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Viola Cheptoo: She was so happy. She even had her earphones on, singing to music on the hallways of the hotel that we were staying in. She was changing to become who she really wanted to be. Her personality was coming out. She had her nails done, hair done. And it really broke me knowing that I was right in front of her performing and doing so well, yet she had other issues back home that as a friend, I felt that maybe I should have seen something.

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Rob Simmelkjaer: Hey everybody, and welcome to Set the Pace, the official podcast of New York Road Runners presented by Peloton. I'm your host, Rob Simmelkjaer, the CEO of New York Road Runners. Becs is not with us this week. She's on her way to Chamonix, France for this epic trail run that she is taking on starting August 28th at 9:00 AM in Courmayeur, Italy. It's 101 kilometer course with over 6,000 feet in elevation gain. It runs through Italy, Switzerland, and France to finish up in Chamonix. And can't wait to see how this goes for Becs.

I know how excited she's been. I've been watching her posts on social media, was texting with her the other day. It's quite an undertaking. Part of her renaissance as a trail runner now and looks very exciting for her. I just want to know about the food when she gets back because when you're putting in that kind of mileage every day in places like Italy and Switzerland and France, I just want a log of all of the after run meals that she's having and the pre-run meals because that to me is probably going to be the highlight. That would be the highlight of trying to complete anything 100 kilometers long. But I hope Becs has a great, great time. We wish her luck in her event and we will talk to her about it when she gets back.

Well, you probably saw the news just last week, the 2026 TCS New York City Marathon announced its professional athlete field. And of course, this is a special one for us at New York Road Runners because it is the 50th anniversary of the Five Borough Marathon, the thing that we all know as the true New York City Marathon starting in Staten Island finishing in Central Park. It was 1976 when this first happened and we are celebrating the 50th anniversary and we're celebrating it with a star-studded field of professional athletes. We are so excited to welcome these amazing athletes, 40 Olympians and Paralympians in the field.

And the woman who helped put that field together joins me now on Set the Pace, Dorian Kail, our director of professional athletes. Dorian, welcome back to Set the Pace.

00:02:53

Dorian Kail: Hi, Rob. Thanks for having me.

00:02:55

Rob Simmelkjaer: Absolutely. And congratulations on this field that we've got. And let's talk about this because it's pretty incredible. We've got three of the four defending champions coming back in the men's open and division, women's open division and both wheelchair fields. Of course, Susannah Scaroni, the only one not able to make it back. She has a good reason. She just had a baby.

00:03:15

Dorian Kail: Yeah. She just had a baby.

00:03:16

Rob Simmelkjaer: Yeah, just had a baby. So she's taken some time off, but the other three defending champs will be with us. And let's start there, Dorian, about those defending champions and how excited we are to have them back.

00:03:28

Dorian Kail: Yeah. Hellen Obiri's coming back. We just love Hellen. We call her the queen of New York. Of course, she just won our MasterCard New York Mini 10K. She's back to run. She ran in London last spring. She ran that race to see how fast she could go. And of course, she ran quite an incredible marathon, but she's back in New York and we're so excited to have her. And of course, Tania will be watching at the finish line with her. That's her daughter. And then Benson Kipruto's back who we visited in Kenya. He's a 202 marathoner. He's won Chicago. He's won many of the majors and we're thrilled that he's back in action with us and as well as Marcel Hug, who we know is the silver bullet. I think he holds every course record at the majors and he's unbeatable at the moment.

But we have 25 Olympians and Paralympians. These are, well, actually medalists and it's an incredible field. It's also so diverse. I'm always so proud of the number of countries that are represented in this field. We have countries, China, Peru, Austria, and I think that's really important to New York and important to runners in our community to see that everybody's represented. So, I'm really happy and excited about that.

We also, there are just a number of athletes I have to rattle off. We're thrilled that Andreas Almgren is running. He just won the gold at Euro Champs and it's really exciting. He's making his debut in the marathon. I think that got loads of attention. And if you saw on social media, people were so excited about that. And of course, we have the American Marathon record holder and Conner Mantz,

he's back and that'll be thrilling. He just had a baby too. It seems like a lot of athletes just had babies.

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Rob Simmelkjaer: Dorian, you mentioned Hellen Obiri coming back and we're used to having a duel between her and Sharon Lokedi. Sharon's not going to be here this year. She's running Chicago, but we've got another big, big name in the women's field that should be giving Hellen quite a run for her money. And that is of course, Sifan Hassan. Let's talk about her. Of course, she had that incredible Olympics in Paris that no one will ever forget in 2024. Came to New York last year, but it was right on the heels of running in the world championship. And so, probably wasn't exactly in her best form, but she wants another shot at New York.

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Dorian Kail: Well, actually, it's funny you brought that up. We had her on a media call and we were laughing with her because it was actually Sydney that she had just run prior to New York last year.

00:06:03

Rob Simmelkjaer: Oh, thank you, yes.

00:06:03

Dorian Kail: And it really beat her up. So she said she's really looking forward to this year to seeing what she can finally do. But she's so funny when you talk to her. She said, "Well, you never know what could happen, but I'm ready. I'm ready for New York." She's a lot of fun and I do think she's going to give Hellen a run for her money, and that's what we want in New York.

We also have Sheila Chepkirui who has won here before. And of course, Sheila has often been with Hellen and Sharon at the end of our marathon. So I think we're going to have quite a group running at the very end.

And let's not forget about some of the top Americans we have. Jess McClain is coming back. She was the top American in Boston. She's just an amazing athlete. This is only the beginning for her. The last few seasons we've seen her just get faster and faster. She's representing Team USA in Copenhagen in the middle of September, and then she's going to come and run our race. So I'm so excited to see her. And let's not forget Winnie Colotti. She's making her debut. She chose New York to make her debut in the marathon, and we're so excited to have her. So I can't wait. I could go on and on with the number of people that we have in this field.

00:07:11

Rob Simmelkjaer: No, it's great. It's a great field. On the men's side, who do you think will give Benson Kipruto his biggest challenge as he tries to go back- to- back years in New York?

00:07:23

Dorian Kail: Listen, there's a great Japanese athlete named Kengo Suzuki. I think Andreas Almgren, who I've mentioned before, he just won gold at European Championships. We have no idea what he can do in his debut. Connor Mantz, an amazing American marathoner. Of course, he has the record. He works so hard. He just had a baby and he was injured early in the year and he is back, better than ever. Zouhair Talbi, Zouhair was the top American in Boston. Not to confuse it, but he has the fastest time as an American, but it was on the all conditions course in Boston, so it's not considered a record. He's a fantastic athlete and look, they all are getting ready for LA. So all of these races mean so much, and they chose New York to show what they can do now and what their training looks like. So I think all of these guys are going to give it their all, and it's going to be a fantastic race.

00:08:26

Rob Simmelkjaer: Dorian, I think it's probably really interesting for a lot of our listeners, our runners, our members, just to get a little peek behind the curtain when it comes to putting these professional fields together. You, your partner, Sam Grotewold, who does such a great job under Christine Burke in this pro athletes area of New York Road Runners, you guys are working at this for months and months to put these fields together. And you are of course, negotiating with athletes, with their agents. You are in a lot of cases, competing and pretty much in all cases, competing against the other fall marathons. There are more of those now with Sydney that you mentioned earlier. And of course, there are two very flat, fast courses that happen in the fall, Berlin and Chicago. So when you're making the pitch for why someone should come run New York, which is not flat and fast versus going to Chicago and Berlin, what's the pitch that you make?

00:09:24

Dorian Kail: Well, first of all, I give Sam Grotewold so much credit. He's been here for over 25 years now, and he's very good at closing the deal. And I think the biggest win for people with New York is we know how to tell their story and we get it out there to the world, not just New York, not just within the United States, but worldwide. And if you

want to get your story out there, you come to New York. And this is a championship race. This is not a time trial. People are running, they're not being paced, they're pushing themselves to the limits, and it is a hard, hard course. And if you look at all the times at all the majors, the slowest times are our race because it's such a tough, tough course. And you're right, we have so much competition now, but I think everybody goes to the races that they choose for a reason.

And my biggest pitch to them is we'll tell their story and we care about who they are. Not that the others don't, but we really know how to shine a light on everybody. And especially, this is how I got to know the person who's coming on to the podcast today, and that's Viola. And I learned her story and now, we're helping tell her story. And she is running this race this year. The first time she ran was in 2021. Hopefully, she'll talk about it. But they come to New York, we get to know them, they become family, and I hope that that's a good enough pitch to convince them to come. And most of the time, it is.

00:10:54

Rob Simmelkjaer: Yeah, I love it. To me, that's exactly how I would pitch it. Not to mention, of course, the city of New York and the experience that you get coming here. There's nothing else like it. Well, good job on beginning my transition there to our interview with Viola Cheptoo. You mentioned her. She's joining the women's field this year. We're so excited to have her. Viola is from Kenya. You might remember she was someone we visited over in Kenya when New York Road Runners made our trip over there in February. She's the founder of Tirop's Angels, the organization that fights gender-based violence. We talked about that. We'll be talking about that a little bit more with Viola coming up.

But let's just talk about Viola as a runner. She's fresh off of a 21905 personal best at the Tokyo Marathon just this past March, one of just six women in this year's field who has run under 220. So she's a contender. She's rising as a runner, a real threat, and Viola will be with us in just a moment. So stay tuned for our conversation with Viola Cheptoo.

00:12:00

Speaker 1: Peloton has got something for whatever running mood you're in. Try instructor-led runs and walks that are built to fit into your routine with classes that help you stay consistent, build speed, and be in the moment. Track your metrics, see your progress, and train smarter. We've got it all to help you reach your goals and stay on track. Peloton, the official digital fitness partner of New York Road Runners.

00:12:24

Rob Simmelkjaer: Our guest today is one of the best marathoners in the world and one of the most amazing people in our sport. Viola Cheptoo grew up in Kenya in one of the country's great running families, the younger sister of five-time Olympian Bernard Lagat, and she has more than made a name of her own. She finished second in her marathon debut right here in New York City. And then this past March, she ran a personal best of 2:19 in Tokyo.

But Viola's story reaches well beyond the finish line. In 2021, her close friend and training partner, Agnes Tirop, a two-time world medalist who had just broken a world record, was killed by her husband and Viola turned her grief into a movement founding and now leading Tirop's Angels, an organization that is fighting gender-based violence and protecting women across Kenya's running community and beyond. We had a chance to visit with Viola and everyone at Tirop's Angels in our trip to Kenya this past February. And now, we are so excited to be welcoming Viola to New York City once again. Welcome, Viola. Great to have you on the podcast.

00:13:33

Viola Cheptoo: Thank you so much for having me, Rob.

00:13:36

Rob Simmelkjaer: It's great to have you. Viola's joining us from Flagstaff, Arizona, where she's out there training for the marathon at some altitude. How's the training going, Viola? How are you feeling with what are we at now? About a couple of months to go before New York, a little less?

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Viola Cheptoo: I'm starting to feel great. I'm happy that Sharon is here to train with. She's a great partner, both in training and just in life. So training is going well and I'm looking forward to-

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Rob Simmelkjaer: Sharon Lokedi, I should say, for folks who don't know. Yeah. Sharon's your training partner extraordinaire. Are you getting any tips from Sharon on running in New York? She's had a little bit of success here as well. What kind of tips are you getting from her about running in New York or you're running against Hellen Obiri, her friend and rival as well?

00:14:22

Viola Cheptoo: She's been really good, especially with telling me just a few things about the race, especially how her

race unfolded last year with the course record. And she's been a really good resource. Looking at the field that we have, this year is going to be also a very strong field with Sifan, Sheila returning and Obiri. And I think it's just about putting in the right amount of work because New York is not an easy course. So that's one of the things that she keeps telling me. And I have to say that the reason why I'm late for this podcast is because I really wanted to join her training because she just came back from Kenya and I wanted to just jump on those tough sessions with her and that's how she's been helping me both in physical training and also emotionally preparing myself for that kind of a field.

00:15:19

Rob Simmelkjaer: Yeah. Well, hey, you're right on time for all of our listeners, so don't worry about it. And priorities, you got to get the work done to get ready for the big day on November 1st. Viola, I want to go back to Tokyo this past March for your incredible personal best run out there. Tell me about that day for you, how it unfolded. We had just seen you in Kenya in February, so, we were all really wondering how things would turn out for you. And obviously, they turned out really well. Walk through that race for us and how you were able to set that PR.

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Viola Cheptoo: Tokyo really turned out to be one of those races that everything aligned. I think it's just from going from the visit that your team, New York Road Runners came to Kenya, it really gave me a renewed source of energy because from what I've been working on with Tirop's Angels, I felt that finally, I have a bigger team or a bigger family to support the work that I'm doing. So, I felt something lifted off my shoulders because now, I know that the team is growing and the support is coming. So I was running with less stress actually. And that was first of all, one of the things that really felt different.

And then number two, I prepared very well for this, for Tokyo Marathon. I have never been to a faster course before. It's always been either Boston or New York, which are known to be the toughest courses to run on. And so, going there, I knew that I needed to give myself an opportunity to run fast and where I had probably slightly higher expectations than the results that I got based on the training that I had done. But either way, I was really, really happy with the 219 because that was a huge PB for me.

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Rob Simmelkjaer: Yeah, huge. And that course, did it work for

you? It's obviously flat. There's a lot of out and backs, so obviously, you felt good. Was there a point in that race, Viola, where you realized you had it going on and it was just going to be a great day for you?

00:17:22

Viola Cheptoo: Yeah. From the beginning, I felt really great and I was surprised by how good I was running and not feeling like I was afraid that by maybe 30K I was hitting the wall. And by the time we even got to 30K, I just kept telling the guy that was helping me in the race, Hillary, that this is amazing. I've never felt this way in a race before at 30K because at 30K, that's where the race starts. And by 30, I was still going maybe until the last two kilometers. Then I started feeling that, okay, I've been working hard for maybe just a little bit before the end. I think it was also the buildup from Berlin, which went well after coming back from a big injury that put me out for over a year. And I just wanted to build the momentum on that.

And I was really happy that I felt great in Berlin and I was able to reflect on running in a race where it was really, really hot, to going to Tokyo where the weather was super nice, the course is flat and fast. And also, the field was really strong as well. And I wanted to challenge myself to make sure that I'm placing as high as I can, but also, running as fast as I could.

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Rob Simmelkjaer: Absolutely. Well, we hope that the time off, because it's actually a good amount of time off. You've got Tokyo in March to New York at the beginning of November. That's the longest period of time you could have between two majors in a calendar year. So you've had time to recover. What's the training block been like as you've tried to ramp back up for New York?

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Viola Cheptoo: So, I took some time, more time than I needed, but I also, knowing that I had a longer break between Tokyo and New York, I just added a few 10-Ks, which one of them was the mini. Of course, mini didn't go as well as I wanted. I think I took more break than my body is used to, and it was a shock for me to go down from a marathon to a 10K. But the building block has been great for heading up to New York. I've done a lot of just longer and build up stuff because I needed to be able to start pushing faster around this time and moving forward towards the race.

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Rob Simmelkjaer: Viola, I want to go back to your growing up in Kenya, obviously from this incredible running family, your brother Bernard Lagat turned into a legend. What was it like in that family? Was there an expectation when you were young that running would be what you would do?

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Viola Cheptoo: Growing up really, nobody talked about running being part of anything. It was just more fun to go to competitions which were not far from home. And as a young girl growing up, I think just not attending school like any other kid, not attending school on a Thursday and a Friday was a different switch from just having a normal school routine. And then I think I remember the first time when my brother ran maybe around 2000 or 2002, I watched him on the TV. It's a funny thing because in our village, we only had a neighbor that had a very small TV, black and white TV. So everybody in the village would go there because everybody now, my brother was a celebrity, both in the village and almost everywhere around back home. So we would all go and cramp into his little living room.

We would sit on top of each other just watching my brother. And I remember thinking, how did he get on a TV? And I was like, "This is amazing. I just want to be in there, on the TV where everybody can watch me." And I think that was the first time that I felt inspired by what he was doing and I really wanted to start running. But the older I got, priorities changed. It wasn't just about being on the TV, but then now, being able to travel on a plane to go to America, because now at that point, I knew my brother was going to school in America. And then my brother started talking to me about discipline in school, starting to run because there's an opportunity for me to come to the U. S. for studies after high school. And now, my priorities switch from just going to a competition just to get away from school on a Thursday and Friday to wanting to do well in school and focus on running so I can get a scholarship to come to America to study.

And really, that happened and my parents also checked me, especially on discipline, especially with girls. It would've been easy for me to probably have a boyfriend at a very young age because that's what all the kids do and maybe switch my priorities a little, but everybody was very strict on education and focusing on running. And that really helped, having my brother to guide me and also the siblings that came here after my brother as well.

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Rob Simmelkjaer: Yeah. It's the discipline. It's the focus that not many young people that young in their teenage years are

generally going to have. That's what it takes to succeed in a sport like running. It creates a tremendous amount of discipline. So, you made the Olympics at the 1500 meters and now, of course, you've moved your way up to the marathon, you've run your fastest times in your 30s. Take us through that transition for you from being outstanding on the track to deciding to move up to the road and the marathon distance as we see so many runners do, but what was that transition like for you and the decision making that went along with it?

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Viola Cheptoo: Switching from track to marathon for me, it was not something that was planned. So after the Olympics in 2016, I got injured in 2017 and that injury took me out for almost two years. And about that time I was just wanting to just get back to running. And the more I ran longer and slower stuff, I was like, I had never done anything past 18 kilometers when I was running track. And so for me to go from 18 to just running 20Ks every day because I really, really desperately wanted to get back to running, it felt really good. And so I started building up on speed, running a little faster. And with time my coach was like, "I want you to try a 5K." And I was like, "Okay." So I think I went to Boston to do the BA 5K and I think I was, I can't remember, I think I was second. And that really surprised me because I was against running anything past 1500 for a very long time. And then after that, I went to Berlin and ran the 10K there and I remember running 31 and I just thought, I had never thought I could run 31. And then 2020, I was invited to go to Napoli to run the first half-marathon. And to me, all these transitions felt like nothing had been planned, but anyways, I'm just going to run for fun to see how fast I can run. Now I run a 5K, I ran a 10, let me see what I can do in half. And my coach kept telling me, "You're going to run 68 in half." And I told him, "You're crazy. There's no way I'll run 70 or 72." And so, I went there and I debut in half-marathon and I ran 66.

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Rob Simmelkjaer: Wow.

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Viola Cheptoo: Yeah. And that made me feel like, okay, maybe I'm doing something right. And maybe that injury was that turning point for me to go now to longer stuff because I started enjoying the training more. It wasn't like the speed and the kind of aerobic stuff that I was doing for 1500 was completely different from what I was doing for the half. And

then I want to say my agent and Sam tricked me into the marathon because now I-

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Rob Simmelkjaer: Sam Grotewold, who we were just talking about-

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Viola Cheptoo: Yes.

00:25:34

Rob Simmelkjaer: Our professional athletes' leader at Road Runners.

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Viola Cheptoo: So I think it was pre-planned because now, it was around COVID time and Devore told me, "Yeah, now would you like to run another 10K?" So I was like, "Yeah, why not?" So he's like, "Oh, we are very happy. You know New York is one of the best places to go run, and this is your opportunity to run this mini 10K. It's a special race for women only." And I was like, "Okay, I'll go there." So I came to New York and then before I arrived actually, he's like, "If Sam asked you if you want to run a marathon, just tell him I'm going to talk to my agent and then we'll decide." So now, thinking back, I think they had talked about, "Oh, Viola might be going to marathon, but let's see what she can do." So I got to New York and Sam is like, "So V, do you think you want to run a marathon in the future?" I was like, "I'm not against it, but you know I'll talk to my agent. Let's see what we can do."

And then I went back and I kept telling Devore, and around that time, Devore had told me that he wanted me to pace Berlin, that way I can feel the marathon pace for about 30K and go back the following year to finish it. That was not the plan. I think they were just training me to run a full marathon without me noticing. So I went back and he's like, "So what do you think? So did Sam ask you?" I said, "Yes, he did ask me. That's actually funny that you mentioned." And then he asked me and then he's like, "So what do you think?" I said, "Let's stick to the plan. Let me go to Berlin. I don't want to just go there and do really bad and I'm moving up in distance and I'm running well." And then he said, "Okay."

I reached out. No, it was actually London Marathon. So I'm like, "I'll go to London. I'll pace it, next year, then we debut in New York." So he's like, "Okay, fine. Let's go train." So I went back to training. My coach kept saying, "If you get an opportunity to ever go back to New York to run a full marathon, even if it's this year, no expectations. Just go run, just finish the race, just feel

the marathon." And I was like, " You guys, I just ran one half-marathon. I have nothing else to look back to and say, I can actually do a marathon." He's like, " It's okay." So the more I trained, my agent comes and says, " You know, I don't think everything is going the way we wanted with London. How about we just sign up for New York and we can cancel if you don't want to run?"

And I said, " Okay, no problem. Just sign me up, but know that I'm going to pace London. I'm not going to New York." He's like, " Okay, no problem." So it gets now to the decision moment and he's like, "You know, Viola, with COVID, there aren't that many races. I think London already have more people that have experience in pacing. The field is a little small this time round. Let's just go to New York. Let's see what we can do." And then Coach-

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Rob Simmelkjaer: Forget the pacing thing. Just go run New York. Yeah.

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Viola Cheptoo: Forget the pacing, go finish it. And then Coach comes in and he's like, " Viola, you know what I've heard? The exact training that you did last week, Peres did the same thing. And guess what? You are all on the same level. Can you now compare yourself to one of the best athletes in the world? Because Peres has been really consistent." And he's thinking-

00:29:05

Rob Simmelkjaer: This is Peres Jepchirchir. Yeah.

00:29:05

Viola Cheptoo: Peres Jepchirchir. And he's like, " I think you can do this." So now, I'm just thinking, "Oh, okay. I need a race. COVID has been bad. Let me just go run the marathon."

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Rob Simmelkjaer: Wow.

00:29:12

Viola Cheptoo: And so, I came to New York with zero expectation, but then I arrived in New York, and you know when you have that talk with the coach and you are panicking, you're just like, " I think, coach, if I'm in the top 10, this is amazing." And he's like, " There's no top 10 for you." And I'm like, " What do you mean there's no top 10?" He's like, " If you actually run smart, there is top three." I told him, "You are crazy. There's no way, no top three for me. Maybe top five, but top three is ridiculous.

What are you talking about?" And so, I came to New York and I'm running at 25K. So we were having a great time, 15K. And I'm just thinking, is this how a marathon is supposed to feel? This is weird. I'm at 15K. All these top athletes. And I remember running alongside Sally Kipyego and I go to maybe 20K and Sally struggling and I'm like, "Sally, let's go." And Sally's like, "Viola, I'm having such a rough day. Just keep going."

So I went up to Edna, and I think it was Edna, and we were just running. And then a little bit there was somebody else and the field just kept getting smaller and smaller. And I'm just thinking, maybe people will come back (inaudible). Maybe by 30K I'll be out of the race. So we go to 25K, Peres picks her drinks and then she takes off. And I think the day before, Devore that told me at some point, somebody's going to make that move. Don't do it. If she's running faster than 315, don't do it.

So for 5K, I'm running between 315, maybe 312, some 310s. I looked at my watch and I'm like, okay, I'm really going really fast. And I'm at 25K. I think I'm going to make a mistake, but it's okay. I'll be in the top 10 anyways. This is what I wanted. I wanted to come here and... So I go to 30K and we are like three or four people. I couldn't believe it. I'm just thinking, I don't know what's going on. Maybe, I don't know, people would just come from behind me.

And then Peres turned around because there was that bridge. I can't remember what K that was. I made a turn and I got up with Peres and I can't remember. I think she was Ethiopian. I can't remember her name. I really forget names. So I got up with them and Peres looked back and she's like, "Oh, it's you?" I said, "Yes." So we kept going and then she's like, "Is the pace okay?" I'm like, "Yeah, I'm okay. Let's just keep going." We keep looking back and Peres is like, "Are you sure this pace is fine?" I was like, "It's okay. If I fall off, I can be in the top five. No problem. People can just come pick me up at the end. No problem. Let's keep going." So the entire race, Peres and I just kept talking about the pace. And then at some point she's like, "This girl is just going to sit on us. Can we pick up a bit?" I'm like, "If you want to pick up, just go ahead. I will just catch up with you." It was a long run.

00:32:16

Rob Simmelkjaer: Unbelievable.

00:32:18

Viola Cheptoo: So we go to Central Park and we had practiced at Central Park with my agent the day before. And I'm looking and I'm like, "This is where the 5K mark is. Oh my goodness. Or less than five." And I just went down and up

and I'm like, "Something is wrong." I now got to Columbus Circle and I'm thinking it's just one straight up, a right, a left, and then to the finish. So we got close to the top of Columbus Circle and I can't remember her name, Ethiopian athlete. Oh, she took off and Peres went with her and she's like, "Come on, Viola, let's go. Let's not let her beat us. We've been working on this." And I'm like, "It's okay, just go." And so, they went and then by the time I made the right turn, I'm like, "They're not even that far." So I started catching up with them and I didn't even...

At that point, I'm just so happy that I forgot I was competing. I was just so happy to be in the top three. I think I just forgot that I was supposed to compete with Peres. I'm just running behind her and I'm just so happy. It was one of those races that looking back, as a professional athlete now, I'm pinching myself that something could've happened. Maybe if I had tried a little harder, maybe I would've gone with Peres. I would've had a chance to maybe win that marathon.

But either way, that is where my marathon story started. I got to write my marathon story the most positive way ever in New York. And that's why coming to New York every single time that I get invited is so special to me. I don't want to forget the fact that that was the first year that I actually came and everybody was very supportive of me, both in my running career and also my journey starting Tirop's Angels. And so, New York is always going to be special to me.

00:34:14

Rob Simmelkjaer: Well, thank you. And thank you for sharing that story about the 2021 TCS New York City Marathon. For those who don't know how the story officially ended, she ended up as the runner up of the marathon that year in her marathon debut, a time of 20: 22: 44. Yeah?

00:34:33

Viola Cheptoo: Yeah. Oh, I forgot to say that my brother was announcing the race that day. And so, I got to the family chat message group, WhatsApp group, and the first thing that my sister-in-law is like, "You are making your nephew so upset right now, Auntie Lola." And I'm like, "I am doing so well here. You should be celebrating me." So she's like, "Oh, he's upset because you are making his dad cry in front of the entire world on the TV."

00:35:07

Rob Simmelkjaer: That is awesome. I have to go back and watch that broadcast sometime. I would love to see that. What an

unbelievable marathon debut, what a story, and you're still getting stronger. So, we cannot wait to see what you have in your legs on November one here in New York. You mentioned, of course, the support you got back in your first trip when you were founding Tirop's Angels. I want to go back and first just talk about Agnes Tirop, your friend. How did you first meet Agnes?

00:35:41

Viola Cheptoo: I met Agnes when I was still running track. I think at the end of the year, there's always this race in Italy and we all go there to just try to run at least one fast race at the end of the season. Agnes was still very young. She was coming, I think she was... I can't remember how old she was, but she was still shaving her head. And that was a sign that she was still new from high school because most high schools, we shave our heads, we don't keep long hair because that's just part of just being disciplined, not having a lot of time to fix your hair, but to focus on your academics. When she came, instantly I felt like a big sister to her because I'm just thinking she's very young. She's probably haven't traveled that much. And so, I went and warmed up with her.

She was still running barefoot at some point and I was asking her, "Where are your spikes?" She's like, "It's in the bag." So we went together after that warmup, ran that race, and surprise, surprise, Agnes, she's very competitive. She ran that race really, really well. I remember struggling as at that time, what I would refer myself to as an experienced athlete compared to her, not knowing that she really was just competitive from a very young age and just ready to take off. And so, that was my first time that I met Agnes.

Then the more I kept going back and forth to Kenya to train, we kept in contact. We trained together in 2017 as well under her coach because now that was the time when I was injured and I had more time in Kenya. So we just kept training together, going to the same training camp. Then after that, I came back to the U.S. and it was really weird that I never knew that something was going on with Agnes because Agnes was not someone who talks like me, 100 words a minute. She was more calm, quiet. But when it comes to training, her competitive nature would just speak for itself because she would just go crash those workouts and just perform really well in every race that she did. So, yeah.

00:38:03

Rob Simmelkjaer: Viola, when you first heard that Agnes had been killed, was that the first you'd ever heard of any problems that she was having in her relationship to her

husband?

00:38:16

Viola Cheptoo: Yes. That was the first time that I heard anything because even when she was in Germany with me when she was running that, breaking the world record in 10,000, I had arrived a few days earlier and then she was coming from another competition. I think it was a diamond league and so she came straight to Germany. I could not even tell because she was so happy. She even had her earphones on, singing to music on the hallways of the hotel that we were staying in. For the first time, Agnes, I could tell she was changing to become who she really wanted to be. Her personality was coming out. She had her nails done, hair done, and she had her earphones and then she hugged me all over in the corridor. And I'm telling her that I missed her and that I felt bad that she had that injury in 2018.

I didn't even know what the injury was. We didn't even go back and talk about it because whenever people say someone has an injury in Kenya, we don't really like, oh, which kind of injury she has. It's always just something. I didn't even know, but it came out later on that it was from... She was hit in the leg and that's how she was injured. And it really broke me knowing that I was right in front of her performing and doing so well, yet she had other issues back home that as a friend, I felt that maybe I should have seen something.

But I think for a very long time I kind of felt bad that I never asked my friends if they're okay because we are not used to asking people if they're okay unless you see something because all of us have been through things or we've seen things in our own homes that maybe some of those signs were not so obvious because nobody talks about it or it's just too normal for me to see it. So that was really something that made me feel really bad about not knowing.

00:40:24

Rob Simmelkjaer: And the issue of gender-based violence in Kenya, you mentioned that it's something that people see. Talk about that and not just, but maybe especially relating to professional runners and women who have talent and the opportunity to make money through running, but even beyond that in Kenyan society, the issue of gender-based violence and how widespread that it is.

00:40:51

Viola Cheptoo: Yeah. Gender-based violence in Kenya is one of the biggest issues that I have come to realize once I understood what gender-based violence is. It's something that feels like a generational cast or a baton that keeps getting

passed down from our grandparents to now as the young people, my generation or even younger generation than mine, because we see our mothers or our grandmothers being abused and they don't leave because back then, women were not even having opportunities to go to school. They were getting married at a very young age. My mom got married when she was 12 and she was a baby and it wasn't like she was picking a husband. It was arranged marriages.

And then now, to a point where young girls look at their older parents who had kids earlier, that was something that is normal. So other kids, other women who are younger, like my mom's age or younger than my mother, just look at marriage as a ways to just maybe start a family, have your own things, but then the abuse that they see through their own parents continues being passed down and it shows women that it doesn't matter what happens to you, as a woman, you always have to be there for your family or for your children to be happy or your husband to be happy. So your happiness and anything else does not matter.

And that is something that has kept women in those relationships because they feel the weight of society judging them based on a family that fails and not looking at why a woman is leaving. Men have been put in a position of authority over women because that is something that has been pushed down to women for generations that a man is above you. He's the provider. He's the one that should be educated to get... So, back then, if there was an opportunity for kids to go to school, the boy child would be educated and the girl would be married off and the dowry that comes from the girl being married would be used to educate the boys. And that has happened for a very long time.

And getting now to Agnes and myself and also people from my generation, as professional athletes, it's very hard to even talk about what we go through in our own relationships because who are you talking to about issues? Number one, people older than us are looking at us as the generation that should not be having these issues. I had my neighbor who was fighting with her husband and her husband is a teacher. And so other women were asking her, "What do you have to fight with your husband? You guys have money." So everybody looks at a family that is successful to be a family with no issues because your husband is providing for you. What is your issue? So that's how people look at women like, "Oh yeah, you are comfortable. What is your problem? You should be sitting happy, providing and make sure that that husband of yours is happy. You shouldn't be doing anything that he's not happy about. He's providing for you."

So now, it comes to us as a professional athlete, it's completely different as well because we are looked as the successful women who should have it together and not have

GBV issues, but that's not how life works. Because one, if as an educated woman like myself, I am empowered, I understand my rights, and I'm also supportive of other women to be educated and to understand their rights as women and to walk away from situations that they're not happy with, men are not going to be happy to have a woman like me because number one, I know too much. Two, I'm going to be talking to women about things that they should know, which is your money is your money, but you contribute to your family based on what you want. It's not what you are forced to give because we have women who are running, they earn their money. It goes to their accounts, yes. But who withdraws the money?

They would go to the bank. I have gone to the bank and bank managers are like, "Viola, what can you do for your fellow athletes?" It's because they go to the bank, the bank manager sits there and tells the husband, "We cannot give you the money because it's in your wife's account," because obviously, agents would have to send money to the athlete's account and it's usually, let's say in form of euros or dollars. So now, the wife goes and changes the money into Kenya Shilling account. From that exchange, let's say I make money in New York, I get paid in dollars.

00:46:10

Rob Simmelkjaer: Yes.

00:46:10

Viola Cheptoo: It goes to my Kenya dollar account. Now I have to switch to Kenya Shillings. Who negotiates? My husband will go into the counter. Okay, that's not my husband that is doing that, but let's say I'm giving a scenario. So my husband would go to over the counter, negotiates the exchange rate. He gets all the paperwork, brings up to me. I'm just sitting there. He points where I'm supposed to sign and I'm just signing. And guess where the money goes after that?

00:46:36

Rob Simmelkjaer: And in that case, he's given himself. Yes, he's given himself access to the account or whatever through that.

00:46:42

Viola Cheptoo: Yes. Yeah.

00:46:42

Rob Simmelkjaer: Yeah. Mm-hmm. Interesting.

00:46:42

Viola Cheptoo: And then that money that is being changed goes straight to an account that he has control. So guess what?

My sweat, the tears, the aches and pains that I've gone through in training, persevering as a woman who is expected, especially in an African culture, to raise the family, to care for the husband and do 100% of everything else that a man cannot do. I'm doing all those balancing running and God forbid it's a woman like me who handles more than just running and personal life. Maybe I have other businesses. Then all that goes in a minute.

00:47:22

Rob Simmelkjaer: You know, Viola, thank you for sharing that. And that is exactly what Tirop's Angels is trying to do, is educate women and men about, first of all, gender-based violence in Kenya and the history that you just talked about and obviously, the fact that it's wrong, explaining to women the rights they have, and also working with men to try to understand that they need to change their mindset when it comes to women.

And we had a chance to come over there, my colleagues and I, my daughters in February to visit Tirop's Angels, to hear from survivors of gender-based violence directly and what was a very emotional meeting hearing from these women what they had been through. Can you talk about Tirop's Angels and it's you, it's other professional runners who are involved in this and what your hopes are in terms of what that organization can accomplish in changing this problem?

00:48:25

Viola Cheptoo: When we started, we worked mostly with women because we felt the need to, first of all, educate women on their rights, especially female athletes because we were coming from a position where if Agnes has died, how many more women out there who are professional athletes earning money and not getting the opportunity to really enjoy what they've worked so hard for? So we went out and talked to women about GBV, educate them. And then now, we switched the gears to, if we are educating ourselves as athletes, how about a woman in the village who would not have access to information that we have? So we now took off, went to villages, we'd go to church, we'd go to anything. Any congregation that we got an opportunity to speak to with women and people about GBV, we would go. And then we decided that also, we would have to go to schools.

And so, we went and talked to girls about GBV issues. And as time went by, we realized that we might be educating the woman about her rights in all this, but the perpetrators are still out there and they're not accessing the information that we have. So now, we included men as our allies, first of all, to support the work. And I think that was the game changer because we realized that men walking alongside us or

all of us with men working on this journey towards eradicating gender-based violence was the best decision that we made as an organization because we picked a group of men. Number one, they're called the boda boda guys. I think you remember the guys-

00:50:02

Rob Simmelkjaer: Yes, they're motorcycle messengers and basically, they drive people around on motorcycles in Kenya and we met a whole bunch of them. Yes.

00:50:12

Viola Cheptoo: Yeah. For everyone who does not know boda boda, there are men who use motorcycle as form of transportation. It's like a taxi here in the U. S. So back Kenya, it's easy to access the dirt roads which a car could not access or it makes just life easier that way. And so, these men are easy to... Usually, the reason why I even started with them, it's because they're the first people to know things that not all of us would know because if a woman was beaten at night and she's injured and she has to go to the hospital, guess who she's going to call? She's going to call her neighbor who has a boda boda business to take her to the hospital. If something happens to a child that has been abused, they will be sneaking them to the hospital because of the stigma and the boda boda will be dropping them off and back home quickly.

And so, we realized that they have more information that we could use to support survivors of gender-based violence. And that's why when we started working with them, it has really, really changed everything about Tirop's Angels because now we get the information that we wouldn't have received. And then we also partnered with women in the villages who used to run back then. When we started Tirop's Angels, they wanted to come and support the work that we do because they're also survivors of GBV, but they never got the opportunity to run the way they wanted. So they meet every day, run together, and then talk about GBV, how to support each other and how to report to Tirop's Angels if there are any issues. So that is one of the things that has really helped us.

00:51:57

Rob Simmelkjaer: Yes. Well, I can't say enough, Viola, about how incredible it is that while you were in the midst of a very, very challenging and successful professional running career, would start an organization like Tirop's Angels. We were all so incredibly blown away by all the work you're doing, all the partnerships and the people you have who care about that work in Kenya that, as you know, but we haven't

really talked about it on the podcast, New York Road Runners was so happy to make a donation to Tirop's Angels that we told you about right before the MasterCard Mini 10K of \$ 30,000. And that money's going to go to purchasing the land in the area of Kenya where you're from and where most of these runners are from. And that land will be used to build a safe house, the first safe house for female victims of gender-based violence that is on your list of goals for the organization.

So, we were thrilled to make that donation to support the work that you're doing, and we can't wait to continue to work with you. One of my colleagues, Erica Edwards-O'Neal, is joining the board of the organization. So we're so happy to support the work you're doing, Viola, and we just wish you and everybody at Tirop's Angels all the best.

00:53:20

Viola Cheptoo: I want to say thank you so much, Rob, and the entire New York Road Runners Organization for the you've given us. You welcome me the first year. I remember (inaudible) running around trying to get my singlet being printed in honor of Agnes. That was just the beginning. And this organization, NYRR, has been at the center of my heart from day one, from just that one day. But the team taking the time to come to Kenya, spending a lot of money to come to see the work that we do at Tirop's Angels, get to learn about what we do because you really came to the ground where we do the work. You saw the women, you heard the testimonies. We went together to the place where the safe house will be built.

And now, coming back for that mini and also surprising me with that \$ 30,000 donation that will go into purchasing that land. It's a dream come true for Tirop's Angels because I can see the light at the end of all this, that number one, survivors of GBV are no longer going to be homeless. Because really, we feel like every time that we have somebody who really needs us, they don't even have a place that they would be comfortable. They will still be looking on their shoulders to see if something might happen to them. But this is one donation that will give us a sigh of relief knowing that once we have somebody who needs us, we are able to really provide that support for them until when they are ready to take the next step to their freedom.

And New York Road Runners has done that. I want to really say thank you and we will not take for granted your contribution towards Tirop's Angels. I also want to say your daughter, Julia, not only came to Kenya as a teenage girl who has never been to Kenya and went straight to the village where the land is going to be, interacted with all these kids and women from the village who love them so

much, and then come back to the U. S. and say, " Viola, I want to do something for Tirop's Angels." It felt like everything happened around Mini because Julia called me and said, " Viola, I want to meet you. I want to do something for Tirop's Angels, but I really don't know. Let's meet and talk."

It is amazing to see that once the team from New York Road Runners got to see what we do, Julia as a very young kid has organized a virtual 5K for anyone to run and continue to contribute because that money will now go into building because the money that we have gotten from New York Road Runners is going to help us to acquire the land. So now, we are heading into the next step, which will be to fundraise for money to build it. I can see all this happening in a way that I had never thought it would happen. And to add the ice on top of that, Erica is part of the board for Tirop's Angels now.

00:56:27

Rob Simmelkjaer: Yes.

00:56:27

Viola Cheptoo: And I would've never dreamt of having a better team to walk this journey with me, and I'm just so happy.

00:56:35

Rob Simmelkjaer: Well, thank you. And since you mentioned it, and I was going to get to it as well, my daughter Julia has organized a virtual 5K. It's called the Back to School Virtual 5K to Benefit Tirop's Angels. We're going to put a link to it in the show notes. It's a Virtual 5K. You download an app, link it to your Strava for a \$ 25 donation to Tirop's Angels, and all the proceeds go to Tirop's Angels. You can run this Virtual 5K. The fastest men's and women's times in the Virtual 5K will be given complimentary automatic entry into the 2027 United Airlines NYC half. I'm donating those myself. And so, make sure you sign up and run. They're open. The Virtual 5K is open until September the 13th. So, we'll put a link to it. You can also see it on my personal Instagram, Viola's Instagram as well. I'll pin it to the top. So we're thrilled to continue to support it.

And Viola, what can I say? You're an incredible person, an incredible athlete. Thank you for joining us today. Fresh off of your training run. Keep at it. You still got some work to do before New York, but we can't wait to see you in New York Marathon Week and hope you have a terrific rest of your training block and a great day on November 1st. Thank you.

00:57:55

Viola Cheptoo: Thank you so much. I am so happy. I'm looking forward to coming back to New York to see what else I still have on these legs. People usually say age is just a number and I'm starting to believe that because the older I get, I feel that the better I become. So I'm hoping that everything will align on November 1st for me to have another great race. I'm really grateful for the support on a personal level. Being invited to such an incredible race that a lot of people would want to be part of is... I don't take that for granted as a professional athlete and also, for the support that I've received for Tirop's Angels. So thank you so much.

Also to Dorian who always does a great job, especially with helping me to plan on how to receive the New York Road Runners because no one had ever been to Kenya before. So that was really amazing. And I want to say also, thank you for supporting me as an athlete. Whenever I come to New York, I feel at home because that first welcome from Dorian always makes you feel like you are in the right place, you belong there. So, thank you so much.

00:59:09

Rob Simmelkjaer: New York Road Runners is a nonprofit organization with a vision to build healthier lives and stronger communities through the transformative power of running. The support of members and donors like you helps us achieve our mission to transform the health and wellbeing of our communities through inclusive and accessible running experiences, empowering all to achieve their potential. Learn more and contribute at nyrr.org/donate.

Before we say goodbye here on Set the Pace, we want to put a bow on Member Week 2026, which was a terrific week. We had gatherings from members, events, things like that. And of course, the caper was the 2026 New York Road Runners Grete's Great Gallop 10K, which we had last Saturday in Central Park. Beautiful day, huge turnout, 8,500 runners in Central Park. The winner, Steph Bruce from Track Smith took home the women's crown at 34:56. By the way, Steph is running this year's TCS New York City Marathon. She's been a member ambassador for us. We love Steph, so congrats to her on the win.

The non-binary winner was Danielle Mata at 33:53 and the men's side, it was Ryan Cutter from Brooklyn Track Club taking home the win. 31:21 was his time. Not only by the way, did we have Greta's Great Gallop in the park, but then we also had our final NYRR start series race out in the Bronx. This of course, is our free set of 5Ks that happen on summer streets and this year, we had it in three boroughs. We're looking to grow that to even all five boroughs in the future, but they're totally free and we had

a great set of events this year. So, congrats to everybody who ran. Almost, I think 1,000 runners took place in the Start Line series in the Bronx. Congrats to everybody who took part in that as well.

Well, what an episode this was of Set the Pace. We want to thank Dorian Kail from New York Road Runners and the amazing Viola Cheptoo. Also want to wish Becs good luck in her big trail race over in Europe. If you liked the episode, make sure you go ahead and give us a rating. I see people at the finish line of our races every week and I love it when you come up to me and say you love the podcast. I always appreciate that. So, make sure you leave a review or a rating as well so others know to find it as well. Enjoy the miles everybody. Hope you're having a good training. If you're training for anything coming up this fall, we'll see you next time. Enjoy the miles.