

'Burundi kids' add depth - and perspective - to Wash teams

Written by Sher Jasperse

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Like their classmates on the Washington High School track team, they're teenagers trying to balance the obligations of home, school and athletics. Beyond that, their early lives could hardly be more different from that of their American-born teammates.

The "Burundi kids" – five boys and four girls currently running for Wash – were all born in that African country during a civil war that has been described as genocide. They have few memories of their native land, having spent most of their lives growing up in refugee camps in Tanzania – some of them for more than 10 years.

Their families came to Cedar Rapids at various times under the auspices of Lutheran Family Services, and they quickly began the process of learning a new language and integrating into the Cedar Rapids school system.

"Wash has a directed program for ELL [English Language Learner] students so that they are able to receive the best possible education they could get in this country," says Will Harte, the boys' team long-distance running coach and an ELL math teacher.

As the students improve their language skills through ELL classes, they progress into mainstream courses, he explains. "It depends on the kid and how outgoing they are. Some can speak and read and write English proficiently. Others struggle more."

For all of them, sports have provided another avenue for learning English and becoming part of the Wash community, with most of them gravitating toward the running teams.

Runners from an early age

"Soccer is king in Africa," says Harte. "Because of that, many of the kids have put in lots of miles of running. They've developed a skill they can put to good use either in cross country or

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track.”

Adds Saroma Mugisha, a senior who speaks nearly flawless English, “In Africa, we do long miles walking or running to school and everywhere. There’s no transportation, basically.”

Harte says the Burundi runners, most of whom had little formal training before arriving at Wash, have performed well in the long-distance events and strengthened the school’s cross country program in the five years he has coached there.

“They helped us win the division title last fall and helped us get to state, where we finished sixth,” he says. Sophomore Etienne Nzoyisaba led the team with a sub-16-minute performance, while junior Laurent Hakizimana, in his first year as a cross country runner, ran “a fantastic race” to finish second on the team in 16:07.

“In track they haven’t had the same success,” Harte says. “A lot of that depends on training in the winter, which is not their strength. Races on the track are shorter, and running on the track is different for them.”

Nonetheless, Nzoyisaba took third in the 3200 at last week’s Mississippi Valley divisional meet and won the event at Thursday’s district meet in Iowa City, qualifying him for state. His sister, Eveline Niyokwizigwa, was a member of the 4x800 relay team that took third.

The power of camaraderie

As their ELL teacher, coach and mentor, Harte says the Burundians’ involvement with the track team benefits them as well as their American teammates in multiple ways.

“The nice thing about track is that it’s an opportunity for them to have more interaction and to get outside of their comfort zone,” he says. “Running is good for you and it doesn’t compromise your studying. It enhances it.”

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The Burundians credit Harte, who taught and coached in Eritrea from 2004-2006 and has traveled widely in Africa, with encouraging their pursuit of running. "Without Mr. Harte I don't know if I would be running," says Mugisha. "He makes things possible, and if we have problems he helps us solve them. He's like a second father to us."

Adds Hakizimana, "He was the one who helped me realize that running is the thing I was good at. And he knows about Africa, because he has been there. If it weren't for running, I wouldn't be doing good in school." His 3.9 GPA speaks for itself.

The Burundians also are grateful for the support of their American teammates. "Being on the team, we're all like brothers, and if we have problems, we help each other out," Mugisha says.

"Our American friends help us learn English," adds Nzoyisaba.

Harte says the Burundians have enriched their American teammates' experience as well. "They spend a lot of time together on and off the track, and it definitely cuts both ways."

Team member Trevor Luebe says the Burundians all stayed at his home during the cross country season. "They're pretty much part of the family, and they have taught us some of their traditions and language."

His classmate Robert Hogg concurs. "They're great guys, great athletes, and when I run with them they're always pushing me. It's a great experience to have them in the mix at Wash, adding to our community."

Strength through struggles

The Burundians admit that, other than learning about African wars in history classes, few of their classmates know much about their background.

"Only our ELL friends know our stories," says Nzoyisaba. "It's our parents who struggle most

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with memories of the violence,” he adds. “Their hopes for us are that we will go to college, get a good job, and be able to take care of them.”

Hakizimana says he believes the challenges that marked their childhoods give them an edge over some of their classmates. “We have been through a lot, and because of that, when we’re given an opportunity, we take it.”

While they don't dwell on the privations of their early lives, it's clear that the trauma experienced by their families hangs over them like a shadow.

“Some of the families have lost loved ones in the civil war and came here after suffering great tragedy,” Harte says. “It’s not easy, but they deal with it, and I think running helps them deal with it.”

Mugisha puts it concisely. “When I run, I feel free,” he says, as his fellow Burundians nod their heads.