

FILBERT BAYI

by Tom Jordan

Someone once said that if they were to build the perfect miler from the ground up, he would come out looking very much like Jim Ryun. More likely, the perfect miler is 5-10/130, grew up at 6000 feet, comes from a clan known for its running heritage, and is named Filbert Bayi.

In the two years since Bayi's was just another strange African name eliminated in the first heats of the Munich 1500, he has become one of the most talked-about trackmen in the world. His defeat of Kip Keino in the African Games in 1973 marked a mercurial emergence onto the world track scene. After his 3:37.2 win over Kip, Bayi lowered his PR to 3:34.6 to lead the world timewise in 1973. In '74, he proved that he was for real, or unreal, by running 3:32.2 to break Jim Ryun's world record and run the equivalent of a 3:49.2 mile. It is not just the fast times that make Filbert intriguing, but the way he runs them. First 400s of 52-54 are not uncommon for him. Rarely in an important race in the last two years has he gone out slower than 55.0 for the first quarter—fairly decent half-mile pace. In his 3:32.2, for example, the splits were 54.9, 57.2, and 58.6 for the first 1200 meters. Then he began to sprint.

Who is Filbert Bayi? Some facts are fairly easy to pin down. He was born on the 23rd of June in 1953 (that's right folks, he's only 21) in a grass house near the town of Karratu, some 90 miles from Kilimanjaro, in what was then the British colony of Tanganyika. His father died when Filbert was 1-2 years-old and he grew up with his mother, step-father and seven half-brothers and sisters on a maize and bean farm. His diet consisted mainly of maize and vegetables with an occasional "steak or gazelle."

Bayi began running while herding his step-father's cattle and during occasional forays onto the plains after gazelle and rabbit with his dog, Simba.

At the age of 12, Bayi moved to the city of Arusha, 50 miles from 19,000-foot Kilimanjaro and began school, where he learned English and first began to run competitively. At 17, he joined the Air Force as a mechanic trainee and moved to the nation's capitol of Dar es Salaam at sea-level. He has lived there ever since and has done all of his training there. He first began to show promise in 1970 and was sent to the Olympic Games in Munich to gain experience. Then, le déluge.

But what about the real Filbert Bayi? What's he like? In talking to him, one realizes what a tremendous culture gap there really is. His English is excellent, especially when you realize that it is his third language, after his native Kiraqwa and Swahili. But a combination of factors makes him difficult to understand fully.

Perhaps LA Times Meet Director Will Kern gives the best example of the culture gap: "Of all the athletes we've brought here from all over the world, including the Soviet Union, in the 16 years of the Times Games, Bayi is the only one who never heard of Mickey Mouse and Disneyland. And did you ever try to explain Mickey Mouse to

somebody who never heard of him?"

Filbert must feel the same way trying to explain his background to us, especially since the questions asked of him over and over tend to be pretty Mickey Mouse themselves. Combine a personality bordering on the diffident, and it's no wonder that Bayi is something of a mystery.

Certain impressions do emerge in talking to Filbert. It is apparent that despite being only 21, Bayi is very capable of handling the stresses of being a national hero and celebrity. It is clear, too, that he is nobody's fool: He's something of a track fan, so he knows who his opponents are and what they are capable of.

As well, Bayi is a master psychologist and tactician. He seems to purposely downplay the amount and quality of his training; and, indoor novice or not, anyone who saw Bayi control Walker, Wohlhuter and Cummings can attest to his tactical genius.

A complex man; a hard book to open. Speaking in a sort of lilting, staccato English, Filbert talks about his running and himself:

T&FN: Was the Times race [3:59.6 win over Walker and Pre] easy for you?

Bayi: I feel that there is no easy race. It just happens somebody wins and when that happens, the crowd says it looked like an easy race. I wasn't tired yesterday in the race because I wasn't running very fast.

Most of the time, I am running fast for the first two laps but yesterday I was just relaxing for the first two, because when you run with experienced athletes, you must be very careful; you must keep them in front, not behind. That is why I let Prefontaine pass me, to go ahead. I let him until they slow the speed. Everybody wanted not to lead the way, you see.

T&FN: Do you go into a race to win rather than to run a fast time?

Bayi: Both.

T&FN: How much do you know about your competitors?

Bayi: I know them well. There are some who are very friendly, but there are some who... I don't know if they are jealous, but they are not happy to see somebody. I don't know if they are jealous or scared, I don't know.

I think that we are all friends, but you can't always understand people, because everybody is different, so I don't mind about them. Because I'm not running with anybody else's strength, just my own. So even if he is jealous, it doesn't help him, because if I can win, I am going to win.

T&FN: Say, our Eastern Editor, Bob Hersh, noticed on your passport that you spelled your name with a "Ph" instead of an "F". How do you spell your name?

Bayi: Umm, it depends. I can use Ph or I can use F; most of the time I use F, but there is no difference—the pronunciation stays the same. Actually, most of the people in my country call me Bayi, because that is my father's name and he used his father's name. It is the custom.

T&FN: The newspapers say that you got your start as a runner chasing gazelles when hunting. Is that true?

Bayi: Just when we were herding cows and they were hiding far away in the hills; maybe 10 miles away. Then we would hunt on the way to them; gazelles and rabbits; wild animals too. But usually we don't have time to just hunt, because lots of times it is just a waste of time, but when there is nothing to do, then we go hunting with dogs.

T&FN: Is Arusha at high altitude?

Bayi: Yes it is, but you know I went from Arusha to Dar es Salaam in 1970. I have not trained at altitude, because the city is at sea level. So if I go to train at altitude, I will get in trouble too, because it is too high, even if I was born there.

T&FN: How many miles do you run?

Bayi: In Dar es Salaam, you can't run too much miles, because the place is very hot; 90°F. Even if you run, you must be careful not to run too much miles, because you lose salt and iron, and water too. Most of the time I run not more than 10 miles; less than 10 miles, 6, 7, 5...

T&FN: Do you do speedwork?

Bayi: In the evenings, I do speedwork; in the mornings, cross country.

T&FN: Do you have a set workout pattern? Do you plan to go out and do quarters for example?

Bayi: Yes, that is how I train. But I can't always plan. Sometimes I can do 400m times six with a time of 55-59 with an interval of two minutes. And after that a 500 and sometimes some sprints. But since I have been over here, I haven't done any 500s. I have been doing sprints only, because of indoors, because of the sharp corners. I want to be able to maintain speed at the corners, so I haven't been doing too much more than the short sprints.

T&FN: How do you like indoor running?

Bayi: It is something very difficult for me, but I can't say that I'm not going to run, because I was invited, you see. So I'm just trying, you see. Experience. Next year, if they invite me back, I will have some experience on it. I will know where I



should stride and where I sprint.

T&FN: *We heard that before the New Zealand Games where you ran 1:45.5 for 800, that you did only three weeks of training. Is that true?*

Bayi: Yeah, because you know that I was injured last year. I went back to Tanzania and after I got better, I went for a job course in the Army for three months and finished in December, without training. I just got Army training, you see; that's no sprints, no workouts, just exercises, you understand.

From there I went to Dar es Salaam to run in the National Championships. I didn't want to run there, but there are some youngsters there who wanted to see my running. And I said, "I can't run, because I didn't train," but I just forced myself to run 1500 and 800 meters without training, without anything. Just two weeks I had for training before these National Championships. It was very hard for me, very difficult. And then I run 3:44 for 1500 and 1:49 for 800 meters. I was tired, because I hadn't trained.

After that, I went to a camp for the New Zealand Games for one week. After that I went to Zaire because I was voted the Athlete of the Year for 1974 and I went there to receive my trophy from the President of Zaire. I stayed there for one week without doing anything, just staying in the hotel and relaxing. And then I had two weeks to prepare for Christchurch. And then I trained hard, but even then, I was getting pains in my legs, because I was forcing myself to train.

T&FN: *What did you do during those two weeks?*

Bayi: I did a lot of cross country, really no speed at all. Also, I did many, many slow 400 and 300 meters.

T&FN: *You mentioned that the younger-runners wanted to see you. Are you a national hero in Tanzania?*

Bayi (very quietly): Yes. They have heard about me running abroad, but they have never seen me run in Tanzania, so they wanted to see me run.

T&FN: *What are your impressions from the Olympics in Munich?*

Bayi: Well, you know, I ran just for the experience. It was my first time and I had only been running for two years. The people I was running against, they were experienced. I was running out in the third lane the whole way in my heat, because there were 11 in my heat. And I was outside the line and they were pushing outside and they would spike me sometimes. I was inexperienced; I was just running, I didn't know anything. So I went back home and trained. I read sports books and things like that.

T&FN: *How about the '76 Olympics?*

Bayi: Myself, I don't know what I will do there. I want to compete in two events, the 1500 and 800 meters, but I don't like to give any comments about those competitions or about the Olympics.

T&FN: *Are there other runners of*

your ability in Tanzania?

Bayi: Yeah, there are many. We left some in the training camp for the Olympic Games. They've started to train for them already.

T&FN: *What race have you enjoyed the most?*

Bayi: I enjoy something fast. The biggest was when I beat Keino. Then everybody knows about me and before they didn't know me. After that race, they invite me to their countries to run. It was when I beat Keino, because the world record means nothing you see.

Everybody now is training to beat Filbert. The 1500 is an event which everybody likes, but now wherever I go in the States they want me to run the 1500/mile. I think San Diego will be my last mile indoors this year, because it makes me tired to run everytime one mile, one mile, one mile.

T&FN: *Is the mile much different from the 1500?*

Bayi: Yes, it is very far; I think 109 meters. The difference is just that 109 meters, but it is called the "mile" you see; that is the difference.

T&FN: *When did you first start training with the idea of becoming a world-class athlete?*

Bayi: This was in 1973, when I beat Keino and I had a coach from the University of Dar es Salaam, an East German called Professor Kramer. He was my coach for six months before we went to the Commonwealth Games. After that, he left the country and I started to coach myself.

T&FN: *Have you worked very hard since you began running?*

Bayi: Yeah, but it is hard to gauge when you are training yourself. Sometimes you are going to run 4 times 300 and you are tired and say to yourself, "Let me only run three"; that isn't good. I mean you are supposed to run more than that. If you are going to run 300 meters times 4, try running it times 5. That is the time you are getting stamina, and speed too.

T&FN: *How often do you finish a workout exhausted?*

Bayi: It depends on my condition. Sometimes I will not be tired even after running 300 meters times 10. I can run 300 meters times 10 in 45-47 and that is just relaxing. It is very slow. But when you run 300 meters, three of them, in 37-39, that is very fast. You have to be tired after that.

T&FN: *Is the 3:50 mile important to you at all?*

Bayi: Hmmm. You mean outdoors? Hmmm. Well, I have only run the mile outdoors twice (3:52.9 and 3:54.1). I don't know, it depends upon the conditions of the race. Sometimes, I think I can make it, but I don't know.

T&FN: *When you go out in 52 seconds for the first 400, how hard is that for you?*

Bayi: If we are talking about 52, outdoors is very easy, because the track is

very round and has no corners and it is only one lap. If you talk about indoors, if you count the laps for indoors and outdoors, it is three to one; they are different. Even if three laps indoors is not longer, it is still too long, because psychologically it is going to seem long. If a miler goes 52 indoors, he is crazy. Even for 800 runners, he can't do it.

T&FN: *Is there pressure upon you to break the mile record?*

Bayi: You can't break 3:50 for the mile every time. People think you can, but they don't know how the human body is. The human body is not a machine. Sometimes you can be beaten, sometimes you can win too.

T&FN: *What are your impressions of the US?*

Bayi: In America, there is much running indoors and we don't have indoors in Africa. Indoors helps sometimes because you can compare John Walker or Filbert with Wohlhuter and Liquori, Waldrop and others. They are experienced; they know how to bend the corners and run the straights. Even if they beat us, it is good experience.

T&FN: *I would think that Los Angeles is much different than Dar es Salaam?*

Bayi: Yeah, it is very different. The weather is different; we don't have weather like this [smoggy, 72°].

T&FN: *And you don't have smog probably?*

Bayi: What?

T&FN: *Smog. The stuff in the air you can't see through.*

Bayi: No, we don't have that. In Dar es Salaam, it is all the time sun. All year-round. In Arusha and other places, it looks like this sometimes.

T&FN: *Yes, but this is from cars and airplanes and smoke and so on.*

Bayi: I see.

T&FN: *Do you have any hobbies outside of track?*

Bayi: I used to play football [soccer], but my employer told me not to, because it is very dangerous. Also, my interests are reading some sports books like this [pointing to *T&FN* and *Sports Illustrated*] and music. So I bought some music, a lot of music here [Ray Charles and movie themes piled 20 high]. I like them.

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

Bayi: Oh, I don't know. It depends on what my condition will be and if my health is right. I think even 40. But I might not reach that, because we want to marry now and get some children, God willing.

T&FN: *One last journalist's question. Do you ever think about your physical limits? Can you, say, run 3:30 for 1500?*

Bayi: That is something which I don't know myself. It is the question which everybody asks me and I tell them all this: If they can tell me the day on which they are going to die, I will tell them when I will run 3:30 for 1500 meters. □