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The Secret of Kenyan Runners and What it Means for You

WARNING: Parts of this post have information of a graphic nature. Reader discretion advised. (Seriously, I wouldn't let your younger kids read this).

How could this possibly be?

A single African tribe (the Kalenjin people) living in an area approximately the size of Massachusetts owns the running world. Seriously, check out these stats:

- 5 American high school runners *ever* have broken the 4:00 mile.
- One high school in the Kalenjin tribe had 4 breaking a 4:00 mile *at the same time*.
- 17 American men in history have run *ever* a marathon under 2:10:00.
- 32 Kalenjin men ran that fast *in a single month* recently.

But why?

How is it that this single tribe can dominate the world of running? And what does it mean for you?

First, let's get one thing out of the way. Yes, genetics plays a role. The Kalenjin people have evolved over time to a certain build that helps them run quickly. There is no denying that. They are considerably better suited to running long distances than yours truly. That's a fact. (*If you're curious about the genetic differences, listen to the audio version of this post above*)

But the real thing that allows them to do this...

Their ability to overcome pain.

Many Americans are built with thin ankles and long, lanky legs, like the Kalenjin people. Just because they generally have a genetic advantage over me and an NFL lineman does not explain their dominance. What does is their *mental toughness*.

The initiation

At the age of fifteen, Kalenjin boys undergo their rite of passage. This is but a snapshot of what that looks like:

- Crawl naked through a tunnel of African stinging nettles.
- Beaten on the bony part of the ankle.
- Knuckles squeezed together.
- Formic acid from the stinging nettles wiped on his genitals.

That sounds awful, I know. But they are just getting started.

Next comes...

The circumcision.

On a fifteen year old boy. With a sharp stick.

This isn't the circumcision you know from American hospitals. It's essentially genital mutilation. The foreskin is cut, wrapped in a bow-like shape and pierced.

And the entire time...through the stinging nettles, the ankle beatings, the acid, the cutting, through it all...*the boys must remain **perfectly stoical**.*

Not a single movement. Not a sound.

They literally cake mud on the boy's face and allow it to dry. If, during the beatings, crawling, or cutting, the mud cracks (meaning he flinched at all), it's a signal for them to beat the boy worse. And the child is forever labeled a *kebitet* - a coward.

Pushing through the pain

After all that, with bloodied ankles, bruised knuckles, cut, exposed skin all over, and recently circumcised, you'd think they'd be sent home to rest. But no.

They run.

In the midst of the worst pain you can imagine, they are not allowed to walk. They are made to run. Fast.

With pain screaming through their bodies, they run, run, run, run, run. With every step they push through the pain. With every mile, they get stronger and faster.

In America, we've grown soft. Especially my generation.

But the Kalenjin *embrace* the pain. They use the pain.

We avoid the pain. We run from the pain. And when we do feel it, we escape the pain. We medicate the pain. We entertain it away.

It's time to stop that.

Find your pain points physically.

Find your pain points emotionally.

Find your pain points in your career and your finances.

And embrace them. Use them.

That is the only way to success.

How have you used pain to push you to success?