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Competitor Classics: Effortless—The Julius Achon Story

Published: Jul 22nd 2011 2:03 PM UTC by [Competitor.com](#)

This piece first appeared in Competitor Magazine in the spring of 2008.



Photo: runnerspace.com

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The women and men glide across the grass in a series of mile repeats for Coach Alberto Salazar. This particular spring morning in Eugene, Oregon is grey with a touch of dampness lingering in the air. Julius Achon (pronounced A-shon) from Uganda is helping out with Salazar's Olympic hopefuls on Team Nike Project, first running with the women and then switching into another gear and catching up to the guys. His job is to push the pace and up the ante for each group as the Olympic Trials loom. There is a smile on his lips that seems to be tattooed on and a love of running in his stride that is tangible, even from a distance.

Achon has had a lot of success in his running career, including winning the 1,500 meters at the Junior World Championship back in 1994 and taking third at the All-Africa Games at 1,500 meters in 1995. He came to the United States in 1996, ran for George Mason College and won the NCAA Championship in the mile with a 3:56.77, ran 1:44.5 for 800 meters and ran in the 1996 and 2000 Olympics in Atlanta and Sydney for Uganda, making it to the semi-finals in the 1,500 both times.

Running, when done right, appears easy, effortless. That is exactly the way Julius Achon looks as he circles the field. But if his running life appears easy and effortless, his struggle to get to this point has been anything but.

Imagine being 12 years old and the oldest of nine children when Ugandan rebels, members of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) invade your village, kidnap you, place a semi-automatic weapon in your hands and insist that you help them overthrow the government... or die. The group kidnapped an estimated 20,000 children between 1996 and 2006.

That is the nightmare that Julius Achon was forced to endure.

Like most children growing up in Uganda, young Julius ran five miles each way from his village to school and back every day... barefoot. When he was 12, he and a number of other youngsters from the village of Lira were kidnapped and forced to walk 100 miles in three days without eating anything at all. "They forced us to be soldiers," he says. "We were in the

bush for over three months and they put drugs in our food. One time they tried to get me to shoot a lady who was supposed to cook for us, but I refused. They caned me and I couldn't sit down on my butt for seven days. But I was lucky the person in charge of our group was from my village. If it had been anyone else, they would have shot me."

Eventually the government's planes found the rebels and attacked. Achon and his friends all dropped their guns and started running. "There were 15 of my friends from the same village and we started running for home," he remembers. "We knew we were about 100 miles away, but we really didn't know where we were going.

To avoid getting shot by the government planes, the boys got down on their bellies and crawled through the scrub to safety. Six survived, nine were killed. "We made it back to our village in three days," he says. When he arrived home his parents and his family were gone, off hiding in the bush. "When the rebels found the parents, they would kill them and steal their children. Everyone was on the run."



Achon came to the United States for the first time in 1994. Photo: trackfocus.com

Eventually, in 1989, he re-connected with his parents and normalcy returned. At 13 he was back in school and competed at 400, 800, 1,500 and 3,000 meters. He won every race he entered even though from 1989 to 1994 he was still running barefoot. "The first running shoes I had came a month before the Junior Worlds," he continues. "It was kind of funny because when I put on my shoes I felt like my foot was so heavy. I felt like I had pounds of mud at the end of my legs."

At the age of 17 he boarded an airplane for the very first time and flew to Portugal to compete in the Junior Worlds. "I remember having electricity for the first time," he says. "I could not see the stars at night because of the lights in the city. In my village, you always have access to the stars in the sky.

To compete in the qualifying event back in Uganda. Achon had no way to get to the meet so he jogged 20 miles to the site of the meet on Thursday, then he won the 800 and the 1550 on Friday.

In December of 1994 he came to the United States for the first time and was offered a college scholarship to George Mason in Fairfax, Virginia. "I came in the winter and saw snow for the very first time," he laughs. "I thought it was white rice falling from the sky."

He never told the people around him about the kidnapping or of his time as a rebel hostage. "I kept silent because I didn't want people to know," he says. But by 2006 word had gotten out, especially when Achon adopted 11 orphans. Yep, you heard right. 11 orphans "I found them on a morning run," he says. "They were sleeping on a side street. I spoke to them and asked what they were doing there. They told me that their parents had been killed and they had nowhere to live. I spoke to my father and told him that I wanted to help these kids when I went back to the United States."

He and his wife Grace adopted the 11 children and the \$20,000 he receives for being an assistant coach with the Nike Running Project is supporting the 11 orphans plus Achon's family, a grand total of 25. He felt he needed to do something, especially after his mother and uncle were killed by the rebels before the 2004 Olympics. The loss of his mother ate away at Julius. "I didn't have a single night's sleep for a full year," he insists. "I would stay awake and just think about her."

His father, brothers and sisters live together with the eleven orphans along with the cook Achon hired to make sure there are good meals in the home. He figures he is spending \$600 per month on food and another \$30 per month for the cook.

The youngest of the orphans is now seven and the oldest is 18. "They all call each other brother and sister," says Achon. "Everyone is from a different family, but they are now their own family. One of the boys didn't know even what his name was, so we decided to name him Julius after me."

He is 31 years old now and will be 32 in December. He hurt his back in a car accident in 2007 which curtailed his training enough to make it impossible for him to make his third Olympic team in 2008, this time at 5,000 meters. He has worked with Alberto Salazar for over three years and loves what he does.

Julius Achon is one of the good guys, someone who sees people in need and, in his effortless style, simply does what it takes to make their lives better. He may never be rich when it comes to finances, but when it comes to giving back he is one of the wealthiest men around.

Bob Babbitt is the founder and editor-in-chief of Competitor Magazine.