Filbert Bayi. *Catch Me If You Can*. Flagstaff: Soulstice Publishing, 2022.

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By any standard, Filbert Bayi was an extraordinary athlete, one of a very select few to hold the world record for both 1,500 meters and the mile at the same time. The son of a cowherder in Karatu, a small village in Tanganyika, who lost his father while very young, Bayi’s story is one of courage and perseverance as he climbed to the highest level of athletic achievement.

But Bayi’s new autobiography *Catch Me If You Can* begins and ends in an unsettling way. In the Preface, Bayi allows that while his world records were “ground breaking at the time,” they are “rarely discussed now” (xv). This sense of disappointment is repeated again when he notes how “I am not in the World Athletics Hall of Fame” (193) because, as we learn, he does not have the two Olympic or World Championship gold medals necessary for this recognition. And it remains a dream for him that he might be named a member of the International Olympic Committee.

A candid assessment suggests there is some truth to what Bayi says although he has no wish to sound like”an aggrieved, embittered old man” (194), and he is grateful for having lived, in his words, “a blessed life” (194). Bayi’s autobiography is a long overdue reminder of his contribution to athletics and to how he transformed middle distance running from a wait and sprint activity to one of running from the front. Bayi broke the world record for 1,500 meters having “run every step of the way in front” (63) in what was characterized as the greatest 1,500 meters of all time. He did it again in what was called the “Dream Mile,” when, again leading “wire to wire” (101), he broke Jim Ryun’s world mile record by a tenth of a second.

Whether Bayi was the first runner to set a brutal pace and lead from the front—one might get disagreement from Prefontaine fans or even John Landy fans—his autobiography has put in stark relief what some see as the artificiality of the current Golden League where every race has a pacer. Bayi is candid in his criticism of pacers even if he appreciates the athletic accomplishment of those who use them. If one calls an event a race, then, in Bayi’s words, “the introduction of pacers went against the fundamental rule that all athletes at the starting line must be trying to win” (132).

Regrettably, Bayi never got his Olympic Gold medal, not because he was not fast enough, but because events transpired against him. He was an inexperienced 19-year old in his first Olympics in Munich, did not run in Montreal because of the African boycott, and in what might be considered a questionable decision chose to run the 3,000 meter steeplechase rather than the 1,500 meters in Moscow. Running from the front, Bayi, an inexperienced steeplechaser, was caught by the Polish runner Malinowski on the final water jump and ended up with the silver medal. One cannot help sharing his disappointment but Bayi accepts his defeat with grace as he observes how “It’s easy to forget to breathe in all that life offers” (149) and to “forget to take in the joy when it comes to us” (151). Indeed, grace is a good word to describe Bayi who takes defeat with the same spirit of generosity as he does victory. Hoping to get the medal that eluded him in the 3,000 meter steeplechase, Bayi at the age 31, got as far as the Olympic Village in Los Angeles before shin splints prevented him from running. Bayi mentions his withdrawal from the Games without comment. While he thought it was his best opportunity for a gold medal, he expresses neither disappointment nor bitterness.

The book provides fascinating details of Bayi’s races with all the big names of his time, especially Marty Liquori and Eamonn Coghlan. Bayi did not win every race, and he admits when he is not at his best. Running against New Zealander John Walker, the gold medal winner in Montreal, takes on special significance, and we come away with an appreciation of their special relationship which has lasted a lifetime, We also learn something of his relationship with Ron Davis who was for a time Bayi’s coach, someone he calls “a brother” and on whom Bayi relied for guidance and support.

As Bayi got older, and recognized that his athletics career was coming to an end, he made the conscious decision to return to school, first at Eastern New Mexico University, and then at the University of Texas El Paso. Bayi was one of a group of African runners recruited to UTEP, which between 1974 and 1982 under coach Ted Banks dominated college running in the United States. That this practice was controversial is well known, and the NCAA, in a direct response to the Banks’ practice, changed its eligibility rules. Bayi, having been there, might have commented more than he does although it should not be overlooked how much Bayi valued his degree.

In many ways, Bayi’s running career was a prelude to his life after running, as he and his wife Anna redirected their energies towards building their country and supporting young people. In 1996, they started a school that provided instruction in Swahili, which from a very modest beginning grew to its current size of 1,200 students on two campuses. It is obvious that the school has provided immense satisfaction to Bayi, perhaps even more than his running achievements. Bayi has not, moreover, given up entirely on athletics. He remains passionate about building athletics in Tanzania and he has worked tirelessly in many different roles although, once again, there is a feeling that Bayi feels unappreciated. As he remarks, “With all due respect to the high-level administrators out there, my duties on technical committees through the years gave me just as much pride” (187).

As much as Bayi’s autobiography is a good read and one that tells us much about an athlete who has perhaps been ignored, one would have liked to have a little more than Bayi gives us. While we learn much about his personal life and on how running impacted his life and gave him immense satisfaction and pleasure, he never really talks about running other than as an athletic activity. Rarely do we get underneath to appreciate how Bayi actually feels about running. At the same time, Bayi is unequivocal in his assertion that three things shaped his life both as an athlete and as a man: “confidence, sacrifice, and commitment” (207).

It is, of course, unfortunate that every runner’s autobiography is inevitably compared to Bannister’s *The First Four Minutes* (1955), and later his *Twin Tracks* (2014), which possess an eloquence and lyricism few other comparable books do. But putting this aside, we leave Bayi’s book impressed with his honesty and gratitude for what life has offered him even if we remain a little sad that the goal of an Olympic gold medal eluded him. Perhaps this book will remind those that make these decisions that Bayi does belong in the World Athletics Hall of Fame and maybe the rules should be changed. And indeed, he should be considered for a seat on the IOC.