

The Irish priest coaching Kenyan athletes



Watching the Olympics this week? If you tune into the men's 800-meter track final on Thursday, pay attention to Kenya's David Rudisha, the current world record holder and favorite to win gold. Rudisha's coach happens to be a Catholic priest originally from Ireland, who'll be watching his athlete compete from a barstool in Kenya. From *Outside* magazine:

Meanwhile, should Rudisha win, his longtime coach, the man largely responsible for the Kenyan's powerful, front-running style, doesn't even plan to be in the crowd to congratulate him. Indeed, his coach, a 63-year-old Irish priest named Brother Colm O'Connell, probably won't even be on the same continent. He'll be 4,000 miles away, sitting on a barstool at the Kerio View Hotel in Iten, Kenya—a village perched on the western escarpment of the Great Rift Valley—watching events unfold on television. "I'm not so attached that I have to go and see them winning races," said O'Connell of Rudisha and the other athletes he coaches, including Olympic middle-distance hopefuls Augustine Choge and Isaac Songok.

O'Connell's unlikely rise began 36 years ago, when, he says, he experienced a sort of epiphany. Born in 1949, in rural Cork, Ireland, he joined the priesthood in his early twenties and began work as a geography teacher and part-time coach at the Newbridge School, in County Kildare. In 1976, while standing on the sideline at a Gaelic football match on a miserable, rainy Irish afternoon, he was asked by an older teacher whether he would volunteer to teach abroad, in Kenya. O'Connell took a look at the weather and said yes.

Less than four months later, O'Connell arrived at St. Patrick's, Iten, a notably successful Patrician Brothers school with a strong reputation for athletics. The next day, he was dragged to a track competition in the nearby town of Eldoret. He'd never seen a track meet before. The man who accompanied him was Peter Foster, a 21-year-old from Newcastle, England, working for Voluntary Service Overseas. Foster was temporarily in charge of track and cross-country at St. Patrick's, and he'd been looking for someone to coach the team when his stint in Kenya ended. He fixed on the new man.

[Read the full article here.](#)

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