

Philemon Rono Seeking Hat Trick of Scotiabank Toronto Waterfront Marathon Victories by Paul Gains

Philemon Rono is almost as familiar with Toronto roads as those around his training camp in Kenya's Great Rift Valley.

On two previous visits to Canada's largest city he has won the Scotiabank Toronto Waterfront Marathon setting the Canadian All Comers' record of 2:06:52 in 2017. That is also a personal best. Last year he returned seeking a third victory in this IAAF Gold Label race but drifted back to finish a disappointing 9th.

The 28-year-old intends to complete his 'hat trick' in the 2019 edition of the race which is set for October 20th.

"My training is going very well now with the same group," Rono says during a video phone call. "We are running morning and evening. Today it was on the track, so we did 16km and in the evening I ran 10km. I will run around 200km in a week.

"This year I will come to Toronto strong and I will try to run a good time. I was not upset last year because of the problem that I was having. My result was good for the problem I was having. But I will be in shape this time. I will be ready. When October comes, I will be strong."

Earlier this year Rono was invited to the Boston Marathon where he finished a respectable 6th place in 2:08:57 one minute behind the winner. It was a race that indicated all is well and the complications which affected him at last year's Toronto Waterfront Marathon are well in the past.

"I was having an injury at that time (Toronto)," he explains. "It was my calf. The last two weeks before the Toronto race my leg started hurting."

From Monday to Saturday Rono lives at a training camp in Kaptagat where he shares a room with Brimin Kipruto, the 2008 Olympic steeplechase champion. It's a comfortable accommodation and they have installed a giant television set in the common area on which to follow English Premier League soccer. Rono trains here with the group managed by Dutch management group, Global Sports Communication.

Discipline is the watchword. They rise before the sun for their first workout of the day so they can avoid both the traffic and the dust which is kicked up by vehicles later in the morning. The group is coached by 1992 Olympic 3,000m steeplechase silver medalist Patrick Sang and includes three-time world half marathon champion, Geoffrey Kamworor and world marathon record holder, Eliud Kipchoge.

Kipchoge's influence on the group is immense. They have watched him rack up four consecutive London marathon victories, two more in Berlin including his world record 2:01:39 and of course the 2016 Rio Olympic gold medal.

"I am training with Eliud," Rono says with pride. "What he does motivates me. He is always focused so it makes me become more motivated and focus on my own racing."

“When it is time to go for training, it is time for training. When it is time for rest we rest. When it’s time to jog it’s time for jogging. We watch everything he does.”

Each athlete living in the camp has duties and everyone, including Kipchoge, shares responsibilities. This year Rono, whose nickname is ‘Baby Police’- a reference to his small stature and his membership in the Kenyan Police Force - is the General Secretary and handles whatever problems might arise. In the past he was the camp treasurer and took care of paying bills to keep the camp running. When athletes return from a victorious marathon, they share the cost of a celebration. And, they follow soccer religiously.

“When it is time to relax, I like to read some books,” Rono reveals. “I read books about athletics. And, we watch football.”

A few years ago, he saw Chelsea FC playing on television and says he liked their style. Among the players he admired are Didier Drogba of Côte d’Ivoire and Brazil’s Willian. Soon he became a fan even though, at the time of this interview, they had just been humiliated by Manchester United 4-0.

“Yeah, I am still a Chelsea fan,” he says laughing. “I was watching the game and thinking ‘oh no!’ Tomorrow I will see them play Liverpool (they lost to their rivals on penalty kicks). We have a big television at the camp. But on weekends I watch at home. When there is a game in the middle of the week we watch at the camp.

"Anthony Maritim (2:06:54 pb at Barcelona this year) - I came with him last year to Toronto - he made a call to me on Sunday. He’s a Manchester United fan and he called me to laugh."

Besides the friendly teasing the group shares common goals in training. For five days each week they focus on training and recovery. After the Saturday morning track session Rono drives 24km home to his farm in Kapchumari which he shares with his wife and infant son. He tends to the cattle. Most importantly he spends time with his family.

“I enjoy being around my son because he will not see me at the camp,” Rono admits. On Monday mornings he returns to Kaptagat.

Most East African runners, when they travel to Toronto, spend most of their time in the hotel, emerging from their rooms only for meals and to go for an easy jog. But the affable Rono has friends living in the city who have taken him shopping at the Eaton Centre and for tea.

“There are some Kenyans living in Toronto and sometimes we meet with them and chat with them,” he admits. “They are not coming from my village they are from different places in Kenya.

“When we take a walk sometimes with them it is not a problem for me. It relaxes me. It makes you more motivated because when you are in the hotel all the time it’s not normal. When you are with them you laugh, you talk, it is good.”

After signing off on his interview Rono went to eat dinner with the group. Ugali (a cornmeal porridge resembling mashed potatoes), meat and cabbage prepared by the camp cook was today’s feature. Then, after dark, it’s time to relax before catching eight hours sleep so he is ready to continue the quest for that Toronto hat trick. He has fond memories of his previous trips to Canada and the people.

“The fans, you see the fans (on the course) and the (Toronto) course is nice,” he offers. “This year I want to run a course record again. That is my objective. I want to lower it.”

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Join ‘Baby Police’ and 26,000 of his friends at this year’s 30th Edition of the Scotiabank Toronto Waterfront Marathon at www.STWM.ca