

# BEN JIPCHO

## T&FN Interview

by Jon Hendershott

**S**unlight streamed through Ben Jipcho's hotel room window above San Francisco's famed Fisherman's Wharf, as fishing boats docked to unload their catches and others headed back toward the Golden Gate and the Pacific.

But the hottest performer in the professional ranks—and one of the hottest anywhere in the track world for that matter—was more interested in sitting in the sun and talking about running than in watching the fishing boats. "Ahh, San Francisco sun," he smiled. "I was told there was only fog here. I like the sun.

And there is a lot to say about the 32-year-old gentleman-farmer from Nairobi, Kenya—second-fastest miler in history at 3:52.0, world steeplechase record holder and Olympic runner-up, 1973 T&FN Athlete of the Year, Commonwealth steeple and 5000 champion and 1500 bronze medalist and, most recently, owner of a brilliant two-mile/mile double of 8:27.0/3:56.2 indoors in the Los Angeles ITA meet. Just the fastest-ever such double in history—and within 56 minutes.

When he talks about running, Jipcho is an expressive man: one moment his face can be fiercely serious, the next brightened by a sparkling smile. His hands move almost all the time. He feels what he is saying—and, while there is plenty to say about Ben, Ben also has plenty to say.

**T&FN:** You were recently quoted that you have some regrets over turning pro? Do you really?

**Jipcho:** Well I was told that by '75 the prize money would go up, but it hasn't and now the Olympics are just ahead. You are deprived of that interest and challenge of running against other champions of the world, of qualifying and representing your country, and of finding out who is courageous in the Olympics. This is the purpose of the Olympics I think: to see who is courageous in competition, who is best, to tackle the other guys. The nations can mix together culturewise, too, and the young nations can mix with the grownup nations in the field of sport so the young ones can learn. But what I regret most is not being able to meet guys like John Walker, Wohlhuter, Bayi, Prefontaine, Brendan Foster. I would like to tackle those guys.

**T&FN:** Competing against the best is primary to you?

**Jipcho:** Yes, you cannot be called a champion unless you tackle other champions from other countries. That is the big thing. It is a war in which you do not shed blood. It is a war of nation against nation but it is done by being courageous and running fast and seeing how you tackle those guys physically and mentally.

**T&FN:** Since you can't have that intense competition against the world's best, what motivates you now as a professional? It can't be solely money.

**Jipcho:** It is all mixed up and I put it in three or four categories. The first is the winning over those you run against. Another is the spectators; they have paid their money to come and see competition. Third, people should not expect the athletes to break world records all the time. We are not machines; a human being is a human being. If you can be constant, consistent, that is good. The most important thing to me is that people should see it from the competitive point of view and not just the times—"Why is Jipcho running 4:00 when Bayi is running 3:55?" But bring those guys together and it will be a different thing altogether. The competition is so important, a close, exciting race that demands an athlete. That is what I like.

**T&FN:** How much did monetary considerations have to do with your turning pro? Was there really much left for you to accomplish as an amateur?

**Jipcho:** Money didn't convince me very much. But the rough and very stupid amateur rules discouraged me very much. I mean I was grown up in 1973, 30 years old. I was training on my own. Nobody knows how I was training. Yet I was required to travel everywhere I went with a manager—and I ended up showing him about customs and what to do. Even a very mature athlete like Kip Keino had to travel with a manager. I disliked it and I had had it. Being an amateur is not so bad, but some of the rules are all awkward.

**T&FN:** You really miss not having another chance at the Olympic Games?

**Jipcho:** Oh, too much. I feel for this coming Olympics, if my health remains as it is now, I would not miss a medal in the 1500. In the steeplechase, I don't think there is any amateur who can challenge me. In the 5000, I feel there isn't anyone to challenge me, even Brendan Foster. If a meeting could be arranged now with amateurs, over a mile and with Walker, Bayi and the others, they would have a very hard time winning. For two miles, Prefontaine is there, but he is no big threat.

**T&FN:** What really motivated you, then, before you turned pro?

**Jipcho:** It was the love for sport, for competing, the running against guys from different countries. Also, of course, the Olympics and the Commonwealth Games.

**T&FN:** How do you regard the competition in the pros? Would you rather have someone who could push you all the time, or do you like to win easily and be the star?

**Jipcho:** Having another guy push you means pain. It means pain and it means

glory when you win. It would be glory to him if he won. If he wins, I shake his hand; if he wins, he will feel the pain and not joy.

As a professional, you meet the same guys. But you also worry about being beaten and losing the money. That is in your mind sometimes. That is natural for a professional sportsman—but I still feel there should be competition.

Not forgetting, that even if someone runs 3:51, it is not that particular time that matters. It is how much he spent in training before that. It is that period before he runs the time that matters—what he spent in time, money and physical effort. So if somebody beats you, you have to thank his sacrifice because he really sacrificed to run like that. Like I have pains in my training.

**T&FN:** Even though you're smiling as you say that.

**Jipcho:** I have pains. Not many athletes could train the way I do. They couldn't keep up with it. It is painful but it pays later.

**T&FN:** You train on more quick bursts over a short period of time. Can you explain your style of training?

**Jipcho:** No, not now. When I retire. It is short, quick, tough, painful training.

**T&FN:** You don't do a lot of mileage? How much in an average week?

**Jipcho:** When we compete every weekend, I will train on Sunday, Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday; four days, eight miles. Thursday I rest, Friday and maybe Saturday I compete. About 35 miles a week, all in short bursts, fast. When I have two weeks between meets, I will do about 60 miles in a week, 110-120 for two weeks.

**T&FN:** Which race is your favorite?

**Jipcho:** The mile. It catches more eyes.

**T&FN:** Why did you run the steeplechase then?

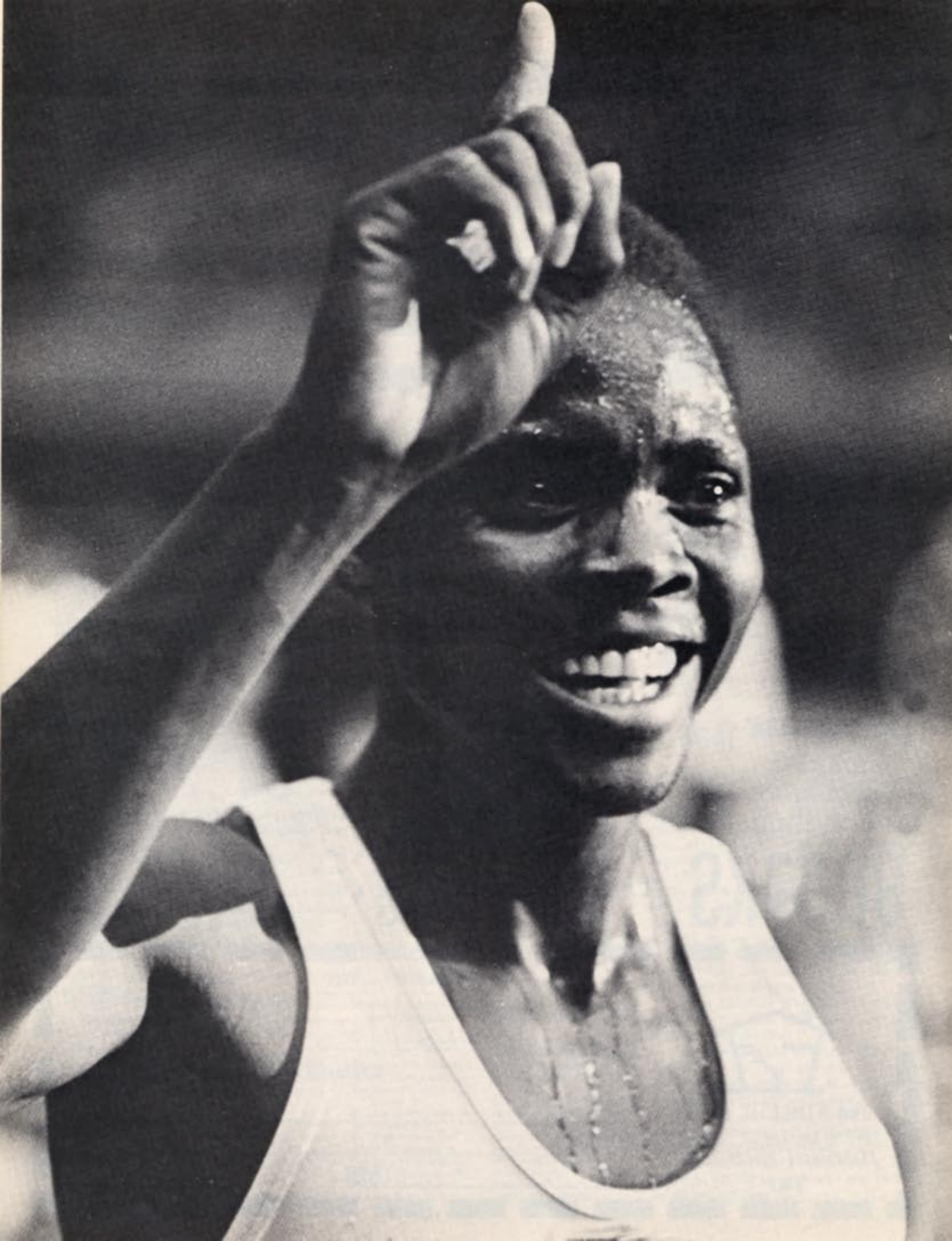
**Jipcho:** For prestige. Before, Kip Keino couldn't allow me to go in front of him in the 1500 and catch the eyes of people. Then I found the steeplechase was open and that was where I could catch the eyes of people. And I did. The steeplechase put me on the map.

**T&FN:** How did you feel when Kip ended up running the steeple at Munich?

**Jipcho:** Well, I felt if he wins, it is his strength. If I win, it is mine. So he has to thank my strength. I thanked his strength. That is all. This is sport.

**T&FN:** Some people have suggested that Kip was a non-specialist in the steeple and moved in and robbed you of a gold medal.

**Jipcho:** Well, he didn't just move in. He trained for the steeplechase. He had the



speed from the 1500 and the strength for jumping the hurdles and the water from the 5000 and 10,000. There is no reason Kip should not have won that steeplechase.

I had a lot of trouble with the Kenya Olympic Committee and I trained intensely for only two weeks before Munich. If I had been able to prepare properly, I would have run very well in the 1500, 5000 and steeplechase.

**T&FN:** *What is the story behind the supposed animosity between you and Kip, which started at Mexico?*

**Jipcho:** Personally, I have read these stories, that Jipcho never went very well with Kip—which is very wrong. Starting in Mexico, I had no experience, to start my career in athletics.

The team officials told me, "You are still very young, Jipcho, and we want a gold medal to go to Kenya so you set the pace for Keino to win. You still have a lot of chances, you are still growing, you have the future."

I accepted and did what they wanted. They felt I shouldn't even finish, that I should be a rabbit and drop out. But I wanted to see it through, I had to and I did. [He placed 10th in 3:51.2, after running 3:46.4 in the heats, good enough for sixth in the final.] Kip won it. The officials did not come and say, "Thank you, Jipcho," for having set the pace.

**T&FN:** *So the officials asked or told you to do this?*

**Jipcho:** Yes, not Kip. I cannot say it was Kip.

**T&FN:** *Did Kip thank you for your part? This is another story that has gone around, that he never did.*

**Jipcho:** I know, I know. After the race, he did not come and say, "Jipcho, thank you very much for what you have done." I did not expect it or take it as an offense. No, I'm sorry. It was just a normal thing. Kip is like that; sometimes he will say thanks for something and sometimes he will not, even when he appreciates it. He could be sitting across from you and dying but he wouldn't say, "Hey, man, I'm dying; can you do something?" For me to run in the shadow of Kip was fine. What do you expect? You cannot expect to perform better than someone like him. At the time of Mexico, he had more than seven years of experience on the track in the best competition. But I was very, very new. So I could not say I should have beaten Kip or that he should leave the steeplechase for me. It could not be given to me. I had to battle my way through.

**T&FN:** *There were other stories that the animosity continued at Munich, that Kip crowded you while running and spat on you.*

**Jipcho:** I have been asked this before but I didn't experience it. I don't know where these things start. I don't know why such things are said about us. Kip Keino is one of my best friends, as far as Kenyan athletes are concerned. He lived at my house last year and my wife stayed with his family many times. Where these things

come from, hell knows.

We compete as athletes, not as enemies. We compete and if he wins, I don't nurse a grudge against him or if I win and he nursed a grudge against me, I never experienced it. Never.

**T&FN:** *Supposedly Filbert Bayi came out in Tanzania and said the reason you turned pro was that he beat you in the Commonwealth 1500. How did you feel about losing to him in a world record over the distance that is your favorite?*

**Jipcho:** That was his chance. John Walker and Rod Dixon played a big part in letting Bayi go with a world record and gold medal. They were interested the whole time in blocking and boxing me. I think their coach told them not to worry about Bayi, because Walker had beaten him in the 800. Worry about Jipcho, so they blocked Jipcho the whole way. Instead of running a race, they were playing games. I still know I would have won that 1500. I knew where to start my sprint to catch Bayi in the straight. I had mastered it.

**T&FN:** *Even if Bayi had run exactly as he did?*

**Jipcho:** I would have beaten him. I felt very strong all the way but whenever I tried to go in front, one of those guys moved ahead of me and I had to break my stride and my speed and try to start again. It was taxing.

**T&FN:** *Had your victories in the steeple and 5000 taken much out of you?*

**Jipcho:** No, no. I was improving. I think I went into the Commonwealth Games at 40% of fitness. I think I was at about 60% at the end of the Games.

**T&FN:** *So you ran yourself to that high degree of fitness. Okay, at 100% what could Ben Jipcho run for a mile...*

**Jipcho:** 3:48.

**T&FN:** *Hmm, no hesitation. How about the steeple and 5000?*

**Jipcho:** 7:58, 8-flat in the steeple. Why not? 13:10, 13:08 in the 5000. A 13:06 would be hard so I won't predict that.

**T&FN:** *How can you double as you do in one night?*

**Jipcho:** Through the training I do. It is the work I do before the race. That is what matters; the training I have put in.

**T&FN:** *How did you begin to run?*

**Jipcho:** My school was about five miles away from my home. That was one factor which started me running. I ran from home to school and back. There was a group of other guys and we would start together from home in the morning and I would wait for them at school, 20 minutes, 30 minutes. Same at night. We started together and I would wait for them at home.

When track was first brought to our school, I was shy. I didn't want to participate. But those guys I beat going to school and home again did well. They were winning up to the provincial level and after a while I thought to myself, "Hey, if those guys can go up to that level but I beat them to school, why shouldn't I take part?" So I ran and beat them and I went from there.

**T&FN:** *Are you so competitive all the time, say in your business?*

**Jipcho:** Well, I'm a very competitive fellow. I like to compete. If you have 50 cattle and I have 40, I will compete with you to try to get up to 50. There are some areas where you cannot compete with somebody, but there are other areas where you can compete with him.

**T&FN:** *Were there any runners you wanted to be like?*

**Jipcho:** Ron Clarke and Peter Snell.

**T&FN:** *Kip?*

**Jipcho:** Well Kip was there as a countryman, as one who brought pride to the country, but Ron Clarke and Peter Snell were the first guys I knew about. I read about them before Kip Keino so they gave me my first impressions.

**T&FN:** *Which runners you met as an amateur were the most competitive?*

**Jipcho:** Puttemans. Brendan Foster. Of course not forgetting Kip Keino. They are very consistent. If they run 13:20 this week, expect a 13:18 or 13:19 next week, not a 13:40. They were very, very competitive, especially Puttemans. Foster is very good, very strong. He is one of the guys who could make the world record go down to 13:08—Puttemans, Foster, Jipcho, David Black and Prefontaine, to be the catalyst. If all were fit and wanted to go for it, one of them would get the record.

**T&FN:** *Do you feel there are ultimates for the mile, steeple and 5000?*

**Jipcho:** It depends on the fitness of the runner and how much he has trained. I think Jim Ryun could have run 3:48 or 3:49.

**T&FN:** *What was your reaction when you learned of his 3:51.1?*

**Jipcho:** When we heard of it, Kip Keino was the big man. We were shocked.

**T&FN:** *You eventually ran 3:52.0 and just missed his mark. Did you ever consider you might get close to that mark?*

**Jipcho:** Never, never. I never dreamed I could get close to four minutes. That was in '67 when I first began to run well. But I did break 4:00 in our Olympic Trials in '68.

**T&FN:** *How long do you plan to compete?*

**Jipcho:** I would like to leave track while I am still adding flavor. When the challenge isn't there anymore. If I break 3:51, I will say bye-bye.

**T&FN:** *When you do retire, what would you like to do, coach perhaps?*

**Jipcho:** At the moment, with the way the sport is administered, I would rather farm than coach. Maybe, if it improves, I could become involved. But there would be frustrations which I don't want. Too much politics, too many demands.

**T&FN:** *How would you like Ben Jipcho to be remembered?*

**Jipcho:** I cannot give a satisfactory answer right now. If you asked after I was 90% fit and had run 3:51, then that would be your answer. I am still preparing.

**T&FN:** *Your best is yet to come?*

**Jipcho:** I am still preparing. □