

Intellectual property: Running on empty rights

Picture the scene. Sapporo, Japan. August 7, 2021. The summer heat is punishing, the roads lined with faces Joshua Cheptegei has never seen before. He runs anyway, 10,000 metres of it and crosses the line with an Olympic gold medal around his neck. Back home, Uganda erupts. Boda bodas honk through Kampala. People who have never watched athletics in their lives know his name by nightfall.

What nobody talks about, amid the celebration, is where the money goes.

The shoes on Cheptegei's feet that day were engineered in Oregon under a Nike patent. The broadcast beamed into Ugandan living rooms was licensed by rights holders who had nothing to do with Kampala. The replica merchandise that fans would later buy, the digital highlights shared millions of times, the global sponsorship deals, almost all of it flowed through an ecosystem built, owned and profited from by others. Uganda gave the world a champion. The world gave Uganda a flag on the podium and not very much else.

This is not a complaint about Cheptegei. It is a diagnosis of a system, or rather, the absence of one. And as the world observes World Intellectual Property Day this Sunday under the theme "IP and Sports: Ready, Set, Innovate," it is a diagnosis Uganda can no longer afford to ignore.

Intellectual property sounds like something that lives in law firms and government gazettes, dry and distant from the roar of a stadium. But strip it down and it is simply this: the legal right to benefit from what your mind creates. A patent gives an inventor exclusive right to their innovation. A trademark protects a name or emblem from being stolen. A copyright ensures that whoever creates content controls how it is used and sold. A registered design protects the look of a product from imitation. In sport, these four things are

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Angela Basiima
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everything. They are the reason a Premier League club earns hundreds of millions from replica jerseys. They are why a single Olympic broadcast deal is worth billions. Without intellectual property rights, sport is just people running and jumping. With them, it becomes one of the most lucrative industries on earth.

So, what does Uganda actually own?

Walk to the stalls outside Mandela National Stadium on any match day. You will find Uganda Cranes jerseys selling for a few thousand shillings, fake, almost all of them, trademark violations sold in the open air in full view of everyone, because nobody is stopping it. Fufa has registered its trademarks. It has the legal right to benefit from its brand. But a trademark on paper is worthless without enforcement, and enforcement without a licensing infrastructure is just whack-a-mole. The counterfeiters know this. The federation, it seems, is still working it out.

And then there are the athletes themselves. Halimah Nakaayi won the 800 metres at the World Championships in Doha. Peruth Chemutai took Olympic gold in the steeplechase in Tokyo. Jacob Kiplimo holds the world half-marathon record. These achievements are not just sporting, they are commercial assets of enormous value. In any mature sports

market, each of these athletes would have a registered trademark on their name, a carefully negotiated image-rights contract, an agent who understands that a world record is also a revenue stream.

In Uganda, most athletes navigate this world alone. They sign whatever is put in front of them, accept whatever fee is offered, and move on. This is the part that should make us genuinely uncomfortable. It is not only an economic failure. It is a failure of duty.

It does not have to be this way. Consider what is possible. Uganda's distance runners train on the volcanic trails of Kapchorwa, on terrain that no European or American shoe design has ever seriously studied. A running shoe engineered specifically for those gradients, that altitude, that soil, patented, manufactured and sold from Uganda to the global trail-running market worth billions, is not fantasy. It is a product brief waiting for someone with the courage to write it. The Uganda Industrial Research Institute has laboratories. Makerere University has engineers. What is missing is a bridge between those people, the IP registration system, and the world market. That bridge is not complicated to build. What it requires is the decision to build it.

The Uganda Registration Services Bureau has done commendable work modernising IP registration. But awareness in the sports sector remains dangerously low. What is needed now is not more pamphlets. It is embedded action: IP officers working inside federations, not visiting once a year. Anti-counterfeiting at stadia as routine as stewarding.

A national sports IP strategy that connects broadcast rights, athlete protection and trademark enforcement as parts of a single economic project, not separate bureaucratic boxes. None of this requires new laws. The laws exist. The institutions exist. The talent, God knows, exists. What Uganda has been missing is the decision to treat intellectual property in sport as a national priority rather than a legal footnote.

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