

Erika Kemp Wants to See More Runners Who Look Like Her

Kemp, who had a solid marathon debut in Boston during a race with racial controversy on the sidelines, did not run cross-country until college. “There wasn’t anyone that looked like me.”

By Matthew Futterman

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The video of local police officers forming a bicycle blockade in front of a group of Black supporters during this year’s Boston Marathon seemed to highlight once again some unpleasant truths about running in America.

It is often a segregated sport in which Black runners (and their supporters) can be treated differently from white runners. Runners of color are often a tiny presence at the biggest races, especially once the race moves beyond the elite competitors born in Africa.

Erika Kemp, 28, who had the best marathon debut by an American woman in Boston last month, has had a close-up view of this dynamic since her teenage years, when she was a very fast young girl growing up in South Jersey.

Kemp, who completed Boston in 2 hours 33 minutes 57 seconds, is one of the rarest of rarities in American track and field — a Black woman born and raised in the country who became a star in distance events instead of as a sprinter, which is how she started out in the sport.

Kemp didn’t run a cross-country race until she entered college on a track scholarship at North Carolina State. She hated running through the mud, but that wasn’t what had kept her away from cross-country, where most distance runners cut their teeth, in high school.

“There wasn’t anyone that looked like me,” she said.

As she evolved into a distance runner on the track, becoming a high school state champion at 3,200 meters, Kemp saw from the inside what outsiders often see at high school meets, where she was often the lone Black entrant in the distance finals. Generally, the Black kids dominated the field in the sprints while the distance races were predominantly white, even though white runners have excelled in sprinting and Black runners have excelled in distance running.

It was not until college, when she began competing against international recruits, that Kemp began to see more Black runners in distance events. Though even now, when she

races at the United States national championships against predominantly white fields, it can sometimes feel like she is back in high school.

“I think we gravitate toward what we know and what we’re comfortable with,” she said.

In addition to trying to win races and qualify for the 2024 Paris Olympics in distance events from the 5,000 up to the marathon, Kemp wants to try to make more Black runners of all ages believe they can pursue distance running.

She finds it especially inspiring when Black people her age send her messages saying they saw her in a race and decided to sign up for a local 5-kilometer run. Yes, she wants more Black kids to run cross-country but she also wants more Black adults signing up for races as well.

That is partly why the treatment of the predominantly Black spectators from the TrailblazHers Run Co. and the Pioneers Run Crew at the Boston Marathon bothered her and so many others so much.

Kemp, who moved to Boston after graduating from college, and plenty of other local runners have gotten used to seeing those two groups supporting their friends and everyone else at local races. She passed them on the hills in Newton, Mass., heard their cheers and their music, saw their confetti and got fired up.

“They were exactly what I expected,” she said. “They were so hype.”

As the race wore on, those supporters did what plenty of lay runners, especially those merely trying to survive a marathon like many of the runners in the videos the police department distributed, have little problem with – they jumped on the course and safely ran a few noisy steps with friends and loved ones. (Buddies have jumped in to run many late miles with me in some races, including Boston. I love it.)

The day after the marathon, a spokesman for the Newton Police Department said it received three notifications of spectators “traversing the rope barrier and impeding runners,” and then officers “respectfully and repeatedly requested that spectators stay behind the rope and not encroach onto the course.”

The department did not say who complained about the Black spectators.

“When spectators continued to cross the rope, N.P.D. with additional officers, calmly used bicycles for a short period to demarcate the course and keep both the runners and spectators safe.”

When Kemp saw the video of the bicycle blockade that was posted to social media, she wondered how this could possibly have happened.

“One of like the top things people come to Boston for is the crowd support and they were a huge part of that,” Kemp said of the Black supporters. “Really unfortunate to see them being treated this way for literally contributing to the magic of Boston.”

The race organizer, the Boston Athletic Association, had a meeting with leaders of the two running clubs. Three days after the race and following that meeting, Jack Fleming, the B.A.A. chief executive, said the organization needed “to do better to create an environment that is welcoming and supportive of the BIPOC community at the marathon,” using an acronym for individuals who are Black, Indigenous and other people of color.

Kemp is looking forward to efforts that might help other fast and young promising distance runners who are Black — and maybe others who are older and much slower who just want to finish a 5K — feel better about toeing a starting line, even on a cross-country course.

She said she thinks about it every time she races. The better she can perform, the more exposure she gets, the more people — young and old — who won’t fall victim to the “you-can’t-be-it-if-you-can’t-see-it” dynamic as she once did.

“It makes me think twice about why I’m out there, the fact that I’m not just running for purely myself anymore,” said Kemp, who signed with Brooks, the running apparel company, earlier this year. “I need to be on the start line.”