



Samuel Wanjiru, who won the 2008 Olympic marathon, was not the first famous Kenyan athlete to drink and run.

LETTER FROM KENYA

FINISH LINE

A Kenyan running champion's tragic weakness.

BY XAN RICE

At 7:30 A.M. on the final day of the 2008 Summer Olympics, in Beijing, the temperature was 70 degrees Fahrenheit and climbing fast. The humidity was seventy-two per cent. For the ninety-five athletes lined up in Tiananmen Square for the men's marathon, the city's notorious pollution posed an added challenge. Haile Gebrselassie, the Ethiopian who held the world record of 2:04:26, had skipped the event, citing the threat to his health. Few experts believed that the winner would finish within six minutes of Gebrselassie's mark; besides the weather, the absence of pacesetters, who are not permitted in Olympic marathons, would be a drag on the tempo.

From the start, a twenty-one-year-old Kenyan named Samuel Wanjiru, running only his third 26.2-miler, sprinted to the front, as if it were a fifteen-hundred-metre race. Only five feet four, Wanjiru ran with his head tilted to the side and his back upright. His hands hung low, palms open, paddling the air as he moved. Kenyan athletes are renowned for their long, birdlike legs and graceful strides, but he had powerful quadriceps that drove his feet at a furious pace. The first five kilometres took him only 14:52—a minute faster than the winning time in the women's five-thousand-metre race, two days earlier. The next five-kilometre split was nineteen seconds quicker. By then, the field had been blown apart, with just eight athletes in the lead group. That fell to five at the halfway mark, which they reached in 1:02:34—five seconds off the world-record pace. Wanjiru was still there.

In bright sunshine, the temperature rose to 84 degrees. Though the pace dropped slightly, Wanjiru kept surging, and one by one his competitors dropped away. With just over three miles to go, he kicked for home. On reaching the Olympic stadium, he sped up once more before breaking the tape. His winning time was

2:06:32, nearly three minutes faster than the Olympic record set in Los Angeles, in 1984, by Portugal's Carlos Lopes, who was then thirty-seven years old. Wanjiru was the youngest marathon gold medalist in seventy-six years.

The first half of his race had been significantly faster than the second half, and this upended the prevailing view that a marathoner should run at an even pace for most of the route, the second half of the race slightly swifter than the first—the “negative split.” On the *Runner's World* Web site, Amby Burfoot, the 1968 Boston Marathon winner, described Wanjiru's performance as “the craziest running I've ever seen.” He also called it the greatest marathon ever.

Two years later, Wanjiru ran an even more astounding race. When he lined up at the Chicago Marathon, in October, 2010, he was only “seventy per cent” fit, he later admitted, and had been written off by the press. “Everyone had doubts about Sammy,” Sean Hartnett, a correspondent for *Track & Field News*, told me. “Reports from Kenya said he was living off his fame, not his fitness, with stories of drinking and fights.” Once again, Wanjiru started fast, and for a while even moved ahead of the pacesetters, in an attempt to hurry them up. At twenty-three miles, he and the Ethiopian Tsegaye Kebede were alone at the front, engaged in the sort of physical and mental duel rarely seen in long-distance running. Kebede surged, opening a small gap, but Wanjiru reeled him in, briefly taking the lead before Kebede surged once more. Again and again, Wanjiru closed in, as if attached to his rival by elastic, but with the morning sun behind them Kebede could react to the sight of his competitor's shadow, prompting Wanjiru to try to hide by veering wide or sticking directly behind him.

“This is like the Frazier-Ali,” a television announcer said.

Having exerted so much energy try-

ing to pull away from Wanjiru, Kebede was spent. With five hundred and fifty yards to go, Wanjiru launched a devastating sprint on a small rise. Federico Rosa, a burly Italian who was Wanjiru's manager, told me, “Sammy won with his mind and his balls.”

In defeating Kebede, Wanjiru retained the title in the World Marathon Majors, a two-year series that ranks performances in the top five city races. With his prize money, appearance fees, and a Nike sponsorship deal, he was earning more than a million dollars a year. Though he was just twenty-three, his place among the finest marathoners in history was assured. He had run only seven marathons, all of them major competitions, and won five, always with fast times. He never ran another one. Seven months after his Chicago victory, Wanjiru fell from the balcony of his home in Kenya, and died at the hospital shortly afterward. The police said that it was suicide.

Like most rural Kenyans, Wanjiru grew up poor. His parents separated when he was four, leaving his mother, Hannah, to raise him and his younger brother, Simon. They lived with Hannah's parents in Ol Kalou, a small town in the highlands of central Kenya. Hannah, who is fifty, told me, “I was cultivating on my father's *shamba*”—Swahili for farm—“and doing manual work. It was just me supporting my family. There was no money.”

When Wanjiru was old enough to ride a bicycle, he began working as a bread delivery boy to help his mother financially. Despite often being excluded from class, because of unpaid fees, he finished primary school. Secondary education, however, was too expensive. He probably would have become a mason or a farm laborer, he later said, if not for athletics.

He first showed running talent at the

age of ten, at school track meets, and soon scored victories in provincial cross-country races. When his education was put on hold, he started running full time, joining a training camp in nearby Nyahururu, which, at nearly eight thousand feet, is the country's highest town, and has served as a base for top athletes ever since Kenya emerged as a distance-running superpower, more than forty years ago.

Isaac Macharia, today a world-class marathoner, lived at the camp as a twenty-year-old in 2000, when Wanjiru arrived there. Conditions were crude, Macharia told me. Few of the runners had proper shoes or a training kit; a tank top was a prized item. They slept two to a bed. After the second tough training session of the day, the young men went off and collected wild vegetables to eat with *ugali*, a maize-flour porridge that is Kenya's staple. The leftovers were the next day's breakfast. Wanjiru, then thirteen, was young to be in a camp, but he was emotionally mature. "Most of us from humble backgrounds—by the time you are ten or eleven you are grown up," Macharia said. "You have to help out your family from so young."

According to Macharia, Wanjiru was "talkative and full of laughter" at the camp. He trained hard and distinguished himself with aggressive "front running"—getting into the lead early. "He was very driven," Macharia said. "First, he had a passion for running. And the second issue was poverty, wanting to get away from it."

Wanjiru's performances in local races attracted the attention of Shunichi Kobayashi, a dapper, sixty-nine-year-old Japanese running scout who, more than two decades earlier, had moved to Kenya to learn Swahili. An athlete in his youth, Kobayashi had become interested in the Kenyan running scene, admiring the natural gifts of many of its practitioners: thin calves, narrow hips, and strong ankles coupled with powerful leg muscles consisting mainly of slow-twitch fibres, which resist fatigue. (Most people have a fifty-fifty mixture of slow- and fast-twitch fibres; sprinters generally have more of the latter.)

In 1983, Kobayashi had started sending Kenyan runners to Japan, which has the world's richest corporate running league. The fusion of Kenyan talent with the rigorous Japanese focus on *gaman* and

konjou—endurance and willpower—quickly yielded success. Five years after Kobayashi sent the eighteen-year-old Douglas Wakiihuri to Japan, Wakiihuri won silver in the marathon at the 1988 Olympics, in Seoul—the first time that a Kenyan marathoner had won an Olympic medal. Another Kobayashi recruit, Erick Wainaina, took bronze in Atlanta, in 1996, and silver in Sydney, four years later.

Kobayashi told me that, in 2001, after observing a barefoot Wanjiru compete and "liking his running style," he got him a scholarship at Sendai Ikuei Gakuen High School, on Japan's northeast coast. Wanjiru, then fifteen, did not know where Japan was. He had never travelled by plane. English was his third language, after Kikuyu and Swahili, and he spoke it poorly. Still, his mother, with whom he was very close, considered training in Japan a huge opportunity, and so he flew to Tokyo in 2002, and took the bullet train to Sendai. He was one of two Kenyans at the school. He didn't go home for the holidays for nearly a year. The winter was severe, as was the discipline. "I could not get used to the food," Wanjiru told the *Times*, in 2009. "And my family was in Kenya, and I sometimes got the homesickness. It was a very hard life."

Still, he fought to adapt, quickly learning to speak good Japanese. On his first day at school, he had told his coach that he would win an Olympic medal; though his initial performances did not

match his confidence, he never balked at training runs of up to eighteen miles. He helped lead the school team to two national titles and, upon graduating, in 2004, was signed by the Toyota Kyushu squad.

In five years, Wanjiru went from not owning a pair of shoes to earning a big salary. (A hundred thousand dollars a year, before performance bonuses, is standard for top foreign athletes in Japan.) He quickly proved his worth. In

August, 2005, he ran 26:41 for the ten thousand metres in Brussels, smashing the world junior record; he was soon signed by Rosa, the Italian manager, who represented many Kenyan athletes. Two weeks later, Wanjiru broke the half-marathon world record. His performances, his jovial demeanor, and his command of Japanese made him a star in Japan.

In the evenings, Wanjiru started having a few beers. Social drinking is routine among elite athletes in Japan, and Brett Larner, a Tokyo-based Canadian who publishes the Japan Running News blog, told me, "While Wanjiru was in Japan, nobody had a sense that he was drinking too much."

That year, during a brief trip home to Kenya, Wanjiru married Terezah Njeri, a local girl whom he had dated in high school. Wanjiru was eighteen, his bride seventeen. Soon afterward, he returned to Japan, alone, for training.

In 2007, Wanjiru lowered his half-marathon world record twice, the second time to 58:33. He told Rosa that he believed he could win the Olympic marathon in Beijing. To some, this seemed premature: a runner traditionally strengthened his body for years before tackling the marathon. This was the route taken by the Kenyan runner Paul Tergat, who, in 2003, became the first man to run a sub-2:05 marathon, and by Gebrselassie, the Ethiopian, who beat Tergat's mark four years later. Both were thirty-four at the time of their victories.

Wanjiru, still only twenty, persuaded Rosa to enter him in the 2007 New York Marathon, but his bosses at Toyota objected, citing contractual obligations. Instead, Wanjiru made his marathon debut in Fukuoka, Japan, that December. Macharia, his friend from Nyahururu, served as his pacesetter for the first nineteen miles. Macharia spent the whole time keeping Wanjiru on a leash. Most marathoners need to carefully manage their "fuel"—the carbohydrates stored in muscles as glycogen—but Wanjiru apparently had fuel to spare. He won in 2:06:39, a course record.

Now focussed on Beijing, he trained harder than ever, in Japan and back in Kenya, where he stayed with Macharia in Nairobi and joined a running group in the Ngong Hills, the scenic suburb popularized in the film "Out of Africa." Studies have indicated that East Africans



do not possess a “running gene” that gives them a singular edge; all elite long-distance athletes have favorable biomechanics and a strong capacity to utilize oxygen. Local coaches believe, however, that the high-altitude training grounds and competition from training partners help propel Kenyans to victory.

“Our workouts were so tough,” Macharia told me. “After training, Sammy would just come home and sleep. Occasionally, we would go out to get something to eat, but we were always home by eight.” At the London Marathon, in April, 2008, Wanjiru ran 2:05:34, finishing second to his countryman Martin Lel. Wanjiru’s performance earned him a spot on the team for Beijing. Four months later, his record-breaking victory there confirmed that he represented a new class of marathoner. As Hartnett, the sportswriter, later observed, Wanjiru was “just fundamentally stronger than this arduous race.”

When Wanjiru returned to Kenya after his Olympic triumph, the convoy welcoming him back to Nyahuru was three miles long. The town’s favorite son was home to stay: Wanjiru had quit the Toyota team, saying that he wanted more freedom and more time with his family. That meant giving up world-class facilities, coaching, and technical support, but the lack of synthetic tracks, heart-rate monitors, dieticians, and Gatorade hadn’t kept other Kenyans from winning.

Early one morning in July, 2011, two months after Wanjiru’s death, I took a taxi to Nyahuru from my home, in Nairobi. As we gained elevation, savanna gave way to lush farmland, conifer plantations, and indigenous forest. Cows grazed in fields and farmers rode through mist in donkey carts. A few miles after crossing the equator from the south, we reached Nyahuru, where several men were jogging on the main road.

Daniel Gatheru, Wanjiru’s childhood friend and training partner, had been with him on the day of his death. He proudly pointed out the places where he and Wanjiru used to train: a dilapidated dirt-and-stone track; a winding flight of a hundred and nineteen irregular steps, to the left of a waterfall; and, on the other side, a steep trail up what was called Agony Hill. “Sammy and I would do the



stairs ten times,” Gatheru said. “For the hill, it was twelve.”

Even on twenty-four-mile training runs, he and Wanjiru had no sports drinks; they drank water instead. Their one luxury was music. On road runs, Wanjiru sent his driver ahead in his Toyota Land Cruiser—one of several S.U.V.s that he owned—with the stereo blasting gospel or reggae.

Away from training, however, life was far more complicated than in Japan. Wanjiru, who could now command hundreds of thousands of dollars just to line up in a major marathon, was generous with his money, supporting an orphanage and other charities, helping relatives, and picking up tabs at bars and restaurants. He gave money to Njeri to start two businesses, a beauty salon and a pharmacy, both of which failed. He also assisted other athletes with training kits, race-entry fees, transportation, and food. Gatheru—whose 2:12:00 best for the marathon would have stood out in a country other than Kenya—might never have competed abroad if Wanjiru had not persuaded Rosa to give him a chance.

“A true friend who is more than a brother, that was Sammy,” Gatheru said. “When we visited my mother, I did not have a cent. He would buy groceries for her worth fifteen thousand shillings—a hundred and eighty dollars—and then give her five thousand shillings in cash.”

In a small town in Kenya, a rich man is expected to help not only his family and friends but also anyone short of cash for rent, food, or hospital bills. In the morning, a line of needy people often stood outside Wanjiru’s house. He was asked by politicians to appear at functions, by businessmen to inaugurate shops, by churches to lead fund-raising drives. Such pressures drove many Kenyan runners to sequester themselves in training camps or to move to big cities, like Nairobi, where they could achieve some anonymity.

Wanjiru, having spent six years abroad, was not about to leave again. But Gatheru said that his friend “was not happy in Nyahuru.” Wanjiru’s personal life was particularly tangled. One afternoon in Nyahuru, I met with Terezah Njeri, Wanjiru’s wife, who was now

twenty-three. The Wanjirus' two-story house, which they built in 2007, was modest by American standards, but stood out there. A security wall was topped by an electric fence and was painted on the inside with wildlife scenes. Njeri and I sat down on leather sofas in the living room, as their four-year-old daughter, Anne, put on a DVD. Pictures of Wanjiru running the Beijing marathon appeared on a flat-screen television. "Anne was very close to her dad," Njeri said.

Njeri, who is small and pretty, said

that she was the youngest of eight children in a poor family. She had immediately fallen for Wanjiru: "He was caring, someone who could be trusted. He was not yet a hero."

When Wanjiru returned to Japan after their wedding, Njeri moved to a one-bedroom rental house in Nyahururu with his mother, Hannah, and his brother, Simon. At first, Njeri and Hannah got along, but as Wanjiru's wealth grew their relationship soured. "According to African culture, when you have

money the mother-in-law has a kind of control of the marriage," Njeri said. "She wants to know everything about his money." The tension between them was evident to Wanjiru the moment he returned: they had clashed over their roles in his homecoming celebrations.

Though Wanjiru bought his mother her own house, it was only a hundred and fifty yards from his. And domestic matters became even trickier in 2009, when Wanjiru, against Njeri's wishes, took a second wife, which is culturally accept-



SHOWCASE BY RICHARD AVEDON "Allen Ginsberg's Family," made on May 3, 1970, at the Alexander Hamilton Hotel, in Paterson, the Gagosian gallery designed by David Adjaye, which reserves space for a wealth of related material. Prints from Avedon's 1963 session with man, posed here with his aunts, uncles, nieces, and nephews. The occasion was a father-and-son reading to celebrate Louis Ginsberg's new book *Eugene*, who wears a bow tie. Digging around the roots of the sexual revolution, Avedon found a family sharing poetry and cake beside the

able in Kenya, if increasingly uncommon.

"Sammy had a lot of stress with his family," Gatheru said. "It's the reason that he started drinking a lot of beer." This habit started in 2009, Wanjiru's friends say. His lawyer, Wahome Ndegwa, recalls seeing him in a bar at 3 A.M. that September, shortly before Wanjiru left for a half-marathon in Rotterdam: "I said, 'You are running on Sunday!' He replied, 'Watch me on Sunday!'" Wanjiru ran well enough, and on his return presented Ndegwa

with a bottle of Jack Daniel's. "He used to say, 'I eat how I want, I train how I want, and I still win,'" Ndegwa said.

One of Wanjiru's drinking buddies was a slightly built twenty-two-year-old named Norman Mathathi, whom I met one afternoon in Nyahururu. He is also a runner, though not an especially committed one. He told me that Wanjiru, after returning from Japan, did not "recognize who he had become. He thought he was still a normal person, not a hero or a role model." They often went bar-

hopping twice a week. "We would go out from 4 or 5 P.M. to 10 P.M.," he said. "We would eat and other friends would come. If Sammy was running the next day, we would have less beer and more Red Bull and Smirnoff." In a night, they "could do a crate together"—twenty-five beers.

Alcohol abuse is widespread in rural Kenya, where jobs are scarce and home brew is cheap. Yet the idea that the world's best marathoner—whose competitors were exploiting the latest in sports science and counting every calorie—could



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New Jersey, is one of four enormous murals that Richard Avedon produced between 1969 and 1971. The works are united in an installation at Ginsberg—in which the poet and his lover, Peter Orlovsky, are seen nude, hugging and kissing—portray the antic other side of the genial family of poems. Louis, book in hand, appears twice: once, at the far right, next to Allen's stepmother, Edith, and, again, on the left, with his other son, American flag.—Vince Aletti

be drinking to this degree would strike most top coaches as crazy. But, at first, Wanjiru got away with it. It helped that he never skipped training, even when hungover. And he didn't have a coach in town to chastise him. Francis Kamau, who helped Wanjiru train but had no supervisory role, told me, "He would drink at night and still run the time he wanted the next day. God had built the boy in a different way."

Indeed, Wanjiru's performances during his first year of public drinking were astonishing. In April, 2009, he won the London Marathon in 2:05:10, a course record. That October, he claimed the Chicago Marathon title, running the fastest time ever on American soil; he had launched a five-hundred-and-fifty-yard sprint, mid-race, after falling back to encourage his friend Macharia. As in Beijing, he had turned the negative-split theory on its head, forcing his more traditional adversaries out of their comfort zones.

"For most runners, starting so fast and surging hard so often would have been the kiss of death, but in terms of fatigue Sammy had a unique ability to recover," Hartnett said. "He thought he had nine lives in every race."

Wanjiru was not the first famous Kenyan athlete to drink and run. The best-known example is Henry Rono, a brilliant track athlete whose career was blighted by Kenya's boycott of the 1976 and 1980 Olympic Games. After enrolling at Washington State University, in 1976, and struggling to settle in, Rono began drinking pitchers of beer every night until two, then rising early for a morning run. On April 8, 1978, as he recalls in his recent memoir, "Olympic Dream," he "spent most of that morning trying to shake a hangover," then smashed the five-thousand-metre world record, at a race in Berkeley, California. In the next eighty days, Rono broke three other world records, an astonishing feat. In his memoir, Rono writes that his drinking did not hamper his running performance, and may even have strengthened him mentally: "Learning to run with a temple-thumping hangover taught me something about discipline, and how to put mind over matter, and focus beyond my physical pain, no matter how excruciating."

Timothy Noakes, a professor of exer-

cise science at the University of Cape Town and the author of "The Lore of Running," the serious runner's bible, said that long training sessions help a runner burn off toxins, but drinking more than two beers a day usually harms performance. "To run 2:06, everything has to be perfect," he told me. "So you have to assume that Wanjiru showed no toxic effects of alcohol. He must have been metabolizing in a way we don't understand." Though Noakes doubted Rono's argument that drinking taught him discipline, he agreed that "the brain is the ultimate determinant of performance." Noakes went on, "At the time, Rono thought that the alcohol had no effect on his running. He perceived himself to be the best athlete in the world, and ran accordingly. It's a mental attribute. And that belief in themselves is part of the reason why the Kenyans are dominant." Still, belief takes you only so far. Rono lapsed into alcoholism and depression for two decades, and even became homeless for more than a year before turning his life around. He now coaches athletics in Albuquerque.

At least three top Kenyan runners with alcohol problems have died in the past seventeen years. Benson Masya, who won the Honolulu Marathon three times, died in 2003, at thirty-three. Richard Chelimo, an Olympic silver medalist in the ten thousand metres, died in 2001, at the age of twenty-nine; Paul Kipkoech, a world champion in the ten thousand metres, was thirty-two when he died, in 1995. In Kenyan running circles, it is well known that two other winners of major marathons have drinking problems.

Unlike in other top running countries, such as Ethiopia, Kenyan athletes are usually not closely monitored by the country's athletics federation. Colm O'Connell, an Irishman who has coached dozens of Kenyan athletes, said that the combination of poor education, overnight riches, and demands from families and neighbors makes top Kenyan runners particularly vulnerable to alcohol abuse. "Especially the men," he told me. "Women are better at sharing emotions and feelings. Men have the macho image—they don't want to show weakness."

Wanjiru's mother and his two wives tried to talk to him about his excessive drinking, they told me, but he denied that he had a problem. Other runners advised him to get help, as did close friends.

Gatheru said that he frequently reminded Wanjiru of countrymen whose running careers had been destroyed by drink. Macharia, who called himself "an elder brother" to Wanjiru, knew how much pressure there was on his friend to perform, and how fickle the adulation could be. Whenever Wanjiru returned home from a marathon victory, the airport arrivals lounge in Nairobi was packed with supporters. But after an injury forced him to drop out of the London Marathon, in April, 2010, Macharia was the only person to welcome Wanjiru, who felt stung.

"He was reserved and did not want to disclose things to people," Macharia said. "But, inside him, he was going down."

Wanjiru's management team knew that he was drinking. One morning last June, I flew to Eldoret, a high-altitude town in the Rift Valley where many elite athletes train, to meet Claudio Berardelli, an Italian sports scientist who coaches many Kenyan runners represented by Rosa. As we watched some of his athletes sprint around a dirt track, generating puffs of red dust, Berardelli told me that Wanjiru underwent routine medical tests in Italy after the 2010 London Marathon. Doctors checked his liver, and the results were clean. "Sammy was still at a level where nothing was spoiled," Berardelli said. Nevertheless, he asked Rosa to tell Wanjiru that there was alcohol-related liver damage—to scare him into changing his life style. Rosa did so, and then asked Wanjiru to train under Berardelli for that fall's marathon season. For the first time, Berardelli observed Wanjiru's biomechanics up close. "He was a short guy with big quad muscles to produce power," he said. "He had a lot of elastic energy in his feet, which really helps toward the end of a marathon, and excellent balance."

Though Berardelli did not give Wanjiru a VO₂ Max test—which gauges a runner's ability to transport and use oxygen—he assured me that Wanjiru had rare aerobic power, because he was so fast in races of five and ten thousand metres, which are short enough for runners to operate at close to their maximum capacity for the entire distance. "Sammy was at the front of this new generation of Kenyan runners who were training for marathons but who could still run the ten thousand metres in twenty-seven minutes on any day," Berardelli said. "It used to be that

MEDICINE CABINET

It seemed to take half the day to reach the bathroom, dragging this skull like unto a kite behind me. Then, like a flaccid balloon. Then the pink misshapen head almost all fontanelle of children born without a brain. And I was about a quarter to dead. That little twinge I'd started out with? Off the smiley/frowny pain chart, children, my garden of scars. Now my whole body felt as if someone had been going at it with a baseball bat as I struggled to awaken this morning long ago. From having mastered and, I have this great fear, memorized the new manual of gender correct English usage and just good old plain personal experience I can tell you the avoidance of mirrors represents one of humankind's major ordeals among the stars, and I approached this medicine cabinet determined that there should be no eye contact, no full frontal glimpse of myself whatsoever. I knew that I looked like death getting ready to eat a cracker! Were you aware, incidentally, that heroin was invented by Bayer, the familiar aspirin company (thanks, Friedrich)? Or that it remained, in liquid form, an effective over-the-counter cough suppressant until its disappearance from the shelves of American pharmacies in 1910? One day I am going to start to cry and never stop until I die. So what. An hour later I could still be found there gnawing my way through the first gray pill, which was about the size of a pie and must have weighed ten pounds.

—*Franz Wright*

you either lacked speed or you lacked endurance. These guys lack neither.”

When Wanjiru came to train with Berardelli in July, he was struggling. He was about nine pounds heavier than his usual racing weight of a hundred and twelve, yet he tried to run as if in peak condition. “The group would start at a comfortable pace,” Berardelli said. “But just after one mile Sammy would go ‘boom,’ and be two hundred and fifty yards away at the front. Gatheru told me, ‘That’s how he trains, don’t worry.’” Wanjiru’s training partners quickly caught up and passed him.

Wanjiru had registered for the Chicago Marathon, but in the weeks before the race his form was so poor that Berardelli considered withdrawing him. Nobody was more surprised than the coach by Wanjiru’s dramatic win. Berardelli said, “Sammy showed that he was not just an athlete with an incredible physiology. He was, first of all, a fighter.”

On December 29, 2010, less than three months after the Chicago Marathon victory, Wanjiru arrived, drunk, at his home in Nyahururu. After an argument with Njeri, he became en-

raged, and fetched an AK-47. He later told police that it belonged to a worker who guarded cattle on a farm he’d bought. After spending the night in jail, Wanjiru was charged with threatening to kill his wife and his watchman, with assaulting the watchman, and with possessing an illegal weapon. A few weeks later, he rolled a friend’s Land Cruiser, narrowly escaping serious injury.

Njeri pressed charges over the gun incident and asked for a divorce, but several weeks later she and Wanjiru tried to make a fresh start by moving to the Ngong Hills, where Wanjiru had bought a house. Macharia enlisted some elders to counsel the couple, and Catherine Ndereba, who won the silver in the Beijing women’s marathon, also offered advice. It appeared to work. Njeri dropped her police complaint against Wanjiru, though the weapons charge, which normally results in jail time, remained.

Wanjiru did not stay settled for long. He went back to Nyahururu, and his drinking intensified. Friends and family did not see him for days at a time. He told Gatheru that he had considered taking Qatari nationality and running for the Gulf state in exchange for a big sal-

ary. He also contemplated returning to Japan. In April, Gatheru phoned Berardelli, the coach in Eldoret, and said, “If we don’t do anything, this guy is lost.”

Berardelli, with Rosa, drove to Nyahururu. They met Wanjiru and Njeri at their home, and then had lunch with Wanjiru alone. They presented him with a proposal: until May 26th, the day of the court date for gun possession, Wanjiru could stay with Berardelli in Eldoret. Afterward, Wanjiru could fly to the U.S. and train for six weeks in America. His friend Gatheru could accompany him.

Wanjiru agreed, and on Monday, May 9th, he and Gatheru arrived in Eldoret. For a week, they trained in the morning, relaxed in the afternoon, and were home for dinner and an early night. That Saturday, Gatheru said to Berardelli, “I think Sammy is finding himself again. He wants to run in Chicago or New York.”

Shortly after dawn the next morning, Wanjiru and Gatheru left Berardelli’s house and jogged up a bumpy dirt road before heading into a forest for an eight-mile run. They returned in good spirits. Wanjiru gave the house cleaner the equivalent of several days’ wages, telling him to enjoy his Sunday.

Berardelli had given Wanjiru permission to go to Nyahururu the next morning, to see his lawyer. Wanjiru had promised to return immediately for another week’s training before heading to America. He left Eldoret with Gatheru, and just before noon they reached Nakuru, a Rift Valley town famous for its national park, and stopped at a bar.

“We just had Red Bull here,” Gatheru told me one day in early August, when we stopped outside the bar, which is called the Donnies. He was retracing the journey that he had made with Wanjiru on the day that his friend died.

After the drink, they had lunch at Hudson’s Bar and Restaurant, which is perched on a hillside and run by a British couple. Posted on the wall behind the bar was a menu; on a previous visit, Wanjiru had signed it with his name, in Japanese and in English, adding the inscription “THE MARATHON MAN LOVES IT AT HUDSON’S.” Wanjiru had a few glasses of wine with his meal. He and Gatheru went on to two more bars; at the second, Wanjiru ordered beers for everyone



"The majestic way they climb higher and higher until they seem to kiss the sky reminds me of the huge pile of work I have waiting for me when I get back."

inside and took one for the road. On reaching Nyahururu, he and Gatheru stopped at Club Jimrock before moving to the Waterfalls Resort restaurant for dinner with Wanjiru's bank manager. Wanjiru drank three more beers. At around nine, Gatheru went home. Wanjiru, promising to go home soon, had suggested that they meet in the morning for training. Gatheru, who was used to seeing his friend more inebriated and downbeat, said, "I was not worried, because it was still early, and Sammy had not drunk too much. I did not know that he would take more beer."

After a dispute over a bar bill, Wanjiru forced his car through a gate outside the restaurant, damaging the bumper, and drove across town to the Kawa Falls Hotel. There he met Jane Nduta, a twenty-one-year-old waitress nearing the end of her shift. Wanjiru was "quite drunk," she told me, adding that she had

known him for a few months. They moved to Club Jimrock, where he drank two more beers, and then drove to his house. Wanjiru asked his watchman whether his wife was home. She was not—though Wanjiru knew that she was in town—and he parked the car and went inside with Nduta.

Wanjiru was tired and intoxicated, and quickly fell asleep, Nduta said. Shortly afterward, she heard footsteps. It was Njeri. Furious, she demanded to know who Nduta was. Wanjiru, who had woken up, said nothing. Njeri locked a gate that separated the bedrooms from the rest of the house—a typical security feature in wealthier Kenyan homes. Wanjiru and Nduta were trapped. (Njeri and the watchman gave me similar accounts.)

"Sammy told me to go to the other bedroom and wait until he got the keys," Nduta said. "I heard him opening the door to the balcony, and then shouting at

his wife to bring him the keys. She refused. Two or three minutes later, I heard a man scream. I went back to the master bedroom and onto the balcony. I saw the watchman, and asked what was wrong. He said, 'Look down.' And I could see Sammy, lying on his back."

Alerted by the commotion, neighbors rushed to the house. The police also arrived. Wanjiru, bleeding from the nose and mouth but still breathing, was taken to the hospital in a police car. He died soon afterward. Gatheru, who rushed to the hospital, called Berardelli and cried, "Sammy is gone!"

That night, the police classified Wanjiru's death a suicide. Though officials later acknowledged that the death could have been accidental, the media focussed on the more sensational possibility. Then, two days after her son died, Hannah Wanjiru announced at a press conference that she believed he had been murdered, implying that Njeri was responsible. (Njeri later issued a forceful denial.) Hannah claimed to have found blood in Wanjiru's bedroom, though nobody else reported seeing any. She applied for a court order to delay the burial, arguing that police needed time to investigate. The order was granted.

The family drama widened when Wanjiru's second wife, who had had a baby with him nine months earlier, appeared in the press, taking Hannah's side. Then another woman came forward, saying that she was carrying Wanjiru's child and would seek DNA proof.

There was plenty to fight over in Wanjiru's estate; he owned thirty properties around town and several vehicles. Ndegwa, Wanjiru's lawyer, told me that the estate was worth at least two and a half million dollars, a fortune in a country where nearly half the population lives in poverty. Normally, under Kenyan law, Njeri would be the main beneficiary, although other dependents—including Hannah and Wanjiru's second wife, as well any children by other women—would also be entitled to a share. But if Njeri was found guilty of murder she would get nothing.

Three doctors conducted the post-mortem, on May 27th. Moses Njue, the chief government pathologist, reported that the cause of death was a "blunt injury" to the back of the head. This seemed con-

sistent with the police's theory that Wanjiru had fallen backward from the balcony, striking his head on the ground. Njue said that he wanted to assess the balcony's height before finalizing the report. He was also awaiting toxicology results.

Wanjiru's balcony is ten feet off the ground, though the guardrail on top is another four feet. After taking these measurements, Njue made a startling announcement. Wanjiru, he claimed to reporters, "landed on his legs and supported himself with his hands. Where did the injury on the back"—of the head—"come from? We could turn into fools if we don't ask ourselves this question." A toxicology report has still not been released, and Njue declined an interview request.

Hannah continued to oppose a burial, but Wanjiru's other relatives wanted the funeral to proceed. On June 4th, Wanjiru's grandfather and two uncles met with Njeri, along with other mourners, at a small farm in Nyahururu to choose a spot for the grave. News footage shows Hannah storming into the farm compound and taking a machete from a bag. When Njeri's brother tries to protect his father from Hannah, she lunges at him with the machete, but does not connect. Hannah's sister gets involved, striking Njeri's brother on the back of the neck with a plank.

The police charged Hannah with disturbing the peace and causing bodily harm. (In a statement, she said that Njeri's family attacked her first.) The funeral went ahead a week later, without Hannah. The crowds were large and rain lashed down as the coffin was lowered into the red earth. A pink marble tombstone was laid on top; it featured a photograph of Wanjiru in a gray suit, his expression reminiscent of the half smile that had charmed interviewers after his marathons. Underneath, on a plaque, were these words: "You fought a good fight, finished the race and kept the faith. You will forever live within our hearts."

A month after Wanjiru's funeral, as I was talking to Njeri at her home in Nyahururu, she told me that she needed to go out. The previous day, Hannah had come to her house with a prophetess from the church, and they had agreed to reconcile. A ceremony marking the breakthrough was taking place that evening, and Njeri invited me along.

It was drizzling outside. We climbed into a green Land Cruiser and drove to the farm where Wanjiru was buried. Hannah was already there, along with two brothers and her parents. A lamb had been slaughtered and a fire prepared. Njeri made tea in a large metal milk pail, dipping in mugs to serve it.

Hannah stood alone near the grave, looking uncomfortable, but next to her the elderly prophetess was smiling. She said of Hannah, "I convinced her that God wanted her to reconcile with her daughter-in-law."

It grew dark and we moved inside a small building. The lamb, tender and delicious, was served in strips with slices of white sandwich bread. We ate by the light of a mobile phone. The pastor from the local church said a prayer, and everyone stood and bowed their heads, Hannah next to Njeri.

The harmony in the Wanjiru family was superficial. The next day, when I spoke with Hannah, she returned to the murder theory. She was sitting on the tiny concrete patio outside the house that Wanjiru had bought her. She was feeling ill, and her voice was a hoarse whisper. "My son was killed by his wife," she said. "He was killed in the bedroom and then they threw him out."

Njeri, she told me, had never loved her son. "Her family came in for the wealth. Our family should benefit, not her family."

After the postmortem, a local judge ordered that an inquest be held in Nairobi, to "allay the strong feelings" of Hannah and Njeri. The inquest still has not taken place, and unanswered questions about the case have left many Kenyans feeling that they have not been told the whole truth.

Several of the people closest to Wanjiru, including his training partner Gatheru, believe that his death was an accident caused by drunkenness. While Wanjiru's house was being built, he and Gatheru had watched the workers hop off the balcony to fetch tools, so it was not a stretch to imagine that he had tried to jump himself. Wanjiru had been wearing leather-soled shoes with limited grip, Gatheru said. The day after Wanjiru's death, Gatheru and others noticed that

two tiles on a section of roof jutting out beneath the balcony had been displaced—in an accidental fall, they could have been dislodged.

"Nobody killed Sammy," Gatheru said.

The police in Nyahururu would not comment on the record, saying that the case was still open. However, a senior officer said that the police had erred with the suicide announcement, and he dismissed the pathologist's insinuations of foul play: "This is the fall of somebody who is annoyed, who is drunk. People are coming to find him red-handed with a woman. He slips, hits the roof, falls down. If you land with your head . . ."

Before I left Hannah's house, she expressed regret that the melodrama after Wanjiru's death had tarnished his name. Her last words to me were: "Since Kenya got independence, nobody had won the Olympic marathon. My son needs to be remembered as a hero."

Berardelli, for his part, likened Wanjiru's story to that of Steve Prefontaine, the brilliant American track runner who died in 1975, at the age of twenty-four, after crashing his car while returning from a party. The autopsy report found that Prefontaine, who was a regular at a local bar, had been intoxicated.

For now, at least, there is no monument to Wanjiru, and no race bearing his name. His legacy can be felt mainly in the performances of friends like Patrick Makau, a twenty-seven-year-old Kenyan who often talked to Wanjiru about running the Berlin Marathon together, in an attempt to break the world record.

In September, 2011, with Wanjiru's friend Macharia acting as pacesetter, Makau ran the Berlin Marathon and

broke the world record by twenty-one seconds, with a time of 2:03:38. A month later, another Kenyan, Wilson Kipsang, ran just four seconds slower, in Frankfurt. Macharia believes that Wanjiru's breakthrough races made these times possible—and that his friend could have run a marathon under 2:03:00.

"When Sammy won in Beijing, he showed everybody that it is just not about the course or the weather," Macharia said. "He changed the marathon completely. He would not give up. He feared nobody." ♦

