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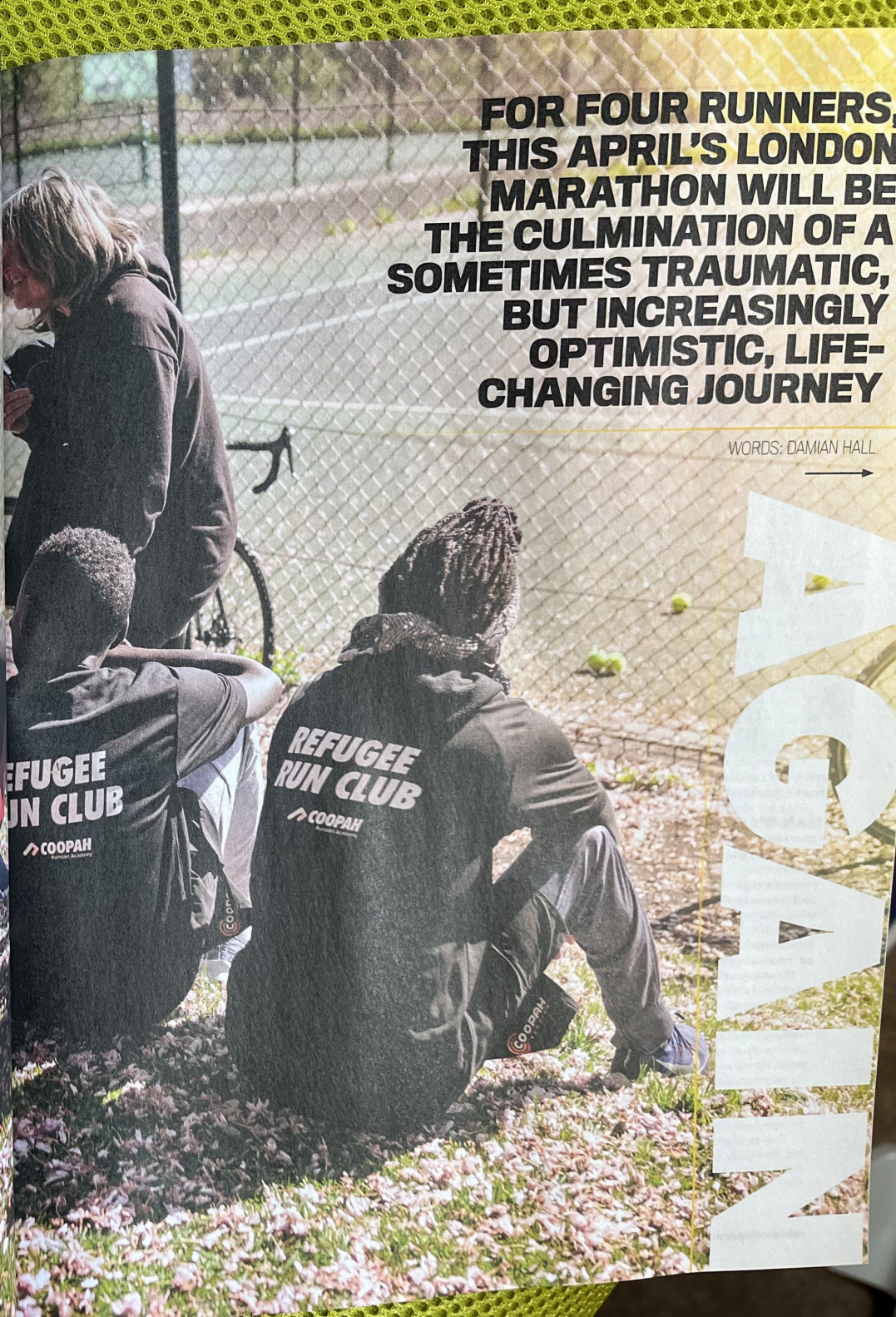
The Refugees Who've Belonging Through

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STARTING



**FOR FOUR RUNNERS,
THIS APRIL'S LONDON
MARATHON WILL BE
THE CULMINATION OF A
SOMETIMES TRAUMATIC,
BUT INCREASINGLY
OPTIMISTIC, LIFE-
CHANGING JOURNEY**

WORDS: DAMIAN HALL

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to feel welcomed into their local community, to integrate into a new culture and to access an amazing sport. All of which really helps their mental health, too.'

The club invites refugees to join an eight-week online coaching programme, including a hosted parkrun on day one and some basic kit, thanks in part to donations from New Balance, On and Soar. Each week, the club meets virtually to share their progress, discuss openly about how they're feeling and to get tips from a range of running experts. At the end of the eight weeks, there's a second parkrun, to help track improvement.

At the end of the programme, Coopah provides every graduate with a lifetime coaching subscription, so they can continue to 'use running to help them be fit, happy and make the most of their new lives here. We're on a mission to inspire 10 million runners'. And Cooper believes running can help to profoundly change lives. 'It can give people purpose, improve their physical health and importantly refocus them mentally,' he says.

Without a doubt, says Cooper, the project's biggest success so far occurred at the Vitality London 10K in 2022. 'We had four home



↑ The Coopah Refugee Run Club, a welcoming and supportive community for those new to the UK

just what a unique and transformative experience it was for them, while Hamzah is too modest to tell us he placed fifth.

A not-for-profit set up in 2023, IU aims to break down financial barriers to participation in ultramarathons and therefore increase inclusivity and diversity. Co-founder Andre 'Basil' Heaney agrees that the biggest obstacle is often the brand primarily targets low-

daydreams,' says Heaney. 'Ultrarunning is becoming a more diverse and inclusive sport, too, albeit belatedly,' he adds.

Aside from kit, the biggest challenge for IU is raising awareness among those who it can support, he says, meaning mainly runners who aren't yet running ultras. 'Please spread the word!' says Heaney.

In its first eight months, IU supported over 40 runners, with more than half female and 20% from ethnic minorities. Coopah has helped over 200 runners across five locations (Solihull, Coventry, Leeds, St Albans and Crystal Palace) and their ultimate aim is to have refugee run clubs in towns in the UK. 'We would love to have



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A not-for-profit set up in 2023, IU aims to break down financial barriers to participation in ultramarathons and therefore increase inclusivity and diversity. Co-founder Andre 'Basil' Heaney agrees that the biggest obstacle is often the cost of running kit. The brand primarily targets low-income runners who want to step up to the ultramarathon distance, in a sport known to be largely white, male, middle class and middle aged, though that's changing.

The equipment cost barrier is ramped up because ultramarathons usually require mandatory kit, such as race packs, waterproof jackets, expectations of GPS watches and so on; then there's the costs of coaching, travel, sports nutrition and more. But similarly, IU has found the running community eager to help, with over 100 partners pledging to help their mission so far, through offering discounts and free kit, coaching and race entries. Although IU tries to source second-hand and repurposed items whenever possible, thanks largely to Kitsquad (and some *Runner's World* test shoe donations, too).

'It's amazing to see runners who wouldn't have had the chance to do trail races, ultra-distance events or run in places they couldn't have got to otherwise, fulfil their



daydreams,' says Heaney. 'Ultrarunning is becoming a more diverse and inclusive sport, too, albeit belatedly,' he adds.

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We can clearly see the huge potential advantages that the physical act of running and having running goals, as well as finding a community, a sense of belonging and new friends, has on refugees new to the UK. It's a credit to the running community, too, that so many runners, groups and brands are supporting these compassionate aims. But the benefits could go even further: a refugee could well become Britain's next big running star. And while no one is pretending that running will solve the problems of every refugee, it does seem fitting that the most universal sport is doing something to help one of the world's most universal crises.

