

Runner

"Runner" is one of those documentaries that is stranger than fiction: Guor Mading Maker was a young black boy of eight when, in the middle of the Sudanese Civil War, he was torn from his village and his family (eight of his siblings were killed in the terror) to be held by rebel Arabic warriors. He escapes--and runs and runs--to a refugee camp and, miraculously, finally finds his way to the bucolic town of Concord, New Hampshire. It is there, at the local high school, that he is encouraged to run again (*the film is now available on various streaming platforms*).

Turns out he is a natural, participating in high school track and field, winning statewide prizes and receiving a full track scholarship to Iowa State University. Guor is a running sensation as a middle distance specialist, earning All-American honors. He then qualifies for the 2012 Olympics in London in the first marathon race he ever tried. In the interim, his birthplace has become the new sovereign state of South Sudan, but it is too new to be recognized by the International Olympic Committee. Thus, having no "state" to represent, Maker has to fight to compete independently, refusing to run for the traditional Sudan, an oppressive regime.

Guor does finally, at the last minute, qualify in the Olympic marathon and does it as the lone stateless athlete running under the International Olympic banner itself, completing the race in 47th place. Still motivated, and by now running for the independent South Sudan, he again qualifies for the 2016 Olympics in Brazil and now looks forward to competing in 2021. Meanwhile, he has joined the US Air Force in 2017 to "give back" to his adopted country.

"Runner" depicts Maker's unbelievable and inspiring journey from refugee to world-class athlete using arresting animated sequences to depict his youth under threat followed by the story of his amazing discovery and development in high school from interviews with his Concord coaches and teammates.

The core of "Runner's" narrative, though, is told in intimate, candid interviews with Guor Maker himself, a thoughtful, modest soul with three co-equal passions: his family, his new country, and running. The film culminates in a heart-wrenching reunion with his parents at their rural home in South Sudan after a 20-year separation. This is a sequence to open the tear ducts.

"Runner" was produced, written, edited, and directed by Bill Gallagher, who spent seven years crafting this moving documentary. He said this about his labor of love:

"Runner" is about the ability to hope and the capacity to thrive even after enduring the most oppressive circumstances. It's about letting the pain of our past propel us into turning negative circumstances into something positive. ...Guor Maker...endured unimaginable suffering, yet he willed himself into becoming an Olympian and used that platform to help inspire others."

(The film is not rated and runs 88 minutes.)

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