



Present

TOWN OF RUNNERS



In Bekoji, running is a way of life.....

A MET FILM and ITVS INTERNATIONAL CO-PRODUCTION, A KLIKK CO-PRODUCTION

In ASSOCIATION WITH BRITDOC AND CHANNEL 4

A film by Jerry Rothwell

UK | 2011 | 85' | 52' | HD

SYNOPSIS

Town Of Runners (www.townofrunners.com) is a feature documentary about young people from the Ethiopian rural town of Bekoji, whose runners have won 8 Olympic Gold medals, 32 World Championships and broken 10 world records in the last 20 years. The film follows two girls as they strive to emulate their local heroes, making the journey from school track to national competition and from childhood to adulthood. Their mentor is a former PE teacher who has discovered and trained many of the world's leading long distance runners including Tirunesh and Genzebe Dibaba, Kenenisa Bekele and Deratu Tulu.



NARRATIVE SYNOPSIS

Bekoji is a rural town in Ethiopia's Southern Highlands, which has produced many of the world's greatest runners in the last twenty years. In the Beijing Olympics, its runners won all four gold medals in the long distance track events – more than most industrialised countries.

The success of runners from Bekoji is partly due to the dedication of **Sentayehu Eshetu**, a former PE teacher in the local primary school. Since his protégé Derartu Tulu became the first African woman to win an Olympic gold in 1996, he has trained and inspired countless elite runners including world champions Kenenisa Bekele, Tariku Bekele and Tirunesh Dibaba. At dawn each morning Sentayehu now oversees an enthusiastic group of over 200 young runners, aged from 10 to adult, through a set of punishing hill runs.

'Town of Runners' tells the story of three of Sentayehu's young hopefuls. The feature documentary, directed by award winning filmmaker Jerry Rothwell, has been in production since July 2008 and follows their stories over three years - a unique view into the lives of young Ethiopians and their struggles to realise their dreams.

Alemi is a farmer's daughter, who needs to persuade her family to allow her to train so that she can pursue a different kind of life from her mother. **Biruk** looks after his grandmother's kiosk on the main road into town and must juggle shop keeping, school work and running. **Hawii** is perhaps the most likely to succeed; she lives with her extended family on their smallholding and hopes to follow in the footsteps of her older sister who runs in the US.

Bekoji holds few opportunities for these young people beyond subsistence agriculture, particularly for girls. Only a small percentage of girls in the town will move from primary to secondary education and many will marry very young. For Alemi and Hawii, athletics offers the chance of a different life and the evidence of the wealth and opportunity it can bring is in the hotels, garages, photo shops and homes owned by the town's successful runners.

The girls first train for regional competition, with Hawii qualifying for the national youth championships resulting in her first visit to the capital Addis Ababa. Biruk fails to reach the regional team and pressure builds for him to succeed in his education to make the best use of the limited life-choices available to him. Biruk becomes the film's narrator, charting the changes in his home town as its traditional ways of life are transformed by interventions from the modern world: a new Chinese road is being built to connect Bekoji to the capital; reliable electricity then mobile telephony arrives, and by the end of the film, Bekoji is connected to the internet. Meanwhile as the girls progress it becomes clear that success in athletics isn't just about talent, but also about resilience and luck. At 14, the girls are selected for new athletics training centres and must move hundreds of miles from their home to government funded camps. Alemi does well but Hawii struggles with illness, bureaucracy and poor living conditions; to continue in her career and re-discover her form she must find the will to overcome obstacles rooted in Ethiopia's lack of wealth.

The story encompasses the high stakes and fierce competition of running, whilst following the characters' journeys through their formative years, set against rapid changes in their community. Punctuated by their preparations for crucial races, the film delves into the children's lives to understand the significance of running for them – to create a portrait of African youth seen not through the standard lens of poverty and famine, but one of ambition and hope.



Director Interview

How did you discover the town of runners?

Dan Demissie, one of the producers, is a British Ethiopian, and he was interested in doing a documentary about the Ethiopian running culture. He pitched the idea to Al Morrow at Met who produces my films and we came across the work of Coach Sentayehu in Bekoji, which seemed to offer a good focus for a film.

I spent some of my childhood in Kenya in the 1970s and my childhood sporting heroes weren't George Best or Gary Sobers, but the great East African runners of that time, Kip Keino and Mike Boit. Apart from a brief visit, I hadn't been back to East Africa since and was excited about making a film there.

We made contact with Sentayehu Eshetu, Bekoji's inspirational coach, and decided to start filming in Ethiopia during the Beijing Olympics. Ten thousand miles away, the town's two best-known runners, Bekele and Dibaba, were carrying Bekoji's hopes onto a world stage; they won all four long distance track gold medals (men's and women's 5k and 10k) – which was a great start for the film!

We did seven shoots in all, each lasting about two weeks – the last of them at the end of 2011.

How do you describe the film?

It's a film about two girls – Hawii and Alemi - who want to run their way to a different life, in a rural Ethiopian town which is undergoing huge change. It's not only a film about running but about being a teenager in a country that is in transition. Because Bekoji has such an incredible history of producing world-class long distance runners, this drives the girls' ambitions, and the film follows them trying to become runners over a three year period. The girls struggle to realize their ambitions

against a complicated backdrop in which lack of resources play a huge part. Their journeys are very different from a teenager in Europe trying to do the same thing.

What do you want audiences to take away from your film?

I hope they gain a strong sense of the resilience of African youth and a belief that it is their dreams – not those of the West – that should shape Africa’s future. The girls’ stories are set against the background of a rural Ethiopia that is undergoing enormous changes as traditional ways of life are transformed by globalisation. On our first visit in 2008, the electricity supply was patchy, there was no mobile or internet and Bekoji could only be reached by a 50km mud road from the nearest large town, Asella. By the time we completed the film, at the end of 2011, the Chinese had built a new tarmac road, connecting Bekoji to the capital Addis Ababa, a new hotel had been opened with satellite TV in every room and mobile phones were everywhere. The film tries to capture this transition and what it might mean for a new generation of Ethiopians, in a country where more than 70% of the population is under 25.

Hawii, Alemi and Biruk are compelling subjects. How did you choose them for the focus of your documentary?

Our first point of contact with the town was Sentayehu – and when we first visited we asked him to introduce us to a group of young people he thought would be interested in doing the film, and who might make interesting subjects. We stressed that it wasn’t about finding the most promising runners – but that we were interested in their lives as a whole. By the second shoot, we found that we were spending most time with Hawii, Alemi and Biruk, and we’d followed the girls to a regional competition. Hawii and Alemi’s friendship seemed important for the film, though at the time we didn’t know that they would be sent away to different parts of the country.

Bekoji is a very tight knit community, but they seemed so receptive to the documentary process. Did it take them some time to warm up to the cameras?

Sentayehu is greatly respected in the town, so having his support for the film was really important. Our production manager in Ethiopia Samuel Tesfaye, who acted as fixer, translator, friend, organizer, advocate, was also crucial in maintaining the relationships the film needed. Dan (Demissie, producer) came on every shoot with me and by the end was almost fluent in Amharic. So all these factors helped us become less the outsiders. We spent a lot of time there and we kept coming back – which helps build trust.

The poor conditions at the running clubs that Hawii attended were truly shocking. Do you think the impact of Town of Runners can increase their funding and possibly bring about improvements in the living conditions? Has anything changed since the release of the film?

Anywhere in the world, a sports club needs the support of its community to function, whether it’s rich in resources or not. I think the problem with Hawii’s club is that it didn’t have that support and so lack of money wasn’t the main or only issue. We’re using the film to help develop education and athletics infrastructure in Bekoji, aiming to set up long term partnerships between running clubs in UK and US and the town. (see www.townofrunners.com/outreach) If we achieve that, hopefully runners won’t have to leave Bekoji (and so leave their family support and their education) so young, in order to progress their careers.

Everyone who watches Town of Runners will want to know how Hawii, Alemi and Biruk are doing. Can you give us an update? Have they seen the finished documentary?

Yes I took the rough cut back to show them at the end of last year. I think they really liked seeing

that part of their lives turned into a film – and their families really enjoyed seeing their achievements (for Alemi it was the first time her mother had seen her running).

They're doing fine – Biruk has been acting as a guide for some UK athletes who went to train in Bekoji at altitude, and has got a job in a video rental kiosk; Hawii's second club (which seemed on the point of collapse at the end of the film) managed to continue. She returned there and is doing well in competitions, back to the form she showed at the start of the film. I just heard Alemi is now back in Bekoji and about to move another club – she's also been doing well in competitions.

Will any of the films 'stars' - be in London for 2012?

The girls at the centre of the film are too young to compete in the Olympics, though we hope to get them here to take part in the film's release.

Bekoji will be well represented in London 2012, though – with Kenenisa Bekele and Tirunesh Dibaba defending their Olympic golds from Beijing – and Tirunesh's sister Genzebe will also be there, and having just won the World Indoor Championship, she also has a very strong chance of winning a medal.

Film outreach

Working with non-profit organisation Running Across Borders, the filmmakers plan to use the film to benefit Bekoji, enabling the town to build on its key strength (its international fame in running) through its contacts with the rest of the world.

We aim to bring Coach Sentayehu to the UK to build partnerships between running clubs here and in Bekoji. The coach will lead training sessions and give talks to young people about his work and there will be a chance to meet the runners in the film. The film will also be touring UK schools and universities.

In Bekoji, Running Across Borders are developing a 'Visit and Train' programme, enabling international runners - both amateur and professional - to train at altitude and experience the town's running culture. Profits from this programme will be used to create to create greater sporting, educational and economic opportunities for young people in Ethiopia.

DIRECTOR'S BIO

Jerry Rothwell

Jerry is a documentary filmmaker whose previous directing credits include the feature documentaries *Heavy Load* (2008, winner of the Audience Award at Britdoc) and *Deep Water* (2006, co-directed with Louise Osmond), winner of the Grierson Award and Best Documentary at Rome Film Festival. He has recently completed *Donor Unknown* (2010) which won the Audience Award at Silverdocs and the Online Award at Tribeca Film Festival, before its US broadcast on PBS and UK on More 4.. Jerry is in development on the feature doc *How To Change The World*, for Met Film. Directing credits prior to this included *The Late George Shaw*, a half hour film for Channel 4's Art Show Series, two short films in the Modern Painters series for Channel 4 and *Fact Plus Fiction* a 30 min documentary for the Arts Council/Channel 4. Another strand of Jerry's work has been

participatory and interactive production. He played in lead role in developing Hi8us' Projects improvised dramas with young people for Channel 4 and in establishing First Light, the UK Film Council's scheme for young filmmakers which has supported over 1000 films.

Previous Documentaries

Donor Unknown, UK 2010

International premiere at IDFA 2010

World Premiere at Sheffield Doc Fest 2010

Audience Award at Silverdocs 2011

Audience Award at Tribeca (Online) Film Festival 2011

Heavy Load, UK 2008

World Premiere at SXSW 2008

Audience Award at Britdoc 2008, CDN Award 2009

Deep Water, UK 2006

Best Cinema Documentary Award at Rome International Film Festival 2006

Best Cinema Documentary at the Grierson British Documentary Awards 2007

Winner of the SDFCS Award at the San Diego Film Critics Society Awards 2007

THE PRODUCERS

Al Morrow

Al is an award winning producer and Head of Documentary at Met Film Production. She has produced a wide range of feature documentaries including *Donor Unknown* (Arte/More 4/VPRO/The Sundance Institute Documentary Film Program/Cinereach/Gucci Tribeca Fund) Winner of the Tribeca Film Festival (online) Award for Best Film 2011, a 2011 Grierson Award nominee for the best Contemporary Documentary and Winner of the Silverdocs Audience Award 2011; *Men Who Swim* (BBC/ARTE/VPRO/NRK/PBS) winner of the 2010 Silverdocs Audience Award and a 2011 Grierson Award nominee for most Entertaining Documentary; *Heavy Load* (BBC/IFCtv/ITVS) and *Deep Water* (Pathe/FilmFour/UKFC) winner of the Grierson Award for Best Cinema Documentary. She is in production on on BAFTA Winner Sarah Gavron's, *On The Edge* (DFI, DRTV, NRK) and in pre-production on Jeanie Finlay's *The Great Hip Hop Hoax* (BBC, Creative Scotland) and active development on many more including Jerry Rothwell's *How To Change The World* developed with the support of the UK Film Council (now BFI) and Poppy Simpson's *Black Like Me*.

Dan Demissie

Dan brought *Town of Runners* to Met Film Production. He is a graduate of Met Film School's producing course and currently a student at the prestigious National Film and Television School in London. Dan's family are from Ethiopia, and he has always felt that the stereotypical image of famine and poverty, projected in the US and Europe, is unbalanced and often dehumanizing. The idea for *Town Of Runners* came from an ambition to show a different side to the country. When he heard about the astonishing success of athletes from the small town of Bekoji, and the inspirational coach who trained them it seemed like the perfect story of self-reliant Ethiopian accomplishment, and a way to address wider issues through a more oblique perspective. Participation in athletics is a unique way into understanding the lives of young people in the rural areas.

CREDITS

Filmed and Directed by **JERRY ROTHWELL**

Produced by **MET FILM**

in co-production with **ITVS INTERNATIONAL**

in co-production with **KLIKK FILMS**

in association **WITH BRITDOC** and **CHANNEL 4**

Produced By **DAN DEMISSIE** and **AL MORROW**

Executive Producer **KRISTIN ÓLAFSDÓTTIR** and **JONNY PERSEY**

Co-Producer **STEWART LE MARÉCHAL**

Executive Producer for **ITVS SALLY JO FIFER**

Edited by **ALAN MACKAY**

Music by **MULATU ASTATKE**

Composed by **VINCENT WATTS**

CONTACTS

For **World Sales** enquires please contact

DOGWOOF GLOBAL SALES

211 Hatton Square Business Centre

16 Baldwins Gardens | London | EC1N 7RJ | UK

Tel: +44 20 7831 7252 | Ana Vicente ana@dogwoof.com or

Vesna Cudic vesna@dogwoof.com

For **Festivals**

global@dogwoof.com

For **Press** enquires please contact

press@dogwoof.com

Production company:

Met Film Production

Ealing Studios

Ealing Green

London W5 5EP

info@metfilmproduction.co.uk