

MIKE BOIT

by Tom Jordan

Forty miles from the equator, between the Kenyan towns of Eldoret and Kitele, Mike Boit grew to manhood on his family's dairy farm. As the oldest male, Mike directed his four brothers and four sisters in the day-to-day management of the herd. At the same time, he was attending grammar and high school, where he added English to his native Swahili, and where his career in athletics began.

By the time he was through with his regular secondary education in 1969, the 6-0/145 Boit had run 1:48.9m, and was set to attend Kenyatta College. There he came under the coaching of Alex Stewart and Bruce Tulloh, and startlingly made the 1972 Olympic team in both the 800 and 1500. Though his 1971 bests had been 1:47.5 and a modest 3:55.4 he impressed the selectors in the Olympic season by running 3:37.4 and 1:47.0 within an hour. At Munich, his first international competition, he won a bronze in the 800 and took fourth in the 1500.

Such talent did not go unnoticed, and in the fall of '72, Boit entered Eastern New Mexico as a freshman. Once the jolt of moving from the 7000-foot green mountains of home to the 1500-foot dusty plain of Portales had been overcome, he settled into four years of physical education studies and untold NAIA track and cross country titles. While Portales was small (10,000) and isolated, Boit enjoyed everything about it but the plentiful rattlesnakes ("more dangerous than anything we have near my home in Kenya, including lions").

Easily named to the Kenyan team for the '76 Games, Boit was one of the heavy favorites for a medal. He came agonizingly close to making his race, even showing up for the Opening Ceremony, before Kenya joined the African boycott and pulled out of the Games. Stunned, Boit remained in Montreal, watching the Games, offering then, as now, no criticism of the boycott. Still, the sadness of lost opportunity lingers.

It did not affect his running, as six sub-1:46 races in Europe after the Games attest. He broke 1:44 twice, and came within 0.03 of matching Alberto Juantorena's 1:43.5 world record for 800 meters with his 1:43.57. Except for the Olympic Games, it was the most successful season in Mike's career.

Now he is in the US again, trying to cram a Master's degree in Education from Stanford into one year. Eager to return to Kenya, there Mike hopes to become a physical education instructor at the college level. A born teacher, he will graciously give spontaneous lessons in geography or Swahili (Asanta Sana—"thank you very much").

As well, Boit is no disinterested spectator of the American scene. Once beyond his vestigial shyness, he will freely offer opinions in his Swahili-British accent on subjects ranging from the Presidential race (pro-Ford) to the US scholarship system (should be kept). Before his heavy 18-unit load sapped his time, he enjoyed such American pursuits as ping pong, really his only other sports
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interest, and his favorite TV program, All In The Family ("Archie Bunker is very funny").

T&FN: A familiar question, but how did you get started in running?

Boit: There was no particular time when I said, "Well, today I am going to start running." I started really competing in high school, but I don't think I was really interested until 1971. I was almost at the time of quitting running. My coaches used to tell me that I was just as good as the best in the world, but I couldn't believe it when they told me. But I became interested.

T&FN: Was Kip Keino a hero of yours when you began your career?

Boit: I respected him like most other people. He did a very good job. I was actually not very much interested in the 1500 meters at that time, so I would say my idols were especially those guys running the 800 meters. I was very much interested in Peter Snell, in getting any articles about him I could, because I wanted to know how he got so good.

T&FN: Do you do long runs in your own training?

Boit (laughing): No, I don't do anything longer than 4-5 miles, but I do everything at a good pace. I think it is not right to do training that another runner does, because there are too many differences in individuals.

T&FN: About Montreal. How would you have placed in the 800, against Juantorena?

Boit: That's a very hard question to answer, because when I was going to Montreal, I was going there with the idea of winning. Of course, that is what everybody is saying; everybody would like to think they are going to win the gold medal.

I think it could have been quite a good race. First of all, the track in Montreal was fantastic. It was a fast track. And second of all, I think the weather the day of the final was probably one of the best days.

I would have really liked to run against Juantorena. Most of the time, I have had to run in the front, and I have a feeling that when I have someone to follow, I usually come up better than if I just run in front from the beginning.

I don't know, I can't say for sure. Of course I was not going to go and just let everybody go past me. I think I would have had a very good run. And the way I ran during the summer also shows that I could

really have made it a good race.

T&FN: What went through your mind, sitting in the stands watching Juantorena and Wohlhuter?

Boit: It is very hard to describe; it is really very difficult. It could have been better really to go to another town, because at the time people were asking, "Are you still going to run?" But I decided to stay anyway because I felt that I had to face reality. If I'm not going to run, it really doesn't make any difference if I leave or not.

T&FN: When were you sure you weren't going to run?

Boit: After the Opening Ceremony. That's when we found out about the decision that we weren't going to participate. I really couldn't believe what I heard, you know. It was really very emotional. I kept thinking, "Well, things may turn," so that I would not feel too bad.

T&FN: Did you ever consider running on your own?

Boit: To be frank, I didn't think of it. It didn't even enter my mind, because I was thinking about those guys who had already left, like Sammy Kipkurgat and Henry Rono. I knew they were equally good, and they never had the opportunity, especially the guys who were coming for the first time. The Olympics really meant a lot to them. So it would never have been fair to leave those guys I'd been training with, just to run for myself.

T&FN: Were you at a peak at Montreal?

Boit: Yes, I was in good shape. I was afraid that being frustrated and having had all that pressure, I thought I probably wasn't going to do well in Europe.

T&FN: Speaking of which, when you ran 1:43.6, did you feel comfortable coming through in 51.0?

Boit: Yeah, I did. I think it was my best race ever. The race I ran two days earlier [1:43.9 in Zurich] was the toughest, because the first lap was so slow [51.8], and we had to kick so hard, and also it wasn't good weather.

T&FN: Was it your goal this summer to break the world record?

Boit: Well, since I didn't get the gold medal, I probably wanted to satisfy my ego by making a world record... but still it wouldn't have been as good.

T&FN: What's the ideal pace for a new world record?

Boit: I don't know. It will depend on the individual. If he runs the first lap too fast, he is going to kill himself, like I did in Cologne [3rd in 1:45.9]. The officials said that the times were going to be called in German, so the rabbit, a West German fellow, said, don't worry, he would take care of everything. So as long as he was running the front, I thought it was the right pace. He went through the 200 in 23.2 and the 300 in 36.0. At the 400, he came through in 49.2, and I was 49.4! I don't know why he did that. And you know, after the 400, he stopped. He was very tired.

T&FN: What are your goals for the future?

Boit: I don't know about next year. You see, I have reached the point where it is getting more and more difficult to improve my time. I have to break a world record to do that now. I'm still working on it, and I still think that I am capable of running around 1:43.0. So this year I am training still and trying to find out what went wrong last year.

T&FN: What went wrong?! Nothing went wrong!

Boit (laughing): Well, I think that I was really quite powerful in my upper body in that 1:43.6, and I think that my lower body, the legs, were letting me down a little bit. I will probably try and run some hills, and hope to strengthen them a bit.

T & F N: Rick Wohlhuter is supposed to have said that your race strategy isn't very good.

Boit: Yeah, I heard about that. I didn't think it was the right thing for Wohlhuter to say, but maybe he didn't say it; maybe he was misquoted.

There was another thing. After the African boycott, I think he was interviewed and was asked, "What do you think about Mike Boit being absent?" and he said, "Well, that makes my task that much easier." I think that was not good to say too, because, as a competitor, if Wohlhuter had not been there, I would not have felt any good if he was not running. But I don't know. Sometimes you are asked something, and the asker is going to write his own answer. I have known Wohlhuter for a long time, and think he is a nice guy.

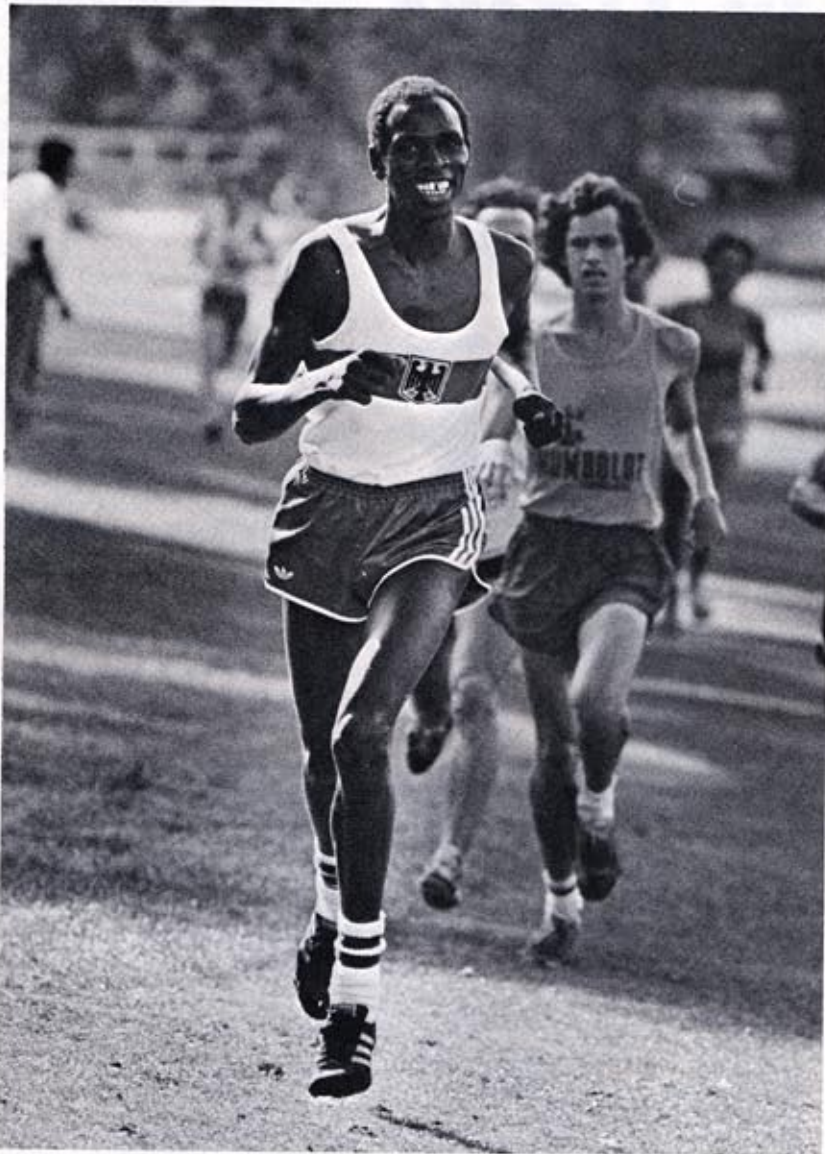
T&FN: Who is the toughest runner you've seen?

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Boit: I think, so far, I will still count on Juantorena. I have run against Ivo Van Damme, and he is very tough too. It is going to be interesting to see how they maintain. It is difficult to come up to that level, but to maintain, that is even more so. I hope he will maintain.

T&FN: Is Juantorena the best ever?

Boit: I really don't know. If Juantorena can keep up what he has done already, I think he is going to be the greatest. Van Damme, too, can be one of



the greatest. Wohlhuter of course has been one; I think he has really done a good job. And of course, Peter Snell; in his time, the facilities weren't quite as excellent as they are now.

T&FN: Are there other Mike Boits back in Kenya that we missed in Montreal?

Boit: Yes. I think Sammy Kipkurgat is quite capable of running good 800 and 1500 meters. He is about the same height as Filbert Bayi, and about the same weight, and he has much more speed than Bayi. So with a little more stamina, I think he will be very good in 1500 meters, and in the 800, he has already run very fast.

T&FN: Are there a lot of athletes who don't continue in Kenya?

Boit: Yes, there are a lot of them. It is hard to see yourself as a world-class athlete, and many of them see no point in running. Myself, until I went to Munich, I was not one of the better runners, I think. In my high school alone, I was not the best, so...

T&FN: Why are there so many great runners who come from your region in Kenya [Keino, Jipcho, Temu, etc]?

Boit: I think there are so many reasons. One of the major contributing factors is geographical advantages and the weather of the country. And also the people are competitive; they like competition, and so the children grew up with that sort of attitude.

T&FN: Now that you are 27, you're older than many of your competitors, such as Bayi, Van Damme, and Walker. Do you think that's an advantage?

Boit: I have the advantage of experience. If I was any slower, then I could not be improving my time. For four years, I have always improved in the 800 meters, and if I didn't improve this year, then I would have been very unhappy about it.

T&FN: Do you think you'll continue through to 1980 and Moscow?

Boit: I don't know yet, but I think so. I will run next summer, and I will still think about 1980, but next year is going to be very good for competition also, because of the World Cup.

T&FN: Earlier, you seemed interested in becoming a pro.

Boit: I told them I already had too many commitments, and since I didn't run in the last Olympics, I have to wait for the next one for the gold medal. Things might have been different had I won the gold medal. Maybe I would have really decided not to have run anymore competitively.

T&FN: You would have retired?

Boit: Well, I don't think I will ever retire. I don't know if I could take it. I would always like to sort of keep "running for fun." □

• PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVE DRENNAN

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