

Henry Rono

World Record Machine

Born into the Nandi Tribe in Kenya, Henry Rono was a warrior. Starting in 1977, he attended Washington State University and became only the third person in history (after Gerry Lindgren and Steve Prefontaine) to win the NCAA Men's Cross Country Championship three times, winning in 1976, 1977, and 1979. He also won multiple NCAA titles in track and field.

The peak of Henry's running career was the 1978 season. In 81 days in the summer of 1978, as a sophomore at Washington State University, Henry set four world records and dominated the sport of track and field. He broke records at 10,000 meters (27:22.5), 5000 meters (13:08.4), the 3000-meter steeplechase (8:05.4), and the 3000 meters (7:32.1); an achievement unparalleled in the history of distance running. Henry accomplished it by running out front by himself, without challengers or rabbits to push him. He set the 5000-meter world record in a dual meet and set the steeplechase world record before a crowd of 200 people.

Henry continued to run and compete at a high level for the next four years; however, he would never get to compete at the Olympics, as his country boycotted both the 1976 and the 1980 Olympic Games. Kenya's boycotts robbed Henry of a world stage and enduring fame. Kenyan track and government officials made many demands of him and took much of his newfound wealth. He had no financial manager, no investments, and little control over his money.

In the years that would follow, Henry faced far greater challenges in life than running around a track. As his problems increased, he began drinking heavily. His successes became more sporadic and he gained weight. He was soon penniless, spending time in a homeless shelter and in and out of rehabilitation clinics.

Henry Rono, the warrior, summoned the determination and courage that made him a world record holder and recovered from his alcoholism to coach at the high school level and resume running.

Questions or Thought:

1. Henry Rono set many world records in one summer. How does it feel when you are on the top of your game?
2. Henry had the capability to push himself even without challengers. He ran to get the most out of himself. Do you challenge yourself? How can you get the most out of yourself?
3. Henry overcame his personal challenges. Do your experiences in athletics help you to overcome personal challenges?