



AFRICA

Malawi's mandalas

by Federico Ravassard





Tissy, from Cape MacLear, used to play netball. She stopped playing when she became a mum for the first time but her passion for sport led her to become a sports teacher.



THE WONDROUS ATHLETICS TRACKS DRAWN ONTO THE GROUND IN OUTLYING AREAS OF MALAWI THAT LAST ONLY A MATTER OF DAYS BEFORE TURNING TO DUST AGAIN

The world over, sport has always been an education in and of itself: sport helps build reciprocal trust, foster selflessness and teach fundamental values like respect for rules and gender equality.

Malawi, one of Africa's poorest nations, lacks many things but in particular there is a dearth of organized sports events and facilities capable of hosting them.

Responding to this is Africathletics, an association that some years ago began using white chalk to trace fully functional athletics tracks in some of the country's more remote

areas. Born from the idea of two Italians, Africathletics has the goal of educating through sport (and in particular, athletics) and, with the help of volunteers all over the world, building a solid sporting tradition in Malawi.

"On a practical level we can train without having an actual track," explains a coach from the association, "However, that track drawn onto the ground assumes an important symbolic value for the athletes: it is proof that in that particular moment, in that place, a piece of Malawi is dedicated exclusively to sporting activities."



A street vendor in Monkey Bay. The water bottles used at training arrive from street traders who collect and resell plastic bottles, jerry cans and lids in bulk.

Creating an athletics track at
Lisumbwi Secondary School in
Monkey Bay. The grooves traced
on the ground are then filled
with water and chalk.





Stretching after training in Mulanje.



Raphick, aged 15, has breakfast at dawn waiting for the start of his first away race. He is staying at Mufasa Eco Lodge in Monkey Bay, a lodge that lies empty due to a lack of tourists.



CREATING AN ATHLETICS TRACK

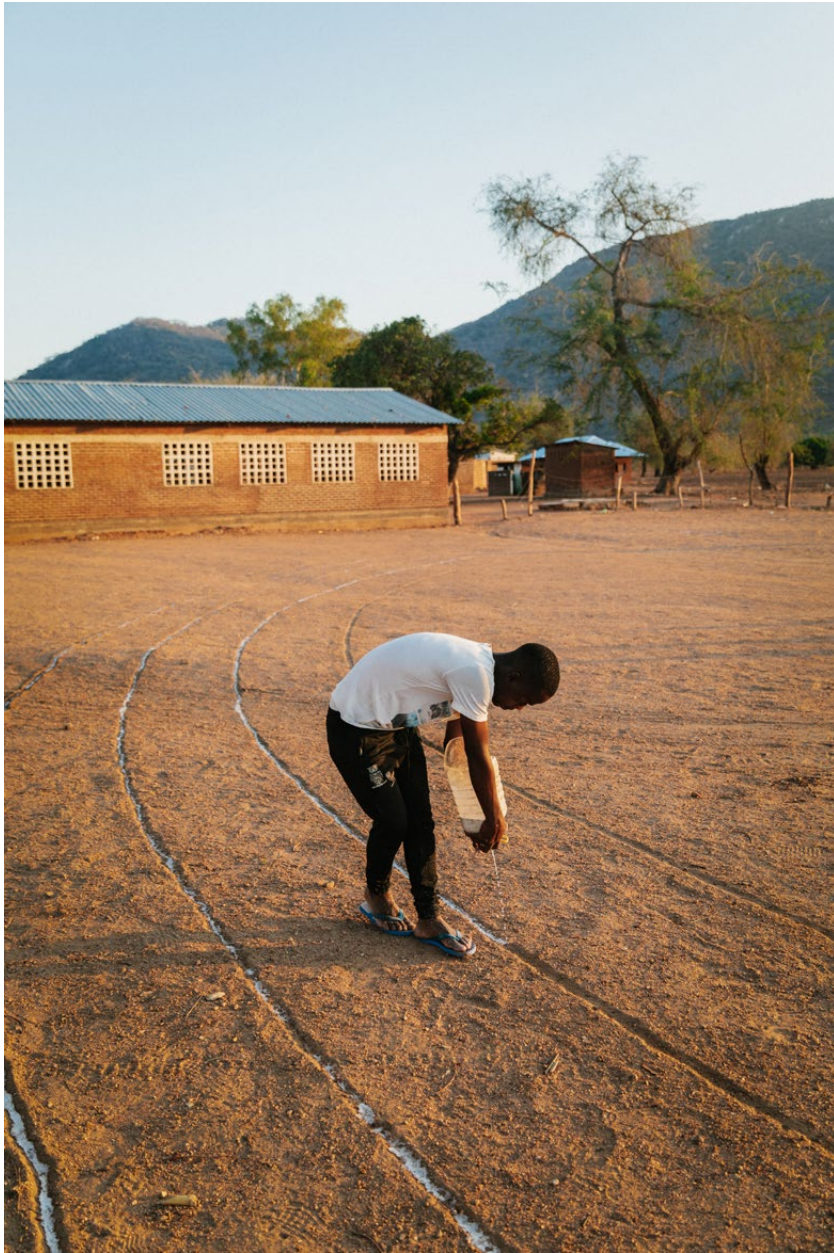
To create an athletics track the first step is to identify a patch of suitable land that is flat enough, regular and not too dry or hard.

Ideally, it's best to find a space large enough to contain a standard 8-lane 400 metre track, otherwise a 200m track with 4 lanes can be traced. What's important is that the curve of the inside lane isn't so tight as to penalize the athlete running in it.

Then work begins with the tracing of two external semicircles and two lines that connect them, all based on measurements determined by the classic formulas of pi and radius. A strong metal pole is required

for scratching through the sun-baked earth. Meanwhile water is mixed with chalk that is poured into the grooves from plastic bottles cut into jugs. At the market these can be found for 300 kwacha, around 30 euro cents. In a country where the average income is comparable to the cost of a lunch for two at an Italian restaurant, those 30 cents are worth more than we can imagine.

The timeframe for creating the athletics track depends on how many hands are involved. Once created (and treated decently) it will last a few days before it is cancelled out by the footsteps of passing people or livestock, or by the rain.



Creating an athletics track at Cape Maclear High School. The grooves are traced in the ground and then filled with water and chalk.



The indications for creating an athletics track are written on a blackboard at Lisumbwi Secondary School in Monkey Bay.



Lea, one of the pupils following the Africathletics programme, during a running trial in Cape Maclear.



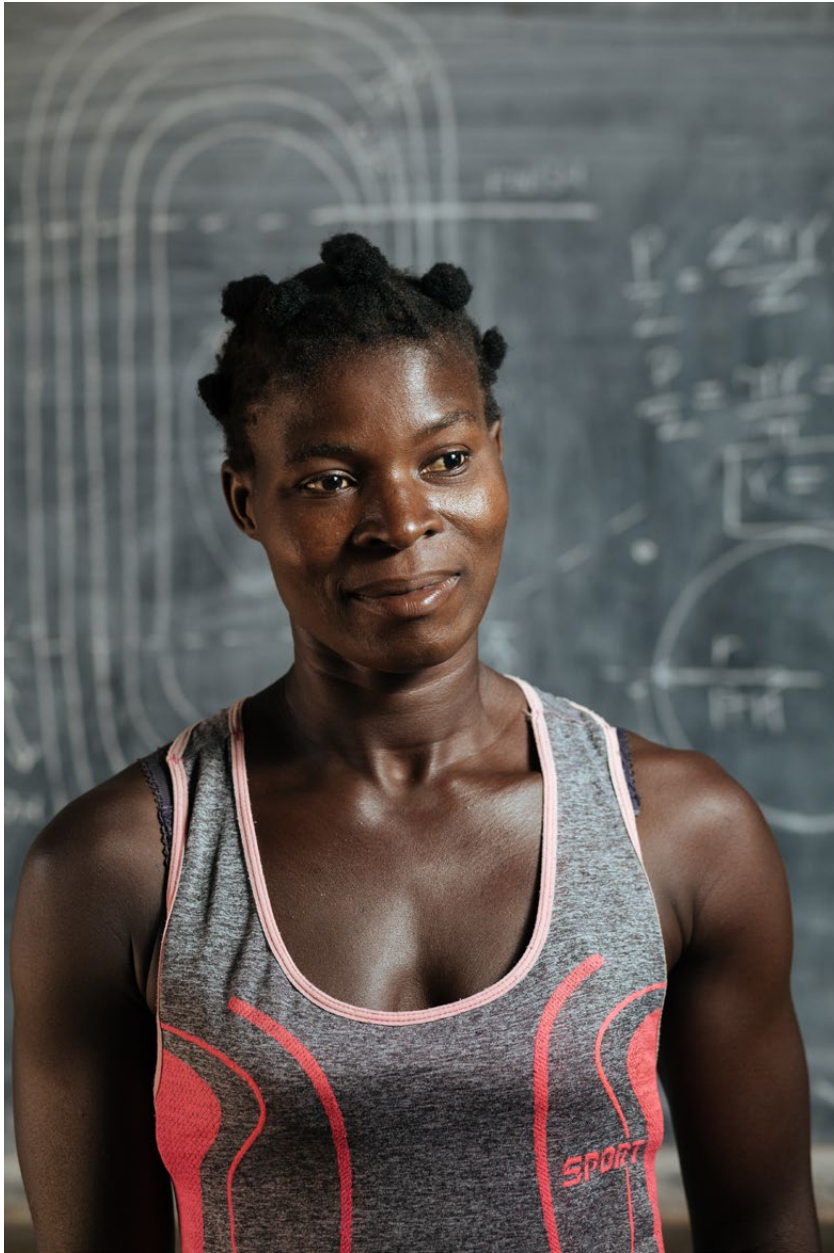
Athletes race on the track in Mulanje created on a clay surface near the tea plantations.



A boy plays among some pillars on the lakeshore in Monkey Bay. The pillars are the remnants of a project to build a restaurant for tourists but was never completed because of a crisis in the tourism sector.



A young athlete competes in the long jump at Lisumbwi Secondary School in Monkey Bay.



Tissy, from Cape MacLear, used to play netball. She stopped playing when she became a mum for the first time but her passion for sport led her to become a sports teacher.



Snoop, aged 36, is the only Malawian to own a restaurant in Cape Maclear. In addition to being an important presence at Africathletics, in his free time Snoop trains a women's football team.



Pupils of the Lisumbwi Secondary School in Monkey Bay stretch during their training session. For many of the youngsters the school represents a safe place in which to spend their time. In Malawi one girl in five and one boy in eight is a victim of family violence.



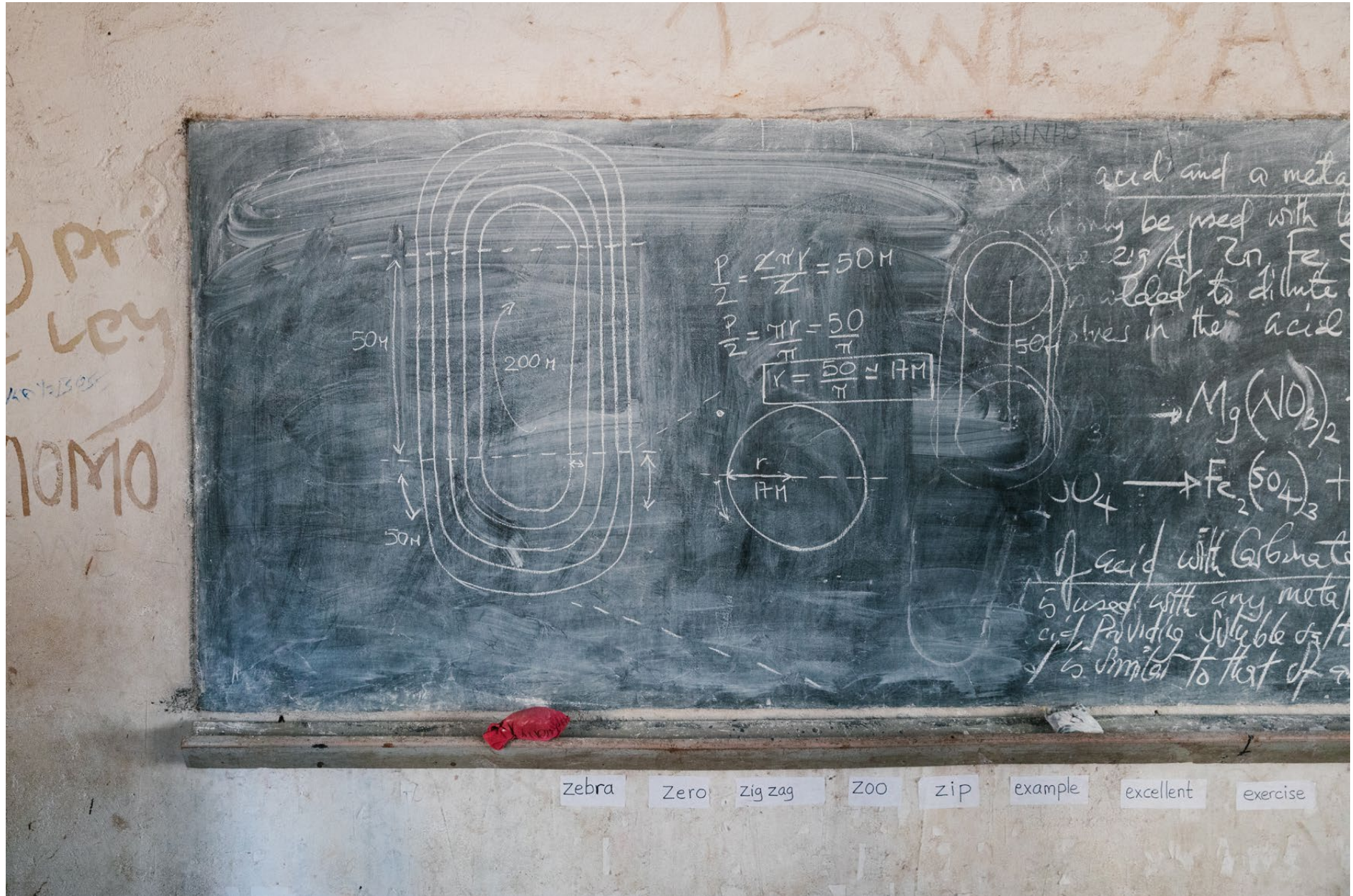
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A boy races on an athletics track created at Cape Maclear High School. The spaces used by the athletes to train are shared with motorcycles and grazing goats.



A girl with her new shoes at Lisumbwi Secondary School in Monkey Bay. It is unlikely that they will be used for training: their high value in Malawi means they will probably only be worn for special occasions, such as races or ceremonies, while training will be performed barefoot.



The indications for creating an athletics track are written on a blackboard at Cape Maclear High School.



A group of students wait their turn to race in Cape Maclear.



Rose, aged 16, lives in Monkey Bay and has followed the Africathletics programme since she was a schoolgirl. Now she is taking a training course to become a coach and has been assigned new tasks and responsibilities.



Raphick enjoys a fruit-based snack during a break in training at Cape Maclear High School. Since joining the Africathletics program, Raphick has become one of the best students in his class; his health has also improved, as he previously suffered from malnutrition.

A young athlete practices the long jump in Cape Maclear.





Athletes line up to take part in an amateur race in Mulanje.



Francis Munthali sits in front of his house in Zomba. Munthali is one of the few Malawian athletes to have taken part in two editions of the Olympic Games. Since his retirement he has worked as the coach of the national team, which is largely made up of amateurs.



Cape Maclear High School. In Malawi education is provided by the state for free and the country has an educational level that is higher than the regional average. Purchasing pens and notebooks nevertheless represents a great expense for many families. The limited funds available mean that a school of a thousand or so students will have around a dozen teachers. The walls of the classrooms are covered with motivational phrases written on pieces of paper.



Daily life in Monkey Bay, one of the main ports on Lake Malawi.

Fishermen lay out their nets alongside a track created in Cape Maclear. The town is situated on the southern shore of Lake Malawi that represents an essential resource for the country.



