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Derartu

Tadesse Gebre-Kidan

ደራርቱ እመቤቲቱ
 ባንቺ አየን ስንቱ።
 የኛ አኩሪ
 አክባሪ - አስከባሪ
 ላፍሪቃውያን ተቆርቋሪ - ድል አብሳሪ
 ወድቆ ስለመነሳት አስተማሪ
 የሀመም ቅልጥም ሰባሪ - እላዩ ላይ ጨፋሪ
 አመሰግናለሁ ስላደረግሽኝ ገድለደራርቱ ጫሪ
 እስኪሾል የነጻጋዬ ማንጎል - አንጠርጣሪ አነጣጣሪ ፈጣሪ
 ተባረኪ - ኩሪ - ለዘላለም ኑሪ።

I was fortunate enough to have met the great Ethiopian athletes, including Haile, Derartu, Fita, Assefa, Gete, Kuture, Ayelech and Brhane in Capetown, South Africa, in April 1996 when they came here to compete in the world cross country championship race. At the time, I was working for a think-tank institute in Capetown after life's imperatives, in Ethiopian parlance *enjera flega* (the search for bread), had forced me to travel from my home base in Canada to this troubled land to assist black South Africans empower themselves economically. My assignment included reviewing research papers submitted by consultants to the institute. This brought me in contact with some of the famous names in Stellenbosch University. I could not fail to fathom the depth of the odds stacked against my fellow Africans.

Stellenbosch, near Capetown, was the venue for the cross country race. The town has been reputedly the mecca for proponents of the apartheid system. Nestled in the comfort of one of the most beautiful sceneries in the world consciously oblivious to the needs of black South Africans, the University of Stellenbosch bred and propagated on the body politic of South African society theoreticians and apologists for the much maligned and satanic apartheid system. When one sees places like Stellenbosch and the entire Cape region, it is not hard

to understand why defenders of the apartheid system fought nail and tooth to hold onto their loot and hold Africans at bay and keep them out of sight. Stellenbosch was off limit to blacks and foreign “agitators,” that is, until Derartu and her comrades descended in full force to force the rewriting of white supremacist scripts about stuffs blacks are made of.

The cross country meet was a much anticipated event, not least for the opportunity the occasion has been expected to provide for witnessing the great rivalry between Kenyan and Ethiopian athletes. It is conceivable that Ethiopia and Kenya may never opt for a shoot out war, as they may wish to leave any dispute to be settled on sports fields. The war has already been going on for some time now. Stellenbosch was bracing for the latest encounter.

In my Capetown office, this white South African colleague had heard me complain about Ethiopians being tired of playing second fiddle to the Kenyans when it comes to cross country races. Her response was South Africans would be too delighted to play third or fourth fiddle.

Sports enthusiasts gathered at Stellenbosch to witness the legendary rivalry between these great athletes of the two neighboring nations were not to be disappointed. The racing athletes followed each other doggedly; no one dared to break away from the pack for fear of burning out too early. Hence, the tactic of breathing on each other’s neck either for its intimidation effect or to leave the leader to dictate the pace at his/her own peril for want of knowing the physical conditions or overtaking intentions of his/her adversaries. It is not, therefore, surprising that many race leaders or front runners end up becoming little more than pace setters and rarely manage to win races; they are eventually chewed up by their pouncers-on-the-wait. These leaders of yester-minutes soon become to their chagrin mere spectators on the run.

On that fateful day, Derartu was kicked on the heel by one of the Kenyans after being sandwiched and boxed in. Whether the incident was an accident or a deliberate mischief is an open question. I have heard people say it is not uncommon for some athletes to take out the competition using the “tactic.” In this respect, I was a spectator when the great Kip Keno came down crashing on the track in the stadium in Addis after one of the Ethiopians tripped him, whether by accident or design is again an open question. The Ethiopian athletes accelerated their pace, leaving the crown jewel of the event behind, to win a

hollow victory. Kip got up and jogged to the finish line to a thunderous applause. If my memory serves me right, Keino accused the Ethiopians of tripping him deliberately and vowed to never return to Addis for a competition. To atone for these trippings and to stoke the fire of competition alive, an annual athletics competition between the two nations would be a welcome development. That would be great for middle and long distance running as other countries would be induced to take appropriate measures to measure up to the two nations. And the greatest winners will be sports enthusiasts and lovers of athletics. That will be the day! This, by the way, was the slogan that was popularly used in my university days in Addis whenever someone wanted to express a deep longing for some change for the better. If someone has not yet carried the slogan to the patent office in the guise of an intellectual property, I venture to bequeath it to all Africans on condition that everyone will have dedicated a notebook for inscribing his/her “that-will-be-the-day”’s as a reminder of the stock of things that have gone awry around us, with a vow to do something about them.

The tripping caused Derartu to lose one of her shoes and came down crashing like Kip did in Addis. If Keino were around in Stellenbosch, an old hand like me who had witnessed what happened to him in Addis before Derartu and company were born would have said “there goes the payback time!” Fortunately, was neither Keino around nor the warrior athletes had the time to live in the past, as their responsibility devolved around dealing with their adversaries of the day in real time as measured in minutes and seconds. I kept my dark contemplation to myself and concentrated on guessing the next step Derartu was likely to take. I had expected her to throw up her arm in the air and scream at and curse the Kenyans, ask her patron saint to sprinkle body rash on her tripper, bury her head between her hardened laps and shed a couple of tears in self-pity, walk to the dressing room with a sullen face still cursing the Kenyans for her predicament only to resume the tear shedding in the dressing room. Oh boy! how wrong could I be!?

When a running athlete’s shoe falls out, the normal reaction is said to be to throw away the other one and continue running barefoot or withdraw from the competition altogether. Derartu’s immediate reaction to the loss of her shoe was to go back and retrieve it. In the process, the fleet footed women almost trampled her. By the same token, they were fortunate that she did not bring some of them down in the scramble. At that juncture, the spectators thought what Derartu had in mind was dropping out of the race and proceed to the dressing room. To

everyone's astonishment, Derartu hurriedly wore her shoe and started running like a possessed person. The fall must have energized her. It was truly a remarkable spectacle. She sped at an incredible speed to catch the leading pack. But time run out and she had to settle for an incredible 4th place when everyone had expected her to finish dead last. Her extraordinary effort wowed and awed the spectators and live television audience. The homegrown favorite was relegated to 5th place right on the finishing line by non other than the black phoenix. Derartu became the talk of South Africa and an instant legend.

South Africans were treated to a glimpse of the determination and will power that made Ethiopia a powerhouse of long distance runners. South Africans may have reflected on the nature of the psychological and sociological factors that made Ethiopians fierce and jealous guardians of their independence for thousands of years. In Derartu they saw the stuffs an Ethiopian is made of.

I have no idea whether the event may have induced my Capetown landlord to reflect on his initial reluctance to let me rent one of his flats merely on account of the color of my skin. Speaking of skin color and my lack of sensitization to it and all this implies, when I arrived in the USA for the first time in 1971, I declared "chocolate brown" in reference to "skin color" on the immigration form, not having been "educated" that I was expected to write black, yellow or white. Apparently, the entry did not catch the immigration officer's eyes; and I was allowed to enter the USA as a member of a fourth race. My friends found the stated self-description too hilarious; and I found it a cheap source of generating laughter whenever I ran out of ammunition in idling sessions devoted to wisecracks and jokes trading.

Conventional wisdom states "once beaten twice shy"; but *yegnayitu* (our) Derartu has caused the rewriting of the script. The degree of one's determination to rise up and soar can be directly proportional to the severity of one's fall. True heroes and heroines are governed by this rule. Derartu Tulu is definitely our heroine. She is our chocolate brown Achilles chasing Hector of Stellenbosch who had the temerity to kick her on the heel. She will remain our heroine for all ages. The young, downtrodden and those who are temporarily down but not out will draw inspiration from her exploit.

As soon as the race was over, she could barely walk due to the severity of the pain on her heel. When the race was in progress she had completely overcome the pain and pushed it out of the realm of her conscious mind. In other words,

she must have triumphed over pain in a way that is beyond the reach of most humans.

Her male colleagues carried her literally into the bus. For that day I had become an honorary *ajabi* (escort) of the team and this had conferred on me the right to ride the bus. Once the athletes were duly ensconced, I had expected the legendary Ethiopian lip smacking (*kenfer memtet*) and a mood of despondency to reign supreme. What I witnessed was as amazing as what I saw on the battlefield. Instead of becoming sorry for herself and retreating into negative territory, Derartu sounded like a cheer leader. She was joking and laughing and did not for a single moment go back to the unfortunate incident, which was discarded as a thing of the past that should not be allowed to interfere with the future. In fact the athletes started discussing the next big meet. I was so impressed and amazed by what I was witnessing. I said to myself “if the athletes are representative of the younger generation, then Ethiopia truly has a brighter future.”

The female athletes fell on each other to take precedence to be on her side and to assuage her physical pain with their delicate fingers. A couple of the female athletes lay at her feet massaging her pained heel. Others sat behind her as props to comfort her. The men perched around watching her intently and caringly as a lion would watch over his lioness. To distract her mind off the pain, they started bantering at each other. All this time, Derartu was laughing and was in an excellent mood. I loved them more and felt proud that they were mine. I was thus initiated into their secret domain and permitted to have an inner glimpse behind their success: determination, positivism, camaraderie spirit, looking forward, and transforming adversity into an opportunity. It also dawned on me as to why whiners end up being losers.

In the office on Monday, South Africans of all hues came to me to express their admiration for the heroic performance of Derartu. Had they also watched the spectacle in the bus, the legend would have grown immensely taller.

At the hotel, she was carried out of the bus by the male athletes to her room only to hobble, after a few minutes rest, back to the bus on their way to the airport.

As soon as I returned to my flat, I wrote a long letter to my children in Ottawa describing the miracle I had witnessed and asked them to spread the

word among friends. Gentiles could wait for the second coming in Sydney 2000.

Derartu came to South Africa, showed the real meaning of determination and will power, conquered prejudices, left food for thought and returned to her homeland victorious.

I, a warrior in my own right who was summoned to South Africa to join in the fight against the injustices of apartheid, had to leave South Africa with mission unaccomplished, after being declared “too radical” by the black head of the institute. His assessment was based on the complaint of a University of Stellenbosch professor whose submissions I had criticized severely but whom the institute head had elected to consider untouchable and beyond reproach. The professor was earmarked to act as a link between white South African business establishments and the institute in the effort to round up financial resources to underwrite black empowerment projects.

So, I was compelled to return to my country of asylum whose prospective employers had already certified me “over qualified” to be employable. Whenever I reminded them that my family is no phantom and requires food for survival, they were more than willing to give me the address of the nearest welfare office.

Thanks to warrior athlete Derartu, my resolve to not give up on myself or on Africa has been strengthened. I am back in the warm embrace of the Mother Continent dabbling in another upliftment project. Whether I will succeed this time is another open question.

Monrovia, Liberia
October 2000