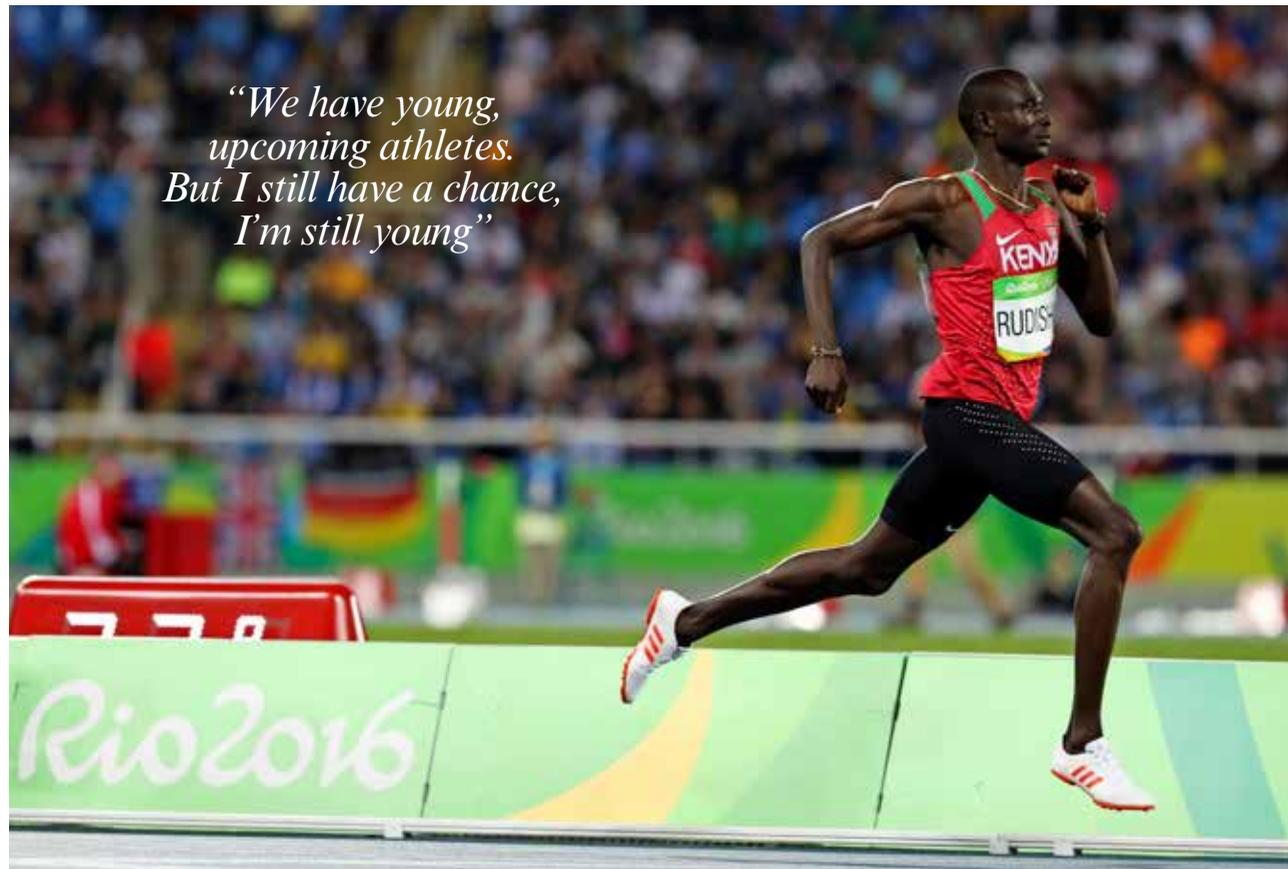


Road to Victory

The high hills of Kenya's Rift Valley are known for producing some of the world's **MOST ELITE RUNNERS**. They bring home bronze, silver and gold medals from **AROUND THE WORLD** and make their fellow Kenyans proud. Meet six of the country's athletic greats.

text Eva de Vries

On 26 March the famous IAAF World Cross Country Championship will be held in Uganda at the Kampala Kololo Independence grounds. This is the second time the championship will be held in Africa. The majority of the teams will be flown in by KQ and Skyteam partners.



“We have young, upcoming athletes. But I still have a chance, I’m still young”

Getty Images

Personal best 800m:
1:40:91 minutes

David Rudisha

Born:
17 December 1988, Kilgoris, Kenya

Discipline:
800m

Milestones:
2012 and 2016 Olympic champion, world champion and world record holder in the 800m. Rudisha is the first and only person to run it in under 1:41 minutes.

Twitter:
@rudishadavid

BORN TO PARENTS who were also talented runners, David Rudisha attended St Patrick’s High in Iten, known as the Home of Champions, for nurturing many top runners. Originally Rudisha was a 400m runner, but his coach Colm O’Connell convinced him to give the 800m a try. The Irish missionary with no coaching background went on to be nicknamed the “godfather of Kenyan running” after 25 of his students became world champions. He proudly considers Rudisha one of his greatest athletes: “Any coach would love to have a David Rudisha in their lives, but most never do.”

After becoming the junior world champion for the 800m in 2006, Rudisha achieved many international victories. With a father who won silver in the 4x400m relay at the 1968 games, Rudisha considers winning gold at the London 2012 Olympics his own greatest running achievement. “It would be good for me to win gold, so we can have gold and silver in our family,” he said before the race. His current world record was set that day; he ran the 800m in 1:40.91.

“Bolt was good, but Rudisha was magnificent,” says Sebastian Coe, the president of the International Association of Athletics Federations, referring to Jamaican sprinter Usain Bolt, the fastest human ever timed. “It was the most extraordinary piece of running I have probably ever seen.”

After the London Olympics, Rudisha suffered a series of injuries, but got back on track in time for last year’s Olympics in Rio, where he successfully defended his title. He looks to the future, and the 2020 Olympics in Tokyo, with optimism. “If I’m still feeling good and my body is still responding... in 2020 I’ll be 31, so still a good age to be running.” Away from the track, Rudisha works for the Kenyan traffic police. If you don’t stop, he’ll run you down in seconds.



“I said I want to win, and I went with everything”

Getty Images

Personal best 5,000m: 14:20:89

Vivian Cheruiyot

Born:
11 September 1983, Keiyo, Kenya

Discipline:
Track and cross-country running

Milestones:
2016 Olympic champion in the 5,000m, and world champion in the 5,000m, 10,000m and cross-country.

Twitter:
@VivianCheruiyot

VIVIAN CHERUIYOT was born in the rural Keiyo district in the centre of Kenya’s Rift Valley. This high-altitude region of fresh air and challenging hills is known for spawning unbeatable long-distance runners. “I started running because of a sports day at school,” Cheruiyot says. “I was good at it, and really enjoyed it.”

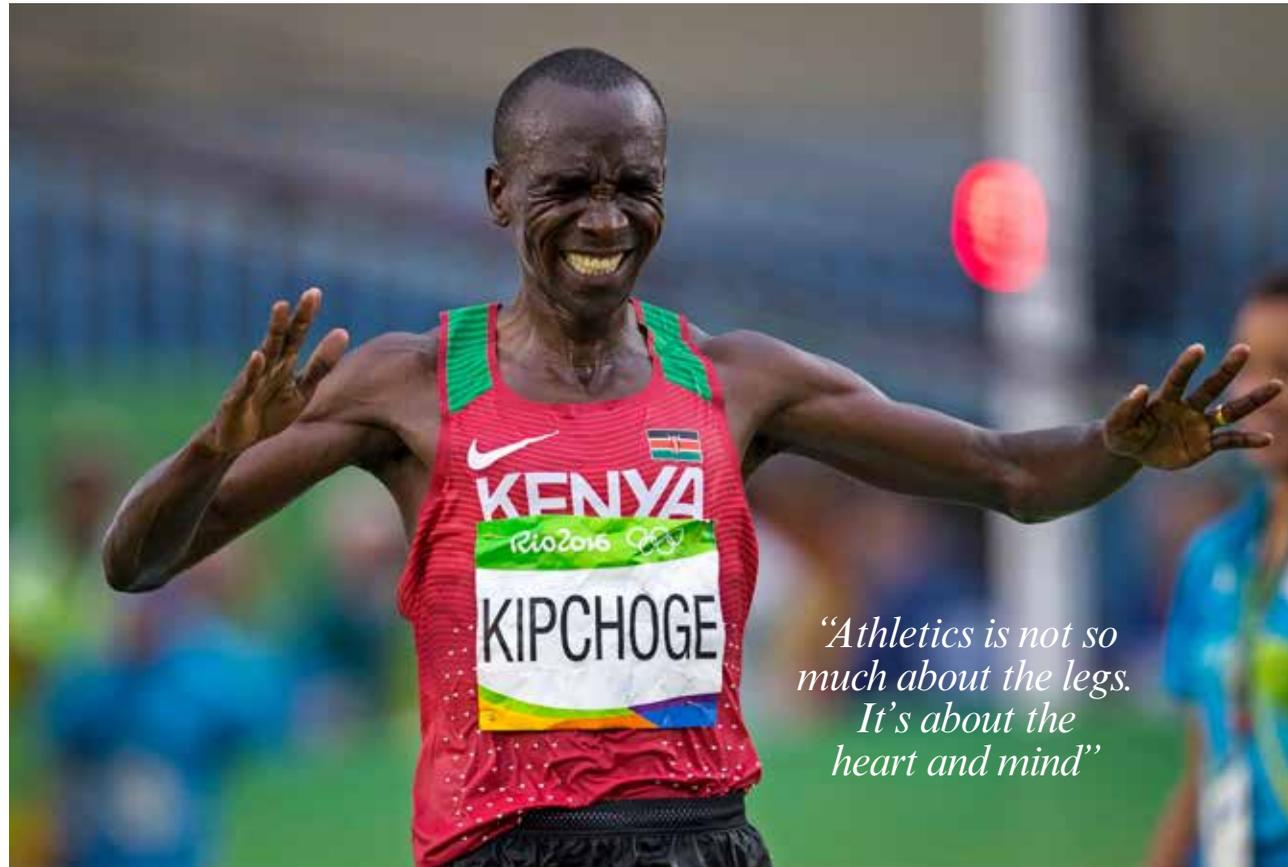
Running soon became her life. Her breakthrough came in 1999, when at age 15, she won the junior silver medal at the world cross-country championships in Belfast. “My Kenyan diet of ugali and lots of vegetables helped me get stronger.”

The up-and-coming athlete was soon nicknamed Pocket Rocket because of her small, powerful body. Her long-time manager Ricky Simms says that Cheruiyot possesses an explosive pace and killer kick finish. Before taking time off to start a family with her husband and coach Moses Kiplagat, Cheruiyot took home bronze at the 2012 London Olympics.

After her son’s birth the following year, Cheruiyot was back to training, determined to chase the only medal that was missing from her collection.

“I’ve won the world championships five times and have Olympic silver and bronze medals, but not the gold,” she once said. “I want a gold in 2016.” In Rio, her dream came true: she won gold for the 5,000m. “It means a lot to Kenya,” Cheruiyot said after the race. “I’ve been dreaming about this since the very start. Anything is possible.”

Having achieved everything there is to achieve on the track, Cheruiyot has a new challenge on the horizon. This year, she’ll be making her marathon debut. “Another goal of mine is to move on to the ultimate distance,” she explains. In December 2016, Cheruiyot received Kenya’s Female Athlete of the Year Award for her incredible running career.



Hollandse Hoogte

Personal best marathon:
2:03:05 hours

Eliud Kipchoge

Born:
5 November 1984, Nandi County, Kenya

Discipline:
Long-distance running

Milestones:
2016 Olympic marathon, 2016 London marathon, 2015 Berlin marathon and 2014 Chicago marathon champion. Gold in the 5,000m at the 2003 world championships.

Twitter:
@EliudKipchoge

"I STILL REMEMBER running to school as a child," Eliud Kipchoge says, although he didn't start seriously until he was in his teens. Kipchoge grew up in the northern Rift Valley, close to the previous world champion, Patrick Sang. "I wanted to be like him," he remembers. Sang agreed to write training programmes for Kipchoge and they developed a strong bond.

Kipchoge devoted the first decade of his running career to running 3,000m and 5,000m track races. In 2012, he started moving towards half and full marathons. A year later, he took first place in the 2013 Hamburg marathon and many more victories followed. Last year was a particularly great year for Kipchoge. At the Olympics in Rio he won gold, making him the third-fastest marathon runner ever.

"What was in my mind was happiness," Kipchoge said afterwards. "The last two Olympics I had the bronze and silver medal, so the 2016 Olympics was really crucial for me."

Kipchoge is known as the Zen Master of the Marathon for his simple lifestyle. His victories have brought him wealth, but he doesn't live a luxurious lifestyle. "One of the most important things about running is being humble," Kipchoge says. "I am happy to stay in a small house with other athletes, work with the group, wash clothes and chop vegetables."

After his victory in Rio, Kipchoge says he still hopes to break the marathon world record, but he won't say when his attempt will take place. Despite all his victories, he tries not to take himself too seriously.

"Even after retirement, I'll still jog in big-city marathons," he says. "I want to make a big mark in athletics so I can be a good example to kids."



Getty Images

"It's such a blessing to win gold on my debut at the Olympics"

LIKE SO MANY other Kenyan athletes, Conseslus Kipruto ran his first kilometres in the Rift Valley. But he started out playing football. In high school, Kipruto's head teacher encouraged him to stop chasing the ball and go after his real talent: running. Japter Keter took over as his coach and still trains him today. "I'll never forget when he told me that I have everything to be a successful runner," says Kipruto.

And so, it began. In 2010, he won the 2,000m steeplechase at the East African youth championships in Eritrea. "It was my first international competition, and Asmara seemed like such a beautiful city," Kipruto says. Afterwards, he travelled the world and won more championships. Apparently, his coach was onto something.

But his back and hamstring gave him problems in 2014, which kept him out of the sport for a whole season. He has since recovered, and last year was one of the best years of his career. He qualified for the Olympics in Rio. On day five, Kipruto cemented his place as the best steeplechase runner in the world after storming to a new Olympic record and winning gold in the 3,000m steeple.

With the world's top medal already around his neck at age 22, the future looks bright for the young Kipruto. "Now I've got the world record on my mind," he said after his victory. "I hope to win the world championship in London next year."

It will be another duel against the current champion and fellow Kenyan Ezekiel Kemboi, who is twelve years older than Kipruto, and one of only three men in history to win both Olympic and World golds in steeplechase. "We are great friends and I am glad he has not retired yet," says Kipruto. "He is encouraging me to aim higher."

Personal best 3,000m steeplechase: 8:00:12 minutes

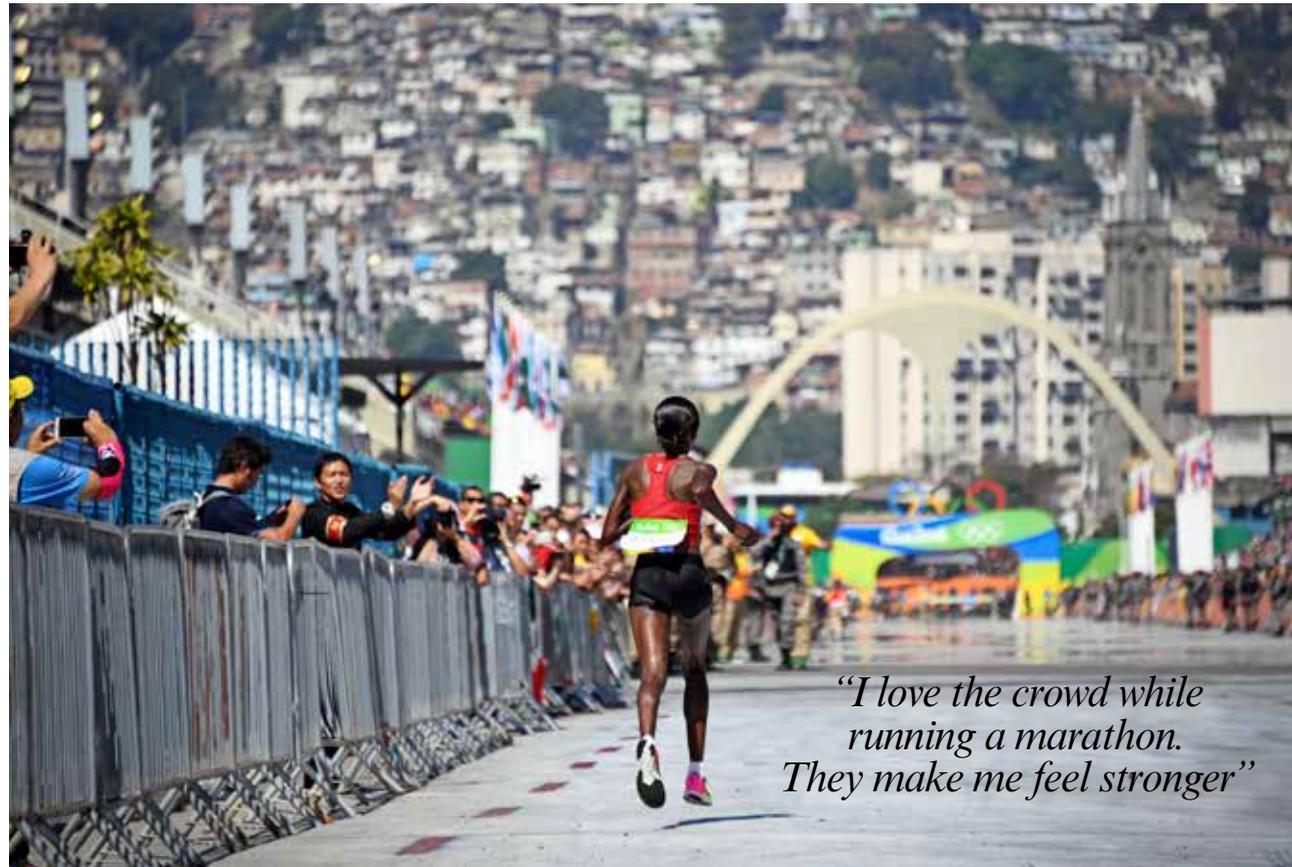
Conseslus Kipruto

Born:
8 December 1994, Nakuru, Kenya

Discipline:
Steeplechase

Milestones:
2016 Olympic champion and Olympic record holder in the 3000m steeplechase. 2011 world youth and 2012 world junior champion in the 2000m and 3000m steeplechase.

Twitter:
@KipConseslus



Getty Images

Personal best marathon:
2:20:48 hours

Jemima Sumgong

Born:
21 December 1984, Nandi County, Kenya

Discipline:
Long-distance running

Milestones:
First Kenyan woman to win Olympic gold in the marathon, at the Rio 2016 Olympics. She won the London, Rotterdam and Las Vegas marathons.

Twitter:
@JemimaSumgong

BORN AMONG PLENTY of talented runners in the Rift Valley (where else?), the young but eager Jemima Sumgong didn't always imagine a career in running. "I didn't expect that I would one day be as successful as this," she says, adding modestly, "There are many female athletes in Kenya who are more talented than me."

Sumgong's early humility turned into an unstoppable ambition when she started participating in national and regional championships. By 2004, when she was 20, she began competing abroad.

In one of her first elite competitions, the Gothenburg Half Marathon in Sweden, she came in second. Two years later, she ran her first marathon in Las Vegas, and won. In 2009, she decided to take a break from running. She signed up to the Kenyan Armed Forces and married fellow Kenyan marathon runner Noah Talam. After the birth of their daughter in 2011, Sumgong successfully returned to running.

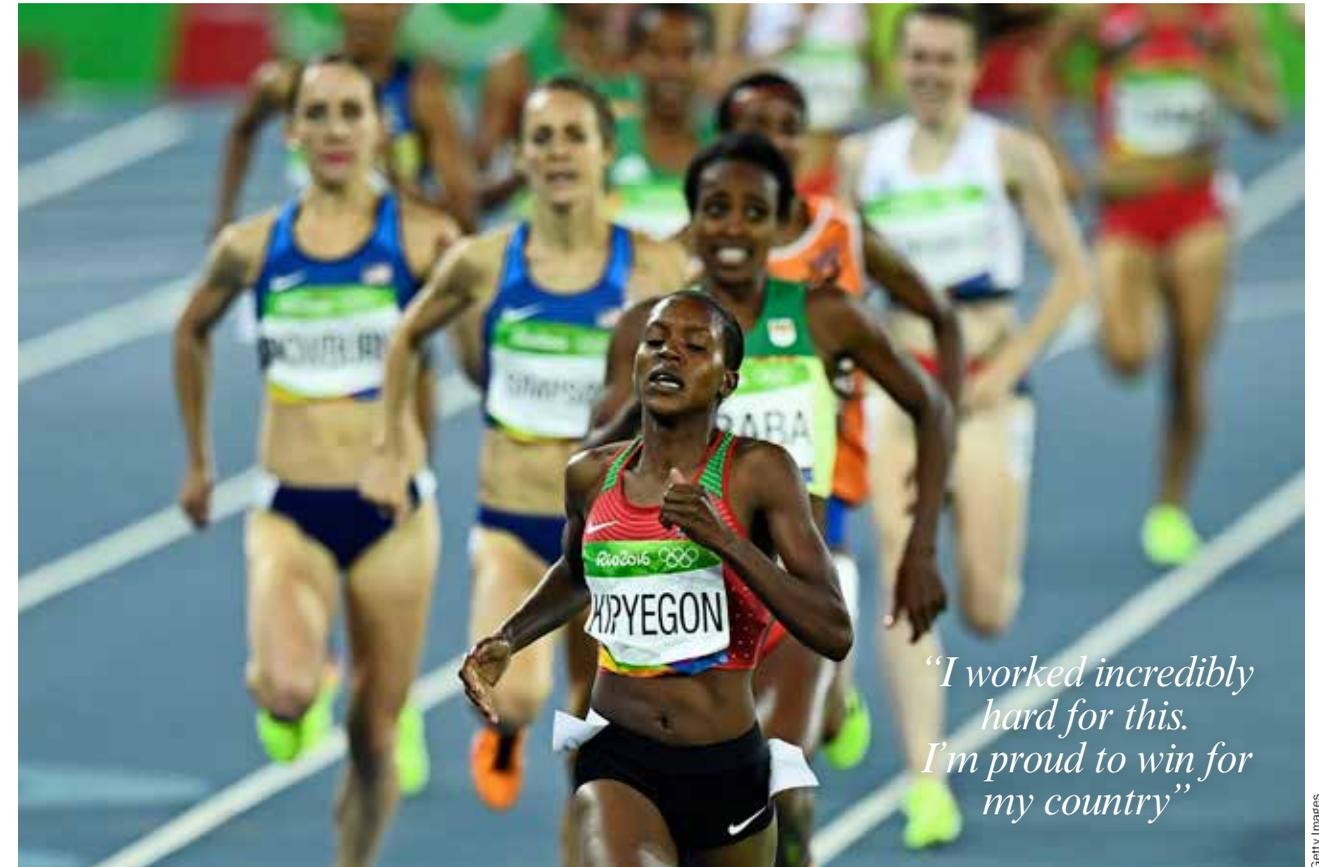
Last year was a great year for Sumgong. Much to everyone's surprise, she won the London Marathon after falling during the race.

"I just jumped back up," Sumgong said afterwards, "and followed the other ladies." She loves the crowds along the roads, which she says give her positive energy and motivation to keep fighting until the finish line.

After her London victory, she went on to win last year's Olympic marathon in hot, humid Rio de Janeiro. "At the 40 kilometre-mark I knew the gold was mine," she said later. "I knew I was on my way to making history."

Kenya's deputy president, William Ruto later praised Sumgong for becoming the first female Kenyan to win Olympic gold in the ultimate distance event, the marathon.

"I love the crowd while running a marathon. They make me feel stronger"



Getty Images

"MY DAUGHTER HAS been extraordinary since childhood," Faith Kipyegon's father said on national television after his daughter won Olympic gold for Kenya. "She skipped the crawling stage and just started walking right away." It's no surprise then that Kipyegon was only seventeen years old when she travelled to Europe and won the 1,500m at the world youth championships in France.

Afterwards, she didn't lose focus. She kept on running and won medal after medal. In 2012, she competed in the 1,500m at the London Olympics. She didn't quite qualify for the finals. Only in her early twenties, eager to grow and hungry for more, she kept believing. After all, she isn't called Faith for nothing. Last year she chased her Olympic dream again in Rio. This time, she amazed the world. The Kenyan went on to defeat the Ethiopian world record holder Genzebe Dibaba in the final of the 1,500m. She fell down on her knees after the finish line, her eyes filled with shock. "It didn't believe I could win," she said after the race. "But I am so excited."

She made her fellow Kenyans proud, especially those in her hometown of Ndabibit, a village in Nakuru County. And she lit up the village in more ways than one. Just before she left for Rio, her father kindly asked President Uhuru Kenyatta to connect their remote village to electricity.

"I want to see my daughter running and winning medals," he said. The power arrived a few days later. An appreciative neighbour, Benard Lang'at, agreed: "Faith liberated us from darkness and we will always remember her and her incredible performance at the Olympic Games."

Her whole village now has the electricity to watch her shine during upcoming world championships, and hopefully many more competitions to come.

Personal best 1,500m:
3:56:41 minutes

Faith Kipyegon

Born:
10 January 1994, Nakuru County, Kenya

Discipline:
Middle-distance running

Milestones:
2016 Olympic gold in the 1,500m, silver in the 1,500m at the 2015 world championships in Beijing, and gold in the world youth championships in 2011 and 2012.

Twitter:
@FaithKipyegon

"I worked incredibly hard for this. I'm proud to win for my country"