

## Story on Melly Chelimo

***It has been suggested that childbirth can physiologically benefit female athletes, but Joan Melly Chelimo, who last weekend at the Sportisimo Prague Half-marathon became the fourth fastest woman in history, says motherhood has transformed her in other ways, writes Paul Halford.***

Since giving birth to Ariana in 2015, the Kenyan has advanced her half-marathon PB from 71:52 to the 65:04 she ran in the Czech capital. She says the responsibility of being a mother has given her the motivation to try to challenge the best in the world.

Such is the metamorphosis that, without exuberant pacing in the early stages of the Sportisimo Prague Half-marathon, she would almost certainly have broken the world record.

Her 14:51 opening 5km in the Czech capital as she decided to keep up with the tempo set by Caroline Kiptanui, who had beaten her by a place at the RAK Half-marathon in Ras Al-Khaimah in February, put them on target to break Joyciline Jepkosgei's 64:51 world mark by an incredible two minutes.

It is a mark of her ability that she managed to hold herself together enough to miss the world record by only 13 seconds and clock the fifth fastest time in history despite the cobbles in the closing section taking their toll. "We went too fast at the start," admitted Chelimo. "It was actually not my pacemaker. It was [Kipkirui] who was going too fast and I was just trying to keep up with her because she beat me in RAK (third and fourth) so I was really prepared to go for my best and I didn't want the same to happen as in RAK - let a gap open so I was trying to keep up."

Remarkably, Chelimo's first 10km of 30:14 in Prague is two minutes quicker than her 10km PB before 2017. As she returned to running in 2016, one could be forgiven for thinking, the then 25-year-old had no more big improvements to make. However, after a low-key comeback, she won the Berlin Half-marathon in 68:45 in spring 2017 and improved still further to 66:25 as she placed second in Copenhagen in the autumn. Still more advancement followed at RAK this year with 65:37.

After winning in Prague, she said of her training before motherhood: "I was just running and not focused. I feel [now] like I have more responsibility and I'm really focused. I want my baby to be okay and it gives me motivation that I have a baby. When the pace is too hard I think about my baby and people who have been supporting me, so I think that's one of the reasons I am running faster. I know I have responsibility and someone is looking up for me."

She also points out the role of her husband. "He is giving me full support and I am a professional athlete. It's all about training. My job is to go to training and rest," said Chelimo, who hires help to look after Ariana so she can focus on her running.



Had things worked out slightly differently , Chelimo could have gained even greater recognition by winning a world title in Valencia at the end of March. She was first reserve in the Kenyan team, but despite two athletes withdrawing she was not entered in time by her federation.

Chelimo began running in order to try to gain a US college sponsorship. Although she didn't end up going it proved to be the start of a worthwhile career.

"I came from a humble background, we had nothing and were struggling so I decided to run for commercial races but I had passion in me about running. I really wanted to run. I was running in school," she said.

"Now I feel I'm another-level athlete. I want to be at the top. I have goals. I'm not running for money - I want to end my career well.

"I would like to be a world champion or win an Olympic medal. That's every athlete's dream."

Another goal is to break the world record. "It's only a matter of time," she said. "Last year I won in Berlin in 68:45 and in Copenhagen 66:25 and then RAK 65:37 and then here 65:04. You can see the graph is going somewhere. I feel like I'm getting more experienced at the half-marathon. I feel like the world record is possible depending on the weather and conditions."

Chelimo is the latest of many relatively unheralded women making what would have been world-record times until recently look ordinary.

Of the top 50 times in history, only seven were run before 2010, while 18 have been achieved in the last 20 months.

Chelimo's explanation is: "When Joyciline did the world record, it opened up. You can see from then other women started running 64, Mary, Fancy. So she showed it's possible."

She is not sure of her immediate racing plans but may step up to marathon this autumn or next year.

She is level-headed in her predictions for the 26-mile distance. "The marathon is so different and you can't predict it," she said. "Anything under 2:30 would be a wonderful result for me."

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Editor: Paul Halford

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