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LASER RUN SPOTLIGHT: IMPACT ACROSS AFRICA



It's a global phenomenon, but in many ways the continent of Africa has come to symbolise the impact of Laser Run in the five years since its introduction as a standalone UIPM Sport.

The number of developing economies across Africa – where UIPM has 28 active National Federations with several more in the pipeline – means it is inevitably the part of the world where sport development can be hardest to accelerate.

In the case of Modern Pentathlon, the challenge of introducing Swimming, Riding and Fencing into the sporting infrastructure is truly acute in some cases.

Laser Run, with its simple plug-and-play format, has given much-needed momentum to the UIPM Sports movement in Africa, where the Global Laser Run City Tour (GLRCT) has been welcomed with open arms in dozens of cities and urban townships.

Pentathlon was already strongly embedded in Egypt and South Africa, giving UIPM Sports a rich presence at the north and south of the continent. But where in between has the movement been cultivated with the rich fertiliser of Laser Run?

We invited five countries – Ivory Coast, Togo, Mali, Uganda and Burkina Faso – to shine the spotlight on their own experiences of UIPM's fastest-growing development sport.



Ivory Coast: Huge growth in participation

The extensive impact of the GLRCT is laid bare in numbers alone. In Ivory Coast, 1500 athletes have participated in the format, with at least 150-200 taking part in each event and bringing friends and family along.

This enabled 12 Laser Run events to be scheduled for 2020, which are currently on hold because of the COVID-19 Coronavirus pandemic.

Francois-Xavier Akonde, President of the Ivory Coast Modern Pentathlon Federation, said: “We have taken the opportunity provided by the Global Laser Run City Tour to develop everywhere, and we have seen more and more participants and athletes as a result.

“Attracting more attention from the public has attracted media coverage as a consequence, and now we want to attract sponsors. We will be able to secure funding from the Government if we can achieve certain goals linked to sport and the mobilisation of youth in our country.”

Now that there is a bedrock of interest in Laser Run, the federation wants to start exploring the other Modern Pentathlon disciplines in 2021 as a step towards full participation.

President Akonde added: “More and more we are willing to do Modern Pentathlon but we want to move steadily, step by step. We are going to a lot of schools and we plan to create regional associations for teaching coaches and judges.”



Togo: Development without boundaries

One idea of the GLRCT, underlined by the new #LaserHomeRun concept, is that all participants feel part of a global movement, with the possibility of international competition.

Laser Run enthusiasts in Togo benefited greatly from travelling to Burkina Faso for the Brotherhood Tournament in 2019.

Abalo Komlan, President of the Togolese Modern Pentathlon Federation, said: “This experience was a great chance for our youth athletes to travel and discover more about other cultures.

“They realised that if they can progress in the disciplines of Modern Pentathlon they will be able to travel for more events worldwide. They also realised that the notions of group, team, brotherhood and solidarity are very important

“Some of them realised that they were confident and strong because they won their races very easily, especially two girls and two boys at Under 15 level.”

In fact, it's not only international travel that has opened the eyes of Togolese youths. President Komlan added: “During our second GLRCT, we included a visit of the sport facilities as the youth athletes were there for the first time and they visited the Lomé Port around 5km away from the venue so that kids could see boats for the first time. It was an emotional moment.”

The federation aims to create six regional development centres and to make Lomé an epicentre for UIPM Sports in the West Africa region.

So why do people in Togo love Laser Run?

President Komlan said: “People love shooting because it requires precision, dexterity, focus and self-control. For kids it’s more like a game, they challenge between themselves to see who will have the best shooting during training or events.

“Thanks to Laser Run we have got the attention of kids, who became very interested so that they could evolve towards Biathlon and Triathlon.

“Our biggest issue is a lack of funding and materials to initiate more kids to Fencing and Swimming. But we are ready to fight by any means the fact that the sport is expensive to develop, and to attract the government towards multi-discipline sports and the benefits for youth development in Togo.”



Mali: Spreading the word

A good communication plan has been pivotal to the growth in popularity of Laser Run in Mali.

Ismaila Lingany, President of the Malian Modern Pentathlon Federation, said: “We contacted newspapers, TV and radio before, during and after competitions.

“We have created an account on Facebook, a WhatsApp group and a website for the federation.

“I assure you in two years of activities the Modern Pentathlon is known more than federations that have existed for more than 15 years in Mali.

“Before and after the competitions, people called us from everywhere to congratulate us. We had many comments on social networks.”

Laser Run has created a buzz in schools in Mali, and laser shooting parties have become a popular extra-curricular activity.

The GLRCT has enabled coaches to identify talent, looking particularly for good shooters and endurance athletes who might be suited to Biathlon and Triathlon.

The next step is to formalize this development.

President Lingany said: “Our objective is to develop the GLRCT across the extent of Mali territory. We want to train sports teachers and provide schools with competition equipment.

“In the coming days we will organize a national GLRCT championships that we can use to implement our Modern Pentathlon development programme.

“It has been a great experience to prepare for competitions in harmony with neighbouring countries such as Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast and Ghana.

“This happened first on an organisational level, in the planning of training and activities during the season. And now we know our level of performance compared to others.”



Uganda: Doors are open

Three instalments of the GLRCT have been held in Uganda, in the cities of Kampala and Gulu, and the invitation was extended to other countries in the East/Central African region.

Simon Peter Komakech, President of the Uganda Modern Pentathlon Federation, said: “Athletes

came from Kenya to join in our event, and we also had some students from South Sudan who trained and participated in Uganda. It was a great experience for them and us.

“People in Uganda like the fun in Laser Run, the power it has in bringing different people together and the challenge of the laser beam shooting.”

Like many nations in Africa, a lot of the activities in Uganda are self-funded by the National Federation, with support from UIPM. But there are plans to change that.

President Komakech added: “In the short term we will continue to promote and expand Laser Run in Uganda. This should pave the way for the development of the other disciplines: Swimming, Fencing and Riding. And we will try to create pathways to Biathle and Triathle.

“The other disciplines require finance – for example, swimming pools are not commonplace in other areas in Uganda, so one needs money to use hotel pools. The same applies to Fencing and Riding.

“In the long term, we plan to get sponsors and I am also in talks with government to officially recognize our Modern Pentathlon Federation so that we can benefit from their support.

“All in all, the future looks great for modern pentathlon in Uganda.”



Burkina Faso: At the heart of a Brotherhood

It was a demonstration of the status of UIPM Sports in Burkina Faso that the nation hosted the Brotherhood Tournament for neighbouring countries in August 2019.

Athletes aged from eight to 18 from Mali, Niger, Togo and the host nation competed in the historic competition, which had its origins in a memorandum of understanding signed by seven nations.

The National Federation of Burkina Faso was initially built on six clubs created around Swimming pools, but eight more clubs have now been created linked to Laser Run.

The Federation has a novel elimination-style vision to identify its 100 best athletes and give them a swimming scholarship, and after 10 lessons identify the best 50 and teach them Fencing, and then take the 25 best athletes and teach them Riding.

Sylvestre Zare, the NF President, said: “Our short-term vision is to use more and more media to organise as many promotional events as possible linked to GLRCT.

“In the mid-term we want to continue with existing schools and increase the reach of Laser Run. We would like to create a national centre that can be self-sufficient without government support.

“This centre would help us to bring athletes and educators together with good structures and equipment and the ability to host camps and competitions.”

Burkina Faso’s development has been helped by the mobility of some of its top athletes. Two competitors travelled to Lisbon (POR) for the UIPM 2016 Laser Run World Championships and a female athlete from the Reo club competed in 2017 in Cape Town (RSA) and in 2018 in Dublin (IRL).

Since 2017 Burkina Faso has organized a national championships, while organizing Laser Run exhibitions alongside popular mass-participation events such as marathons.

President Zare added: “GLRCT is at the centre of our development because swimming pools are difficult and expensive to access. Young athletes now want to go to schools that offer Laser Run.

“Thanks to Laser Run, six of our 13 regions have provided athletes for the Nationals, which have drawn more and more participants, crowd and VIPs such as politicians.

“GLRCT has also taught people that laser pistols are not dangerous, so this sport can be organized everywhere.”

