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RUNNER

Story by Kate Tindall

Images by Matt Van Winkle, Getty Images, ISU Athletics

“The practice of sport is a human right.” On August 12, 2012, this phrase from the Olympic Charter became reality for one Cyclone.

Guor Maker spent his life running. His early days began in a war-torn southern region of the Sudan—currently known as South Sudan. The northeastern African country that Maker* (‘11 chemistry) was born into in 1984 had been divided by political, cultural, and religious conflicts for decades. At age 8, Maker’s father and mother sent him to live with an aunt and uncle in Khartoum, Sudan.

“When my dad and my mom decided to send me away, I had no choice,” he says. “Growing up in a war, you learn quickly that you have no decision.”

Messiria militiamen kidnapped Maker on this journey, making him and his fellow lost boys herd cattle and goats under threat of death. Maker escaped, but was captured and enslaved by a Sudanese soldier, and escaped again. Three years after setting out from home, he arrived at his aunt and uncle’s house. There, a midnight raid by soldiers left Maker with a broken jaw. His uncle was imprisoned on suspicions of aiding South Sudanese resistance efforts. Maker and his aunt fled to Egypt.

In 2001, Maker and several relatives were given refugee status in Concord, New Hampshire. It was there that Maker found himself running competitively. In those miles, Maker was often reminded of his childhood; however, he also found hope.

“There is a lot of joy in running,” Maker says. “A lot of happiness, both as an individual and as a team. Even just to get the opportunity to get into the race and finish is a joy. It is not all sadness, all the time.”

He won the 2004 New Hampshire Interscholastic Athletic Association Meet of Champions cross country title, then the national two-mile championship for the Crimson Tide.



A top cross-country recruit from South Sudan, Guor Maker found a home at Iowa State where he earned a degree in chemistry, became an All-American, and started his journey to the Olympics.

ISU ATHLETICS

FINDING A HOME AT IOWA STATE

By the time college rolled around, Maker was actively being recruited by top institutions. A representative of South Sudan visited Iowa State days before Maker's first campus visit. Maker took this as a sign. That, and "the nice corn fields looked like home," he recalls.

To this day, Maker describes Iowa State as home. He studied non-stop, becoming an All-American in cross country.

"I don't know if I've ever had anyone who worked as hard as he did," says Corey Ihmels, former director of men's and women's track and cross country at Iowa State. "It's the one time in a student athlete's life when it's OK to be selfish. They don't have families; they don't have responsibilities other than making sure they're doing what they need to do athletically and academically. Guor didn't have that luxury. Everything he did was for his family, was for his country."

Over the years, Maker lost 28 close relatives and eight of his nine siblings to war. At Iowa State, he could focus on academics and athletics and, at times, find moments of joy.

A COLLECTIVE HOPE

Following graduation, Maker focused on his Olympic dreams full time. When the 2012 London Olympics rolled around, he hoped to represent South Sudan. Having gained its independence in 2011, the fledgling country was unable to send a competition team. Sudan offered Maker a place instead.

"If I ran for Sudan, I would be betraying my people," Maker said to a Huffington Post contributor at the time. "I would be dishonoring the two million people who died for our freedom."

Maker won his hard-fought petition to run under the Olympic flag instead. When he rounded a corner of the marathon on August 12, 2012, Maker was greeted by South Sudanese refugees – his people – representing a collective hope. It's that hope which fuels his dreams for peace in South Sudan.

RAISING HIS FLAG HIGH

In 2013, Maker became a U.S citizen and traveled to South Sudan for the first time in two decades. He was met by his weeping mother. "Is it you, my son?" she asked, over and over. His father sang traditional songs, rubbing ash on his son's forehead as a blessing.

During the 2016 Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, Maker again competed in the marathon – this time as a member of South Sudan's National Olympic team. He served as flag bearer for the opening ceremonies, waving his young country's flag high for all to see.

A NEW ROUTE FORWARD

Motivated by gratitude, Maker enlisted in the Air Force in 2017.

He was to run in the 2020 Tokyo Olympics before the global pandemic and an injury halted his plans. Maker is considering a place in the next Olympic games, as well as opportunities to aid Sudanese athletes and help his home nation grow stronger.



With his home country of South Sudan in turmoil, marathoner and Iowa State alum Guor Maker competed under the Olympic flag in the 2012 London Olympics. In 2016, he was not only able to compete as part of South Sudan's National Olympic team, he proudly served as flag bearer in the opening ceremonies.

GETTY IMAGES

CYCLONE STORIES: RUNNER

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SHARING HIS STORY

Guor Maker visited Iowa State in October for a screening of *Runner* co-hosted by the ISU Alumni Association, ISU Athletics, and the Student Government-funded

Committee on Lectures. Following its release on the eve of World Refugee Day in 2020, the film documenting his running journey garnered the praise of numerous festivals and film guilds, including the Jury Award and Audience Award at the 2019 Naples International Film Festival.

"Every time I sit and watch, tears just drop from my eyes," Maker shared following the screening. "Today, I decided to see the documentary to the end ... It always inspires me to refocus on my plan of wanting to help youth across South Sudan. I must do my level best to help with sport and education development in South Sudan; it's a lifetime goal."

Listen to the Q&A following the screening by scanning this QR code with the camera of your smart phone or tablet. Explore Maker's story and documentary screening opportunities for your organization or group at www.RunnerDoc.com.