

NAME **Fathia Ali Bouraleh** AGE **28** PROFESSION **Student, coach of Girls Run 2, Olympian**



In Balbala, the neighborhood where she grew up, "Running has taught me that being a woman is a beautiful thing."

PHOTOGRAPH BY BRIAN VERNOR (RUNNERS ON HILL)



WHEN I WAS SMALL, I ran because I was a thief. I stole shoes from outside the mosque and fried bread from ladies in the market, and I had to run to not get caught. I became fast and won a race at my school. My gym teacher knew I was getting into trouble and failing my classes. He asked me to train as a runner. He gave me a pair of running shoes, and said if I ran, he would help me study and pass the exams.

That's when I started to love running. My mother didn't want me to run because Djiboutian culture says women should be in the house. But my father, who was a soldier, said, "You can do it." I am the firstborn and we are very close. He gave me bus money to go train at the Hassan Gouled Stadium.

At that time, Djibouti, which borders Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia, hosted many track competitions and road races, and girls like me could participate in distances like 3K and 5K—even 15K—plus all the shorter races. Back then, there was funding for races and there was hope. Parents who weren't sure about running could at least see that their girls had a chance to achieve something. But that opportunity doesn't exist anymore for girls. Events longer than 3K are now only for men.

Girls have one, maybe two road races and the track championship. Sometimes the road event is canceled. Imagine you are training the whole year and

As told to Rachel Pieh Jones



From top: donning abayas after training; dancing with teammates; drawing a crowd; hill training; going for postrun bread.

there is no competition. When I ask why, athletics officials say girls aren't at a high enough level to race long, or more often, or internationally. But nobody is checking their times; they can meet the minimum. If they had hope, good food, good equipment, they could be the best. But nobody cares.

My team, Girls Run 2, started in 2008. We train girls to run, and use club membership as motivation for them to stay in school. We focus on developing strong character and good health and hygiene. I became the coach in 2013.

This year, we have about 25 athletes, 12 to 18 years old. Some train in bare feet or flip-flops and they wear the same clothes every day: baggy T-shirts and double layers of sweatpants because their pants have holes in them. A few girls have sports bras; some wear bikini tops, others wear nothing beneath their shirts. We train in the hill

region called Tora Bora, on the edge of Djibouti City and across from the Balbala neighborhood where most of the girls live. It's a hard place, the desert. We are outside in the dust, sun, and heat—it can reach 110°F, 115°F. There are goats, rocks, thorns, big hills, boys and men who smoke and take drugs, and no security. Well, that is Djibouti! Sometimes, I thank God the girls don't know anything different. Nobody else could run in the afternoon in that place.

There is a stadium now in Balbala, up the hill from Tora Bora, but we have to pay, and we usually don't have enough money. When we do go there, the other teams—almost all

boys—take over the lanes and make us wait. To learn endurance, we run the road from Tora Bora to the airport, about 4K one way. Sometimes a bus will stop and everyone stares; some people cheer, some tell us we look tired and should stop. But we keep going.

The trouble with finding a place to train is the boys. In Tora Bora, they throw stones at us and insult us. They say, “If you run you won’t be able to have babies.” Or they call us prostitutes [and worse], and talk about how our bodies bounce around. But we don’t run to be insulted. We want to train. So I get angry—I don’t want my girls to be tripped or hit by a little boy. Sometimes I yell, but that makes things worse, so we try to ignore them. One good thing is that Tora Bora is near a Djiboutian military base and sometimes the soldiers protect us. They see us helping these girls work hard. They make the boys leave us alone.

When people see me running with my girls, some will say, “Why is she not in her house? She doesn’t have enough work to do?” Or, “She is *walaan*, crazy.” Or they say, “*Bon courage!*” More and more, those who cheer us on are those who cheer for Ayanleh Souleiman [the Djiboutian middle distance runner who set the indoor world record in the 1,000 meters in March 2016]. He has helped people see that running can bring honor to our country, and so the sport is alive again. Some people now say, “I want to be like Ayanleh,” and they’re the ones saying, “*Bon courage!*” Progress, yes, but there is a long way to go, especially with older or less-educated



Runner Amir Moussa walks to her home in Balbala (top); Coach Fathia leading her team near the Tora Bora neighborhood.

people who say women belong in the house. Even though our president is encouraging women to do sports, the culture is strong. But the culture can’t stop girls from running.

AS AN ATHLETE, I accomplished my dreams—I was the second female runner from Djibouti to go to the Olympics [the first, Roda Wais, ran the 800 meters at the 2000 games in Sydney, Australia]. I ran the 100 meters [but false-started and placed second-to-last overall in Beijing in 2008]. Now my dream is for one of my girls to someday race in the Olympics.

Djiboutian people are Muslims, but they aren’t strict. When a sheikh told a girl on our team that girls who wear pants are prostitutes and going to hell, she didn’t know what to do because she loves to run and she loves Allah. She thought for two weeks then said, “I

don’t care. I run for myself.” And she got a PR in her race that year! So religion is not governing us. We are free to run and dress how we choose and still be Muslims.

At the Olympics, I wore long pants, a long-sleeved shirt, and my scarf. Not as an obligation, but because I’m not comfortable outside without long clothes, even for running. I don’t want to feel naked. Other Muslim athletes—like Sarah Attar [800-meter runner in the 2012 games and one of the first female Olympians representing Saudi Arabia] and Ruqaya Al-Ghasra [100-meter sprinter in the 2004 Athens Games and the first woman Olympian from Bahrain]—also cover. But my girls and I don’t care if someone covers their head or not. We are more encouraged by the strength of other athletes and their presence in races.

Running has taught me that being a woman is a

beautiful thing. We have value. We can do more than sit at home. In a family with girls and boys, the boys are up and the girls are down.

The girl gives the boy water, brings his food, takes his plate, washes his clothes. The boy gets the new clothes, the new shoes. Not the girl. If a man kills a man or a woman, he will pay more money for killing the man. When a woman gives birth, she has more value if she has a boy. One day, we were going to a race and a coach said, “Why are you bringing all these girls and taking so many seats on the bus? You should all go home and work in your house.” That was humiliating, and his words, they made me feel like an animal.

As a child, I saw that girls get married, have kids, and stay in the house. I dropped out of high school because I didn’t need an education to stay home with babies and clean. But I have learned from running that I am strong and can reach my goals. Now I’m taking night classes in [business] management. I have two jobs, coach and student. This is what I tell team members: Women can have more. They don’t have to wait for a man to work for them; they can provide, they can get a good education. I never used to think girls could have a dream. But now I know. Girls can study. Girls can drive. Girls can run. Girls can do anything. 🏃‍♀️

✚ Fathia Ali Bouraleh and her team were the subject of a 2013 film, *Finding Strong*. The movie, about the transformative power of running, was a collaboration between Saucony and *Runner’s World*. Watch it at runnersworld.com/findingstrong.