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Toby Tanser – Founder of Shoe4Africa

by [Jessica](#) on January 21, 2011 in [nonprofit](#)

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Race director, author, runner, coach, philanthropist and writer, Toby Tanser is the founder and only staff member of the charity organization Shoe4Africa. His latest and greatest project is trying to build Africa's largest public children's hospital.

Tanser, a former professional athlete, lived with international athletes and their top coaches on a variety of continents and spent ten years racing around the world giving him a unique method of coaching. He lives in Harlem, N.Y., and is the head coach of the city's largest club, the New York Flyers. He also is the head coach of the Fashion Institute cross country team (Manhattan's State University), Team Lifeline (an international charity group) and his own Shoe4Africa runners. He also started a running program for reformed prisoners in New York, Fortune House, and has coached the Grassroot Soccer charity team and

the ALS team. He was the first coach of the successful Nike RUN NYC program. Tanser has appeared on radio shows, TV shows and Web casts. In addition, he has lectured and served as a guest coach for a variety of outlets including the New York Marathon, financial companies such as ING Direct, Land Rover and Runner's World. He also is a Commit to Fit national ambassador for Subway.

Tanser sits on the board of director's for the New York Road Runner's, Achilles International and the coaches Advisory Board for Runner's World. In 2005, he was elected as the USATF Metro Men's/Women's Long Distance Chair but declined the position.

His last race was running the NYC Marathon with Tony Award-winner Sarah Jones (whom he coached) and former world record holder Tegla Loroupe raising funds for the said charity. Tanser's favorite running distance was the 5 km, which he ran 13- minutes and high-change. He won numerous worldwide races (well over 150+), national championship medals from the 1500 m up to the full marathon distance, and cross country, and various recognition awards.

His latest book, "More Fire" (released by Westholme Publishing), was dubbed "The best book on Kenyan Running" by RW's Amby Burfoot. His first book, "Train Hard Win Easy," became an instant best-seller and was favorably reviewed in 17 countries. He also wrote "The Essential Guide to Running the New York City Marathon." Tanser has been a columnist for East Africa's largest newspaper, The Daily Nation, and American sports and running magazines. His articles have appeared in running journals all over the world.

As a race director he has put on races in Tanzania, Kenya, Morocco, Iceland and America. Each summer in New York, Tanser directs the Hope & Possibility 5-miler; an event that has been graced yearly with celebs from ER, The Soprano's Young Guns, has politicians coming running — State Governors, a group of wounded warriors from the Walter Read Clinic in Washington, and in 2010 Tanser had arguably the biggest celebrity ever to run in New York with the appearance of Prince Harry of England. His women's races in Kenya and Tanzania have been the largest women's-only events in the respective countries.

He has been a consultant for a large international drinks company, Soccerade powered by Cristiano Ronaldo; the athletics federation in Stockholm, Sweden; and a computer running software program called MoreLogic. He also was a public speaker for a host of universities, charitable groups, schools and running clubs.

Tanser's latest quest is to run from the Sea to the Stars; an ultra run from the African tropical Ocean, over land, through wild game parks, to the top of Antarctic-like Kilimanjaro (the world's highest free standing mountain). The concept being, "The peak is not the end of the journey, touching the stars will start breaking ground to build the first public children's hospital in Sub Saharan Africa."

For his charity work, in the field of a near civil war in Africa, he was awarded the Runner's World Heroes Award in 2008, and made a Nandi Elder in Kenya (the highest tribal honor). In the 2000, at the NYC Marathon he was awarded the Elite Comeback Award after completing the marathon in 35th place months after surviving brain surgery. He also received the Big Apple award for being the first New Yorker. The same year he won the city's Half Marathon Gran Prix series and the Metropolitan runner of the year.

He holds the obscure world record (recognized by the Scottish athletics federation) for the fastest 10km run wearing a kilt, and he holds a Guinness Book record for being a team member who pushed an Eight ton truck over 300-miles and then completed a speedy fastest hand-pushed-truck-lap of the British Gran Prix Silverstone racing track.

What are you working on right now?

Building the first general public children's hospital in Sub-Saharan Africa. It is a 250-bed four story unit. I decided to do it while just sitting in a cafe garden in Edloret, after going to see the church that had burned to the ground an hour before (and seeing the bones and scraps of clothes of the 50 people murdered there in the genocide attack). Then hearing that there was not a single public kids hospital, I wanted to do something to promote healing, a place without tribalism where people came to get better and heal. It sounded like fate.

To get the proposal off the ground all it took was saying, yes, I would do it. Then the idea began to roll, amazingly enough, to the stage it is in today. I certainly did not have the qualifications.

What are 3 trends that excite you?

Change, challenge and pressure.

Change: In my charity's lifetime, I have seen us make a change. Of course, it's rewarding that my work means something. I can drive to two villages in rural Kenya with a friend who has not been to Africa, and they can see the difference in my "area."

Challenge: You can look and say something is too difficult, or you can't do it, but I have found in life that whatever situation I am in, it's always the most exciting thing to give any idea your best shot. Regrets come from not trying.

Pressure: With my charity work I have been arrested. I have been in a truck in which a soldier with a gun has wanted to shoot me. I have been chased by men with garrotes. I have had my head split open with a homemade baseball bat. I have been sliced with a machete. I have truly, truly ran for my life. And the list could continue.

I always remember one crazy event I put on. It was in the slums, and had never been done before (even by the United Nations), because it was so hard. I was trying to get 5,000 rowdy women to run through the thin mud lanes of Kibera. And why should they run? it was hot, and they had been standing in the sun for hours. Plus, I wanted them to run "away" from the place where they were going to get shoes. They were worried and did not want to leave. I thought the event was going to fail, but then my good friend, Martin Lel (who's won the NYC marathon twice, and London three times), said, "Toby, the end result doesn't matter, what is important is you tried. No one else would have." That pretty much embodied what I knew everyone felt, but it was good to hear it. Luckily, everything did go as planned, but that pressure was a good place to be!

How do you bring ideas to life?

By standing up and committing rather than sitting down and talking.

I realized all you have to do is start, and I get frustrated that so many are slow to do so. There is always another reason to have another meeting, throw another dose of caution into the pot, but perfection does not exist. Chances are it will never turn out how you plan either. I live in NYC, and each year I see boatloads of humanitarians attending conferences and meetings. The conclusion of which appears to be

where to meet next — and surprise, surprise — it is always a pleasant destination. This is not only in the West. In Kenya, close to where I saw children eating rats and a drop of water would not touch their throats for days, we saw the area MP (member of Parliament who is paid more money than an American senator) for this rural area sitting in one of Nairobi's most exclusive hotels. He was stuffing plates of food into his mouth with absolutely no plan of action and criticized my friend who brought sacks of food because he was not informed and would have "liked to be present for the media opportunity."

What inspires you?

People who overcome hardship inspire me. Great sportspeople, or people with talent, never impressed me. When I see the pain and struggle of someone fighting the odds to do something like walk when they have lived in a wheelchair, that is what impresses and inspires me to rise above.

I suppose, in a way a lot of this came from myself. I was a runner who won my first race. I just set off and victory came, so sports were never impressive. However, when I was younger, I used to work with handicapped people over the Easter/fall holidays when my parents took us to a Camphill Village. There I saw people who, but for a stroke of fate, could have been me.

What is one mistake you've made, and what did you learn from it?

Not to act when I feel it is right to. I have learned to step forward if I feel it is right at the time — as it invariably is.

What is one business idea that you're willing to give away to our readers?

I am not really in business, but as with design, follow the rules that have proven successful, and improve by thought and questions.

What is one book and one tool that helps you bring ideas to life?

A jotterpad and my laptop.

What inspired you to host peace races during the political clashes in Africa, and what was the impact?

Kids. I was attending an open-field funeral, and as dusk fell everyone ran away (people were being shot by poison arrows so cover was nice). Kids came up to me as everyone got into their cars and said, "The men are burning churches, homes and schools. Can't you do something please?" I was dismissive at first. I thought, what can I do? I was the only foreigner. All others in the area had been flown out of the country. Then I suddenly had a thought: Use my formula of elite athletes and running to promote change. By a

weird stroke of fate, Kenya had two world marathon champions at that time, one Kalenjin (think Hutsi) the other Kikuyu (think Tutsi).

I thought, what if those two shared a big Kenyan flag and marched through town together? There are 42 Kenyan tribes and 42 km in the marathon, so if I could get 42 Olympic/World Champions from all the Kenyan tribes to march behind these men and 600 school girls holding olive branches, we could hold a peace race and make quite a statement — and we did!

I took it further. Next I marched hundreds of kids into the Kalenjin refugee camps and lined the Kikuyu kids up inside the camp. I gave the Kalenjin kids two t-shirts: one to wear one and one for their new friend. Then we ran together through the camp with athletes from both tribes. I was kind of having great success — and the funny thing is that all the foreign aid peace initiative charities had been flown out of the area. Very ironic.

I noted that typically I see “white” people in Africa working for the Red Cross, yet the only people I saw on the ground working were Kenyan Red Cross workers. I wonder why we are not using aid money to train more Kenyans and send fewer westerners to Africa if during a crisis they are all airlifted back home. I learned a lot.

You are opening a school in January. What will this mean for the children there?

I ran away from school when I was 15. I never finished the free education I was offered. I know, a dummy. As penance, I am building this school. The catalyst was a run for education in which I gave a kid a pencil, a pair of shoes and a book. He ran home. He must have been 22-years old, and he said, “Finally, I can go to school!” These items are required and the poor can not afford them. I later heard that when he got home, he cut the pencil into five pieces to share his good luck with five less fortunate friends. This summer I visited the site unannounced. I wanted to check on the progress. It was a break from the school year (the summer holidays), yet a big group of kids sat on a mound of dirt in their school uniforms watching the builders — waiting for their school to be built.

Tell us about the “clicks for bricks” idea.

This was my fundraising idea for the hospital: Write 15 friends who were millionaires and wait for each of them to send me a million dollars. This backfired on the grandest scale. Not one of the 15 responded to my e-mail. I sat at my computer and thought about what to do next. That is when I e-mailed friends and asked for smaller donations, and I would build a Web page of hospital bricks. Ten dollars buys a brick, so when you click on the “enter” button, you are essentially purchasing a brick. This was the scheme that led me to today having \$940,000 toward building the hospital.

How does donating shoes help someone in Africa?

I don't believe in charity, per se. Wind back the clock. If I was 17 years old, and you gave me a check each week for \$1,000, I would stay home and wait for my check. The same is true with aid. I stumbled across making people run 10 km before I gave them anything. This way, women and children finish a race feeling they deserve what I am giving. Someone walks two inches taller in a pair of shoes, not only in height, but

because of a sense of dignity. Plus, you have the health issue. If you are walking through the mud, sewage and slime in a Kenyan slum there are little worms, called hookworms, that enter the body through the toenail and attack the immune system. Six hundred million people have this affliction, and the overwhelming majority are in Sub-Saharan Africa. Show someone a hookworm, and its effects, and they will wear the shoes! Also Africans want to progress. They are just lacking what we take for granted. It's a little step in the right direction.

Why do you love running?

I fell into running by mistake, and I found I could totally be myself — in thought and as a person. I ran competitively only because it opened doors to do so much more — like meeting presidents and kings — and traveling all over the world. The joy of being in a mad, mad world, lacing up a pair of running shoes and zoning out for an hour a day gives me more than I could ever tell.

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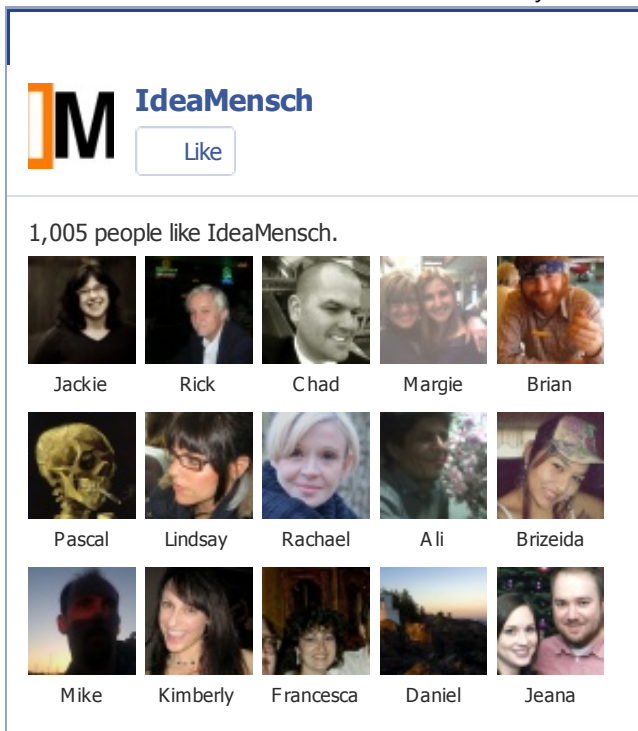
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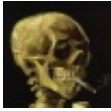




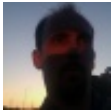




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