

Ghone to Ghana

Wigglers past and present;

Finally Ghone to Ghana... Made it in @ 7:00AM Monday morning Accra time. That was after a 9:00 AM departure FRIDAY morning from Mobile. Made it to Atlanta okay, but got delayed at ATL for 10 hours waiting out "weather" in New York. In around midnight, crashed, then went out for my last decent workout since--15 miles at sub-8:00 Pace at my old stomping grounds, Rockland Lake on Saturday morning. (It's a whole lot easier to walk fast when it's 45 degrees rather than the typical 85 in Mobile...) Got to the airport by 2:00 to find out that the flight to Ghana that I fought so hard to get on was canceled. Stayed in Queens, NY overnight then tried again on Sunday afternoon. After manageable delays and a 10-hour flight (advertised as 9 hours...) made it here and was picked up by Vincent Asumang, the country's top racewalker.

This is definitely the Africa we see pictures of on CNN--without the gunfire. First meal was a big ol' grilled tilapia and two balls of banku (cornmeal mush--a delicacy.) After a several-hours-long nap I was ready to train. Vincent was to pick me up to train at 5:00. He arrived after dark at 6:30. The roads are what you'd expect, there are no streetlights, and 1/2 of the cars don't have headlights, so we went out to meet the town. (Pop. 3 million, and it's apparently customary to introduce a new visitor to every last one of them.) Thankfully the car threw a brake pin and stalled out in front of a bar. We found a mechanic who worked on it (parked in the middle of the intersection of course) while we waited in the bar. We never did make it to the internet cafe as promised (sorry, Mo...) So this is my first connection to the 21st century since arriving.

The town is a bit like a large town in Mexico, but the clothes are more colorful and the women carry a lot more stuff on their heads. (If we hadn't found a mechanic, I suspect we could have found someone to tow the car to the shop on top of her head.)

This morning (after dreaming all night of dive-bombing malaria-carrying mosquitoes...) I was interviewed by the local sports station. Problem was I couldn't hear the announcer, so I just fudged on the answers. Must have sounded awfully odd to anyone who might have been listening. Vincent was to pick me up at 7:30 after the interview to take me to the National Sports Stadium. A friend if his arrived at 10:00. Close enough in Africa time, I guess... The main purpose of the morning track session was to convince the Nat'l Sports Administration that racewalking is a real sport that deserves funding. So after beating up Vincent and a few other walkers on the track, they made me do the same workout to show the coaches/staff what "elite" racewalking is supposed to look like. I'm not really sure what that means, but I know that any speed workout done in African heat and humidity at 12:30pm probably doesn't look all that impressive. I did a few repeat miles at 7:15 pace and bailed as soon as the bigwigs walked off the track to get out of the heat.

Now we're at the internet cafe trying to read e-mail at about 3 bytes per minute. (after a lunch of fufu and palm soup. fufu is cassava mush in a very hot soup with goat, land snails and "grasscutter"--something like rabbit, and actually the most edible meat in the thing.) Plans are to hold the first of three clinics tomorrow for walkers and coaches. About 50 are scheduled to attend. They don't have a video camera and I have enough battery power to last about 2 hours. Should be a long day...

OK

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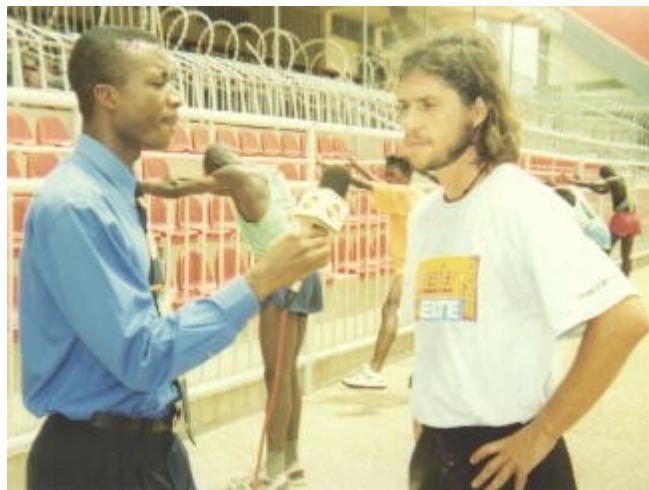
Wigglers past and present;

Well, I'm back... I actually wrote several accounts from Accra, but the e-mail gods were really angry this week. Rainy season has started, so the phone lines are a mess. It takes a good 10 minutes to load a page, so opening any e-mail, then sending replies takes at least that long--IF the line continues to work that long the message will go out. But that hasn't happened yet, so I lost all of my posts before sending them. Anyway...

Wednesday... Vincent PROMISED that we would do a 2-hour workout in Accra on Wednesday morning before the 10:00 am start of the clinic. Promises, it seems are negotiable here... Jude's car was out of commission again, so I was picked up at the hotel 6:00 am by one of the other walkers who was riding with two friends. Believe it or not, there really is serious rush-hour traffic in town, so the 30K ride took close to an hour. I was worried about messing up Vincent's workout, but he didn't seem at all upset when we arrived. He also didn't seem at all worried about training. He said he had to dash off to secure the video camera from the TV station so they could cover the clinic. His best guess was that he would be back at 8:30. Problematic, but if we did an evening workout it wouldn't be so bad to only get in one hour in the morning. Vincent finally arrived back at the Stadium at 10:45... I held off the start of the clinic (after blowing off the workout entirely...) as long as I could, but I got things rolling at 10:30. I was surprised to find out that I was only scheduled for a 2-hour clinic, since I usually run all weekend. Not much time to cover every aspect of racewalking for beginners, onlookers, and somewhat advanced walkers.....



Since most of the attendees were press or administrators who had no idea what racewalking was, I showed some video footage of the 1997 World Cup. All were indeed impressed and surprised at the level of athleticism displayed by the walkers in the video (except, of course, when I flailed across the screen, struggling at the end of the race...) Next we went outside where I got the 10 or so racewalkers walking. It was very obvious that they all learned to walk from the same source. When I worked with Vincent last summer he walked very stiffly, trying to cover ground without bending his knees at any part of his stride. The stiff-legged technique was shared by every other walker except one. So making the changes was a very easy job. I got before and after shots on film and then had to beg to show the walkers the results, since we were already over our 12:00 cut-off time. They were all very impressed by the changes and vowed to make them stick. After the (short) clinic and several TV and press interviews, we headed to lunch for more fufu.



This time no snails, but lots of grasscutter. I still have no idea what a "grasscutter" is, but Vincent continues to compare them to innocent creatures like rabbits, so I continue to relish the tender meat. That evening we head to the small apartment at the Air Force Base that Vincent shares with his brother and probably 4 or 5 other racewalkers. Well, I head to apartment. Vincent puts me in a cab while he rides his motorcycle, promising to get to the apartment by 4:30. I tell Eric--on paper, the #2 walker in Ghana, but in reality the #1 walker in Ghana mainly because he bothers to walk every once in a while--that we're going to head out the door to train at 5:00 pm sharp whether Vincent shows up or not. True to form, Vincent does not show up, so after an extra 30-minute grace period Eric and I head out for an easy 15K. 1 km into the workout Vinnie shows up on his motorcycle, stunned that we started without him. He ditches the bike and we head off. Somehow or another we finished the 15K, at the beach, in 43 minutes--new world record. After a sunset swim we head back to the base, by taxi. (Interesting note on the sunsets... since Ghana's coast faces the Gulf of Guinea and the Atlantic Ocean to the south, the sunrises and sunsets both occur over land, a strange thing to see after seeing the sun rising or setting over water on just about every other coast I've been to in the world.) Back at the base we are met with a fine meal of... fufu. I was dropped off at my hotel fairly late, so I wasn't all that happy to hear the "oh by the way..." that I would be doing another radio interview at 7:20 the next morning...

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Wrigglers;

After the early wake up for the interview I was eager to get in our scheduled 30K. Needless to say, Vincent had other plans. "A few orders of business" turned into a half day wasted. Vinnie eventually dropped me off at the internet cafe to try to send out some e-mails. That went nowhere--and took 2 hours. A frenetic Vincent picked me up on his motorcycle at 4:00 saying that the bus to Cape Coast had already pulled out of the station, but that if we hauled a## down the highway we could catch it. On a good day traffic laws don't mean anything to our man Vincent, but when he's in a hurry, hang onto your teeth...

After flying through traffic for about 25K we determined that the bus was long gone. I figured it would be a lot easier to just keep on going, but Vincent said he could get me on another bus at a different station. More white-knuckle driving to get to that station, and luckily, the bus was there waiting. And waiting... As with most things in Ghana, there is no set schedule. Tickets are sold until the bus is full, then it departs. The bus looked almost full when we got on, until I learned about the middle seats. After all other seats are filled up, there is a fold-out seat in each row that turns the row into a full port-to-starboard bench. It was more than an hour before the fold-out seats were all filled up. We finally departed for Cape Coast, the colonial capital of Ghana, at somewhere around 5:30 pm--fairly typical, I guess, considering we were scheduled to head out there at about noon...

The Accra to Cape Coast Road is one of Ghana's most deadly. Accidents for the year-to-date totaled 292, or

about two per day, with many fatalities. I was a bit shaken when we passed a fairly ugly carnage scene on the side of the road, but somehow oddly relieved when we passed a second several minutes later, telling myself that we were safe since the day's quota was met--statistics was never one of my strongest classes.

I arrived at the Biriwa Beach Hotel at about 9:00 pm. Vincent was supposed to get there by motorcycle before me, but of course there was no sign of him when I got in. The owner was forewarned of my arrival, so I was quickly in my room and back at the restaurant for a wonderfully fufu-free meal of barbecued lobster and rice. Failing to get through to the US by phone for the umpteenth time in the past 48 hours I hit the sack. It was a rough night... The air conditioner was set at low sauna, and I was starting to feel the effects of a case of bronchitis that I had been successfully holding off for several days. I decided to bail out on the morning workout, but nobody was inconvenienced, because Vincent had already "arranged it" off the schedule with another radio interview--this one a live 10-minute chat with the local reggae DJ. We seemed to hit it off right away, partly because I knew the lyrics to most of the songs he was playing, and partly because by that time my hair was in full dreadlock mode, having been without a decent shower for several days. The apartment at the Air Force Base in Accra only has one working spigot, that being in the kitchen. All other water uses are fulfilled by loading up a big bucket in the kitchen, carrying it where you need it, and dispensing it from there. So to shower, one goes into the shower stall with the big bucket and a smaller pail which is used to scoop water out of the bigger bucket. So a shower is really more of a standing sponge bath. Due to the problems associated with the rainy season, even the posh Biriwa Beach Hotel was without running water, so showers continued in the same manner in Cape Coast, hence my rapport with the Rastafarian DJ...



Lunch was... fufu. But this was no ordinary fufu, but the "Best Fufu in all of Ghana"--served at the home of Vincent's mother. And indeed, the soup was tasty, the fish delightful, and even the snails that tasted so much like muddy erasers in Accra were excellent. But then there were the pig feet.... I kept it all down, but I was never closer to heaving my lunch than I was after downing my first hunk of pure pig fat and skin. Note to self: Add pig foot fufu to the list. (1. Less-than \$2/bottle tequila; 2. Haggis; 3. Blood pudding; 4. Any food made of the same material as an American football...)

I somehow convinced Vinnie and the boys to do an afternoon workout. My bronchitis was worse, so I rode in a cab to coach the walkers. I had scheduled an easy 20K with Vincent and Eric dictating "easy" since they were wearing heart rate monitors and were more experienced. From the data I had gathered on Tuesday I knew that both should stay at HRs 140-155. I would ride 1K at a time in the cab, giving water every 4K and technique tips the rest of the way. Eric looked very strong and was riding a surprisingly low heart rate so I sent him out ahead. Vincent pulled the rest of the group through about 8K comfortably, but then he started hitting heart rates in the 160s. I could only imagine what the other guys were maintaining. Nobody wanted to be the first to fall off pace, so they trashed each other until one by one they fell off and quit walking. By 12.5K it was all over, except for Eric who continued on strong to the finish. We have a whole lot of work ahead of us...

Friday: With my departure set for midnight, this was do or die time for Vincent to get in the 30K workout I had been trying to get him to do since Wednesday. He agreed to meet me early this morning. And in fact, he did--with a crew of reporters from various Cape Coast newspapers. And there went THAT workout... Vincent promised a quick interview. Breakfast was served, then a reporter left to get the tape recorder that he had forgotten in town. 8:00 turned to 9:00, then 10:00. Then sandwiches. When all was said and done, and all the photos were shot it was 12:30. Time to go to the rain forest where the team was supposed to walk. On the way one of the walkers bought a bag of chips to share. With potatoes in short supply, and the sea a stone's throw away, fried, salted baby tilapia are the best substitute available. They actually taste pretty good--like chewier, greasier potato chips. The only disconcerting thing is having each of those little whole goldfish-sized fried fish stare at you just as you pop them into your mouth. Everyone had their workout clothes and shoes with them, but of course, after the rain forest tour it was time for fufu. And more fufu. And more fufu. In fact we stopped at every village from the park all the way back to Cape Coast, 30Kms distant. Some was good, some was downright awful--steer clear of the forest deer (or was that monkey????) By now it was close to 5:00 and high time to head back to Accra and the airport, this time by motorcycle--especially considering the afternoon rains, which began before we were 20K down the road. Vincent and I stopped at the first shelter we could find, and why the hell not? Got more fufu. We also stopped at another village so I could get a good look at a grasscutter. By Vincent's more and more detailed descriptions, grasscutter was sounding less and less lagamorph (rabbit family) and more and more rodent. My suspicions were confirmed when a villager brought out a rat the size of a big cat. I'm convincing myself that it was a nutria (pretty much just a big rat, but just a wee bit better sounding) so that I don't have too many nightmares--if I ever do get to sleep again.

The rains never stopped so it was a pretty scary ride down death-a-day highway, especially after dark. Somehow we did make it, soaked to the bone. We still had a few hours before my departure so we camped out at the military base for a quick bucket shower and a surprise meal--no fufu! It was pretty danged close, but it was technically NOT fufu, but kenky. Instead of cassava, the dough is made of corn and plantain or sweet potato, and it is cooked in corn husks like a Mexican tamale. The rest of the dish is the same, but in this case the meat was fish. I told Vincent in no uncertain terms that pig feet and grasscutter were off the menu.

Vincent did his best to keep me off the flight back to the US, but I made it onto the plane seconds before the 11:59 pm scheduled departure. We made it out of Ghana just fine, but then made an unscheduled stop in Senegal at about 3:00 am. It seems the fuel truck in Accra wasn't working so we flew with the gas gauge on "E" north to Senegal--over the battles in Sierra Leone--to get a fill up before heading over the Atlantic. Very reassuring...

I'm in New York now, quite ready to head back home tomorrow. I'm not sure where Ghanaian racewalking will go from here. As it turns out, the training tour was much less about training than about getting support from the press, sponsors, and the nation as a whole. With this goal achieved it should be much easier for the walkers to achieve their goals of competing internationally. Vincent still hopes to compete in Sydney in the 50K. He's aiming for the 4:10 standard in Ireland on July 15th. If this week was just an aberration and Vincent can really put together 6 solid weeks of training I suppose anything is possible. If not, my goal is to field a full team of 5 men and 3 women at next year's World Cup in Turin, Italy. I also hope the sponsorship money comes through so that at least some of the team can come to the US for a more focused training camp--one with more training less media! The talent is certainly there. I had the pleasure of working with many fine athletes during the past week. Now with some coaching behind them--and in the coming months by e-mail (if the infrastructure allows it)--I expect to see a great deal of improvement out of the core group of 20 or so serious racewalkers in the country, and hopefully the heavy media exposure will shake more walkers out of the woodwork. I just hope the grasscutters don't come along for the ride...

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[*Return to homepage](#)
