

# GO SUPERHERO DRIFTER GO!

OTHERS MAY RUN FASTER, BUT NO ONE RUNS AS **FREQUENTLY FAST** AS MARATHONER **YUKI KAWAUCHI** DOES. WHICH, AT LEAST IN JAPAN, MAKES THIS **MANGA-LOVING SALARYMAN** A **ROCK STAR**.

51 MARATHONS - 23 WINS!



*This page: Going all out at the New York City and Tokyo marathons. Opposite: At home in Saitama, Japan, sporting his signature fringed hairstyle.*



BY KUMIKO MAKIHARA  
PHOTOGRAPH BY ANDRONIKI CHRISTODOULOU

# T

## THE BOY IS RUNNING HARD,

his breathing loud and choppy. He sees his mother up ahead, standing at the spot on the asphalt path that marks the end of the lap. She's looking at the stopwatch in her hand. If he beats his personal best, even by a second, practice will end and there might be a reward. An ice cream or a burger, maybe. If he's slower, he'll have to run around the park again. He hates those penalty runs, but at age 7, he doesn't dare challenge his mother. She shouts, "Three minutes 34...35...36," and each second declared propels him faster. When he finally reaches her, he collapses on the grass. Bits of twigs and dirt stick to his sweaty arms and legs as he rolls around on the ground and tries to calm his breathing. But soon his mother is shouting a gain. "What are you doing lying down there?"

It's time for a penalty lap.

**MORE THAN 20** years later, Japanese marathoner Yuki Kawauchi is still running

*Kawauchi once froze at age 4 during a school sports day (left); as a second-grader after his big run, he upped his total lap count to 60.*



**BY DAY, A MILD-MANNERED GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEE...**



hard. Very hard. Kawauchi, 29, races nearly every weekend, in distances that range from half marathons to ultras to the world marathon majors. Racing so many events is impressive, but what makes Kawauchi exceptional is how consistently fast he runs them. In 2013,

he ran 11 marathons, four of which were sub-2:10 performances:

He ran 2:09:15 and 2:09:14 (his PR) 42 days apart in February and March, and

2:09:05 and 2:09:15 just 14 days apart in December (at press time, a world record for the shortest time span between sub-2:10s). In 2014, he ran 13 marathons in times that ranged from 2:16:41 to 2:09:26 (his seventh career sub-2:10, a total that netted him the Japanese record). This past May, he ran—and won—three half marathons over three days, running 1:07:23, 1:07:03, and 1:09:23. By comparison, just one American man ran a sub-2:10 marathon in 2013 (Dathan Ritzenhein ran 2:09:45 in Chicago), and only one did so in 2014 (Meb Keflezighi ran 2:09:37 in Boston). In fact, just 16 Americans have ever run under 2:10, and few pros of any nationality run more than two marathons a year.

But Kawauchi is not a full-time athlete. He's got an office job. He works about 40 hours a week. He collects prize money from races but refuses sponsorships or appearance fees (as a government employee, he is forbidden from receiving income from other jobs).



BUT BETTER KNOWN AS ...  
**THE CITIZEN  
 RUNNER!**

*Mobbed by press after being selected to Japan's marathon team for the 2013 IAAF champs (left); with fans after the 2011 Fukuoka International Marathon (above).*

THIS SPREAD: PHOTOGRAPHS BY THE ASAHI SHIMBUN VIA GETTY IMAGES (KAWAUCHI AT WORK, WITH FANS), COURTESY OF YUKI KAWAUCHI (CHILDHOOD PHOTOS)

He has no coach or manager. At 5'7" and 130 pounds, the public servant doesn't look much like a runner. By day, he's the office nerd channeling Clark Kent, wearing glasses and working at a desk, his back ramrod straight. On weekends, though, despite a contorted expression and labored stride, he's blowing past his competition.

Because of this, he is an inspiration for Japan's millions of weekend warriors. The Japanese love marathons and marathoners in part because the culture values the stoicism the race requires. "Runners come across as people with perseverance," says Yukiya Higuchi, editor of the Japanese monthly running magazine *Courir*. "You can practically measure the extent of their efforts [by] watching their sweat drip." Kawauchi has garnered such a huge following because he's dared the masses to believe that a desk job isn't a deal-breaker when it comes to achieving great things. "Kawauchi has shown them another

way of life for an athlete. For him, marathoning is not the ultimate goal. It's a hobby," says Higuchi. In turn, these ordinary runners spur the "citizen runner," as Kawauchi is affectionately called. Where he was once compelled by the promise of a sweet treat, Kawauchi now performs his best for those, he says, "who've only seen fast runners on TV."

**MAKING HIS FANS** happy "is my mission," Kawauchi says in Japanese while scarfing down a sandwich (he speaks limited English). He's seated at a small table giving back-to-back interviews in a corner of the media area the day before the 2014 New York City Marathon. Amid the noise of simultaneous press briefings and race officials rushing in all directions, Kawauchi speaks in a rapid-fire manner while looking me straight in the eye, displaying utmost attention to each question.

Kawauchi's running career began

early. When he ran 7:30 in the 1500 meters as a 6-year-old, his mother, a former high school middle-distance runner, was impressed. Mika Kawauchi decided to coach him, and her training program, which lasted until the boy finished elementary school, consisted of daily time trials in local parks. His task each day was to best his personal record; if he was up to 30 seconds off, he had to run an extra lap. If he was a minute off, two laps. If he was consistently slow, he would have to walk the nearly two miles home alone, although that only happened a few times. An obedient child, Kawauchi remembers that no matter how much fun he was having playing video games with friends after school, he'd tell them, "I have my running now," and head to the park.

Mika Kawauchi's fierce parenting style is not that unusual in Japan, where mothers traditionally push children to excel. But the boy's compliant character allowed her to create and enforce a →



◆ grueling regimen. Every day he went as hard as he could, staggering at the finish. When the occasional passerby remarked that it was too much to make such a young kid run so hard, Mika Kawauchi retorted, "This is our family's way of raising children."

Her approach likely prepared the boy mentally for the rigors of running track at school, where training methods are intense. Kawauchi's high school team practiced six or seven days a week, with daily 30-minute strength-training in the morning plus afternoon runs that could exceed two hours. They did speedwork three or four times a week. Going all-out was expected, and stronger runners like Kawauchi, who often pulled ahead of the group, routinely collapsed by the finish. Initially, the boy thrived, but during an 11K training run in his second year, Kawauchi felt a sharp pain above his left knee. He kept going, however, completing ten 400-meter sprints and 90 squats with his teammates. "Then I completely broke down," he says. He suffered shin splints and recurring bouts of iliotibial-band syndrome in his left knee. It was the start of a persistent cycle—injury followed by insufficient recovery followed by injury—that would torment Kawauchi throughout his high school years.

Under the team's hierarchical system, out-of-commission runners like Kawauchi were assigned the humiliating tasks of carrying bags or fetching water for teammates. He recorded his emotional turmoil in a diary with entries like, "What am I? Human scum?" His mother, who had handed over the coaching reins to the track team, recalls giving her son his space. "It seemed like he needed to get through this on his own," Mika Kawauchi says. "If he wanted to talk about it, I was there. ◆

The weekly start of the 2025 Hakone Ekiden celebrates the January 9, 2025, by 100th anniversary of the start of the first relay race, Kawauchi's collection of relay races.



## BIG IN JAPAN

The country's marathoners once dominated the world, taking the top three spots at Boston in consecutive years. But today, another race steals the show.

BY KIT FOX

The Hakone Ekiden is one of Japan's most popular annual sporting events. Nearly 30 percent of the country's households tune in to the two-day, 134.9-mile regional collegiate relay completed by about 20 university teams. But while Hakone Ekiden competitors are lauded by the Japanese public, rarely do they transition into great marathoners. In 2014, for example, no

Japanese runners—male or female—cracked the top 20 in the World Marathon Major rankings. Instead, the swiftest high school and collegiate runners are fed into a corporate running structure focused on pro ekiden relays sponsored by some of Japan's largest companies, like Toyota.

The word "ekiden" loosely references Japan's communication system



PHOTOGRAPH BY THE ASHLEY SHIMBUN VIA GETTY IMAGES/OLIVIERO TOSCANI

from the 17th and 18th centuries in which a chain of messengers delivered mail around the country, similar to America's Pony Express. In the spirit of that ancient system, the first running ekiden occurred in 1917 and gained national prominence after World War II, says Adharanand Finn, a news and running blog editor for *The Guardian* and author of *The Way of the Runner*, about Japanese running culture. For a population reeling from war's destruction, "running was seen as something to build morale," Finn says. "It was a good example to workers that if you work hard, you will succeed." Large companies funded their own ekiden teams—providing salaries,

facilities, and coaching to runners—to give employees something to celebrate.

The ekiden system ultimately led to the country's running boom in the 1950s and '60s. That boom coincided with the growth of several major marathons around the world, and a period of international dominance by Japan's pro runners; in both the 1965 and 1966 Boston Marathons, they took the top three spots. Meanwhile, ekidens continued growing in popularity. Japan's largest newspapers began sponsoring the races, and their wall-to-wall coverage introduced more fans to the sport. Once the event went on live TV, corporations realized the marketing value

of winning races, and they injected more sponsorship and prize money into the system, raising the profile of the races, which spurred even more interest.

The event's format is at least partially responsible for its popularity. The relay turns running into the ultimate team sport, says Finn. "There's a real sense of responsibility because you're one link in a chain. In an ekiden, one guy can't have a bad race. Individual warriors are fighting at the same time." The team concept, he explains, is more culturally appealing to the Japanese than individual performances are because it taps into the ancient Samurai code, *bushido*. "It's a code of honor, discipline, and morality. There's this idea that ekiden runners are following that tradition," says Finn.

The paradox of the ekiden is that while it has popularized running in Japan, its overemphasis in men's running is likely responsible for the decline in the country's international presence. The largest pro relays are in fall and winter, a schedule that makes it difficult for Japanese runners to compete in or peak for major marathons.

There's "no doubt" the ekiden system has hurt Japan's international running results, says Brendan Reilly, an American sports agent who represents several Japanese runners, and who has organized training camps for corporate-sponsored Japanese running teams. "How much can you do internationally when the focus is only on [ekidens]?"

Such focus has another cost as well. Japanese runners follow a brutal training regimen, logging dozens more miles per week than most elite marathoners. "There's a huge emphasis on effort with Japanese runners," Finn says. "If you

feel tired and your form suffers during a run, you train harder." There is a high burnout and injury rate, according to Reilly. In fact, the Kenyan runners whom Japanese corporations regularly recruit to compete for their teams are known to train separately from their Japanese peers.

"Almost every time I have been involved in recruiting a foreign runner for a Japanese team, one of the questions that comes from the athlete's coach or agent is about the intensity of Japanese training," Reilly says. "I think here is this widespread belief that some of the Japanese training methods are nuts."

Of course, there are Japanese marathoners—like Yuki Kawauchi—who compete outside the corporate system and are trying to make a name for themselves in competitions other than the ekiden. They support themselves with day jobs, which differs from ekiden runners who receive salaries and professional coaching from the corporations they represent.

So yes, the relay probably diminishes Japan's international presence. But maybe that's not such a bad thing, according to Finn. "Without the ekiden system there wouldn't be any corporate teams, and without any corporate teams there would be a lot less opportunities to be a pro runner," he says. "If you're a runner, the system is good because it means you have a job. You just have to prioritize your goals differently to focus on the ekiden." Perhaps more important, however, the system has made the Japanese public crazy about long-distance running. "The ekiden has [made] running an even bigger, more important thing in their culture," Finn says. "It is key to keeping running alive."

→ but he didn't say much." Shortly before high school graduation, another hardship struck. Kawauchi's father—who had massaged the boy's aching legs every night no matter how late he arrived home from work—died suddenly from a heart attack at age 59. Says Kawauchi regretfully, "He only saw me at my lowest point."

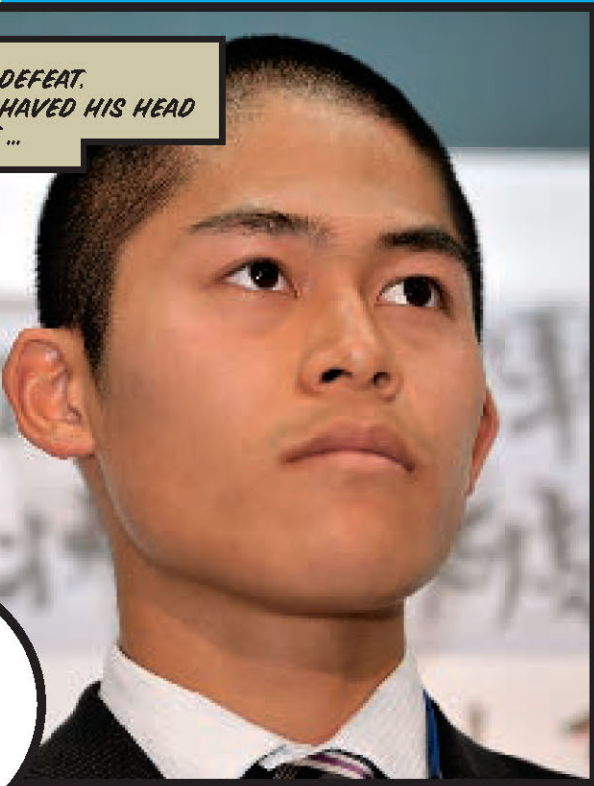
**PERHAPS** because of his injury history, Kawauchi was never a standout in high school, and no university recruited him. Instead, he went to Gakushuin University in Tokyo, a school known not for athletics but for educating Japan's nobility, and joined its track team.

If Kawauchi's mother started the engine of his running career, his college coach shifted him into high gear. Seiichi Tsuda adjusted the young runner's habit of kicking his right foot outward upon landing, a move that was burdening his left side, and encouraged him to keep a steady pace so he wouldn't collapse upon finishing. The drive conditioned from childhood was still there; Tsuda would tell his restive protégé: "Let's try to enjoy our training." To Kawauchi's surprise, his coach scheduled speedwork just twice a week. Gradually, the young man learned to scale back his do-or-die approach to intervals and chill out if he felt a strain coming on. The tempered approach paid off, and within months, his PR of 15:07 for 5,000 meters fell to 14:38. Kawauchi had finally learned how to balance his training and heed his body. "I felt like I was in paradise," he says.

To add to this euphoria, in his sophomore year, Kawauchi achieved the dream of all young Japanese runners. He qualified for the 2006 Hakone Ekiden, a two-day-long university men's relay of 10 roughly 13.4-mile legs that covers the 134.9-mile distance from downtown Tokyo to the hot-spring resort town of Hakone and back (see "Big in Japan," page 72). It's one of Japan's most popular sporting events. More than a million spectators typically line the course, and nearly 30 percent of the population watches the live TV broadcast. While the field boasts the country's top university teams, one team is composed of runners from schools outside the elite racing circle. As Gakushuin University had never fielded a runner in the race, news spread of its contestant. Kawauchi finished third in his leg (he qualified again in 2008 as a senior and finished third on the sixth

**SHAMED BY DEFEAT. KAWAUCHI SHAVED HIS HEAD IN REMORSE ...**

*Kawauchi at a press conference in Saitama, after a poor performance in the 2012 Tokyo Marathon kept him off Japan's 2012 Olympic team.*



stage), and his fame still permeates the Hakone Ekiden—at the start of the 2014 race, students handed out a university newspaper with a huge photo of his tortured race face and the headline, "The Legend of Passion."

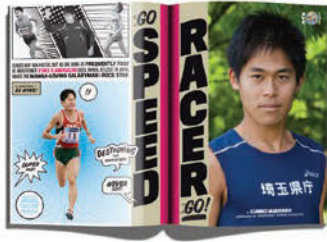
In his senior year, Kawauchi ran his first marathon, the 2009 Beppu-Oita Mainichi Marathon in southern Japan, in 2:19:26. The following month, he ran the Tokyo International Marathon in 2:18:18, and came in 19th. He had found his calling.

**AROUND THIS TIME.** Kawauchi made another important discovery. For years, he had been running for others—his mother, his coach—obedient to their bidding and afraid that if he stopped heeding them, he would lose everything he had worked for. But one day, he overheard another student saying how much he liked to run; "I suddenly realized that I wasn't running because I was afraid, but because I *liked* to run," Kawauchi says. "It was like I woke up. And after that, my times just kept getting better."

Kawauchi catapulted onto the elite

stage and into the public consciousness at the 2011 Tokyo Marathon. At mile 24, as he overtook the only other Japanese runner ahead of him, an excited broadcaster raved about the surge of the "star citizen runner." Kawauchi finished third in 2:08:37, first among Japanese. To date, he has run 51 marathons, placing in the top three in 31 of them and winning 23. He's accepted invitations to races around the world, including Egypt, Australia, Germany, Switzerland, and the U.S., where he's run the New York City Marathon the past two years. "He almost always has the fastest final split," says Brett Larner, who has known Kawauchi since 2006 and authors the website *Japan Running News*. "He's really tough. No matter what the circumstances, he can really grind it out, just putting everything into that last 1.2 miles."

Tsuda, too, credits Kawauchi's sheer force of will. "It's not talent, but mental strength," he says. "When things get tough, he pulls forward." Tsuda, who volunteered to coach Kawauchi after graduation, attri- (Continued on page 107)



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butes the young man's drive to his close relationship with his mother. He views the mother and son as "monozygotic," and says that Kawauchi, despite his declarations of fun, still runs "for his mother's attention and a fear of being left behind."

In the summer of 2010, after 18 months of a postcollege partnership, Tsuda and Kawauchi had a falling out over practice and racing schedules. Since then, Kawauchi has been on his own, a lonely endeavor, particularly in times of failure. When he came in a disappointing 14th place at the 2012 Tokyo Marathon, Kawauchi shaved his head—an expression of remorse in Japan. And when he came in third, running 2:12:42 in a dramatically close race at the Asian Games Marathon in South Korea last October, he promptly announced he'd

cease competing in qualifier races for the world championships in Beijing this August until his performance improved. He kept to his word and stayed away.

**KAWAUCHI LIVES** in a two-story suburban home with his mother and one of his two younger brothers in Saitama Prefecture, about 34 miles north of Tokyo. Since college, he's worked for the Saitama Prefectural government, assigned to the 1 p.m. to 9 p.m. shift at a night high school. He answers phones, enters data, and collects tuition and meal payments. As a government employee, he gets about 25 days off and uses most of them for racing and traveling.

Straitlaced and serious, Kawauchi spends most of his spare time running. Four mornings a week, he'll log 18 to 20 kilometers (11 to 12 miles) over about two hours in a park near his house. At night, he'll strength-train in his room with homemade equipment, using an old bike tube as an exercise band and a 33-pound weight bar from which he hangs his retired running shoes. He does speedwork on Wednesdays and uses the weekend to make up some mileage. He might hit mountain trails for anywhere from three to seven hours, but often, he competes.

Kawauchi targets monthly "main" races before which he'll run various distances in preparation. In 2014, in addition to running 13 marathons, Kawauchi completed 12 half marathons, one 50K, one 40K, two 30Ks, one 20K, and a 10-miler. By September 10, 2015—press time—he'd already run eight marathons, 15 half marathons, a 50K, and numerous shorter races this year. While most elite runners would cave under such a load, Kawauchi thrives, viewing his packed schedule as a way to fulfill his dream of a "marathon pilgrimage" throughout Japan and the world. "It looks hard to others, but for me it's just so much fun," he says, although his face betrays little in the way of excitement or pleasure. His manner is simply matter-of-fact; he knows exactly what he wants and that hard work is required to get there.

He rarely drinks alcohol, because he worries it might affect his racing. The night before a race, he likes to eat Japanese-style curry, thick sauce over white rice, and he's obsessive about getting exactly seven and a half hours of sleep. As for his recovery regimen, it's not nearly as involved as one would expect, given his level of effort. If he's in Japan, he'll relax and rest by alternating between hot- and cold-water (Continued on page 110)

baths fed by hot springs.

With just a small circle of friends, mostly runners, Kawauchi is somewhat of a loner, preferring to sing by himself in karaoke rooms, belting out—sometimes several times in a row—the seven-minute-long song “Silent Jealousy” by the Japanese rock band X Japan. He also owns, by his estimate, the largest collection of running-related manga. The heroic feats of the comic characters may be unrealistic, “but they wind me up,” says Kawauchi.

What really gets him going, however, is reflected in his favorite motto: “*genjyo daha*” or “destroying the status quo.” That sentiment refers to repeatedly conquering a staggering race schedule and to defying the country’s running establishment, which is dominated by a rigid system of corporate sponsorships. Japanese businesses traditionally recruit runners out of school and provide them with in-house coaching. In exchange for full-time employment, athletes compete with their company names emblazoned on their uniforms and singlets. (In honor of his employer, Kawauchi’s racing singlet reads “Saitama Prefecture,” but he receives no funding from them, says Larner.) “I want to change the conventions of Japan’s running world,” Kawauchi has repeatedly said.

With the exception of a small group of elites who have ventured outside the system (like London Olympian Arata Fujiwara, who courts both corporate and individual donors to support his efforts), nearly all of Japan’s top runners compete for corporate teams that often train twice a day at company facilities, and log around 620 miles a month (nearly double what Kawauchi averages). Kawauchi’s success hasn’t gone over well with many such runners because it prompts the office number-crunchers to question the need to finance the training of corporate athletes—here’s a full-time employee doing it all alone who is just as good as them, and often better. In showing his countrymen there are ways to race successfully outside the corporate system, Kawauchi has been a pioneer—Larner calls him “the rebel government clerk.”

“In the past, if you said a citizen runner would aim for the Olympics, people would have said, ‘What are you talking about?’” says Toshihiro Endo, a sports reporter for Japan’s Nippon Television AX-ON. “But now, it’s no longer a dream.”

**AND FOR THAT,** the Japanese public loves Kawauchi. Spectators line up at races to shake his hand, often saying, “Thank you for giving us citizen runners the courage.” There’s even a comedian, Takashi Emu, who specializes in imitating Kawauchi and shows up at marathons sporting a similar fringed hairstyle and offering handshakes to those who can’t get to the real thing. His everyman appeal caught the eye of Mary Wittenberg, former race director of the New York City Marathon, to which Kawauchi was invited the past two years. “He’s everything we aim for,” says Wittenberg. “He’s so relatable.”

Kawauchi will again race New York in November, hoping for a “third time lucky,” after finishing a disappointing 11th in both 2013 and 2014. He hopes, too, for the chance to compete in Rio de Janeiro at the Olympics (selection is based on the August world champs in Beijing and three Japanese marathons that start in December), and in London for the 2017 world championships.

He certainly has no plans to retire. “I hope to run in races all over Japan and around the world, no matter how old I get, until I die,” he says. On his bucket list is the Paris Marathon: “I want to see the Arc de Triomphe and Eiffel Tower. One of my favorite manga characters runs the Paris Marathon.”

While Kawauchi credits his mother and Tsuda for guiding him toward the path he’s now on, it was his departure from them both that ultimately freed him to succeed as a marathoner. Of his metamorphosis from obedient son and student to instigator and star of Japan’s running world, Kawauchi says, “If I was told to turn right, I’d turn right. If I was told to turn left, I’d turn left, striving for perfection in every way.” Now on his own and bolstered by legions of fans, he feels empowered and exhilarated. “I had suppressed my emotions ever since I was a kid. I was the serious, good boy.” With a shy laugh, he adds, “Now I’m having a blast.” ■

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