

SHANGHAI 800M WINNER KISASY: 'I PLAN TO RUN UNDER 1:43 THIS YEAR'

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While it is perhaps a little premature to speak of David Rudisha's successor as the planet's premier two-lap runner, especially as the two-time world and Olympic 800m champion and world 800m record holder is still only 29, it is inevitable an athlete will one day emerge to replace the Kenyan great.

In recent times several athletes have loomed as potential challengers to Rudisha's long-held status. The 2017 IAAF Diamond League champion and 2012 Olympic silver medallist Nijel Amos of Botswana boasts strong credentials. World champion Pierre-Ambroise Bosse, the charismatic Frenchman, is another with a burgeoning profile but perhaps it is Commonwealth 800m champion and Shanghai Diamond League winner Wycliffe Kinyamal Kisasy* who is best equipped to take on the mantle.

ATHLETICS ROOTS IN THE HIGH JUMP

Just 20, the exciting but raw Kenyan boasts many similarities to Rudisha. The pair

grew up just 11km apart in Narok County. Like Rudisha, Kinyamal is a Maasai and the duo both have a similar long, raking stride which eats up the ground with ease.

Yet Kisasy's journey as one of the world's most exciting 800m talents is a little less formulaic than most.

Born the fifth of six children, Kisasy's father and three brothers share a passion for football, but the middle-distance star has no interest in kicking a ball. Instead, he started his sporting journey as a promising schoolboy high jumper.

Boasting a personal best of "around 2.00m" he finished in the top five in Kenyan national age-group championships before a comment from a friend in late-2015 that running might improve his high jump was to radically change the whole direction of his athletics career.

RAPID RISE

At the time based out of Keringet, he took up running and rapidly discovered a latent talent. After just a few months training he made his 800m debut, running 1:49 to win in Bondo in February 2016. Two months later he struck gold at the East African Regional Junior Championships in Tanzania – a victory which crystallised a belief his future may lie as a middle-distance runner.

"At that point I was still training on my own in Keringet (the base of world and Olympic 1500m champion Faith Kipyegon)," he explains. "I was very happy with the times I had run (over 800m) after only a few of months training."

Despite his inexperience, in June 2016 he finished third at the Kenyan Junior Trials - and just one place shy of a place on the two-man Kenyan team for the World U20 Championships team – slashing his personal best by one second to record 1:46.8.

JOINS SANG'S CAMP

Clearly boasting a special talent, he was picked up by the athletics management agency Global Sports Communication and in early 2017 Kisasy moved from Keringet to Kaptagat to come under the influence of leading Kenyan Patrick Sang – a switch which has accelerated his meteoric development.



Wycliffe Kinyamal Kisasy winning Commonwealth 800m gold (Getty Images)

“Since Patrick started coaching me my life has changed,” adds the softly-spoken Kinyamal, who in his spare time loves to sing to Maasai music. “When he asks me to do something, I have total faith in what he is telling me to do.”

Training largely on his own for track sessions, twice a week he joins Sang’s world-class long-distance training group for easy runs led by Olympic marathon champion and Kenyan running colossus Eliud Kipchoge.

“I have learned so much since training with them (the distance-running group),” he says. “They are a big motivation.

“Eliud offers regular advice. He tells me training is a struggle and that I need to work hard.”

Further progress came last year. On his seasonal debut in Nijmegen he ran a PB of 1:46.56. In his next outing, he scalped a further 0.89 from his lifetime best to place second in Hengelo.

INJURY FRUSTRATIONS IN 2017

His progression in 2017 was frustratingly stunted by a hamstring injury and he limped to sixth spot in the heats at the Kenyan World Championship Trials in Nairobi. The issue meant he missed two months of competitive action only to return in late August in Rovereto, Italy, where Kisasy made another giant leap forward in his fledgling career by taking victory in a stunning new personal best of 1:43.94.

“I followed the pacemaker and later (Antoine) Gakeme from Burundi,” he explains. “I moved to the front at 250m and started to push the pace. The time surprised me.”

Making his 2018 seasonal debut indoors in Dusseldorf, finishing second in 1:46.54, he also revealed another similarity to Rudisha – a lack of aptitude for running indoors.

“I found it hard running around the tight turns, because I am tall,” he explains.

A week-and-a-half later in the more familiar outdoor running environment he secured second spot at the Kenyan Commonwealth Games Trials, recording 1:44.72 - just 0.08 behind Jonathan Kitilit - to book his ticket on the Kenyan team for Gold Coast.



All smiles - Wycliffe Kinyamal Kisasy after winning the Commonwealth 800m title

In Australia, Kisasy backed up his raw talent to reveal genuine championship pedigree – the mark of any great champion. In the final, he hit the bell in third before making his winning move and kicking past the fading 2014 Commonwealth champion Nijel Amos at 250m.

Holding a significant advantage down much of the home stretch he repelled a blistering late charge from Englishman Kyle Langford to clinch gold by 0.05 in 1:45.11.

Aiming to win “any medal” before the Games to take victory was the icing on the cake.

“Winning gold has given me a lot of confidence,” he says. “My career ambition now is to do a lot more in the future. I am still young and I need to do more at the 2019 World Championships (in Doha) and 2020 Olympic Games in Tokyo.”

AMBITIOUS 2018 GOALS

His Diamond League debut in Shanghai offered further evidence of his gifts. Edging a titanic tussle from Kitilit in a personal best time 1:43.91 he sent another thunderous statement to the 800m running world that he could be the man to beat for the rest of this season.

“I feel I have good speed-endurance and I plan to run under 1:43 this year,” he explains of his qualities and future plans for 2018.

Aged just 20 and with a little over 20 competitive 800m races in his life his best is clearly yet to come. Meanwhile, working under the astute and often patient stewardship of Sang is another positive sign.

Which brings us to one final question: does Kisasy have any plans to return to the high jump?

“No,” he says with a smile. “I have left the high jump in the past back in Kenya.” And after his dazzling transition into the 800m who could blame him.
