

Sporting reward proves a boon for development in Kenya's Rift Valley

As the athletics competition at the 2012 Olympic Games begins, Syerramia Willoughby looks at how Kenya's success in the sport has fuelled the economic success in Eldoret, a city in the country's Rift Valley.

Today, Eldoret in Kenya's Rift Valley Province is a thriving commercial centre. Yet just a quarter-century ago, it was simply another rural town in urgent need of development. Its only claim to fame back then was the production line of athletes, from its Kalenjin, Masai and Kikuyu tribes, who would bring glory to the country in athletics competition during the quadrennial Olympic Games.

While Kenyan athletes once again hold centre stage over the middle to long distance events at the London Olympic Games from 3 August 2012, the real success story is how the country's running achievements have transformed Eldoret from a backwater town into a vibrant economic centre.



Traditionally, life in the Rift Valley centred around agriculture and cattle. The Kalenjin tribe, for example, is famous for its **milk preservation technology**. As track, cross country and road running have become more lucrative over the past couple of decades, money has poured into Eldoret and the surrounding areas.

Local athletes, keen to invest their dollars, have put their money into the construction of commercial high-rise buildings that were once synonymous with the major cities of Nairobi, Mombasa and Kisumu. Hotels have sprung up as well as palatial homes for the athletes themselves.



David Rudisha is one of Kenya's main hopes for gold at the Olympics

Previously, money only entered the area during the harvest around July and August, now cash flows in all year round. As the city's economy has grown, many banks have opened branches in Eldoret. Even the global sportswear company Nike has a store in the city.

Flights between Nairobi and Eldoret started ten years ago purely for the benefit of athletes. Today, three airlines operate that route with four to five flights a day between the two cities.

Another flourishing business in the area is the athletics camps for foreign athletes who visit Eldoret and nearby Iten for training blocs to take advantage of the altitude conditions, widely viewed as critical to the success of the province's athletes. Those growing up there have a bigger lung capacity which means they can train for longer before getting tired. The likes of Kenya's double Olympic champion **Kip Keino** and **Lornah Kiplagat** have opened athletics training centres for that purpose.

As the likes of Rudisha, Vivian Cheruiyot and Ezekiel Kemboi chase Olympic glory over the next ten days, it is worth remembering that their achievements will count for much more than personal attainment.

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