The Most Talented Runner of His Generation Takes the Unexpected Route Back Home

Forty-four years ago, Henry Rono set multiple world records on the track. Much of his life was later overshadowed by addiction. But at 70, he has no regrets.

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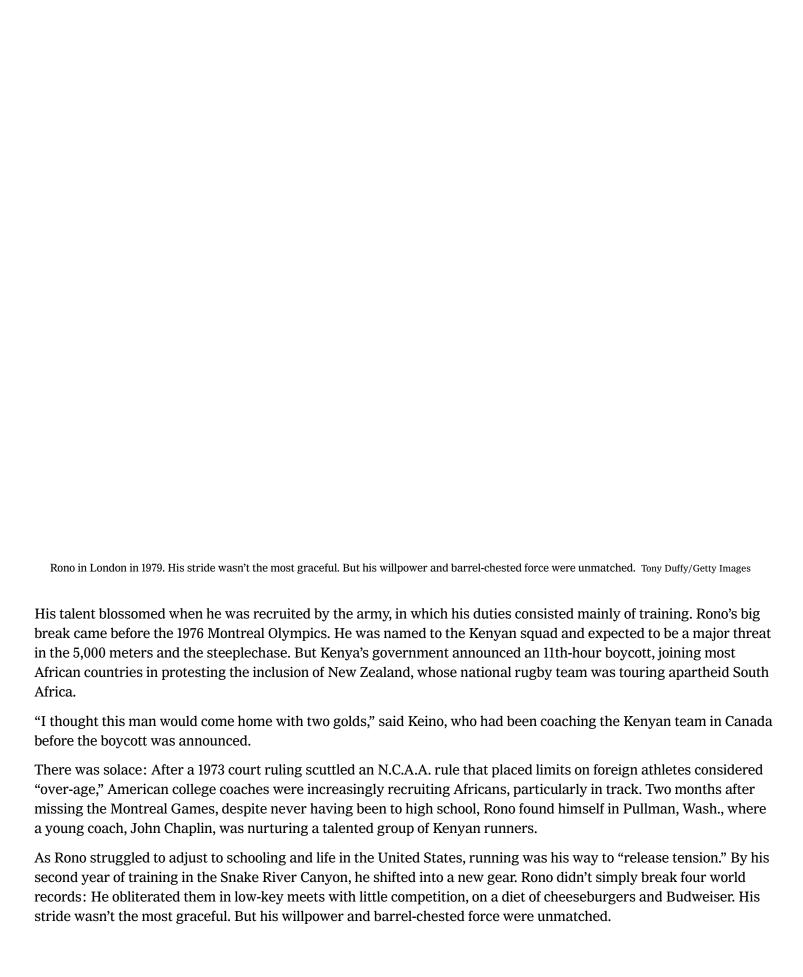
KIPTARAGON, Kenya — One afternoon in May, as a cold rain pelted the roof of his brother's rural home, Henry Rono sipped a mug of tea and reflected on what he called his greatest achievement.

To most running fans — especially those who came of age during the 1970s, the sport's boom years — his signature accomplishment would seem obvious. Stifled by the Kenyan boycotts of the 1976 and 1980 Summer Games, Rono never experienced Olympic glory. But his 1978 season was one of the most remarkable ones in track history.

Over 81 days, as a 26-year-old Washington State sophomore, he set world records in four events: the 3,000 meters, 5,000 meters, 10,000 meters and 3,000-meter steeplechase. It was a feat accomplished by no one else before or since: Rarely does a runner with the stamina to break new ground over 25 laps have the speed to do so over seven and a half laps with barriers. Yet to Rono, decades later, its significance barely registers. Instead, he's proudest of a period later in life when he enrolled in a community college and finally achieved what he said had long eluded him: a mastery of English.

"Running to me was second nature," he said. "Education was my weakness."





Rono, right, in 1978 in Washington. As a 26-year-old Washington State sophomore, he set world records in four events that year. Tony Duffy/Getty Images

"I could tell him exactly what to run, exactly how to do it, and he would do it," Chaplin said.

It was after that climax, in most accounts of Rono's life, that the drawn-out, tragic denouement began. While there were a few more moments of glory, including a 1981 season that began with a beer belly and ended with another 5,000-meter world record, his luster faded quickly.

Despite a college degree and a contract with Nike, he receded into a cocoon of personal struggles. Disheartened by friction with athletics officials back home, he began drinking with increasing regularity. Like many Kenyan stars of future generations, he was careless with money: He lost track of bank accounts, had cash stolen on airplanes and was lured into bad investments by con artists. Soon, he was drifting across the United States, in and out of friends' guest rooms and alcohol-addiction rehab. He parked cars in Portland, Ore., rang the bell for the Salvation Army in Salt Lake City and pushed people in wheelchairs at the Albuquerque airport.

There were more uplifting periods. In the 1990s, after settling in New Mexico, he spent time as a special-education teacher and coach. He trained college athletes in the Navajo Nation and aspiring elites in Albuquerque and was invited for a stint in Yemen to develop national-caliber athletes there. Kris Houghton and Solomon Kandie, runners based in New Mexico who set personal bests under his guidance, described him as a "wise sage" with a reverence for hills and deep appreciation for the sport's mental aspects. "He loves the pureness of someone seeking to better themselves," Houghton said.

