



ZONETALK PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

**MESHACK SANG – KENYAN TRACK YOUTH DEVELOPMENT COACH,
AUTHOR, AND RETIRED DISTANCE RUNNER**

Introduction

Kenyan coach, and author, Meshack Sang, has competed internationally and has been coaching young Kenyan athletes in a career spanning 20 years. This accomplished coach and author sat down with Bob to freely give of his time and knowledge to inspire coaches and athletes around the globe to overcome financial and equipment limitations and to achieve greatness. His concepts utilize modern scientific methodology of Zone (flow) and total focus in ways that his Kenyan athletes understand. His sensitivity to the culture and beliefs of his athletes make him one of the best coach/educators of developmental athletes in Kenya, if not in the world.

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Bob Palmer: [00:00:06] This is Bob Palmer, and you're listening to *ZoneTalk* by SportExcel, where the magic of the Zone is a game-changer. In every episode, we dive into the lives of high performers and learn their amazing strategies so that you can take leadership of your game, your team, and your life.

Bob Palmer: [00:00:22] Coach Meshack Sang is a retired distance runner from Kenya and currently is a youth development coach who is guiding young athletes to U.S. and European college scholarships. He's an avid competitor and registered some international times in the 5000 meter, 10k, and 1500 meter. He left professional running due to a knee injury. His name is footnoted in some of the best cutting-edge research publications such as the *American Journal of Human Biology*.

He has had roles in international documentaries relating to the prowess of East African runners and works with top academic researchers on questions of sport, performance, and health. Welcome, Coach Meshack.

Meshack Sang: [00:01:05] Thank you very much. My pleasure.

Bob Palmer: [00:01:09] What is it like for a runner to be cooped up in four walls during COVID?

Meshack Sang: [00:01:16] Now, it's not pleasant. I mean, it's like the end of the world itself.

Bob Palmer: [00:01:24] How do you get any training in or how do you do anything or is this just a wait and see?

Meshack Sang: [00:01:30] Well, training is possible because we just get to go out and run, but we try to maintain that social distancing, as it has been advised by the World Health Organization and the Minister of Health here in Kenya.

Bob Palmer: [00:01:45] And so running should be one of the sports that is really easier to train in then?

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Meshack Sang: [00:01:52] Yes, yes and no. Yes, physically, but psychologically, no, because it's very difficult to train when you don't know [when] you're going to [compete]. When you don't know if you have a race coming. You know, training is based on the competitions ahead of you. So you train towards that competition. And when you don't know when you're going to compete, it's very difficult to follow through on the training program. So that's the challenge. That's why we hate COVID-19.

Bob Palmer: [00:02:20] Do you have anything that you do right now to get the athlete motivated?

Meshack Sang: [00:02:27] We give them hope. We just try to make sure that their hope stays alive and if possible, keep encouraging them to continue running because you don't know when the whole thing will open up. And when it does, you'd better be ready. So that's what we tell them. So they keep training. That's at the heart. It doesn't kill [them] to train. So they should be able to keep on training while waiting for the world to open up and competitions to resume.

Bob Palmer: [00:02:54] So you ran professionally yourself?

Meshack Sang: [00:02:57] Yes.

Bob Palmer: [00:02:57] What was it like for a kid out of Africa thrown into the big leagues at your first international event?

Meshack Sang: [00:03:05] Nothing special, I mean, Africans are running already - they did that before me. So it is just like any other kid from Europe, America, or China, and so it's nothing special. Just get onto the track and start running and that's it.

Meshack Sang: [00:03:25] You don't feel special for being African to run. It is just competing like any other athlete.

Bob Palmer: [00:03:30] So I'm not sure about that. Africans have a pretty good reputation to uphold!

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Meshack Sang: [00:03:38] The pride behind running is not what we are looking for. People just add it onto us. But in the real sense, when we go out to run and when we go into a competition, we don't find it special. We compete like any other athlete. In fact, when we look over our shoulders, we are also worried about the white guys following us [as] is that expression.

Bob Palmer: [00:04:00] How old were you when you first started going international?

Meshack Sang: [00:04:05] 19 years old. Well, I started running here in Kenya with international athletes when I was 18, but I went to Europe to be in my competitions when I was 19 years old and I never stopped.

Bob Palmer: [00:04:20] You told me about an event, I think, in Holland. Can you describe that? One of your first European events maybe?

Meshack Sang: [00:04:28] Yeah, actually, it was my first international professional competition, because before that I was running as a student when I was in Europe. So I was competing; I was running for a club. But then when I was done with my studies, I came back to Kenya and began training for real - for the money.

Meshack Sang: [00:04:50] So that was my first competition when I went to Holland, and when we got to the start line, things were a little bit difficult for me. I did not know how to start. I didn't know what to do because everyone else was highly decorated with all those brands - Nike, Adidas, Reebok, and things were not very nice to an intimidated beginner. My gear was mixed up – Nike on top, Reebok shorts and different that did not even have a name. And people were surprised when they saw me on the start line without any kind of sponsorship.

Meshack Sang: [00:05:22] So when we began the race, I think they kept looking at me and asking themselves - where was this guy? Because I was hanging behind them all through eight kilometers, 10 kilometers, 12 kilometers. It was 15 kilometers. And when I finished fourth, they were really surprised because they didn't know where I came from. So they'll ask me, who is this guy? And I told them - now, you know. That was really exciting for me. And I got some really good money after that competition and an offer to sign up a contract to compete professionally. /...5

Bob Palmer: [00:06:01] So you're saying that it's pretty easy for a runner to make a career out of it when you're good?

Meshack Sang: [00:06:09] Running is one of the best. It's like acting. Running is like acting, you know, because you really work hard. It's not easy. So you work hard, you struggle in training. But the moment you get a chance to compete - it becomes really easy to make a career out of it or make some money out of it.

Meshack Sang: [00:06:26] So that's why many athletes in Kenya are actually focused in training, because this training is what training to run professionally is, what takes most of them out of poverty, because people joke around saying that Kenyans run away from poverty. Because actually, when you break through in running, your life changes completely, plus that of your family and your siblings and everyone else because of the winnings that we make. And it's what we really value most. And that's why it's one of the best careers that a Kenyan athlete can take up.

Bob Palmer: [00:07:03] It sounds like there has been a lot of pressure on you. Back then, how did you get ready? What did you do?

Meshack Sang: [00:07:14] Before the competition or...

Bob Palmer: [00:07:16] Yeah, to get ready for the competition, I mean, huge pressure. Your family and friends are rooting for you.

Meshack Sang: [00:07:24] For a Kenyan, competition is like training, because when we train back here at home, it's a real competition. We kick each other as certainly in training as in competition. And we make sure that every training, every session is trained at a race place. And so when you get into competition, there's nothing new. There's only [the difference] that the guys you're competing with are not your ordinary fellow athletes that you have been training with back at home.

Meshack Sang: [00:07:55] So it's new guys maybe from Canada, from the US, from elsewhere. You meet new faces, but it's the same thing - back here at home with your friends, your family and the people you're training with [or] that you are training. /...6

So to us when we get into the competition, when I got into competition, it was nothing different from what we do at home. I didn't feel anything is the normal process of warm-up and then, you know, a little visualization to look at yourself competing in a new environment, [with] new people. And then when the gun goes off, it's the same thing. You run until you drop.

Bob Palmer: [00:08:36] You mentioned to me that running was life or death, or in your words, you have no business doing it for fun. What do you mean by that?

Meshack Sang: [00:08:47] That's very correct. That's very correct. Because if you get into that, if you begin training to run, the moment you've started - know that there's no going back, because when you choose, when you decide to be an athlete - it is to train and compete for life for them, because many people would go and do that job to test and see if they can survive, but not for Kenyans. Kenyans run it. They've got no right to be training if they are not training to win and make some money.

Meshack Sang: [00:09:26] And so we don't really entertain people who want to run for fun. And if you meet a Kenyan who tells you that he is running for fun, then he is a liar. I don't believe it because we run to survive and for survival. Many Kenyans don't have anything else to do.

Bob Palmer: [00:09:47] So it must be kind of different for a coach, because you don't have to motivate, they're motivated when they come to you.

Meshack Sang: [00:09:56] Yes, they are. They know what they want to do. They just need guidance. So our job as coaches is to guide. It is to show them how to do it. They know what they want to achieve. They know they want to win. They know they want to break a world record.

Meshack Sang: [00:10:09] They know they want to overcome the injuries they are going through. And when they come to us, it's not because they are looking for some magic bullet or something like that. But they are looking to really do it for life and death. And what we provide is just normal guidance for them to be able to succeed.

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Bob Palmer: [00:10:34] Do you have any specialized ways of [training]... I mean, so it sounds like you don't have to motivate, but you're certainly teaching skill. Do you have any specialized way to get that information to stick so your athletes run with it?

Meshack Sang: [00:10:50] Kenyan coaches are not as technical as maybe Western coaches. We really build a relationship with athletes, so they believe in us. So whatever we tell them is religious to them, you know, so when an athlete comes to me, I have to be really careful in what I'm telling him or her.

Meshack Sang: [00:11:14] And so everything I tell my athletes - [they] take it as it is, and they follow. So it makes it easy for us to build a concept in them for training. So for me, like I told you before, I try to [guide them]...because you see Kenyan athletes - they have faith. Even when they come to you, they know it's by faith they are going to make it in running.

Meshack Sang: [00:11:39] They don't believe in making it through science or through doping or through anything else that is not spiritual. So they believe that running to them is something spiritual, and that's why when they get into it; they do it for life and death. So when we give them what we build [in training], we try to build faith. I try to build faith, to put faith in them, and show them how it can work for them.

Meshack Sang: [00:12:08] Like I have a little concept I came up with. When an athlete is running, I ask him or her to listen to their steps because those steps will instruct and guide them. Like what the Europeans do - okay? They listen to the music when they are running - the Europeans and Americans, you'll find all of them with earbuds, listening to music to get the rhythm to boost them. But I tell my athletes to listen to their steps. That's free music. You don't need to buy that. So when you step on the ground, that takes you into a world that is like the Zone that you always explained to us.

Meshack Sang: [00:12:42] It takes them into that world of solidarity with the running that they are doing. So if they can count their steps, then they know they still have some energy to finish the remaining steps that are coming up. So they listen to that. And within a short while, there is some rhythm that they have built and that keeps them going.

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Meshack Sang: [00:13:03] And the strides will always be as uniform as they want, because if they can maintain their stride in a marathon, then it is possible to maintain the speed and keep the time, because if you mess up with the time during a marathon run, then you're going to mess up - your finishing will be disrupted. So if they can listen to that, I ask them, "Are you able to listen to that?" because many athletes get distracted when they are running.

Meshack Sang: [00:13:31] I start by teaching them how to go with the rhythm of their steps when they are running. And I call it the steps of faith. So if you can be at peace with the rhythm of your legs, the legs, and the sounds that it's giving you, it is of the sounds of the open road that is breathing over your shoulders. Then it's possible for you to move with your body and your steps and the speed that you are expected to use to complete your run.

Bob Palmer: [00:13:58] So it sounds like it would be very easy then if they wanted to pick up their pace just to change the tempo.

Meshack Sang: [00:14:06] Listen to your steps.

Bob Palmer: [00:14:06] Yes, pretty cool.

Meshack Sang: [00:14:07] So the steps will guide them like the music, you know, it takes them to the Zone.

Bob Palmer: [00:14:15] Are there any unique challenges that face your athletes in East Africa?

Meshack Sang: [00:14:22] The biggest challenges that face our athletes is training equipment because they're very expensive to get them - so they depend on athletes who have already made good on some contracts so that they can share their old gear. So many athletes, you know, we have so many athletes in this country. And especially in my village, we have more than a hundred active athletes, and many who are contemplating to begin running, and many who have also gone outside the country to compete professionally. So you realize that if all these people are able to get the right training gear, training equipment, and the facilities that they need, that is a good step. It is like giving him or her a fishing line and a hook.

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Meshack Sang: [00:15:17] And that way they know what to do with it. You don't need to teach them again how to run. You just give them a shoe and they'll show you a medal in three or four months. It's that simple for a Kenyan athlete. So they get a better shoe - The next week they'll be calling you to celebrate with them.

Meshack Sang: [00:15:34] And that's the good thing about it because we have enough food in Kenya. We have food. Our athletes are not starving because we eat basic food. So if you compare with Western athletes, many of them actually depend on multivitamins and a lot of food supplements that they need for them to be able to run like the Kenyans. But for us, our diet is simple and very, very healthy, and science has proven that the Kenyan diet is very good. And like many people who maybe believe that Kenyan athletes are doping, I don't think that's the main thing for a Kenyan athlete. So we have enough food.

Meshack Sang: [00:16:16] The challenge for the Kenyan athlete is the training equipment. That is the biggest challenge - they don't even need the big tracks and the gym and whatever other things they need to succeed. All they need is a pair of shoes, a tracksuit and maybe a stopwatch to test themselves and off they'll go.

Bob Palmer: [00:16:36] And they can pretty much train year-round.

Meshack Sang: [00:16:39] Yes,

Bob Palmer: [00:16:40] Huge advantage.

Meshack Sang: [00:16:41] And the shoe that you change after every three months, they can use it for a year - they take good care of it.

Bob Palmer: [00:16:48] How about for coaches? Are there some unique challenges for you as a coach?

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Meshack Sang: [00:16:53] Coaches have a problem with money. They have the passion to coach; they have the commitment; but the biggest challenge is they don't get paid because many athletes when they break through [to pro], they are signed up and they leave the country. And many of them are managed by international companies, management companies who don't care about the coaches who actually founded [developed] these athletes and came up with the training programs. So no Kenyan coach, especially [coaches like me who work with beginners], don't get any pay. They do it for a long time. They do for free and it is the biggest challenge for many coaches.

Meshack Sang: [00:17:33] So when I meet my colleagues, they get to tell me that they even don't know how to start charging athletes who need help. So in fact, we use our own resources to support the athletes instead of them paying us to train them.

Meshack Sang: [00:17:47] And when they become professional, like I said, they are signed up and they don't come back. And we are okay with that, because the only thing we need is to see them succeed because of the kind of life and the kind of background they come from.

Bob Palmer: [00:18:04] But you have to have a second job. You have to have a first job actually to support your coaching hat.

Meshack Sang: [00:18:10] Lucky enough, the majority of coaches are former athletes who made some good money. And they, like my coach who coached me, always tells me that the best way to spend your retirement as an athlete is with athletes. So you realize that many, many athletes, when they retire, they go into coaching and they are happy to do it for free because sometimes they invested some money and they have income. So they don't need to struggle with athletes, [by] asking athletes for any kind of payment.

Meshack Sang: [00:18:44] And the other challenge for the coaches is they can't access the right training, like the professional academic training to be better coaches because the state has [many] athletes and many of them don't have really [good coaches with] coaching skills [that are] scientific. So they lack that education - this is also another challenge for the coaches. So their coaching careers are not as professional as it is supposed to be.

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Meshack Sang: [00:19:15] Actually [it] would be beneficial [for them] to access these educational opportunities, but they can't get that.

Bob Palmer: [00:19:23] Are there roles within the Olympic movement in Kenya?

Meshack Sang: [00:19:28] In Kenya, the Kenyan Athletics Federation [is], Athletics Kenya - we have a federation in Kenya to try to give education in collaboration with world athletics, IWF, formerly IWF. They try to train most of these coaches, but they give them the basic skills, which is Level One. For a coach like me to come to Canada to coach, I need to have a degree in coaching or maybe to go to Australia or go to the US for good money. So I need to get a better education. But that kind of education is not available with the AK that is supporting coaches. So the majority of them are trained into [the roles of] officials who can support Athletics Kenya, events in Kenya, and that is it. And they don't get paid because they do that to be as volunteers, especially because they have athletes in these competitions.

Bob Palmer: [00:20:25] Can coaches like you move to the Internet and coach North American athletes via Skype or via Zoom or whatever?

Meshack Sang: [00:20:35] Yes and no. Yes, because the opportunity is there. If I can prove that I have the right concepts for the athletes who are looking for my services, then I should be able to do that. But the challenge that I know is - we have a problem with the Internet connection. Not everyone can access that, especially the coaches who are coaching in the villages. I'm lucky to be able to connect to you now because maybe this was my lucky day. I have a connection, but sometimes it disappears. So it's very difficult for many coaches to access the Internet and maybe advertise themselves to coach, although there are those who are trying through proxies. Maybe they work with the other coaches who are outside [Kenya] also they partner - work together to coach athletes who are outside Kenya.

Bob Palmer: [00:21:25] So by the sounds of it, you don't really have to motivate athletes to get them to train. Do you have the case where you might have athletes who over-train? How do you pace that?

Meshack Sang: [00:21:40] Yes.

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Bob Palmer: [00:21:41] How do you program your athletes, so they have a proper training program?

Meshack Sang: [00:21:48] The excitement. If you can control the excitement that the athletes have, because when they get into running, they really don't know when to stop. Because their goal is to go, compete and win. So they can really over-train. So for my kids, I get to assess them every six weeks. I make sure that these athletes are put through an assessment. I also take them through a medical assessment to check for potentially possible injuries, maybe if they have any injuries they are hiding, because most of them hide [injuries]. If you realize that - if the coach knows that I am injured, then he'll stop me from training, then I lose out in the competition that is coming up. So they hide [injuries].

Meshack Sang: [00:22:37] So for my kids, I don't know if other coaches are doing that, is I put my athletes through a medical checkup before I take them through the second phase of the coaching program. I assess them every six weeks and then I begin to redesign the training programs based on their level and their health levels. Because if they don't have injuries within six weeks, then I can proceed to the next stage because we have [curriculum] that we follow. And then maybe after that, I get to put them through a time trial to see if the speed has come and if they are able to compete again, if they are able to go into competitions.

Meshack Sang: [00:23:26] So if you can control the excitement, then we can control those who can over-train. It is all about that - they call it the runner's high. So if you can check on that, a good coach will know that this athlete is going crazy and he can stop him.

Bob Palmer: [00:23:41] How do you know?

Meshack Sang: [00:23:44] Like I said, a good coach would know that this athlete is going crazy.

Bob Palmer: [00:23:49] I know I'm pressing you here. I want you to drill down. How do you know? I mean, you and I would accept it's a feel thing. Is it a feel thing? Is it intuitive? Do you just...you can tell?

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Meshack Sang: [00:24:02] There's a checklist I follow every time I enroll an athlete. So for the checklist I keep checking my list every time. If I take the athletes out for training, I get to assess them psychologically, physically, emotionally. Some can come with really chained emotions. And I have to take them aside to discuss what the problem might be, because in running a lot happens to an athlete. And so I have a checklist that I follow to make sure that the athlete is following the things that I've given him to follow.

Bob Palmer: [00:24:42] So you've had kids move on to US colleges, I believe, have you?

Meshack Sang: [00:24:49] Yes, I'm involved in many, many programs that have seen so many athletes go on to study outside. And I founded several training camps that I've really done so successfully. One of them is Complete Sports [<https://complete-sports.org/>], which is based near Eldoret, our big city, and they are sending many athletes every year. I founded the program, the training center and the company sending out so many athletes so far. And it's working for many athletes around my area.

Bob Palmer: [00:25:22] What's your experience with athletes who go to the States or Canada or Europe?

Meshack Sang: [00:25:30] I talk with them on a daily basis and seem to be doing very well, although not competitively. The US colleges do not require the athletes to be as professional as expected [by coaches here].

Meshack Sang: [00:25:41] But as long as they can run good for the college, then their education is safe. So I discuss [strategies] with them to help them be focused and encourage them to at least think of [it being a] career in writing off the [cost] of their education because it has worked for so many. When they finish their education, they take up professional running. And many of the athletes who have done so have really shown good progress, especially when most of our top athletes in Kenya went through the US college system and Canadian universities.

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Meshack Sang: [00:26:14] And after their education, they take up professional running and they come out really good runners. So I encourage them on a daily basis through social media. We talk directly with athletes with whom I have assisted to go to study outside of the country. At least I want to make sure that they stick to their mission of not to get diverted when they get there.

Bob Palmer: [00:26:39] I know we worked together for a short while, and I always like to ask what came out of that? What do you feel came out of our relationship in terms of high performance?

Meshack Sang: [00:26:57] I think my interaction with you or my experience with you. It really transformed the way, not just the way I do my coaching, but also the way I conduct my life, because surviving close to six years of no pay and working with the people who expected me to support them cannot work for many people. But it's working for me. It has really impacted my family life. I'm focused, I am stable psychologically, and I am able to pursue my goals really, really well. And although some of the goals are very big, I think I'm on track getting to follow them through. So your training or your program actually kind of aligned in my mind to do one thing at a time, in the right way.

Meshack Sang: [00:27:57] So it has really worked for me because like I told you before, I am one athlete who has survived so many challenges in life and as a coach [and] also the way I conduct my life and I compare myself with some of the coaches that I know. I think I'm different. And that would be the secret. I don't need to doubt that. So it really works for me.

Bob Palmer: [00:28:24] Last question. Do you have any piece of advice for a young, competitive runner seeking to be the best distant runner in the world, not just from Kenya but from North America or Europe or Australia?

Meshack Sang: [00:28:44] The best advice is what I told you before. Don't get into running for fun, because running is not a game with people. So when you get outside and start running, run for the win and nothing more.

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Meshack Sang: [00:29:06] It might take a while to achieve that but running has to be everything. You put everything in running. Otherwise, if you stick to good discipline, you stay focused (especially if you have chosen your sport)...you eat right...don't use drugs...and the right food for you to run. You don't need to modify so much. So I think my main advice is don't get into the running if you are not ready to feel the pain because running is painful. It's very painful.

Meshack Sang: [00:29:44] And it's not just physical pain, it's also psychological pain. Like I told you – you can go crazy if you keep training and you are not achieving our goals. Your head can snap so you have to be very careful when you get into running, because those are the things that you need along the way.

Meshack Sang: [00:30:03] And I think that running is one of the most rewarding professions or careers you can ever take up. But don't forget to also pick up some education because it's what is keeping Meshack Sang alive, even now in retirement.

Bob Palmer: [00:30:20] Perfect, Meshack - thank you so much. I've learned a lot.

Meshack Sang: [00:30:26] Thank you very much. I really appreciate this and thank you for giving me this opportunity to talk to you. It's good to connect with you after a very long time and you remind me of the Zone. And I think it's kicked it back in again - but my Zone is back. Thank you so much. I really appreciate it.

Bob Palmer: [00:30:45] Good stuff. Bye friend.

Meshack Sang: [00:30:46] Stay safe from COVID-19.

Bob Palmer: [00:30:48] You too. You too.

Meshack Sang: [00:30:50] Bye for now. Thank you so much.

Bob Palmer: [00:30:59] This episode of *ZoneTalk* by SportExcel has ended but be sure to subscribe and be sure to read and review us so that we can continue to bring you the best Zone and High-Performance content. See you on the next episode.