

Ethiopian Marathon Hero Coaches Youth Athletes

Making people smile wherever he goes, a long-distance running legend from Ethiopia lives and works in a rural Japanese town!

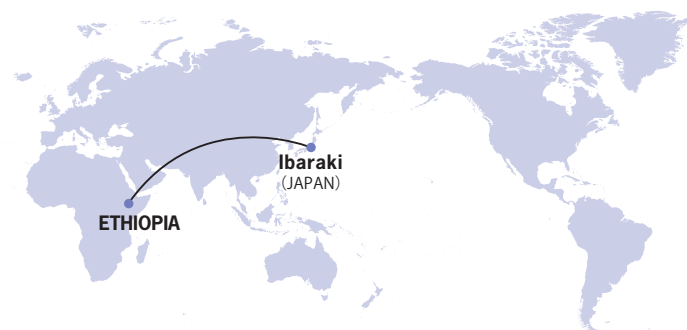
Abebe Mekonnen, Ethiopian long-distance running hero, won the Tokyo International Marathon three times, along with various other famous races, including the Beijing Marathon and Boston Marathon. He also competed twice in the Summer Olympics. This past year, he has been playing an active role as a Sports Exchange Advisor (SEA) for the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme in Kasama City, Ibaraki Prefecture.

Rich with nature, Kasama is a rural city about a two-hour drive from Tokyo. As Japan's largest producer of chestnuts, it abounds with typical heartwarming Japanese landscapes unchanged since olden days, such as the approach leading up to the well-known Kasama Inari

Shrine. The city is also famous for its style of porcelain known as Kasama-ware. About forty years ago, an Ethiopian potter fascinated with the style of pottery moved to the region, which led the long-term connection with the country that has lasted many years.

After Kasama had been named as the Host Towns for Ethiopian team for the Tokyo 2020 Games, President Derartu Tulu of the Ethiopian

Athletics Federation, made a visit there in March 2019, also with the purpose of coaching students of an athletics class. It was Tulu who advised Mekonnen to work there as an SEA. "She told me that she had been very warmly received by the people of Kasama, which made me think that I'd really like to go there myself," he recalls. Thus, he ended up coming to Kasama in that role. "The natural countryside is



Abebe Mekonnen

Born in Ethiopia in 1964. Former long-distance and marathon runner, he competed in many World Championships, as well as twice in the Olympics. Three-time winner of the Tokyo International Marathon. Technical director of the Addis Ababa Sport Commission in the capital of Ethiopia.

Mekonnen is pictured with members of the Tomobe Junior High School athletic club in Kasama City. Getting advice directly from a former Olympic athlete clearly boosted the students' motivation.



Ministers and Olympic medalists from Ethiopia shown while visiting Japan for the Kasama Togeinosato Half Marathon held in 2019. Running together with Mekonnen, they established good relationships with the people of Kasama.



Kasama is Japan's largest producer of chestnuts.



Each piece of Kasama-ware is characterized by the artist's individuality. They create pieces that are free from tradition and formalities.

Kasama Inari Shrine, a symbol of the city, is included along the route of the annual Kasama Togeinosato Half Marathon.



beautiful, and the people are warm and friendly. I could relax easily, and soon fell in love with Kasama."

Mekonnen's role has been to draw the two countries closer together by acting as an intermediary between Ethiopia and Kasama City. His duties also include giving advice and making training plans for junior high school athletic clubs. His daily training plans set out target times down to the very second, leaving colleagues amazed at how precise they are.

"In Ethiopia, it's normal to walk 5km or 6km to school. I encourage students here in Kasama to go to school on foot, and to take walks on the weekend to build basic physical strength. Currently because of the novel coronavirus, I cannot do the programs I originally prepared, but I'm hoping to give as much advice as possible to students through individual online lessons."

Among Mekonnen's students, some had the opportunity to join the training in Ethiopia. "Even when making the same movements, we only use a part of our bodies, whereas Ethiopian athletes use their whole bodies in a more dynamic manner. We finally came to understand what

Mekonnen-*sensei* means by saying that it's important to train with the whole body," one of them says.

Having spent less than a year in Japan, Mekonnen still finds it hard to communicate in Japanese, but he says, "I can get by with gestures and laughing. I can talk with Japanese people through the heart. As well as taking part in the town's marathon, Mekonnen participated in the Ibaraki Ekiden (long-distance road relay race) held in December 2019, representing Kasama City as a runner and coach. He is a popular person, who fits in well with the people of the city.

The day after the Ekiden race, an elementary school in the city included Ethiopian food in their school lunch menu to help students become more familiar with Ethiopian culture. Mekonnen, having been invited to the lunch, was so touched that he was brought to tears.

This summer, after finishing his contract as an SEA, Mekonnen will return to Ethiopia. "After going back home, I'll continue to train Ethiopia's next generation, and I also want to be the link that helps build an even stronger relationship between Kasama and Ethiopia."

This strong, kind Ethiopian hero is bringing the two countries closer together, both through his heart and through sports. *

About the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme

The JET Programme began in 1987 with the goal of promoting grassroots international exchange between Japan and other nations, and is now one of the world's largest international exchange programs.

JET participants are placed in every region of Japan and work in one of three positions: assistant language teachers (ALTs), coordinators for international relations (CIRs), or sports exchange advisors (SEAs). In 2019, the JET Programme welcomed 5,761 participants, and currently there are more than 70,000 alumni from 75 countries living in all parts of the world.



The JET Programme official website
<http://jetprogramme.org/en/>