

by Jon Hendershott

SULEIMAN NYAMBUI

Suleiman Nyambui is the winningest athlete in NCAA history. Of the 18 championship races he has contested indoors, outdoors and in cross country, he has won 15 (plus a 2nd, 7th and 12th). Never has he lost in the outdoor.

A runner of international caliber at just about any distance he chooses and the winner of the 1980 Olympic silver in the 5000, Nyambui has nonetheless directed the better part of his energies the last 4 years to running well for his UTEP team. It's no coincidence that in that time the Miners have won 4 straight NCAA outdoor titles.

We talked to the 29-year-old Nyambui shortly before his historic fourth 10,000 win, as he sat in his Provo motel room resting after a morning run.

He was wearing a bright orange t-shirt with "UTEP National Champions—Time Is On Our Side" on the front. Friendly and outgoing, Nyambui laughed when told that the slogan fit his NCAA career perfectly.

Freely and animatedly he talked about the running which has made his college career so successful:

T&FN: What is it that makes Suleiman Nyambui so good in NCAA races?

Nyambui: I think the main thing is that I just always train hard. After I finish my studies, I train once a day. I never train twice a day, but once I finish competing for the college team, I may go to training twice a day.

I think the main reason is that I love to work out; I love to train. I'm not afraid of working out hard. I like sports a lot. I like track very much and I just have strong discipline to work out hard.

T&FN: What do you go into a race trying to achieve? Just to win, run a fast time, what?

Nyambui: It usually depends on the field. I might think before a race, "I need a good time today." If you try for a good time, winning usually comes after.

Winning with a poor time, well, that's useless. Even coming 2nd with a good time is better than that. Myself, I go for a good time first; I don't care which position I come in.

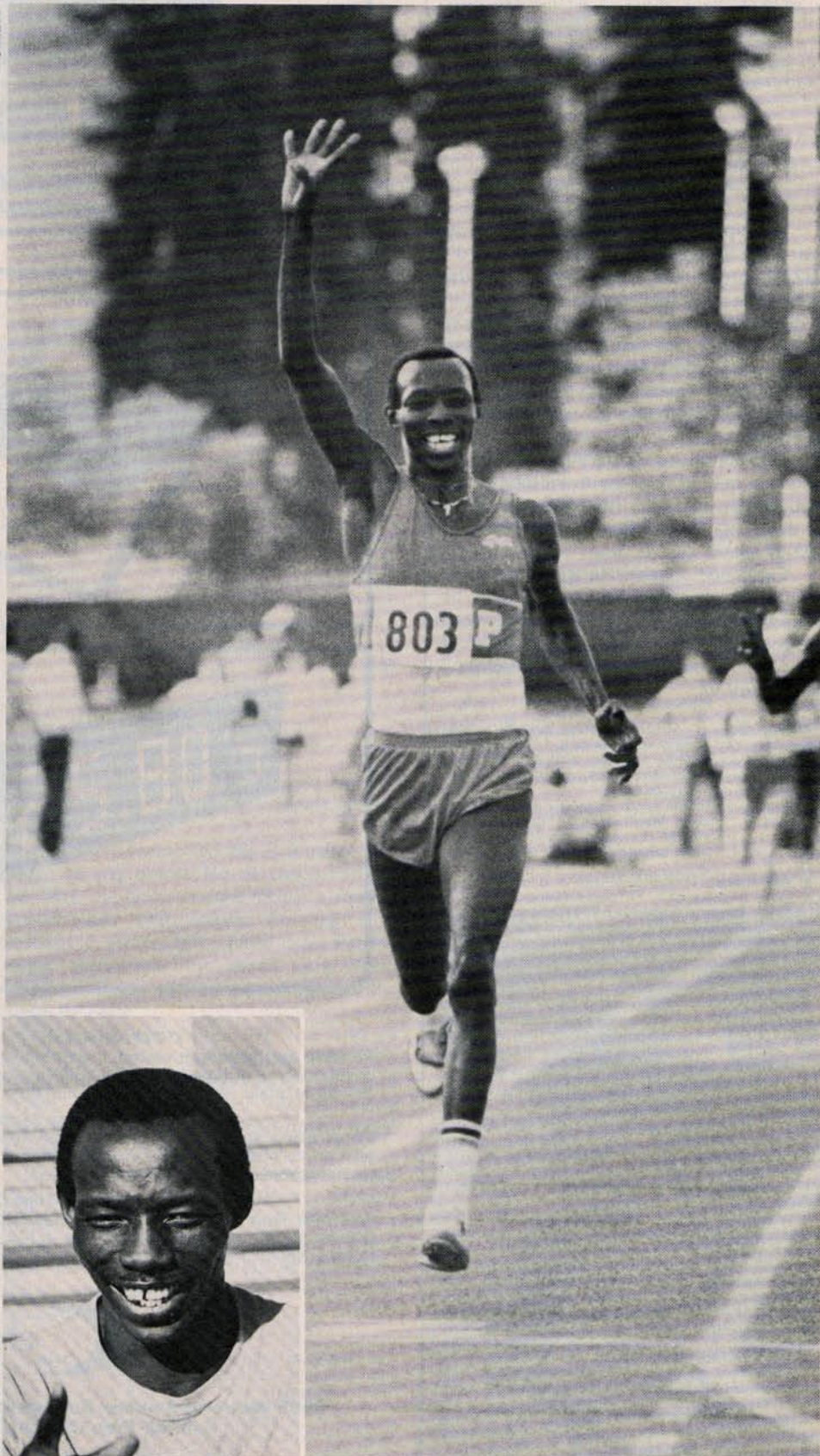
T&FN: But it is important for you to win NCAA races, both for yourself and for the team?

Nyambui: Yes, it is important, especially for me to win four 10,000s because the late [Steve] Prefontaine was the first to win four titles in a career, in the 5000. So I want to win four 10,000s to be proud of myself.

So I will run the 10,000 for serious. The 5000 will be just for points, for the team. But I want to end my college career having won the 10,000 for four years.

T&FN: You have been quoted before

Don Chadez



Bill Leung, Jr.

that it is important to you to score points for the college team. But is it possible that having to put in a long, hard college season—cross country, indoor track, outdoor track—before the big races in Europe might have prevented you from setting a World Record at 5000 or 10,000 before now?

Nyambui: Actually, all the races have made it difficult because I never get any rest. I can't sit down and plan good workouts and a schedule for racing and maybe for a record.

I think that all those races maybe took away from me running my best races in Europe, but next year I'm looking forward to running very very nice in other events. I won't have the responsibilities of the college team, but I can plan seriously for the major meets.

I'm looking forward to running well over 1500 and the mile, as well as 5000. I don't like to run the 10,000 anymore; I ran that just for the college.

T&FN: *So you consider yourself a 5000 runner first?*

Nyambui: That, and the 1500 and mile and 3000. Those events, but not the 10,000—unless I find out that I'm not fast enough for the shorter events. Then I could move to the 10,000.

T&FN: *Because you have won so many NCAA titles, do you feel any pressure or expectations to have to keep winning these titles time after time?*

Nyambui: Not so much—but I think it affects other guys. My winning has had a psychological effect on others. They think, "Ah, Nyambui is over there; he is going to win." There might be some guy who is better than me, but he might think that way and that makes him not so good.

But if a guy doesn't think that way... like Padilla, he beat me indoors. He is a good guy. He is ambitious, he never gave up. So if guys would think like Padilla, they could compete with anybody. But they see guys like Nyambui or Rono and they tell themselves they can't win. They talk themselves out of it.

And the other guys could do good too, if they would not automatically put the idea in their mind, "Nyambui is there. I can't do well." Once they put that idea in their minds, they won't do their best. But if they would just forget Nyambui and tell themselves, "Today I have to win and I don't care who is in the race. I have to run my best time ever." They would have a good attitude in their minds.

But if I hear them say, "Nyambui is here," I don't like it. Anyone who says that already won't give his best and that is what I like to give and have everyone else give, too. When I hear others say, "Today, we will do a good job, Nyambui," then I say, "That's good. We will have a good race. Good luck, my friend."

T&FN: *You are the type of competitor who wants the other runners in The Bible of the Sport*

a race to give their best.

Nyambui: Yes. Just like with me, when I first ran in Europe in 1973, I was young and I ran against the top runners for the first time. Jipcho, the late Prefontaine. But I was put many times in the slow races, the "B" race, and I went to the coaches and meet organizers and said I wanted to be in the best race. They said I was young and that I didn't have the times.

But, I said, how else can I grow and get the good times unless I run against those good people? I don't care if I come last; I want the good competition so I can run good. So the first time I ran against the good guys, I ran 13:54, my first time under 14 minutes.

Then the second time I ran against the good guys, I ran 13:33.0, my personal best. So I learned that you have to go against the good runners. It doesn't matter who, but they will help anybody get a good time.

So that's why I don't like to hear runners say, "Ah, I don't like running against Nyambui, he is too good a runner." The four years I have been running in college, if someone is smart, he can learn from me.

He can make me his target. If you want to perform well, you have to put a target in front of you. That's what Padilla did; he kept improving and improving against me until last year he came up to the top.

T&FN: *Are there any runners today whom you fear?*

Nyambui: No, I never fear anybody and I never hate anybody, because I know that once a guy beats me, he becomes my target. He becomes my goal. I lost to Salazar and Rono and those guys, so they become my target. I ask myself, "How can I beat this guy? What do I have to do to beat him? What kind of training do I have to do to beat him?"

You work hard and prepare well, so when you meet him, you can say, "I am ready. I can beat this guy." Then, even if he should beat you again, you can still run a good time. That's the thing all runners want to do.

T&FN: *You are the most prominent of all the foreign athletes who have attended UTEP and, of course, there has been a lot of criticism directed toward UTEP for having many older foreign athletes on its team. What do you think of such criticism?*

Nyambui: I feel that people try to explain foreigners in the wrong way. They talk about foreigners being black and being from Africa, but there are many students from many different countries going to many American colleges.

Many people look at UTEP because we are winning, but there are many foreign athletes in many schools. But because they are not winning, they don't get the coverage in the media. They don't get the attention.

Another thing is that many foreigners,

like from Tanzania and other countries in Africa, come to America through the government. So the first thing we come for is school. Running is second. I can stop running, but I can't stop learning.

Actually, it makes me mad when I hear a foreigner, any foreigner, say he came here for running. Education comes first. The U.S. is a big country and mine is a small one in many ways, so this is one way we can catch up, by learning.

I have to say that I don't think it is especially good for a young American kid to come out of high school, to college, and have to compete against me. But we also have to understand that this is a chance for everyone to learn, in the race and out. I will go back home and try to make my country better. The American guys will learn from competing against me and other Africans and they will get better, too.

Plus, I think that people can learn from us socially, learn about our background and our culture. They would learn that many times we run to obey an order.

If your mom or dad tells you to get something from the store or anywhere, the town might be miles away. So you run. That's what I did. You obey the order because that is the custom, and you run because that is the fastest and easiest way to get anywhere. You run to show you obeyed the order.

I began running when I started to go to school; school was about 8M from my house, so I ran. About 16M a day. I competed for the first time when I was 12 years old, but everybody runs for a long time before they ever compete.

T&FN: *How does Suleiman Nyambui consider himself as a runner?*

Nyambui: Actually, it is good to have an Olympic medal, but I would consider myself to be a really good runner if I could set a World Record. At 1500, 1 mile or 5000; I would never try the 10,000 or the marathon. They are too long. Once I get a World Record, I can agree when someone says, "You are a great runner."

After that, I can set some new targets, maybe at another distance on the track, or maybe I will go back home and teach the children. But once I get a World Record, I can begin to feel satisfied with myself. □

Suleiman Nyambui was born in Tanzania on February 13, 1953, and is 5-8/140. He is only the ninth man ever to reach the World Rankings in the 1500, 5000 and 10,000. PRs—3:35.8, 3:51.94, 7:40.3, 8:21.21, 13:12.29 (4, 6 W) NR, 27:51.73. His progression (with World Rankings in parentheses):

Year	Age	1500	5000	10,000
1973	20	—	13:33.0	—
1974	21	3:39.6	13:35.0	—
1975	22	3:40.6	13:36.2	—
1976	23	—	13:29.8	28:19.2
1977	24	3:38.63	13:19.59 (9)	28:36.1
1978	25	—	13:28.53	28:56.7
1979	26	3:35.8 (8)	13:12.29 (4)	28:01.30
1980	27	3:36.41	13:18.6 (3)	29:21.85
1981	28	3:37.72	13:20.41	27:51.73 (5)
1982	29	3:43.68	13:26.8	28:07.09