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What It Was Like to Pace the Fastest Marathon in History

A few American distance runners led the way at the attempt to break two hours—and gained a new level of respect for their competitors in the process.

By [Erin Strout \(/person/erin-strout\)](#) TUESDAY, MAY 9, 2017, 4:29 PM






Eliud Kipchoge (in a red jersey) follows his team of pacers at the Breaking2 event in Italy, including Bernard Lagat (in front), Lopez Lomong (left, in back of Lagat), Sam Chelanga (directly behind Lomong), Chris Derrick (in front of Kipchoge), and Andrew Bumbalough (right, wearing a red race bib). GIANCARLO COLOMBO/PHOTO RUN



In the early morning hours on Saturday in Monza, Italy, Andrew Bumbalough was as nervous as he would be for his own race. Yet when he stepped to the starting line on the racetrack alongside three of the fastest distance runners in the world, he wasn't there to compete against them—he was there to help them achieve what many



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But I had confidence, too—I knew what the pace should feel like and once the gun went off I knew it was going to be fine.”

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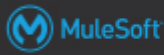
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Bumbalough, 30, and [Chris Derrick](#) (<http://www.runnersworld.com/tag/chris-derrick>), 26, teammates from the Bowerman Track Club, based in Portland, Oregon, were two of 30 men primarily from the U.S., Kenya, Eritrea, and Ethiopia, recruited by Nike to help pace the company's attempt at a sub-two-hour marathon. Other Americans included [Bernard Lagat](#) (<http://www.runnersworld.com/tag/bernard-lagat>), [Lopez Lomong](#) (<http://www.runnersworld.com/tag/lopez-lomong>), and [Sam Chelanga](#) (<http://www.runnersworld.com/tag/sam-chelanga>).

“I was already pretty excited to run a marathon but now in some ways I’m more inspired and in some ways more afraid, because seeing that a person



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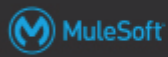
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displaying a large clock and projecting green lasers onto the ground to mark where the lead pacer should be, was an integral part of the plan to provide as much science, technology, and support as possible to [Eliud Kipchoge](#) (<http://www.runnersworld.com/tag/eliud-kipchoge>), [Lelisa Desisa](#) (<http://www.runnersworld.com/tag/lelisa-desisa>), and [Zersenay Tadese](#) (<http://www.runnersworld.com/tag/zersenay-tadese>) in their quest to average 4:34.5 per mile for 26.2 miles. In the end, Kipchoge, the 32-year-old Kenyan Olympic gold medalist in the marathon, [came closest to the goal](#) (<http://www.runnersworld.com/2-hour-marathon/so-close-kipchoge-runs-a-20025-in-the-breaking2-attempt>), finishing in 2:00:25. Tadese ran 2:06:51 and Desisa clocked 2:14:10.

“I was a lot more nervous before I knew there was going to be a car setting the pace,” Derrick said. “I actually said to [Bumbalough] before we got over there, ‘They should use lasers.’ As it turned out they had already thought of that.”

But running at the prescribed speed wasn’t the only measure of success for the pacing group. They also had to follow detailed choreography that required a week of practice together before Saturday, which meant they had to hit the Formula One track in the pre-dawn hours before a Ferrari event took over the facility.



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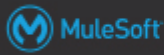
we never really practiced with them.



Based on experiments in a Nike lab, scientists involved in the project came up with a triangle pacer formation to block the wind for the three athletes. Each pacer covered two laps (4.8 kilometers) at a time and had 30 minutes of rest between shifts. The pace that Kipchoge sustained for just more than two hours was challenging even in those shorter increments—Derrick and Bumbalough estimated they could probably keep it for 15K, “on a good day.”

Six pacers were on the course with the leader (Kipchoge) at all times. The most nerve-wracking part of the gig was carefully maneuvering the exchange zones, where three runners would exit the course, three runners moved to the front of the triangle, and three fresh pacers entered the formation.

All of this happened every 2.4K without losing a second of speed, tripping, or causing disruption for the time-trialing athletes. It often required chatter between the runners to make sure everybody was staying close together, they were running the shortest



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During the 30 minutes of rest between pacing duties, the runners had access to a tent where they found stretching mats, foam rollers, blankets to stay warm, and an area to jog and do some strides.

“The first five minutes in the tent I just sort of had to calm down. By 10 minutes, I started jogging again,” Bumbalough said. “When Eliud was still on pace at 30K, we knew it was going to be a big finish over the last 5K or so. In the tent, there was this excitement everybody could feel, even if we couldn’t communicate to each other in words—we could just sense it. Whatever people think of the project, we were witnessing and being part of one of the greatest pieces of running history ever.”

What struck Bumbalough and Derrick most was Kipchoge’s composure and focus. Even as he crossed into unknown territory—no human has ever run that fast for that long before—his expression remained unstrained, his form was fluid, his concentration uninterrupted. He wanted to push a bit at the 1:40 mark, but his coach signaled to hold the pace, which was hovering at 2:00:10 at that point.

“He’s just so smooth,” Derrick said. “Even when he was in what I can only imagine was a world of hurt, he stayed pretty serene throughout. The difference between how I felt





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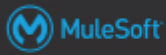
As Kipchoge remains calm, his pack of pacers show the strain of averaging 4:34 per mile. CHRIS LAWRENCE

Bumbalough was impressed with what he imagines was Kipchoge's intense mental preparation to attempt such a feat and come so close to achieving it.

"It's part of who he is. He has a Zen approach and clearly he readied his mind as much as he readied his body," he said. "I have no idea what he thinks about. Clearly he has something that works well for him."

Over the course of the last seven months, the attempt became a divisive topic among running fans, physiologists, coaches, pro athletes, and other skeptical observers. The methods used to aid the runners—including the rotating cast of pacers—made it ineligible for official records even though Kipchoge beat the standing world record of 2:02:57. Only Nike athletes were chosen to participate. It was also a marketing strategy to launch new technologically advanced shoes—some wonder if they are legal by the standards of the International Association of Athletics Federations.





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"It's not often I am a fan of other runners, because I'm trying to beat them. I am a fan of Eliud."




ANDREW BUMBALOUGH

"I didn't think anybody could get very close, but then he was so confident that I kind of believed...because he seemed to," Derrick said. "In a race without the car and rotating pacers, I think we're pretty far away but I wouldn't be surprised if he stays healthy and goes to Berlin [marathon], he could take a big chunk off the world record. Perception plays a big role in performance. He's raised a lot of people's expectations."

Kipchoge's demeanor throughout the week was contagious, Bumbalough said.

"The man is a team guy. He had his own car and driver, but when we were going to dinner one night he wanted to go on the bus with the team of pacers," he said. "What superstar in their sport would do that? He is incredibly humble and grateful for the opportunity. It was cool to be around him—he exudes greatness."

"I'm inspired and ready to do something special," Bumbalough continued. "It's not often I am a fan of other runners, because I'm trying to beat them. I am a fan of Eliud."

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Eliud Kipchoge celebrates with members of the pacing team in Italy after his attempt to break two hours in the marathon. GIANCARLO COLOMBO/PHOTO RUN

The best part of the experience, the two agreed, was the camaraderie between all the members of the pacing team. It's a rare opportunity for athletes at this level to come together in pursuit of a common goal and be forced into a situation in which they had to overcome language barriers to communicate and interact with each other.

"All week the Ethiopians were leading the cheering charge—they broke into dance routines at random times, too," Derrick said. "Everybody no matter where they were from was really celebrating the achievement and it was a special thing. I understand that people have certain reservations or objections to the whole project but I hope people can look past some of those and see how cool that was for us as well."



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“The Kenyan and Ethiopian mindset is not brash or cocky, but it’s a true self belief that they can achieve something,” he said. “I know I’m not going to run a two hour marathon, but why am I only considering my next step? Why do I put those limits on what I am capable of? Does that Western mindset keep me from doing more?”

Both athletes will be taking the inspiration and motivation to the outdoor track season, where they plan to compete in the 10,000 meters at the U.S. championships to attempt to make the world championships in August in London. Beyond that, the marathon is on the horizon for each of them too.

Bumbalough debuted in February at the Tokyo Marathon, where he finished in 2:13:58. Derrick has yet to run 26.2 miles, but knows it’s coming soon.

“I was already pretty excited to run a marathon but now in some ways I’m more inspired and in some ways more afraid, because seeing that a person can run that pace for that long is almost scary,” Derrick said. “I’ve been moving towards the marathon stuff for a while and hopefully that will come in the next year to 18 months. Being around guys that have run 2:05 has given me new perspective—hopefully it will help me aim higher in my career.”



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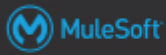
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