

Preface

Symposium on 'East African Running: A Cross Discipline Perspective'

In the increasingly competitive world of sport, the debate surrounding the predictors of sporting success has intensified, with the question of 'nature' versus 'nurture' at the fore. The disproportionate success of certain populations in particular events has sustained the belief that genetic endowment has a role in the determination of athletic success. For example, male East African athletes have enjoyed particular success in endurance athletics and currently hold the majority of distance running world records. The unanswered questions surrounding the success of East African distance runners have generated a plethora of studies attempting to elucidate putative contributory mechanisms. Proposed explanations have included favourable physiological characteristics, which may include favourable genetic endowment, advantageous environmental conditions, such as being born and raised at altitude, running a long way to school each day, and psychological advantage. Much of the 'evidence' presented to support some of these views is anecdotal or based on compelling statistics. These arguments are led by non-academics who use popular media as their vehicle rather than relying on scientific publications, and this has resulted in many stereotypical arguments being advocated.

The University of Glasgow recently launched a new research centre, the International Centre for East African Running Science (ICEARS) in an attempt to study this phenomenon rigorously. ICEARS is a virtual research centre, currently hosted by the University of Glasgow, comprising basic scientists and social scientists from institutions around the world. To mark this occasion, a one-day symposium entitled 'East African Running: A Cross Discipline Perspective' was held in Glasgow, Scotland on 15 May 2004. Topics included socio-economics, demographics, diet and genetics in an attempt to explain the consistent top performance of this particular group of elite athletes. A range of internationally recognized authorities were invited to present a paper and to submit a written version of this research for inclusion in these proceedings.

This series of manuscripts will attempt to cast some light on why this relatively small geographical area of Africa has produced such a disproportionately high number of great middle- and long-distance runners. These papers will be a useful resource for scientists, researchers, students and others who have an interest in this remarkable phenomenon. It is my hope that the perspectives set out in this series will encourage a standard of excellence and serve as a guide for future scientific exploration.

Dr Yannis Pitsiladis

Director of ICEARS