

## T&FN INTERVIEW

# PAUL ERENG

by SIEG LINDSTROM

*In his first season of 800m running Paul Ereng won an Olympic gold medal. In his second he set an indoor World Record and racked up a string of 11 outdoor European meets in which he averaged 1:44.16, a feat of which he is rightfully proud. But in the fickle world that is sports, some have already spoken of his decline in his third campaign, 1990.*

*Bronchitis slowed him in June and July—though he did run 1:43.78 to win a race in Barcelona—and a hamstring pull in the home-stretch in Brussels stopped him from rebounding in late summer.*

*At 23, Ereng is far from ready to call it a career, however. He is aiming for both the indoor and outdoor World Records in 1991 as well as World Championships gold.*

*In early September he phoned T&FN to announce he is renewing his day-to-day coaching relationship with Fred Hardy, the coach who brought him to Virginia in the fall of 1987 and guided him to the '88 NCAA title. Ereng repeated as collegiate champ in '89 before foregoing his remaining eligibility.*

*Born to a farming family of Kenya's Turkana tribe, Ereng, a Catholic, was drawn to the religion degree he is still pursuing at Virginia when he developed an interest in Islam.*

*For relaxation, he enlists the aid of music, from Central African lingala to Mozart, and the novels of Jeffrey Archer.*

*To speak with Ereng is to speak with an athlete strikingly unawed by his own talent and the rapidity with which he rose to the elite level:*

**T&FN:** *How do you feel to have been sick and injured in '90 after the year of consistently strong performances you had in '89?*

**Ereng:** A season like this one makes you appreciate what you do sometimes. I was playing around last year so much and I ran still ran very fast. It was like nothing to me.

**T&FN:** *Why have you felt a renewed need for a coach to oversee your program?*

**Ereng:** I can do the coaching myself too. I can write programs for people to do, because I've written my programs before. But it's so hard, even if you are a doctor, to treat yourself; you need another doctor.

Last year, I did, as I say, have a very good season, but I also had some critics. I

had coaches criticizing what I was doing. I had Seb Coe critiquing what he thought about my running. And all those things amounted to some kind of strength to me because I thought, "Hmmm, this is really good. I'm getting a second opinion from somebody."

But I also thought, "Do I really need this kind of criticism? I think the best thing I can do is have a coach who can give me criticism which is more constructive."

**T&FN:** *Coach Hardy says one of your goals is to become more multifaceted in your racing strategy. How did you develop your current trademark strategy of hanging back*

*the first 400 and kicking over the second lap?*

**Ereng:** Coach Hardy wanted me to run in front, and I did that a couple of times and I used to feel tired. I also discovered I wasn't a long-distance type of 800m runner; I was a sprint type. So one day I sat at the back in 53 seconds and I kept moving, I ran almost constant, and then I kicked at the end, and I ran 1:46.74. That was early in the season when I was a freshman.

Coach Hardy said, "I think you don't need to stay at the back all the time. You need to move and run fast, because if you get in the big races, your 53 first-lap won't do anything to anybody. Everybody's going to run 49 and they will be like four seconds ahead of you, and for you to cover that distance will be very difficult."

**T&FN:** *Did you try it?*

**Ereng:** I did, and then I found there was a problem, because if I ran 49 or 50—because I didn't want to run like a rabbit in front of everybody—as soon as I got into the group in 2nd or 3rd position, I was always the victim of tripping.

I have a long stride. It trips people

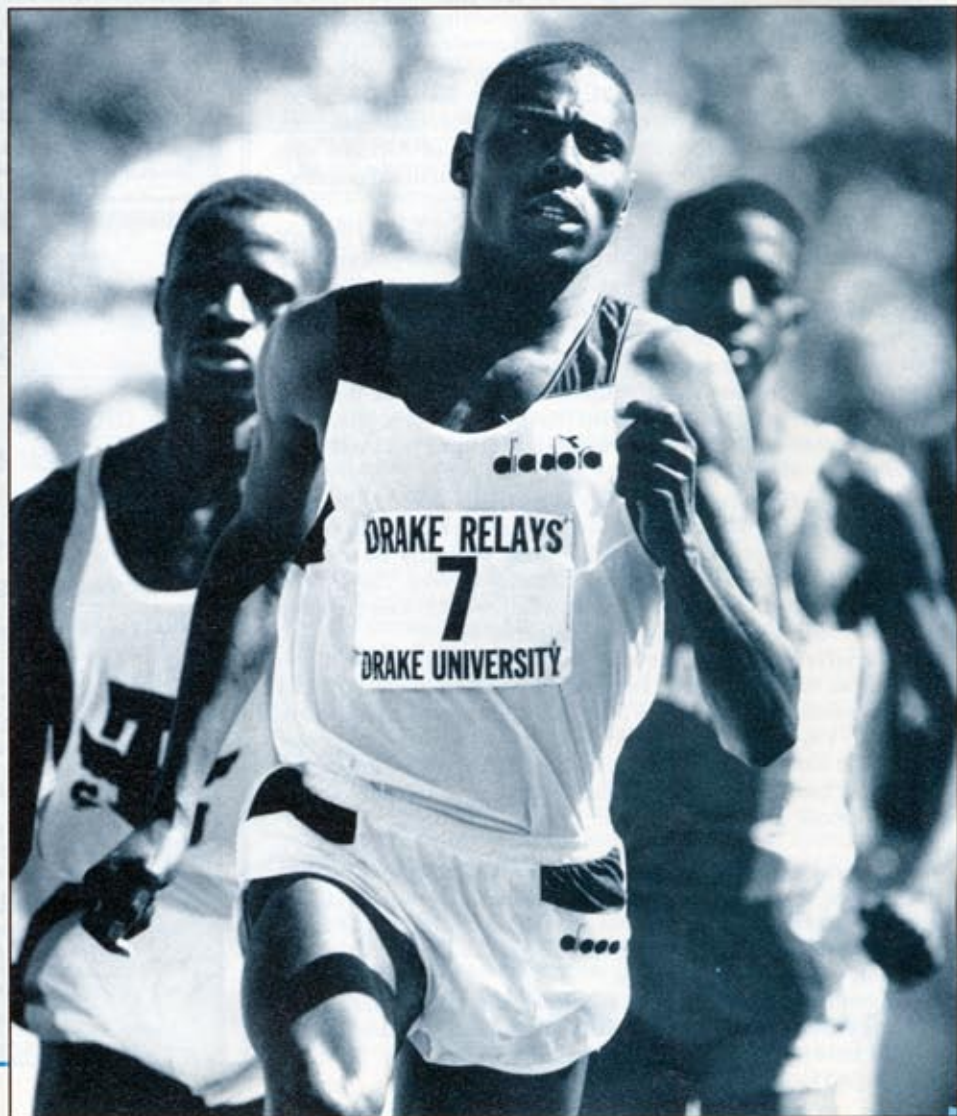


Photo: Dave T. Miller/Media Register & Tribune

who are following me and also the person who is in front, because I can look at him and he looks far away. Then I step and I step right on his shoe.

**T&FN:** *You started conservatively in Seoul though the Kenyan coaches wanted you to take the pace to aid Nixon Kiprotich, no?*

**Ereng:** I told Nixon, "I'm not going to be a rabbit. I'm going to run the race the way I feel like, and I'll give you some friendly advice: I don't want you to run the first 200m really fast or you guys are going to die."

And then he told me, "If you're going to stay at the back, you're going to be last, because it's hard to beat these people; these people are tough. If you hang on in the back, you're going to hang on in the back forever."

I didn't believe that and I came up with a theory: "If I run 25 seconds for the first 200 and keep on running another 25, and another 25, and another 25, I'll run 1:40." Then I said, "If I run 1:40 and I still lose the race, I'll be under the World Record and I won't care."

I thought for sure I was going to run a World Record and get like 8th. I thought, "These guys are good. Maybe somebody's going to run a crazy race here and run 1:37 or something and I'm going to run 1:38 or 1:40 and still lose the race."

**T&FN:** *It's wonderful that you were inexperienced enough to think that, yet still confident enough to think you would run 1:40. How did you react to winning?*

**Ereng:** I said, "Am I dreaming or what is this?" I looked up at the scoreboard and I saw 1:43, and I was like, "No, what's going on here?" I looked at the screen and saw the cameras were focusing on me. I saw only my image on the screen. I said, "Why are they focusing on me? Am I still dreaming or something?"

**T&FN:** *Had you been nervous that summer, running in Europe in your first season at 800 against Coe and some of the other big names?*

**Ereng:** Coach Hardy used to tell me, "You've got to make them run your race." I went to Europe and I made them run my race, but I lost [laughs].

I PRed from 1:46.24 to 1:44.82 and I was very happy about that. I lost that PR race to Abdi Bile; I didn't really understand why I lost, but I found that maybe I could have planned the race better and I would have even won it easily.

**T&FN:** *But then you didn't win another race until Seoul. What gave you confidence?*

**Ereng:** When I got to Korea, I was sitting in the village and I used to see 800m people train. Like Cruz, Johnny Gray. I looked at what they were doing and I thought, "Man, I think I run faster than these guys, but they run 1:42. How do

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they do it?" So I wanted to be in a race where somebody was going to run 1:42 and by doing that maybe I was going to beat him.

So I had to be there, stay at the Olympic Village and wait for things to happen. I was in that kind of an atmosphere.

**T&FN:** *When you began running as a teenager did you do it for fun or did you see it as a way to fame and fortune?*

**Ereng:** The reason for me starting really to run was to get a scholarship so that I could get an education. Because a college education is very expensive, I said, "Well, if I can run and get a scholarship—colleges in America offer scholarships for good runners—then I can get an education free."

**T&FN:** *How did you settle on a religion major? Is it a great interest of yours?*

**Ereng:** Not Christianity. What I wanted to study was Islam. Because I found Islam was very interesting in that it's just a way of life. It's kind of politics; the way the state runs is through religion, through morality. I found it very interesting. I wanted to know more, a lot.

**T&FN:** *The take one gets from reading the papers these days is that there is currently a strong current of hostility toward the West within Islam today.*

**Ereng:** Yes, but they are also learning what is happening in the other parts of the world. When you become so circumscribed within yourself, you don't advance much.

You have to open your orientation and perceive and accept what other people say. In other words, what other people think. By doing that you advance in a lot of your daily routines and everything.

Maybe Islam is looking on that now, and they want to welcome other people's views too.

**T&FN:** *Perhaps it's a stretch to make the comparison, but you advanced greatly as an athlete when you took Fred Hardy's advice to train for the 800. You also made an earlier transition from a jumper to a quartermiler. Many American kids are initially reluctant to run the 400 because it is painful. Were you?*

**Ereng:** No, I felt it was fine. The 400 is painful, but what you have to realize is there is nothing which is not painful. When you are not an 800 runner, you think maybe 800m is not painful, but when you become an 800 runner, it becomes painful.

Most long distance runners, if you told them to run a shorter event, would not realize the pain because they are not toned up for that event. If you tell a 10,000 runner to run a 200, it's nothing for him. First of all, he doesn't have the speed, and he can't exert a lot of force to his muscles to feel the pain.

**T&FN:** *You began running to get an education and you've said that you eventually hope to use your running to help others—perhaps Kenyan youth. These are serious goals. Do you enjoy track too?*

**Ereng:** I do have fun. It's very interesting because the thing you have to realize is that you have to enjoy it yourself. You are the only person who knows what you're doing. Other people might take you differently. Other people might take you to be a champion and everything, but being a champion doesn't mean you are not a human being; you also have those feelings.

So the thing is to try to stay relaxed and enjoy it. Welcome defeats and welcome victories. All of them are part of it. All of them are the joy of the running sport. □

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Paul Ereng was born August 22, 1967, in Trans-Nzoia, Kenya, and is 6-1<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>/159. Unlike most of the top Kenyan athletes, he was born into the Turkana tribe, though he was raised among the famed Nandi in the Rift Valley. He competed for Virginia in '88 and '89 before skipping the rest of his NCAA eligibility.

He stands 7th on the all-time world list and holds the indoor WR at 1:44.84.

His progression (World Ranking in parentheses):

Year	Age	400	800	Major Meets
'84	16/17	49.6	—	—
'85	17/18	47.6	—	—
'86	18/19	47.0	—	—
'87	19/20	45.6	—	—
'88	20/21	46.3	1:43.45 (3)	1)NCAA, 1)OG
'89	21/22	—	1:43.16 (1)	1)WIC, 1)NCAA
'90	22/23	—	1:43.78 (?)	—