



## Why Kenyans are so good at the steeple chase?

Bonjour. My name is Pierre. Pierre Baron de Coubertin and I know everything about the Olympics. Really. For example do you know why people from Africa are always winning the steeplechase?

I do!

My story starts with an american FBI agent named Horace Ashenfelter. He trained for the steeplechase by hurdling park benches at night. In 1952 he beat russian Vladimir Kazantsev and won Olympic gold. It was the middle of the cold war and the headlines in the papers were: Capitalism beats Communism. This was very, very right, because Steeplechase is a very capitalistic sport.

Really!

To understand this we go back to the 18th and 19th century. In that time if you had a sheep, you could let it graze almost anywhere. Then some wealthy land owners said: Hey, why don't we take all the common land. So they lobbied with the parliament and crafted the Enclosure Acts. The result was that by law almost all common land went to a few people and small land owners were forced to move to the cities. This kickstarted the Industrial revolution and - very important for this story - everywhere there were fences and small brick walls built around pieces of land. Suddenly during fox hunts horses had to jump all kinds of obstacles. They had never done this before, because simply there was no need to jump.



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So foxes had some good years, but then horses showed their incredible physical abilities. They became so good at jumping that people started organizing competitions. Some were held in stadiums, much like Horse Jumping today. Other competitions were held across country. They were called steeple chases. During those years it was very popular to sit on a horse, look for a church steeple and race to it, jumping all kinds of walls, hedges, fences and ditches. People loved it. But not all people.

### **Take Halifax Wyatt.**

He was an Oxford student and very, very bad at this steeplechase thing. He was always falling from his horse. One day he proclaimed: Rather than climb back onto that damned camel, I run those 2 miles by foot...”

This sparked the idea of a race by foot, with the same barriers. It was first held in 1850 and won, of course, by Halifax Wyatt himself. Steeple chase by foot then became part of the Oxford – Cambridge rivalry and later moved to the stadium and to the Olympic Program.

At the Olympics since 1984 the steeplechase is dominated by athletes from Kenya. They have won the last 7 golden medals. People from Kenya however never have won a medal on an equestrian event. In history there have been 395 equestrian medal winners but none of them came from Africa. Not one. The conclusion can only be that people from Africa are not very good at horse riding, just like Halifax Wyatt in 1850. And that must be why they are so incredibly good at steeplechase.

Really!

