

# The *Healing Power* of Running

BY JAYME OTTO,  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY WILLIAM CHESSE



In Rwanda, one woman helps other women recover from a brutal past by introducing them to sports, and gives thousands of girls the chance to play.

50-year-old Felicité Rwemalika, the executive director of the Association of Kigali Women in Sports (AKWOS), isn't running on this late 2009 June day. Instead, she stands before nearly 6,000 runners in the small town of Gisenyi, 60 miles outside Rwanda's capital city Kigali, looking at her watch. She's waiting to signal the start of Rwanda's first women's race. The competitors, ages 8 to 15, wait at a start line marked by white sand. Even more amazing than the 6,000 runners is the crowd: Some 10,000 have gathered on this misty Sunday morning. Some cram into the covered pavilion at one end of the soccer field. Others opt for the bleachers on the opposite side. But most are standing along the track, 10 people deep, anxious to catch a glimpse of their daughters, sisters and wives. For the majority, this is the first race they've ever seen. For the girls at the start line, it's the first race they've ever run. For Rwemalika, it's a dream 15 years in the making.





Rwemalika signals. Whistles blow, and the girls take off, chasing down their first finishes at the 5k and 10k distances. Dust flies up from their frantic feet, anointing the crowd in a cloud of grit. Spectators applaud, chuckling as the dust settles over dozens of flip-flops that were unable to keep up with their owners. Volunteers rush out to collect the shoes littering the track, forming a pile at Rwemalika's feet. She turns her back to the crowd for just a moment, the words "Women Sports for Unity" on her bright blue T-shirt now visible. She wipes her eye. It could be either a tear, or a clump of dirt, but most likely, it's both.

"It's hard for me to believe this is finally happening," she says. "When you think about where this country was 15 years ago, the anguish our women endured, well, it's a miracle."

For Rwemalika, this event is like a stretch of scenic downhill after a long, brutal uphill course she's been running since 1994. The genocide that year, as the world now knows, left more than one million inhabitants of this small East African country dead, more than 400,000 children orphaned and nearly half a million women scarred by torture and abuse.

"What we are witnessing here today," says Rwemalika, "the joy, the laughter, the participation, wouldn't have been possible even 10 years ago. And I had no idea this many women would show up. I don't think we planned enough water." Her eyes widen as she contemplates running out of water, then excuses herself to assess the situation.

### Running from the Past

Rwemalika was born in neighboring Uganda, the daughter of Rwandan refugees. With four girls in the family, there was a lot of pressure to get them married off. But instead, her father put a priority on education. "He told us that we could be anything we wanted to be," she remembers.

In school in Uganda, Rwemalika fell in love with sports. She learned to run and to play soccer and handball. She went to college and eventually became a nurse, got married and had four children, three girls and one boy. Meanwhile, political instability in her native Rwanda was coming to a head.



Felicité Rwemalika at the Sainte Famille school in Kigali, Rwanda.

In 1990, Rwemalika's husband, Frank, returned home to try and help liberate Rwanda, and she supported him.

She had little time to ponder his absence. Four children could not be supported on a nurse's salary. Rwemalika took a small sum of money her father had left her when he died and opened a restaurant. She worked at the clinic during the day and the restau-

rant at night. "I wasn't able to sleep," she says. "But I was able to keep my children in school."

Rwemalika's life continued this way for four years. Back in Rwanda, war raged, and when it finally ended in July of 1994, nearly 15 percent of the population had been slaughtered.

Once it was over, Rwemalika, catching only bits and pieces of the story, left her children with family and journeyed to Rwanda. She wanted to find her husband, but most of all, she wanted to help. When she arrived in the "land of a thousand hills," she found villages deserted and cities rotting, full of trash and dead bodies.

Looking back, Rwemalika can't remember how she was able to remain in Rwanda. "I think about it sometimes," she says. "I wonder, 'how was I so strong?' But then I remember that it was also a time of opportunity for Rwanda, with the promise of change. And I remember how I wanted to grab hold of that."

She tried to create a supermarket out of a trailer because most of Rwanda's infrastructure had been destroyed. The business skills she'd learned moonlighting as a restaurant owner were of greater value to Rwanda now than her nursing skills. But before she could open, everything was stolen, even the trailer. So she began importing water to the capital city, Kigali. There was such a demand en route that most of her truckloads were empty before they could reach their destination.

Her husband found her five months later. He was alive, but in poor health. Together they settled into a new life in Rwanda and tried to help their neighbors. With so many men dead, Rwanda was left a country of 70 percent women. It seemed to Rwemalika that every woman she met had been a victim or a witness to sexual violence.

"I wanted to do something for



Rwandan countryside

RWANDAN COUNTRYSIDE BY ISTOCKPHOTO.COM

these women," Rwemalika says, "something that gave them back their dignity."

### Using Sports to Heal

Rwemalika recalled how much she loved to play sports as a young woman in Uganda. She remembered the positive impact running had on her self-esteem. And most importantly, she remembered how athletics equalized everyone, no matter what their skin color, tribe or age. So, in 1997 she formed AKWOS and tried to launch a soccer team.

But no one wanted to play.

"The women were traumatized," she says. "It's like they were hiding in a corner and wouldn't come out."

Rwemalika felt if she could convince them to come out and play, she would prove that life could go on. She knew that sports could never change what happened, but she hoped they could heal some of the trauma experienced by Rwanda's women.

It took her two years to gather

enough girls to fill a 15-member soccer team. The first team debuted in 1999. They called themselves Urumuli, which means light, and traveled to Uganda to play their first match.

"We still don't know how she did it," says Rwemalika's younger sister, Margret. "She went door to door talking to the women. In the end, we suspect it was just her sheer will."

By 2006, hundreds of women had participated in AKWOS programs and Rwemalika had nabbed a Nike sponsorship. The organization even started the first national women's soccer team. Rwemalika had found her way to make a difference. And women in Rwanda had found something to hold onto.

"It's like they started to wake up," says Rwemalika. "You could actually see it. The first time they interacted with us, they were very quiet. The second time they started to smile, and by the third time, there was something in their eyes—hope."

"It was transformative for me," says Grace Nyinawumuntu, one of the origi-

nal team members. While the pretty 27-year-old won't discuss her past, she has plenty to say about the present and her future. Through AKWOS, she was inspired to become Rwanda's first female referee, then the country's first female coach. She now is working to train 1,000 female coaches in Rwanda.

"Sports can be a powerful tool for creating heroes," she says.

Today, AKWOS works on a global scale, hosting an annual conference on gender equity in sports and leading calls for social change. The organization is known for motivating women in Rwanda through sports and education and has become a powerful voice on topics such as unity and reconciliation, women's rights and the prevention of HIV/AIDS.

This summer, Rwemalika broadened her scope to include running and hosted the country's first women's 5k and 10k. "I chose running because anyone can do it, there are no barriers to participation," she says. "The women of Rwanda have been running from a horrible past. I want them to know that there are still things left worth running for.

"Running is an open door. And once a woman steps through it, she starts thinking, 'If I can run, maybe there are other things I can do.' And that's the start of a profound awakening." ■

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### Get Involved

Want to help women reap the benefits of sports around the world? Learn more about the **Association of Kigali Women in Sports** and make a donation to the program through [globalgiving.com/projects/support-women-empowerment-africa](http://globalgiving.com/projects/support-women-empowerment-africa). Get involved with the **International Working Group on Women and Sport** ([iwg-gti.org](http://iwg-gti.org)), the largest women's athletic organization in the world. Or give a woman the gift of running shoes by donating shoes through **Soles4Souls** ([soles4souls.org](http://soles4souls.org)).

