Shoe4Africa came into being in the craziest of ways, but its founder has seen it grow to embrace the whole of East Africa.

THE year is 1995, the event a road race, and the place Machelons.

Toby Tanser is joined at the starting line by a host of other participants as he warms up for the road.

But something is wrong here. Staring down at the forest of legs that have made it to the starting line, he cannot believe that a shoe can be so worn out that it loses its original shape and colour. For his Nike shoes are covered by a thick layer of dust that has no names, no specific colour, no shape... just some running gear.

He can't believe his eyes. I was embarrassed because back in Sweden I had 30 barely used running shoes stumped under my kitchen table that I would never bother using," he says.

After the race, Toby phoned one of his friends back in Sweden to break into his apartment (his friend did not have Toby's keys and mail) the shoes and other running gear. Then he distributes them to needy athletes in Eldoret who are staying with his friends.

Visit

All this happened during Toby's first visit to Kenya as an athlete. He had initially intended to stay for five months, but extended it to seven because he could not bring himself to say goodbye to the hospitality of the Kenyan people.

On his way to the Eldoret Airport for a flight to Nairobi, his taxi driver noticed his running shoes and commented about them.

"He asked me if I could spare him the shoes. What the heck?" He asked himself and handed the shoes to the driver. His philosophy, after all, has always been this: if you have a pair of shoes, there would be no one without a pair of shoes in this world.

He had hoped to buy a pair of sandals at the Jomo Kenyatta International Airport. Nairobi, where he was to get a connecting flight to Sweden. But shock of all shocks. He could not believe his eyes when he touched down at the airport. All the shops had been closed down, so he eased himself into the flight home and sunk into his seat — blissful!

But his troubles had just begun. They had to switch planes in Paris, but as he walked across the airport, barefoot, the cops detailed him, for he looked every inch a vagabond!

"They found my name, phone number (Kalenjin for sure) and my passport number, my words, and boy weren't they scared! Pringles! They shouted, convinced that they had nabbed a drug trafficker!

Persuaded

After much persuasion, they eventually bought his story and let him proceed to Sweden, and there, while waiting for a cab, a woman pulled next to him and asked him why he was barefoot yet it was raining. She offered to drop him at his apartment.

After explaining to her how he ended up being kicked out, the woman removed her shoes and gave them to him so that he would give them to a needy case in Kenya.

It hit him that people could actually respond for a worthy cause. And that's how the Shoe4Africa was born.

The charity is a not-for-profit organization dedicated to promoting social empowerment, health initiatives and health awareness through sports.

The idea of Shoe4Africa was finally cemented during a holiday that Toby had in Zanzibar with his fiancé.

One evening he rode with her on a motorcycle to a beach, then laid down to be chased by the dogs. Suddenly he was hit by an epiphany.

"I had the idea of collecting shoes given the way I was living in Kenya. I also realized that shoes can be used to help people living in poverty."

Robbers

While involving the spectacle of the sun's golden rays, he noticed a man watching towards the hill. The man turned out to be robbers. One had a machete and the other a baseball bat. He suffered a severe and bloody head wound, and a nasty cut on his hand as they stole his wrist watch, sunglasses and one of his shoes.

"They couldn't steal the other shoe since I somehow snatched the machete and fought them off. Dared, I ran with the one shoe to safety." That is how Shoe4Africa got its name. It credits the one shoe the mugger did not steal for his life. Since its inception, thousands of shoes have been distributed with some published in Kalenjin, have been distributed.

He has since been involved in bringing big names like ZE's star Anthony Edwards (Dr E), Manchester United's Christiano Ronaldo and celebrated movie director Steven Spielberg, among others.

Toby is also credited with organizing the largest all-women race in Kenya.

Participants are normally issued with free T-shirts and running shoes. Currently, Toby's biggest undertaking is to raise funds that will be invested in building the biggest children's hospital in Africa, and possibly the world, at the Eldoret Referral Hospital.

SUFFICIENTLY CHARITABLE: Toby Tanser

Photo: Anthony Njuguna

WHAT'S ON ➤ WHAT'S IN ➤ WHAT'S OUT ➤ WHAT'S UP

MAGICAL SHOE NETS MILLIONS FOR CHARITY

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