their way of running is more instinctive; they listen to their bodies rather than using gadgets. We have access to everything in Europe and this often makes us overthink things." The Geneva athlete does not believe that Africans are naturally superior runners:

"If you go in thinking that then you've already lost, because you can't argue with genetics. In long-distance running, it's the training that counts and you can go far even if you are not genetically designed for that specific activity. Personally, I believe that the body can adapt."

A sportsman who recovers well and progresses

Marco Jäger is thus able to set challenging exercises to match his young recruit's ambition. "To become a champion, you need to combine talent with the ability to work hard. A coach will push an athlete and the quality of that athlete's response is measured by their capacity to implement this." Jäger was happy to note that Julien Wanders is continually progressing and recovers quickly. Everything else is strongly linked to a sportsman's mental fortitude. "Julien is driven by passion and enjoyment, which are two essential ingredients for competition. He doesn't set

Julien Wanders in front of his modest home in Kenya's Iten.
Photo: Jürg Würz (Fit-for-life)

himself any limits and he pushes as far as he can." The Swiss runner is indeed ambitious as he is hoping to win medals in the World Athletics Championships in Qatar in 2019 and in the Olympic Games in Tokyo in 2020. But, as Marco Jäger reminds us, competitive sport is a continuous journey, not just a trail scattered with one or two highlights: "An Olympic champion? Why not! But it's limiting as this type of medal relies on one performance in one individual race on one individual day," comments the coach, who retired from competition at the age of 21. As for Wanders, the young runner practices meditation: "When I run, I try to stay in the present," he explains. "I might think of the finish line, but never of the distance left to run."

Early to bed, early to rise

The high plateau in Kenya sees Julien Wanders follow a repetitive daily routine with consistently early nights. Rising at 5.30 am and turning in at 8.30 pm, this teetotal runner never breaks his rhythm to head out to parties in the evening. Marco Jäger plans out each week of training, alternating running sessions with strengthening exercises, exercises for flexibility and rest days, where Wanders will go cycling for example.

The Swiss sportsman is monitored by a multidisciplinary team. In Geneva, he receives advice from a specialist in biomechanical therapy, a doctor, a mental coach and a nutritionist, whilst in Kenya he is surrounded by a team of masseurs and a physiotherapist. Wanders' recent success has also attracted attention from several sponsors and the Geneva-born runner now enjoys the support of multiple Swiss companies and an international manager.

Julien Wanders in an interview with sports journalist Jürg Würz: www.ogy.de/wanders