Meaningful Running

NCAA Cross Country National qualifiers Chemaoi and Sangau are part of a long line of international athletes to compete for coach Dean Hayes

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"One might say running is an absurd pastime. But if you can find meaning in the running you have to do to stay on this team, then you may find meaning in the other absurd pastime. Life." William Bowerman, legendary Oregon track coach and Nike co-founder, echoed these words to his runners at the first practice of every season.

For Middle Tennessee cross country runners Festus Chemaoi and Zamzam Sangau the meaning of running is a way of life that not only reflects their own cultural heritage and pride but also giving them the opportunity for a quality education and life for themselves and their respective families.

Coming from a part of the world very different from America, it is difficult to comprehend the passion for the sport. Unlike in United States, running in Africa is not seen as simply a way to exercise, but rather as a mode of transportation and a way to gain national status.

"In Kenya, distance running is a way of life," Chemaoi said. "We do it for exercise, but we concentrate on running to earn life."

Chemaoi began running competitively in high school. Initially, running was not seen as a way to create great things for his life, but simply an opportunity to get out of the classroom.

"I did not run competitively until I came to high school. At the boarding school I attended, you could not leave class if you did not play sports. Running was the only sport I could do, so I ran."Like Chemaoi, Sangau participated in athletics in primary school in her native country of Uganda. However, she came to running in a different way.

Sangau said, "My family was always encouraged to do sports. My brothers played volleyball and handball. They were also runners, which is where I started running. There were also Sports Days at my school and running was one of the events. We were divided into houses and you would compete for house. I was not very talented, but I was very competitive in these races."

Many of their fellow country people were migrating to the United States to use their talents to get a college education and help their families. Like most domestic collegiate recruits, a word-of-mouth networking pipeline is the way MT head coach Dean Hayes imports international talent.

"We use a pipeline system when we recruit international athletes," said Hayes. "It starts with one athlete from another country. This athlete knows someone who knows someone and a lot of it is word of mouth. The internet has made things easier because they will contact you directly nowadays."

Sangau found connections through a personal friend who had contacts with Hayes. Through her friend, she contacted him, saying she was interested in coming to America and running.

Similarly, Chemaoi was recruited by MT assistant track coach Keith Vroman while participating at a Kenyan running camp.

Chemaoi said, "We have camps where you go to train year 'round. The camp I went to focused on student-athletes. If I was to stay at home, I would have had to chose to run or go to school. Through my camp, Keith emailed me through a friend and asked me about coming to MT. I was excited."

Chemaoi and Sangau are not the first African student-athletes to compete at MT under hall of fame coach Hayes. Throughout the years, Hayes has recruited and imported some of his top athletes from abroad, many of whom have earned conference and All-American honors as well as eight who have competed for their home nations in the Olympics.

The current athletes themselves are the biggest tool Hayes uses for getting prospective athletes to Middle Tennessee. Blue Raider discus record holder Harrison Salami of Nigeria was the first international student to immigrate to Murfreesboro, in 1973. Salami met Tommy Hayes in 1972 while Haynes was on a mission trip to Africa. Haynes got Salami's name and he was a Blue Raider the next semester.

Once in America, there is an adjustment period that every international student goes through.

"When I came here I did not like the food," said Sangau. "At first my taste buds did not agree with the food. Now that I have been here for awhile, I like a lot of the food. The colder weather has also been something I have had to adjust to."

Since coming to Middle Tennessee, Chemaoi and Sangau have experienced great success, each capturing multiple Sun Belt Conference victories as well as each being the first to qualify for the upcoming NCAA Cross Country National Championships on Monday. However, their respective success has not come without great work and effort. They will run up to 90 miles a week to train, while maintaining full class schedules. Both were named to the 2009 Sun Belt Cross Country Honor Roll at this year's conference championships.

"International athletes are more likely to take advantage of the opportunity," said Hayes. "They work very hard. They cannot afford to fail with the embarrassment of going home not making it and getting their degree."

Sangau remarked, "I do not like to let my teammates down. Sometimes they will think it is a big deal when I do not run my best, but it hurts me. It keeps me motivated."

Beyond Middle Tennessee both look to attend post-graduate programs. Chemaoi wants to stay in the United States for a period in an attempt at a professional career, while Sangau may return home after receiving a post-graduate degree.

Stay tuned to goblueraiders.com for results and coverage of Chemaoi and Sangau as they represent Middle Tennessee at the NCAA Cross Country National Championships on Monday November 23. The men's race will begin at 12:08 p.m. followed by the women's race at 12:58 p.m.

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