

Running FREE

As the Rio Games draw nearer, **Harriet Constable** visits the makeshift Kenyan training camp playing home to the Refugee Olympic Team's track stars

Driving down the narrow, muddy, unkempt back roads of Ngong, a chaotic town about 40 minutes drive from central Nairobi, it's hard to believe I am headed toward a team of training Olympians. Yet, as I arrive at the destination: the church-run Anita Children's Home where the team now live, I am greeted by John Anzrah, a former 400m runner and Kenyan Olympic team coach, wearing a tracksuit and a large smile. He's here to train the world's first refugee running team for the Rio Olympics. Set up by the IOC and the Tegla Loroupe Peace Foundation - an organisation run by Kenyan athlete Tegla Loroupe to promote peace through sport - the team is made up of five refugees. Each fled war torn South Sudan, and had been living in Kakuma Refugee Camp in Northern Kenya until they decided to try out for the team on World Refugee Day last year.

'The runners arrived in September 2015,' Anzrah explains, 'so we've only had eight months to train them. Elite athletes have normally had four or five years to prepare.' But this isn't an exercise in winning medals. There is a more powerful message they hope will resonate by having a team of refugees competing: 'This is to show the world that refugees are people just like you and me. They can succeed!' Anzrah says.

It's been a tough regime for the team in the past few months, with early starts, strict diets and training programmes to adhere to. Team manager Jackson Pkemoi explains, 'It was a struggle at first. The team suffered muscle injuries as they weren't used to running so much.' Now, however, the story is quite different. 'These people have changed from refugees to athletes!'

I'm led into a scrappy classroom with a few overturned chairs to meet the five runners - James Nyak, Rose Nathike, Paul Amotun, Angelina Nadai and Paul Biel. They are seated in two lines and are dressed in pale blue branded jackets and matching jogging pants. On the wall in front of them, a bed sheet has been



tagged up, with 'Over the Rainbow' written on it in colourful felt tip pens. A little sleepily (I've woken them from their morning rest) they explain what the opportunity means to them. 'I didn't know how far I could come,' says Nadai, who had spent the past ten years of her life in the refugee camp. 'It is a dream.' Fellow runner Amotun continues, 'This is a great achievement. It gives us courage and we feel like other humans in life. Sometimes, refugees feel ashamed to be refugees, but we feel hope.'

Before long it's time to leave them to their naps: their afternoon training session is a couple of hours away and they need their down time. As I leave, I ask Amotun if the team feels a sense of responsibility to inspire others with their success. 'We have faced many challenges, and now we have a big task at the Olympics. This is not just about running, it is about interacting with the world, showing others the challenges refugees face and showing that you can change your life through sport.'