

00:00:00

Dorian Kail: When we arrived at the Eldoret Airport and Viola Cheptoo and Sharon Lokedi and a whole dancing tribe and the Tirop's were there to greet us, I was overwhelmed. I couldn't believe that these people were right past baggage claim. There they were grabbing our bags, putting them down, and we were dancing with these people who we had never met before.

00:00:22

Erica Edwards-O'Neal: I thought I understood what we were doing. I had no idea the scale and the impact.

00:00:34

Rob Simmelkjaer: Hey, everybody, and welcome to Set The Pace, the official podcast of New York Road Runners, presented by Peloton. I'm Rob Simmelkjaer, the CEO of New York Road Runners. And we don't have Becs with us this week as we are doing a special episode from right here actually inside the offices of New York Road Runners. As you know, if you've been following me or New York Road Runners on social media, you know that a group of New York Road Runners leaders recently took the first ever official trip of the organization to Kenya. And today we're going to spend some time with some of my colleagues talking about that trip, what we learned, and what we think it means for the future of running, the future of New York Road Runners. So we're very excited to do that today.

Of course, if you've ever watched the TCS New York City Marathon or any major marathon, you know that Kenyans are an absolute force in the sport. You see Kenyan athletes winning year in and year out here in New York or Boston and wherever you might go. Of course, this past November, both the men's and women's champions of the TCS New York City Marathon were from Kenya, Benson Kipruto and Hellen Obiri. Also, I think for a lot of fans, that's where the story ends. It's another Kenyan winning a major marathon. And you watch that and you celebrate that, and then maybe that's where you stop and you go back to your training or your running or whatever you might do.

Well, part of what we all did when we went to Kenya and what we want to spend some time doing today is talk about how that is not where the story stops. Actually, there's so much more to tell about these athletes, the communities that they come from, their families, their colleagues, the people who help get them where they are, and then what it means for them and their entire larger communities in Kenya when one of them wins. That's a lot of what we spent time doing when we are in Kenya.

Kenya as a country and as a running culture is really

integral to the foundation of this sport and the implications for each one of them winning a major go far beyond the podium. It can change their family life. It can change their communities. And for some of the women, it can also put them in some form of danger, which is one of the things that we'll talk about today.

When we were in Kenya, we had a dinner with dozens of former New York City Marathon champions. We also visited a children's hospital where money to create it was actually raised, in large part, through the New York City Marathon Charity Program. And we spent time with an organization called Tirop's Angels, which we'll talk about a lot today. That was founded in honor of a former runner named Agnes Tirop, a woman who was murdered in 2021 by her partner. And a big part of the reason for our visit and what we did while we were there was the issue of gender-based violence in Kenya, which we'll talk about quite a bit today.

So before we get into this conversation, let me introduce my colleagues to my right, Dorian Kail, who works in our pro athletes group. Dorian was really one of the visionaries behind us taking this trip in the first place. She knows our pro athlete community very well and understood some of these issues of gender-based violence that affect a lot of the female runners from Kenya. So Dorian, welcome to Set the Pace. You've been on before.

00:03:48

Dorian Kail: Thank you.

00:03:48

Rob Simmelkjaer: Once before. And then to her right is Erica Edwards-O'Neal. She's our chief diversity officer and also very well acquainted with these issues of what face Kenyan runners and also issues that face women and runners all over the world. So, looking forward to having this conversation with you as well.

00:04:09

Erica Edwards-O'Neal: Absolutely. Happy to be here. Thank you.

00:04:10

Rob Simmelkjaer: All right. Now I'm not moderating this conversation because we're going to hand the reins over to Matt Singer. Matt is our head of content at New York Road Runners. He's in charge of telling stories about not only New York Road Runners, but our professional athletes throughout the year, including the broadcast of the TCS New York City Marathon. So we're going to hand the hosting reins over to Matt to continue this conversation.

00:04:31

Matt Singer: Yeah. Thanks, Rob. And first, it was a huge honor to be a part of this first group that went over to Kenya as a part of this first official visit. And it's great to be on this side of the set, although a little reluctantly. I've been with you for 162 episodes now, so you drag me over to this side of the camera for the first time. But I think it's really important to continue to shine a light on everything that we saw and learned over in Kenya. And I take my role very seriously in being a big part in telling those stories. A lot of people, like you said, know the Kenyans that cross the finish line and they get to see that one moment, but there's a whole other world and a whole other set of stories on the other side of that finish line.

So really excited to shine a light on that today. I want to start today with a little bit how this trip came to be. Dorian and I used to sit next to each other. I think they separated us because we spoke a little too much during the day, but one of the things we would talk about was the idea for this trip even back then. So, Dorian, can you talk us through a little bit about why it was so important to ideate and plan and execute this trip?

00:05:30

Dorian Kail: Yeah. Matt, we have been talking about it a long time. And then Rob started and it was, I think, the first spring you were here, you came up to the professional athlete suite. We know all the athletes stay in the hotel and we were sitting around that big long table and you got to meet many of them. Many of them were Kenyan and you just got to know them. We were just chit-chatting, and I have the lucky ... I mean, I have the privilege to get to know all these athletes and I hear all kinds of stories. But then you left and then I wanted to know what you thought. And then I started to tell you about some of the stories I had heard. And we talked about Agnes Tirop and we talked about that tragedy and how it affected so many of our athletes that we bring in.

The pro athletes who compete at our races make a lot of money and they go back to Kenya and they're targets of violence because they have so much more than the people in their community. And there are many people who want to take advantage of them. And I didn't want to ignore the fact that we're part of that problem. This is our running community. And when I told you about what was going on, you agreed with me that we need to do something. And then time went on and athletes would come back to our races and we'd talk to them again. Then we learned about Tirop's Angels because Viola Cheptoo came to one of our races and she was

telling us about her organization and how she wanted to build a safe house.

And it just became more and more apparent that we needed to support. We needed to follow up. We needed to find out what was going on there. And then every time I think you walked by our desk, I needed to talk about it. And we just kept pushing and pushing. And then we had more and more conversations with the stakeholders, more and more conversations with the athletes, more and more conversations with the organizations. And we put this trip together. And I'm so grateful we did.

00:07:28

Rob Simmelkjaer: There was also the Rebecca Cheptegei murder that took place during that period as well, which shined another light on this. Rebecca Cheptegei, another athlete, she was Ugandan, I believe, but was murdered in Kenya by a partner as well.

00:07:47

Dorian Kail: Exactly. Right after she competed at the Paris Olympics, she was 44th, two young children, and she was murdered by her boyfriend in front of her kids. So tragic. So we couldn't ignore what was going on. So that's when we decided we needed to put this trip together.

00:08:05

Erica Edwards-O'Neal: And we had the staff that were asking questions that were clearly concerned and wanted to know that this was something that was at the forefront of our minds, and at least in conversation. Staff feels, loved the organization, loved the runners, and wanted to know that we were committed to doing something.

00:08:25

Matt Singer: Taking it from planning and the need to actually arriving, setting foot down in Kenya, this first time in Kenya for all of us, the four of us, can you tell us something that either took you... What was your first interaction or something you weren't necessarily prepared for?

00:08:42

Erica Edwards-O'Neal: The elevation. The second thing was the warmth. It's a beautiful country, but the people were extraordinarily warm and welcoming.

00:08:55

Dorian Kail: So open. Everybody was so open. We were part of their family everywhere we went.

00:09:00

Rob Simmelkjaer: I think for me, I was stunned at how excited people were that we were there. I mean, I know that running is a big deal in Kenya. They obviously have an incredible culture, but I don't think I expected there to be that much excitement that New York Road Runners and that the people who run the TCS New York City Marathon were there. And people were really excited just to have an opportunity to meet with us.

There were people in the government. And I mean, even at one point there was talk about the president of Kenya trying to come see us. Right? I mean, it was that big a deal that we were there in the country, and that was incredible to see. The amount of reverence that people in Kenya have for the New York City Marathon, I think, really tells you a lot about what we do means there, the impact of our organization, and of course, just the love of running and the marathon.

00:10:00

Matt Singer: I think outside of New York on race day, there's nowhere else other than Kenya where we're that big of a deal where we go somewhere. Abraham was saying-

00:10:07

Rob Simmelkjaer: I'm not used to being a rockstar quite like that.

00:10:09

Matt Singer: Ibrahim Hussein who was the first Kenyan winner, first African winner of the New York City Marathon, he said it best. He said, "New York City Marathon here is Hollywood."

00:10:17

Dorian Kail: But we actually followed through. We said we were going to come and we went, and that was a big deal to so many people there.

00:10:24

Matt Singer: I think another thing that we all got to witness firsthand, we were all warned of this ahead of time was Kenya time. And I think from the very first moment where we got to the airport with a very, very warm, nice, but very long welcome, we were quickly introduced to what Kenya time meant.

00:10:38

Erica Edwards-O'Neal: Yeah. We had a local say to us, I see your agenda and we were discussing the next day and we were

going to need to leave something early. And this person giggled and said, "No, you're not." Right? You're going to slow down and be present. That's really important for this. This is a community and slowing down and being present and maybe having a cup of tea and a conversation. And so you don't know when that first thing is going to end, so you can't plan the next. So just be committed to being present and thin out that agenda a bit.

And so what really was a beautiful change, we had a lot accomplished and the folks of Kenya get a lot accomplished, but they also make time to be present for one another. Being welcome into each other's homes, sharing a meal, really a key part of the culture. And that took some adjusting to, and then I'd say to you that I absolutely, as we left, I missed it, that notion of getting back to the hustle and bustle.

00:11:45

Dorian Kail: It was hard to slow down the pace. And then once we did-

00:11:48

Matt Singer: For New Yorkers.

00:11:49

Dorian Kail: Right. But once we did, it made so much sense.

00:11:53

Matt Singer: And I think I speak for all of us when I say this trip became so much more than we originally thought or planned. What moment for all of you was it where it hit like this is a bigger deal than what we had on paper for the agenda?

00:12:05

Erica Edwards-O'Neal: It was the hotel in Eldoret where a member of the hotel staff realized that we were with New York Road Runners and began to jump up and down and say, "Finally, you all have come. We've heard so much about you." And then I go to find Dorian with tears on my eyes and I'm like, "There's a woman and she's here." It was that excitement for our presence. And that person was sharing with us, they knew about New York Road Runners and the TCS New York City Marathon because of their involvement with the hospital, with Shoe4Africa, and they knew that we had been a key part. And so our presence, that was the moment that I think I was... Well, it is just etched in my mind.

00:12:54

Dorian Kail: There were so many moments and everybody laughed

at me because every day was better than the next. And I had a permanent smile on my face because I knew the minute we got there that it was the right thing to do. And I don't think there was one moment, but when we got... One of the many, when we arrived at the Eldoret Airport and Viola Cheptoo and Sharon Lokedi and a whole dancing tribe and the Tirop's were there to greet us, I was overwhelmed. I couldn't believe that these people were right past baggage claim. There they were grabbing our bags, putting them down. And we were dancing with these people who we had never met before, and not the athletes-

00:13:37

Matt Singer: They surprised us with a welcome that the marathon champions get when they come home and land at Eldoret.

00:13:41

Dorian Kail: Right. Right. It was incredible. And again, it was just like we were family and it felt right. Every moment was incredible.

00:13:51

Rob Simmelkjaer: I think that the first full day I was really there when we were in Eldoret and we went to the place that will hopefully be the future home of a safe house that Tirop's Angels is hoping to build for women who are victims of gender-based violence. And we get there and it's an open field in the middle of an area that was a good probably 45-minute drive from our hotel in Eldoret, maybe an hour. And the entire community had gathered there. I mean, I was not expecting this. I was expecting maybe the folks who work at Tirop's Angels and a couple other people, but the whole community had come out and they had seating set up and tents, and they were all there to welcome us and just to show how much it mattered to them that we were there to potentially support this project. Right?

So that was like, wow, this is really something. And then I think for sure when we went to visit the Shoe4Africa Children's Hospital, which was founded by a former New York Road Runners board member, Toby Tanser, and for many, many years was able to raise money through the marathon charity program that many of our listeners are probably a part of, raising money for some charity. And we all think of that as, "Oh, it's such a great thing. We raised money for all these great causes." But to see the personification of that, to meet mothers and fathers whose children were being treated there, who didn't have anywhere else to go, who would not be able to be there with their children when they were being treated for whatever their illness was, to see that

was really, it just put in a very different perspective what we do.

00:15:39

Matt Singer: It's really special to see those dollars come off that meter on a GoFundMe page and as an entry method to the marathon and really see the meaning that those miles really can have. Yeah. Well, a big part of this trip, we'll talk a little bit more about Shoe4Africa Hospital and the work that Tirop's Angels is doing, but a big part of the trip was also getting to see where these world-class athletes are living and training and seeing this, it's not called the home of champions for Nothing, getting to see behind the curtain a little bit. And, Erica, one of the camps we got to see was the Global Sports Camp, which is also known as the house that Kipchoge built, it's where the greatest in the world gets to train and live. Can you tell us a little bit about getting that special behind-the-scene tour?

00:16:18

Erica Edwards-O'Neal: That was extraordinary. I think we could also call that a mindfulness retreat. That's what it felt like. It was lush and green and quiet. Every inch, there was intentionality behind and there is intentionality behind the design from the signs and messaging, simple, beautiful and powerful. I just remember talking, that was another moment of I thought we were moving slowly and we entered that space and it felt like I could just sit. I wanted to just have a seat and not necessarily have a conversation, but I felt immense peace as I entered the space. And then listening to Elliot was to continue to talk forever and ever. That was really magnificent. And it was, of course, great to see the space where these athletes are training. I just was floored by it.

00:17:23

Rob Simmelkjaer: Kipchoge, he's like a philosopher. Yes, he's the greatest marathon runner ever, but when you are in a setting like that with him, where he's from, with people who are there to train underneath him, you see what made him what he is. It's not just his running talent, it's not just his work ethic, but he's like the Dalai Lama of running. He's got-

00:17:47

Dorian Kail: It's like this magic. There's something magical, right?

00:17:50

Rob Simmelkjaer: Yes. Yes. And he's got a true philosophy of

life and teamwork, and he doesn't believe that anybody does these things alone. And I think that's what came really through loud and clear to me is how much of a team sport he sees running as, and the kind of values, the team values that he's trying to create at his camp where lots of runners are going and training every day, and as Erica said, it's simple. The simplicity is part of what seems to be his secret weapon, is not to complicate things, not to have a lot of distractions because running at that level requires full focus and dedication of not only your body, but your mind. So yes, I felt like it really was a retreat in a way. And I'd love to go back there.

00:18:47

Erica Edwards-O'Neal: Yeah. Absolutely. I'll say jumping in again, Dorian, is that one of the messages from the camp that they have up on the boards is to check your laces. And he reminded us that he wasn't talking about the shoe laces. He saw that each participant should be checking on their other team members and they should consider them the laces. They keep things together. And that's just one small example, but it was a joy-filled visit. We were kind of giddy, I think there.

00:19:24

Dorian Kail: And each of the training camps we went to, they would give us a tour and then we'd all sit around and we would talk, and they gave everybody a chance to speak and everybody was heard. And that was really cool. I mean, that just doesn't happen. When I have people over my house, I don't give them a chance to talk.

00:19:47

Rob Simmelkjaer: Everybody speak. They went around the room. It could be 30 people and everybody would have a chance to say something.

00:19:50

Erica Edwards-O'Neal: And that required a mindset shift because you're checking your time and you're like, "Well, gosh, we said this was going to go until four." And then you learned to put your shoulders down and how important it was to make time for every voice. Right? Really, truly centering a community atmosphere.

00:20:08

Matt Singer: Yeah. Yeah. One of the other camps we visited, which was 2 Running Club, which is Coach Claudio's club. That was another opportunity we got to hear from the full staff and the full team there. And we had some really

important conversations there. Rob, can you talk us through-

00:20:22

Rob Simmelkjaer: Coach Claudio, who is a very accomplished coach, tremendous number of successful athletes, including Benson Kipruto, our defending TCS New York City Marathon Champion, trained out of that camp. And again, we went in, we saw where they all lived. This was like a dormitory that all the athletes live there, right there on the campus, if you will, and they eat there and spend their time there. We met every athlete there. But as a part of that conversation with these athletes, we had a pretty in depth conversation about performance enhancing drugs and about the importance of maintaining the integrity of the sport.

There has been a complicated history in Kenya and well beyond everywhere when it comes to the use of performance enhancing drugs in marathon running and endurance sports, in general. We all know that. We know of the temptation that often exists for these athletes to take the kinds of shortcuts that unfortunately some people choose to take. We get news on a regular basis about athletes, current athletes being suspended for use of performance enhancing drugs. And it was very honest because we didn't pretend like the temptation didn't exist. We told stories about past incidents that have happened, including Coach Claudio and some of the issues that he's had and his own coaching history with athletes who ended up using things they shouldn't have been using, and problems that had caused him in his career and his life. Right?

And so what was good about that conversation is that it wasn't like us talking at them and saying, "Hey, don't do these things." It was a conversation that was going both ways. And I felt coming out of there that there was a genuine understanding by the coaches, by the athletes of why this is important, why it's not just in our best interest, but in their best interests and their family's best interest to do things the right way. But I'm not under any illusions that this is a solved problem, but we had that conversation there. And then in a number of other places as well, had a chance to meet with some of the officials in Kenya who are in charge of the anti-doping program they have there as well.

00:22:48

Matt Singer: Another thing that was really a big topic at Claudio's camp was also the importance of including not just women athletes, but women coaches. It was really great to see a familiar face to New York on the coaching staff there. Dorian, can you tell us a little bit about the atmosphere for the women at the camp?

00:23:02

Dorian Kail: Yeah, there were several women and first, they embraced us. They were so happy we were there. They showed us their rooms, but Prisca Jeptoo is Claudio's assistant coach and they were just, again, very open, very honest. I also was impressed with some of the athletes who spoke about doping and how important it is to them that they all stay clean and that they want to work on this with us. We hadn't heard that before, but yes, the women were thrilled that we were there. There's a good number of them. Claudio is so proud of all the women. And that wasn't something that he had in the beginning of the team and now they have many more. And I think there were at least 20 of them and they're all doing quite well and training altogether and treated very well there.

00:23:51

Matt Singer: Yeah, that was great to see. And yeah, Prisca, the 2013 New York City Marathon champion, so great to see that she's moved on from champion herself and is going to build the next generation.

00:24:00

Dorian Kail: And now she's coaching. That's exactly right.

00:24:01

Matt Singer: Yeah. Dorian, we also got to go to the Kechei Center and see two of the runners we recently hosted since our trip to Kenya, Abel Kipchumba and Agnes Ngetich. What was it like getting to join two of those up and comers for a workout?

00:24:13

Dorian Kail: It was fun. Abel had a Fartlek training run and he went on the street with his group and we followed him actually in Agnes's car and his coach. And we just followed them and watched them for about 30 minutes as they trained. And he was actually training for our half marathon, which he was coming to just a few weeks later, which was just a few weeks ago. He was then our defending champion of the half. And it was fun to see the roads and the group and the camaraderie and what the coach was telling him. And we just kind of watched him.

And then Agnes, of course, Agnes Ngetich, who is a rising star. She actually has the world record in the 10K on the road. She's 25 years old. She supports her family with her running. She grew up in a family of eight siblings, if I recall, single mom. And at a very young age right now, she is supporting her family, sending many of her siblings to

school. It was really nice getting to know her.

She's a new athlete to us. She just ran the half and it's amazing to see where she's from. With this visit, we're able to see where these athletes are from and meet some of their family, see who they train with, where they train, how they train, gives us a whole new understanding of the athletes. And it really provides me a background that I wouldn't have had otherwise. So I was really proud to meet Agnes and to find out where she lives and just get to know her.

00:25:46

Matt Singer: Yeah. It was really incredible to get to see the up and coming athletes, the current athletes, recent champions. But we also took a moment to get to catch up with some of the past champions in Kenya. Obviously, there's no shortage of them. And I want to talk a little bit about the champions dinner that Toby helped organize for us, where 17 of the past champions came together in one room in Kenya and, again, made us feel so welcome and had the opportunity to hear directly from them about how the New York City Marathon impacted their lives and also their communities. Dorian, can you tell us a little bit about what they told us about the impact marathon has had on them?

00:26:22

Dorian Kail: So it was really great because each one of them got up to talk about the impact that we've had on their lives. And aside from providing homes and cows and school for their kids or their siblings or their extended family, some of them have formed organizations. Tegla Loroupe talked about not only her foundation, her Peace Foundation, but she has this school that was set up primarily for orphans.

00:26:48

Rob Simmelkjaer: For those who don't know, Tegla was the first African woman ever to win the New York City Marathon or any major marathon.

00:26:55

Dorian Kail: Oh, sorry. That's right. First African woman. That's right. Sorry about that. You are absolutely right. Tegla Loroupe is amazing. She won our marathon twice in 1994 and 1995. And as Rob said, she was the first African woman to win a major marathon. She took all of the resources provided to her and has given back tenfold. She has this foundation, as I mentioned, but she started the school and they serve over 300 kids a year, half of them sleep there. And it was started for orphans who lived in areas where there was conflict.

So it was a way for them to have a safe place, to have

food, school, a safe place to sleep. And it's continued on. I guess it's from ages 5 to 15. It's amazing. So that was one of many stories. But so many of those athletes just praised us because their lives have changed because of us and they have changed their communities because of what they've accomplished.

00:27:54

Matt Singer: Yeah. We'd be remiss not to mention that the dinner was also hosted at the resort of Ibrahim Hussein, we mentioned before, who before Tegla was the first man or woman to win a major marathon.

00:28:03

Dorian Kail: And it was his resort. And we had just seen a few days earlier, a cross-country championship on that resort.

00:28:12

Matt Singer: Rob and Erica, I'll start with you, Rob, what are some other key takeaways that you learned or relearned while getting to sit with those 17 past champions?

00:28:21

Rob Simmelkjaer: I mean, first of all, just the fact that you can get 17 former New York City Marathon champions to show up at a dinner, they're all within a couple of hours drive of where we were in Eldoret, Kenya. That tells you a lot about what it means. But I think that the fact that it was, maybe this wasn't a surprise, but it was the pinnacle for all of them. It was a life defining moment for every single one of them. And it wasn't just that day, it wasn't just the money they won or the recognition or the fame, but they were different people when they came back to Kenya. They were seen differently. They had opportunities they didn't have before. It's just a life-changing event.

You're a rockstar in Kenya when you've won the New York City Marathon. And in the States, we got a lot of sports in this country. There's basketball and baseball and football, and the marathon winner can walk down Fifth Avenue the next day and not probably be recognized, but that is not true. If you win the New York City Marathon or another major marathon and you come back to Eldoret or Iten or whatever it is, you're a rockstar.

00:29:38

Erica Edwards-O'Neal: I'd say what stands out for me from the dinner was, I don't know if it was Tegla who said it, is that we were the first to gather them. They had never all been gathered in the same place. And watching them celebrate

each other and love on each other and talk to each other and reminisce and seeing the first connect to the most recent, that was extraordinarily special. And they also are people who express that appreciation, gratitude, and respect for one another.

00:30:11

Matt Singer: Rob, can you take a little bit of a deeper dive into what Shoe4Africa is and the contribution that New York City Marathon has had to the organization?

00:30:18

Rob Simmelkjaer: So Shoe4Africa is a nonprofit organization based in Kenya, founded by, as I mentioned earlier, Toby Tanser, a former New York Road Runner board member. My understanding is it started out really actually focused on shoes. They were actually raising money to give shoes to kids to run in Africa. But over time, it morphed into something very different. They started building children's hospitals and schools as well to benefit children in Kenya.

And the children's hospital that we went to, which was called Shoe4Africa Hospital, they had an entire operation there with kids being treated there. And what was special is the parents could be with them. It wasn't just a place where the kid would go and the parents wouldn't see them. The parents could live there, stay there alongside their kids as these kids were being treated. And that was something that was life changing for them.

And then there's nothing like this anywhere near where they were. I think it was the only hospital of its kind, certainly in that part of Kenya, maybe all of Kenya. And so when you're there and you meet people impacted by something like that, it just affects you. Not only that, but then later that same day, we went to an afterschool program that same organization funds. And it was just a place where kids could go either before school to get a meal before going to school because a lot of them didn't have access to healthy breakfast before going to school. So they'd get oatmeal before going to school, or they could come after. And they had just like a fun run for these kids. I think it was like a two kilometer fun run for kids to come after school that day. And I'm thinking, "Oh, yeah, sure, maybe a few dozen kids will come."

900 kids showed up after school to run this fun run. And they each got three books when they finished. That was the prize that they got. And I mean, we have kids races every day here, not every day, but every week on a regular basis. And just to have 900 kids show up after school one random day to run for three books, I did not expect to see something like that. So that was incredible. And the spirit

and the joy that these kids had for running for the community that was created there, and just what Toby has created, again, in large part through funding in our marathon, it really blew my mind.

00:32:45

Erica Edwards-O'Neal: It so far exceeded my expectations. I understood that we'd helped with this hospital. I thought I understood what we were doing. I had no idea the scale and the impact. And I do think as we arrived on the property, not even the pictures did it justice. And so there was a moment of just standing to take it in, but also understanding, I don't know if we said this, being reminded that these families are being cared for at no cost and that New York Road Runners as a part of making that happen was so far beyond anything I really expected. A separate burn unit and it was just serving so many people.

And then also going back to the hotel, when I was in the hotel, we met a group of women from South Africa who were with, I believe, Operation Smile, who were doing surgeries that we get at the hospital and they stopped us and said, "Oh, my goodness, everyone has been talking about New York Road Runners is coming. Finally, they're coming to see what they've helped build." And beyond meeting the children and the parents and hearing their stories and seeing that it is a place where despite the illness, they center joy. They create always every day a space for play and joy.

The care teams that are caring for the children and the families, I'm going to be honest, I owe Toby an apology because I was like, "It's great," but it's something else about being there and seeing it. I am forever changed. I really am eager to go back personally to volunteer.

00:34:35

Matt Singer: Yeah. I mean, it's kind of funny when Operation Smile is excited that we're there. It's like, you're the ones doing the free surgery. We have lollipops, but it really puts it into perspective. And we mentioned Shoe4Africa was built in large part to the money that was raised by the charity runners for the team, over 4 million over their time as a charity partner of ours. We announced a pretty lofty goal for our charity program this year. Rob, I want to hear a little bit about that goal and also, how does seeing the work in person change your perspective on the importance of that goal?

00:35:08

Rob Simmelkjaer: So this year, as hopefully everybody knows by now is the 50th anniversary of the Five Borough New York City Marathon. And we thought here, what are some ways that

we can highlight this anniversary, but also highlight the impact that the marathon has? And so we set a goal this year of, for the first time ever, raising \$100 million for charities through the charity program of the marathon. So we increased how many entries went to charity this year and we've launched that. And we've got now hundreds and hundreds of charities out there with bibs into the marathon and lots of runners.

I'm sure many people watching or listening to this are out there raising money for one of these fantastic causes. So it's a big part of what the marathon's about. I think to your question, one thing that coming off of this trip to Kenya, I want to do more of, and this podcast and other things that we do in the content space can be a big part of this, Matt, going to give a little, here we go, here comes your work assignment-

00:36:09

Matt Singer: My next year assignment.

00:36:10

Rob Simmelkjaer: Exactly. I don't think we tell those stories enough. And again, it's very easy to fall back on how much was raised and the money and the dollars. And that's all great and it's all important, but numbers just don't come close to telling the story of that aspect of our impact. And as an organization, we have an impact statement, our mission to create healthier lives and stronger communities through the transformative power of running. Well, obviously running itself is the focus and the core of what we do as an organization, but when people raise money for organizations like Shoe4Africa or whatever it might be, maybe it's Memorial Sloan Kettering through Fred's team, maybe it's the Leukemia Society, maybe it's any number of social services or educational or whatever kinds of organizations are part of our charity program, which is just about every charitable organization type that you can think of, that's part of creating healthier lives and stronger communities through running.

And we can do a better job, I think, of helping people understand that because we've all seen, especially in the days after the marathon drawing, when people don't get into the marathon and they're disappointed, or maybe they find out that the time they ran wasn't fast enough to get in when they thought it would be. And we see people saying, "Well, gosh, if it weren't for all these charity runners, I would've gotten in." Right? And when you see what's actually happening and the impact that this charity program is really having, no one who saw that would ever say something like that again. And so I think the more we can do to tell

those stories, hopefully people will understand. I think most people do, but everyone will understand why it's so important to support this charity program and to really celebrate the runners who devote their marathon entry and their time and their effort to raising money for these causes through running the marathon.

00:38:18

Matt Singer: Some of those runners will still say it, but hopefully they feel a little guiltier about saying it.

00:38:25

Rob Simmelkjaer: Fair.

00:38:27

Matt Singer: Speaking of impact, again, one of the big driving forces to this trip was... And, Eric, I think you did a really good job of setting what our role on this trip was, was to listen and learn specifically about the issues that Kenyan women are facing over there. So I do want to pivot a little bit for the rest of the show to talk about that larger issue that we spent a good amount of the trip focusing on. And, Erica, before we even took off from Nairobi to Eldoret, you had met with a friend of a friend, Dr. Faith, who helped lay the landscape of what we were about to witness firsthand. She talked about the judicial system. Can you tell us a little bit about what we learned and what she told us?

00:39:08

Erica Edwards-O'Neal: Yeah. She was extraordinarily helpful. And we had also expressed to Dr. Faith that we weren't looking to parachute in. We didn't come with answers, but it was truly about listening and learning and supporting, one, the folks who were already on the ground with solutions and advocacy. And she gave, I think, great insight, reminding us that it is a complex situation and problem, not just there in Kenya, but all over the world, this notion of gender-based violence often comes with shame.

And then we also talked specifically around cultural barriers, getting over shame, the educational piece, and understanding that recent changes even in the judicial system that I had not understood that it had been at some point really challenging for a woman or a person to get a divorce. It had previously taken a very long time. It required kind of open testimony and just a really complex process. And that was something that none of us had really known or discussed. And so she gave a great overview to the challenges that there was not one simple solution, but that we needed to go in and really hear from folks what their

individual obstacles and barriers were. And it would be important that we think about this on an individual level and also as a systemic situation. I think that was really helpful.

00:40:41

Matt Singer: Yeah. And Rob, I think a lot of people might think that the elite woman runners, because of their success, maybe they're immune to this, but it's actually the opposite. Can you tell us a little bit about the impact that the climate for women in Kenya has on women in the sport?

00:40:57

Rob Simmelkjaer: One of the stories that we heard when we were there, which really impacted me was stories about camps that young girls are beginning to train at. And when a girl is identified early on as a good runner, it's fast, what starts to happen in a lot of those cases, which is people start to see them as, to some people, less well-intentioned people, start to see them as opportunities. There are stories of girls being targeted for whatever it may be, friendship, romantic relationships by folks who see them as opportunities for financial advancement, because they know that if this girl grows into a champion, there will be money that comes with that.

And so there now is a part in a situation like that, part of the process of raising a female champion runner is protecting them from people who are essentially predatory, looking to take advantage of them. So in a situation like that, just because you've gone on and become a professional runner and had financial success and you have prize money and sponsorship, you may be caught up already in a situation where you're in a relationship that is not in your best interest. You may not have independent financial wherewithal. You may not have your own bank account. You may not even get money paid to you by your sponsor or by the race that you just won. That money may go to a husband or a boyfriend first before you even see it.

So creating that level of financial independence for these women is a part of that. And that's where the running element of this really does come in. And to your point earlier, Dorian, about the role we have to play, of course, we want the best for all of our runners, but we and the other major marathons have to at least start taking into account the circumstances that some of these women may be coming from when they come to run one of our races.

00:43:13

Dorian Kail: Well, and that's why we really felt to support the organization like Tirop's Angels who is educating these

people, is teaching them financial literacy, teaching them skills that they can support themselves so that then we can feel good about paying these women when they run our races and we know that they're going to be safe.

00:43:32

Matt Singer: Yeah. Dorian, tell us a little bit more about Tirop's Angels and especially Viola. A lot of our listeners might know Viola Cheptoo as a 2021 New York City Marathon runner up and her recent sixth place finish in Tokyo. But tell us a little bit more about Viola as the person and her dual role that she's taken on.

00:43:48

Dorian Kail: Viola's an amazing athlete, like you just said, and her very good friend, Agnes Tirop, was just 25 when she was killed. Agnes was an amazing athlete. She was a star in her own right. She had two world championship medals. She had just broken the world record in the 10K and she was killed by her husband and she was stabbed to death. And she was embarrassed to tell her friends that she had been abused. And Viola was one of her good friends, one of her training partners, and she started with a group of women, Tirop's Angels to help combat gender-based violence, to help support these women, to make them feel comfortable talking about it, to giving them a safe space.

And Viola trains really hard as a professional athlete. She just did really well in Tokyo, broke her own personal record in the marathon just a few weeks ago, and she's also chairing this organization and trying to make a difference. And as Rob pointed out, they're trying to build a safe house. That's when they showed us the land. They're working really hard to help women in the community to educate men and boys that this isn't okay. They're working with government officials, they're working with organizations like ours, and I think we can help give them a voice. And she's just a remarkable woman, just a true friend to Road Runners now.

00:45:17

Rob Simmelkjaer: And while we were there in Kenya visiting with her and her team, this was weeks before the Tokyo marathon, I was actually getting concerned. I was like, "Viola, you're spending a lot of time with us while we're here visiting your organization. Shouldn't you be training? I'm worried that you're not going to be ready for the Tokyo marathon." Well, she was ready because she ran a personal record in Tokyo, personal best-

00:45:41

Dorian Kail: Exactly. But what's amazing about Viola is that she'll train and then in the evening she'll take calls from people, or she's told me that she's been home and she'll have people come to her house if they don't feel safe. She is a giver. And I'm so proud of her because she gives so much to so many people. Yes. So we were worried about her at her own race.

00:46:02

Matt Singer: I think that was one of the most impressive things. Obviously, we talk about runners who balanced work-life and training all the time, but this work that she's taken on herself. No one's asked her to do this. She's taken it on herself. And it is 24/7. She's always on call. We saw her taking calls from survivors in between meetings and in between training. And we actually got the chance to hear directly with some of the survivors that Viola and her team have supported. Erica, can you tell us a little bit about the experience to sit in that room at the Tirop's Angels office and hear directly from the survivors and the impact that had?

00:46:33

Erica Edwards-O'Neal: Yeah. Some of the stories were just simply heartbreaking, but what I focus on is the resiliency in that room. Women who had not just survived with Viola and her team, her wonderful team around her, not just survive, but they were thriving. And what I saw was holding and supporting each other. We won't go into those stories, but we saw really trauma and survivors at several different age groups. And just, again, what I choose to take from that was the resiliency and that the gratitude that they had for the work that Tirop's Angels was doing really was, I think, the true impact for me.

00:47:30

Matt Singer: Yeah. And the community behind Viola, that just resonated throughout the entire trip. Everywhere we went, it was so amazing to see the community uplifting her because it's not a soft subject to have over there in a male-dominated community when you're trying to uplift those women.

00:47:46

Erica Edwards-O'Neal: I think that's important to say there were and are a lot of men who were and are supporting the efforts. And so my own biases may have said I didn't expect to see that, but it was really beautiful to see the men there doing the ceremonies, celebrating what Tirop's Angels is doing and also supporting and investing in.

00:48:12

Dorian Kail: There was a group of men called the Boda-boda, and they are the men who drive the motorcycles that are like the taxis there. And they paraded us into where the Tirop's Angels office was located, but they were a big part of when Agnes Tirop was found. It was one of the Boda-boda men who found her. And they've been a big part of Tirop's Angels in helping the organization train men and boys. So I think it's a good point to bring up that there are men who are supporting that organization.

00:48:43

Erica Edwards-O'Neal: Who are absolutely modeling what it looks like to care and respect women, and also how just brilliant of Viola to see that important piece of the puzzle to ensure that men are modeling and educating. And I know those folks say they provide education during rides. They ask people if they're familiar with Tirop's Angels. They take every opportunity during their regular course of business to talk about the importance of reeducating folks around gender-based violence.

00:49:20

Matt Singer: I think one moment where we really got to see full community come together, men, women, elected officials, the Boda-boda group, some of the dance groups, coaches, agents was the shareholder meeting that Viola planned. Rob, can you tell us a little bit about that meeting and what was shared, what was discussed, and who was in the room?

00:49:40

Rob Simmelkjaer: So Viola Cheptoo and her husband, who's a huge supporter of her speaking of men who support the cause, he's an incredible person who's really supportive of all the work she's doing. They gathered people who have been donors to Tirop's Angels, local government officials, people from the running community, runners, agents, coaches, race organizers, all kinds of stakeholders in that community all gathered together to talk about Tier Ops angels, talk about the organization's mission and purpose, give an update on where they are, the plans for the safe house, their needs for funding.

I spoke there as well to just talk about why we as New York Road Runners were there and how we hope to be able to help them in the future. So it was impressive to see the breadth of the support that that organization has in right there in Eldoret, which is really the heart of the running community in Kenya. And it definitely gave me a lot of optimism that this can continue to grow as a movement and that there's a broad enough support for really making change

on what is a really complex societal issue.

00:50:59

Matt Singer: Yeah. And I think that's an important message coming out of this trip and something that we reiterated to staff when we spoke to them at a recent town hall, is this wasn't just a trip to Kenya. We were here to listen and learn, but next step is to determine and take action. Erica, Dorian, can you walk us through what's next for us on our partnership with Viola and Tirop's Angels?

00:51:21

Erica Edwards-O'Neal: Our goal, we are looking to support their application to be a charity partner, and really right now we are in conversations with them to figure out just what it is they need. So we're not going in with some prepackaged solutions, but our first hope is that they will complete their paperwork and application to successfully become a charity partner. And we think that's first step, Dorian.

00:51:51

Dorian Kail: Yeah. Absolutely. And help tell their story like we're doing now because the more people who know about it, maybe the more people can reach out and support and provide their assistance.

00:52:01

Rob Simmelkjaer: And being a part of the charity program, when I was there, one thing that you realize again is, all right, we talk about raising \$100 million for charities. Just take a teeny, tiny fraction of that. If an organization like that were to have 10 bibs in the marathon, let's say, and raise, I don't know, \$25,000, the distance that money like that goes in a place like that is so much greater than what you might think it would do and the impact that it would make here.

I mean, we all remember going out to dinner in Kenya, in Eldoret or wherever we were going and we'd have a whole group of us going out to dinner and the bill would come and it would be like \$40. The dollar goes a really long way in a place like that. So we're really hopeful that whatever we're able to do for them can make a really big impact on what they're doing as an organization.

00:52:58

Erica Edwards-O'Neal: And sustained growth, right? So we're looking to ensure that they are helped to ensure that they are set up for sustained growth and success. So that's the other part of our conversation.

00:53:14

Matt Singer: All right, Rob, before I throw it back to you and I go to that side of the set again, I want to hear from the three of you, what's something that you maybe didn't know before the trip that you learned while we were over there that you want our listeners to know as well?

00:53:26

Rob Simmelkjaer: I think that just, I don't know, the passion that I think exists there for running. And it's more than just a form of exercise there. It's more than what we sometimes refer to it as free therapy. A lot of our runners talk about running as that for them, but it's a lifestyle and it's really just fundamental for a lot of them in terms of their existence, their aspirations. The culture of running there is just something that's very special. And I think everyone with a passion for running, I would recommend anybody who ever has a chance to go over there and see what it's like.

Be in Eldoret or be in any other town that's got a lot of runners who come from and just sit there and watch there's this path on the side of the road and you see these unbelievably fast people. You don't know who they are. I mean, each of them could be a top 20 in the world runner. You don't always know, but they're just flying at 5,000 feet of altitude. And you realize that it's something that really is ingrained in the culture there.

00:54:39

Erica Edwards-O'Neal: I'd say pivoting a bit, what I did not realize was that sustainability is a way of life, not a nice to have. I was surprised by repurposed shoes and finding notebooks that were recycled. What was it? Papaya, banana leaf. That was beautiful to me. And we saw a lot of social enterprises. So that's one.

00:55:15

Dorian Kail: I guess, really, I can't believe the impact we've had over there. Really, everywhere we went, you could see the impact we've had. And it is remarkable, really. And I think that's why we were greeted with open arms, because we've had such an impact over there. And I hope we can go back again because there's so much more to do and see. And anyway, I guess it's the impact more than anything.

00:55:45

Matt Singer: Great. Well, thank all three of you for letting me moderate this panel. And, Rob, until the next time I'm dragged on set, back to you.

00:55:55

Speaker 5: Peloton's most advanced tread yet is here. The new Peloton cross-training series, Tread+, powered by Peloton IQ. Designed for runners who want top tier performance, it features premium hardware that makes every run and workout more efficient, effective, and motivating. And it accelerates your personal growth mile after mile. The rubberized slap belt cushions every single step and creates an energizing running space for each stride.

And with strength workouts, you can stack right into your routine. You'll build lower body muscle to support stronger runs. With auto incline adjusting automatically to match instructor cues, your intensity stays exactly where it needs to be so you can stay in the zone and focus on your workout. Experience our most advanced tread yet at onepeloton.com. Peloton, the official digital fitness partner of New York Road Runners.

00:56:51

Rob Simmelkjaer: Well, that does it for another episode of Set the Pace. I want to thank our guest today, New York Runners Chief Diversity Officer, Erica Edwards-O'Neal, and New York Runners Director of Professional Athletes, Dorian Kail, as well as our moderator today and the guy who's behind all these podcasts, our head of content, Matt Singer. Hope you enjoyed this episode. If you want to learn more about our trip to Kenya, please check out our social feeds on Instagram, Facebook. We've put a lot of effort into telling the story while we were there. We also have a great blog post on nyrr.org where you can learn more about it.

You can also, by the way, visit Tirop's Angels and follow them on Instagram as well. They do a great job of telling the stories of everything they're doing as well. Thanks for joining us. Remember, if you like the show, please rate it, subscribe, and we'll see you next week. Enjoy the miles.