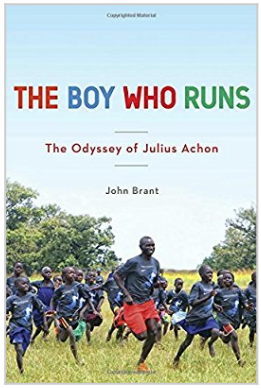

The Boy Who Runs: The Odyssey of Julius Achon

By John Brant

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In the tradition of Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* by way of Christopher McDougall's *Born to Run*, this is the inspirational true story of the Ugandan boy soldier who became a world-renowned runner, then found his calling as director of a world-renowned African children's charity.

"Julius can't remember who first saw the men. He heard no warning sounds—no dog barking or twig snapping. Until this point, events had moved too swiftly for Julius to be afraid, but now panic seized him. In another instant, he realized that his old life was finished."

Thus begins the extraordinary odyssey of Julius Achon, a journey that takes a barefoot twelve-year-old boy from a village in northern Uganda to the rebel camp of the notorious Lord's Resistance Army, where he was made a boy soldier, and then, miraculously, to a career as one of the world's foremost middle-distance runners. But when a devastating tragedy prevents Julius from pursuing the gold at the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens, he is once again set adrift and forced to forge a new path for himself, finally finding his true calling as an internationally recognized humanitarian. Today, Julius is the director of the Achon Uganda Children's Fund, a charity whose mission is to improve the quality of life in rural Uganda through access to healthcare, education, and athletics.

While pursuing his destiny, Julius encounters a range of unforgettable characters who variously befriend and betray him: the demonic Joseph Kony, a "world-class warlord"; John Cook, a brilliant and eccentric U.S. track coach; Jim Fee, an American businessman who helps Julius build a state-of-the-art medical center deep in the Ugandan bush; and finally Kristina, Julius's mother, whose own tragic journey forms the pivot for this spellbinding narrative of love, loss, suffering, and redemption.

Written by award-winning sportswriter John Brant, *The Boy Who Runs* is an empowering tale of obstacles overcome, challenges met, and light wrested from darkness. It's a story about forging your true path and finding your higher purpose—even when the road ahead bends in unexpected directions.

Advance praise for *The Boy Who Runs*

“Brant proves again why he is one of our best sportswriters, masterfully weaving a compelling narrative of an African country at war, along with the transformation of a young man from athlete to humanitarian. . . . [Achon’s] life story is a shining example of the Olympic spirit.”**—*Booklist* (starred review)**

“Fantastic . . . Brant does a beautiful job of chronicling the tension. . . . Indeed, his work is first-rate throughout the book, and it makes for a read-in-one-sitting story.”**—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)**

“Inspiring . . . Achon’s difficult journey as an athlete and humanitarian reveals how sport can provide a valuable avenue of hope for those seeking to rise above tragic circumstances.”**—*Library Journal***

“This is an astonishing story about an amazing athlete who outruns not only the grinding poverty and deprivation of the Ugandan bush but brutal war and imminent death, then dedicates himself to saving his family and friends. This man has the heart of a lion. I couldn’t put this book down.”**—John L. Parker, Jr., author of *Once a Runner***

“An instant classic . . . John Brant has given us an epic, moving, and ultimately hopeful story about the power of sport and friendship to transcend boundaries and make the world a better place.”**—Daniel Coyle, author of *The Talent Code***

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Editorial Review

Review
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“Inspiring . . . With breezy, accessible prose, Brant’s profile incorporates African history and insider details on the physical demands of race-running, strategies for success, and how Achon personally paved the way for others like him to succeed with pride and humanitarianism both on the track and in everyday life. A bright, uplifting biography about determination and giving back.”**—*Kirkus Reviews***

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“Ace writer John Brant unearths meanings and connections forged in the fires of competition. Julius Achon runs for his life, then for his sport, and finally for his people. This is a book you can’t put down and won’t forget.”**—Benjamin Cheever, author of *Strides: Running Through History with an Unlikely Athlete***

“*The Boy Who Runs* tells Julius Achon’s story with gripping detail and anecdote, while never once slipping into cliché or sentimentality. It’s an inspiring tale of linked cultures—African and American—and what they can achieve together.”**—Amby Burfoot, editor-at-large, *Runner’s World***

About the Author
John Brant is the author of *Duel in the Sun: Alberto Salazar, Dick Beardsley, and America’s Greatest Marathon*. He is a writer at large for *Runner’s World* and a contributor to publications ranging from *Outside* to *The New York Times Magazine.* Brant’s stories have appeared numerous times in the annual *Best American Sports Writing* collection. He lives in Portland, Oregon.

It was Saturday, which meant that Julius would be spared the shame of school. He would not be hectored by a teacher demanding tuition and thus wouldn't have to jump out a window to escape a caning. He wouldn't feel humiliated by his lack of a school blouse, he wouldn't grow lightheaded because he had nothing to eat between dawn and evening, and his guts wouldn't seize because he'd drunk out of a ditch where the cattle wallowed.

On the other hand, there would be no games during recess, no joking with friends on the three-mile walk to school, no pretty girls to watch shyly from a distance, and no moment under the mango tree when, scratching out numbers in the dirt, he suddenly recognized their order and pattern—a thrill of insight that would inevitably be wiped away by the teacher dragging his shoe over Julius's work so that the next child could take his turn with arithmetic.

Saturday, so none of that, but still Julius rose early. The Achon family—Julius was the oldest of nine children—occupied a complex of circular huts, dried mud at the base and dried grass woven into a roof, spread over an acre-sized clearing about a mile off the main road between the city Lira and the border with Sudan. Clansmen occupied similar clusters of huts within a ten-minute walk. Together, the huts formed the village of Awake. There was no commercial center to mark the place; its boundaries were engraved in the memories of the village elders.

The family slept inside last night because the Karamojong were not active in the area. During the time of the Karamojong—herders infamous for thieving cattle—you had to leave at night to sleep in the elephant grass; there was no resisting their savagery when they came. You could smell the Karamojong before you saw them, that sickening grease smell from the cattle fat they slathered over their naked flesh. They used to attack with bows and spears, but now they came with AK-47s. Julius once saw a friend, a classmate, a Langi boy his own age, fall like a bird from the branch of a shea nut tree when a Karamojong scout shot him. The boy landed with a sickening thud, bounced once, and then lay still and dead.

At that point Julius Achon had already seen a number of dead people, especially dead children, but they had all died from cholera or typhus or AIDS or dysentery or pneumonia or malaria or any number of other preventable diseases that afflicted Uganda, where 60 percent of the population was under the age of twenty and the life expectancy was forty-six. But that was the first violent death the boy had witnessed. It would not be the last.

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On this Saturday morning in January 1988, there was no school, no Karamojong, and no lion track in the packed dirt by the fire pit outside the hut. The lion had come only once, but Julius never forgot the immensity of its pawprint—nearly twelve inches across. The air seemed to shimmer above the track, just a few steps from where Julius and his family had been sleeping.

His father explained that the lion had likely been an aged male cast out from its pride and posed relatively little threat. Still, the pawprint seemed to pulse with a malevolent force of its own, frightening Julius more than the notion of seeing the beast itself. Every morning, the boy looked down apprehensively as he stepped from the hut. When the lion's mark wasn't there, he would say a quick prayer of thanks. And yet at the same time he felt a faint, inexplicable throb of disappointment.

Julius moved into his day and its long chain of chores: tethering the goats, turning over the garden soil for planting, cutting sugar cane, snaring birds, and twice a day, without fail, humping the clay jar down to the spring. He would fill the jar with water, balance it on top of his head, and pick his way barefoot over the mud

and rocks and razor-sharp grass for the half mile back to the hut, careful not to spill a precious drop or, worse, drop and break the even more precious jar, made out of mud and shaped and baked with painstaking care by his mother.

The job put steel in his hips, back, neck, and abdominal muscles and taught him to run with a sinuous, efficient, straight-backed stride that would serve him so well in the future. But now Julius resented the jar. Children in neighboring villages bore their family's water in five-gallon plastic jugs that rode easy on their heads or could be balanced, yoke-like, on their shoulders.

Why couldn't Julius use a plastic jerrycan like other children? The same reason he couldn't afford tuition and a school blouse, or a few pennies to buy a mango or cassava root at lunchtime: because Charles, his father, drank up all the money, pounding home-brewed banana beer with his buddies in the nearby town of Otuke. Charles drank all day, every day. That Saturday was no exception.

Julius returned from the spring, carefully balancing his forty-pound cargo of water. His father was up and tending to the cattle. When sober, Charles was a respected herdsman, a broad-chested man known for his strength and endurance, who displayed shrewd judgment and a sharp intelligence. With these traits and his ample landholdings—his farm was among the largest in the area—and the sizable herds he'd inherited from his father, Charles should have prospered in a place where wealth was measured by the number of cattle a man possessed and the number of wives his cattle allowed him to buy. Some Langi men accrued as many as nine wives and sixty children. With all his advantages, Charles easily should have been good for five wives and thirty kids. Instead, due to his drinking and gambling, Charles, at age forty, had amassed only twenty cows, fifteen goats, nine children, and one wife—Kristina.

In the Langi tradition the men took care of the cattle, while the women and children attended to the garden, goats, huts, and everything else. Now, before heading to Otuke, Charles fed and watered his herd. As he worked, he ignored his son; only mothers dealt with the children. Despite the silence, Julius prized these moments with his father. For Charles, however, the silence weighed more heavily. He was painfully aware that, due to his drinking, Julius and the rest of his family suffered. All the more reason to lose himself in the kongo arege, the bush brew with an obliterating 20 percent alcohol content.

Beyond fetching water and tending the garden and goats, Julius raised sugar cane to sell at the local market. Along with the clay jars sold by his mother, that was the family's sole source of income. Also, by Langi custom, Julius, as oldest son, looked after his younger siblings. Most boys performed this task grudgingly, but Julius took his protector's role to heart. "Even as a baby, Julius had an old soul," his father would remember later.

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Julius Achon was born in 1976, five years into Idi Amin's reign of terror. Amin came from southwestern Uganda, an orphan boy who'd grown up serving the British soldiers in the elite King's Rifles regiment, in which he later enlisted and distinguished himself with exceptional courage and brutality. After independence arrived in 1962, the semiliterate Amin, who was also a champion heavyweight boxer, bullied his way to a general's rank in the army of Milton Obote, the Lira native with leftist leanings who became Uganda's first president. In 1971, when Obote was traveling abroad, Amin, with the tacit backing of the United States, staged a coup and seized control of the country.

Amin was a paranoid sociopath who saw threats to his rule everywhere, especially among his closest allies and advisers, the army officers who were predominantly Langi and Acholi. The fish of Lake Victoria,

feeding on the corpses of Amin's victims, swelled to grotesque size. He summarily ordered all Ugandans of Indian descent—the backbone of the merchant class—out of the nation. Amin and his cronies ransacked the treasury, living in gross luxury while the people starved. Due to Amin's paranoia, however, the usual pattern of patronage and sycophancy was stood on its head: Eventually, inevitably, getting close to the president equated to a death sentence.

According to various estimates, Amin murdered between 150,000 and 300,000 of his countrymen. His rule lasted for eight years, until 1978, when his army lost a war with Tanzania and he fled in exile to Libya.

So Julius Achon lived his early years under a killing moon. Two days before his birth, his mother, Kristina, walked three miles to the hospital at the Aliwang Catholic mission, which had the area's only maternity ward. Two days after Julius was born, Kristina, again on foot, carried her infant son back to Awake. His first memory, formed when he was around four or five, was of the boom of artillery, a distant rumble like a storm approaching at the start of the rainy season.

After Amin, Obote returned to power and, in revenge for Amin's persecution of Acholi and Langi soldiers, wrought havoc on people from the south. To counter him, Yoweri Museveni, who would later become president, was leading a fresh insurgency, his forces including fierce Tutsi warriors who had been exiled from bordering Rwanda. Obote directed an action near the town of Soroti in which thousands of villagers were killed. Perhaps the young Julius heard the boom from that massacre, or the ordnance from any number of related battles.

At that point, however, the distant thunder of artillery was the only direct sign of war in Otuke district, where Awake was situated. The region seemed a world apart, with no mail service, newspapers, or television; no mineral wealth to exploit, no forests to clear or major rivers to drain; and a single, often impassable road supplying access to the rest of the nation. Northerners died wholesale in Uganda's wars, but almost always in the south, where things were deemed worthy of dying for.

The Langi raised cattle, chickens, and goats. They grew cassava (a fibrous white root vegetable), mangoes, and sweet potatoes and trapped birds and other small game, subsisting on the yield and selling any surplus in local markets. Awake exemplified this way of life. Julius, the firstborn, was doted on by the women of the clan. His grandmother had a dream in which Julius was flying in an airplane, an impossible notion for a villager. A great destiny was augured for the boy.

At age seven, Julius contracted measles, a disease which, in the bush of central Africa, was most often fatal. In fact, the village witch doctor proclaimed the boy deceased, and the women wrapped him in sheets for burial. But then a woman heard the child sneeze. And then he sneezed again. The women unwrapped the boy and embraced him. They sang with joy because he had risen like Jesus from the dead, a sign that God had a plan for Julius Achon. A glorious future was again prophesied.

Perhaps Julius would learn a trade and work in Lira as a plasterer or a shoemaker. Maybe he would make it as far as Kampala, where he could serve as a porter at the airport or at a hotel. Otherwise, a boy from a northern village had only three career options: Join the army, join the police, or become a farmer, like his father.

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Charles hustled off to Otuke, leaving Julius, age twelve, as the man of the house, responsible for helping his mother look after the children. He would make sure they got their handful of beans, carry the little ones on

his back down to the cane fields, and keep an eye out for danger, which usually arose from three sources: the pythons, the big cats, or the Karamojong. The trouble most often visited at night, the time that all Langi feared, when evil—they call it lujoji—prevailed and families drew close around the fire for comfort and protection.

The Karamojong were avatars from the stone age, or perhaps the outriders of a terrible new age to come. They ranged far from their homeland in the savannah of northeastern Uganda, on a mission to claim all the cattle in Africa, which they believed that their god had vouchsafed to them. They slaughtered the cows and drank the hot blood as it coursed from the beasts' slit necks. They roasted the meat and slathered their flesh with the rendered fat. They wore no clothes, which they believed to be the cloak of the devil.

The Karamojong sent their scouts out by day—one of those scouts had shot the Langi boy that Julius had watched fall from the tree—but attacked at night, advancing in columns of hundreds of warriors, killing anything that stood between them and their prize. There was no resisting the Karamojong, no police to turn to for protection. The only recourse was to leave your hut as darkness fell and range out to the bush to sleep or try to sleep, waiting for the raiders to claim their quota of cattle blood. In the morning, you could emerge from the elephant grass and return to your hut and patchwork fields.

Julius assumed that, along with low-grade hunger and perpetual toil, the Karamojong would always be part of his life, a life that in all probability would entail getting married in the next few years. He hoped that his parents would pick him a pretty bride. Then it would be time for him to build his own hut and start his own family. He was good at farming, strong and handy like his father, and his other two career options—the army and the police, professions of the rifle—held little appeal for him. Perhaps, in following the traditional Langi way, Julius could eventually rebuild the family holdings that Charles had neglected. Due to his intelligence, integrity, and industry, Julius might even ascend to a position of clan leadership, arbitrating disputes and settling grievances.

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