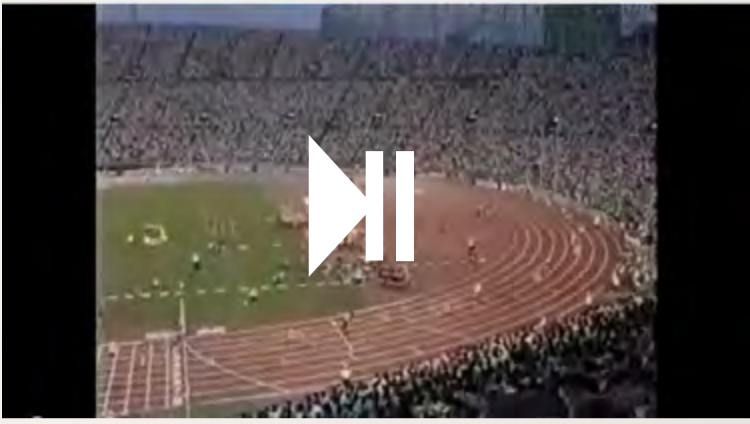


LIFE CHANGER



# Parallel Lives

**Kriss Akabusi,**  
MBE



INTERNET CONNECTION REQUIRED



**B**orn in London in 1958 to Nigerian parents, Kriss was left in England at the age of 4 and put into care. His parents had been studying in London and wanted to return to Nigeria, to their newly independent country and be part of its exciting future. Kriss and his brother were to be educated in England and then return to Nigeria as doctors or lawyers. But the plan went awry. Nigeria fell into a bitter civil war, his parents lost everything and there was no money to send to England for their keep, and so the boys grew up in a series of care homes. Kriss recalls crying himself to sleep at night until the age of 12, longing for his

mother to return. A less than average pupil at school, including on the sports field, he lacked direction at 16, so joined the army. With mental health issues in his family, a lack of identity, no sense of belonging, and without any inspiring role models, his future was at best uncertain.

Yet this man went on to become one of Britain's most famous and adored athletes, thanks to his prowess on the track and in particular, three minutes in his life in 1991. He's admired and loved for his effervescent personality, his louder than usual laugh, is a popular TV personality, has the letters MBE after his name and two student union bars named after him, one at Cambridge University!

## Overnight Stardom

He is best known for taking gold for Great Britain in the anchor leg of the [British 4 x 400m relay at the 1991 World Championships in Tokyo](#). Winning the race propelled him into the limelight and made him a household name in Britain. In fact he's earned a living for years talking about 'that race' and those infamous few minutes of his life in 1991.

Ask any Englishman who was alive in 1991 who Kriss is and he'll likely relate the race to you blow by blow, and then flail his fist around in a peculiar twirling pump action, Kriss' signature gesture after winning a race.

By convention you save your best runner til last in athletics. But at the World Championships, the British took a controversial gamble and decided to put their fastest man, Roger Black, first in the 4 x 400m race. Less experienced runner Kriss Akabusi was to run what's known as the anchor (last) leg, with a nation's expectation on him.



## Highest Recognition

The year after his success in Tokyo, the by then three times Olympic medallist was awarded an MBE by Her Majesty the Queen in recognition of his services to England through athletics. When the phone call came through from the Prime Minister's office at 10 Downing Street, Kriss was out in California training. Being a joker himself, he assumed it was an excellent wind up from a friend. After 'laughing his head off', and saying 'yeah, yeah, very funny', it became apparent that the PM's 'obedient servant' was in fact bona fide and was asking if it 'would be agreeable' to him to accept such an award and if so, would he be willing to attend the ceremony? "Are you serious? Agreeable? Me, willing? Would I? Of course I would. The Queen? Oh yeah, I'll be there."

But, all athletes have a shelf life, and the following year at 34 years of age Kriss hung up his spikes and retired from athletics, knowing that his fastest times were behind as opposed to ahead of him.

# A

kabusi clinched Gold for Great Britain that day, and took with him the hearts of everyone watching. Overnight, he became a household name and hero across Britain. At 2

minutes 57.54 seconds he and his team had set a new British, Commonwealth and European record, and in the words of an emotional commentator David Coleman, 'the gamble paid off.'

So how did he go from directionless teenager to world-class athlete? He puts it down to his strict army discipline and one Drill Sergeant in particular, who took him under his wing and believed in him, Sergeant Ian McKenzie. For the first time in his life he had a sense of purpose. He belonged. The army was his family for the next 15 years of his life, whilst he trained his body and mind in fitness, endurance and determination. He says with certainty that the army was the making of him, giving him the opportunity to be the best he could be. And he's not just aware of this, but immensely grateful for it.

## LIFE CHANGER



With such an exuberant personality and zest for life, Kriss found that work came looking for him. People naturally gravitated towards him, wanting to hear him speak at their events and be buoyed up by his energy.

By sharing his moments of sporting glory, he realised he could draw out of his audience parallels in their own lives, showing them that we all experience highs and lows, achievements and failures, and it is how we meet life's challenges that affects the outcome.

**O**n a trip back to Nigeria at the age of 28, kicking a football around in the compound at his parents' home, he asked the age of the talented little kid he was playing footie with, and was told he was in fact 16 years old. Kriss was stunned; he'd assumed he was an 8 year old, given his tiny size, but this was simply due to malnourishment. 'I just stared at him and

thought, that kid could've been me. There but for the grace of God go I. He was so small and talented, and yet in Nigeria he had no prospects.' There was no Sergeant Ian McKenzie for this young boy. And so Kriss set about doing something about it.

### Paying it Forward

Kriss sees the parallel life he could have led, had he not

been educated in England, had he not been mentored, had it been him rather than other members of his family who suffered mental health issues. All his projects via the charity he went on to set up, [The Akabusi Charitable Trust](#) (TACT), reflect these parallels, with projects in Nigeria and England. He initially focused on Nigeria, setting up a mental health organisation and helping kids get into fashion, via hairdressing and sewing.

## LIFE CHANGER



**W**hile people with mental health needs in the UK have assistance available to them, in Nigeria, they are for the large part abandoned. They are not understood in medical terms; being mentally unwell is considered taboo, attributed to voodoo or possession by evil spirits. Many ill people are said to 'go on a journey' i.e. are driven miles away by their own family members and abandoned. Or are kept hidden away at home away from public view. The charity Kriss partners with, Amaudo, helps take mentally unwell people in off the streets and starts to rehabilitate them back into mainstream life.

But the parallels Kriss draws don't stop there. In August 2011 he was in Carmel, California, playing golf and staying in a 5 star hotel, when the TV screens were suddenly full of staggering footage of riots

in London. Kriss watched these familiar London streets burn and youngsters looting shops in broad daylight. He remembered himself at 16, with no prospects and he saw plainly how he could have become unemployed and disaffected had he not met Sergeant Ian McKenzie and benefitted from such strong leadership and mentoring. He knew he needed to be a Sergeant Ian McKenzie role model for kids who were coming up through the system now and needed that direction instilling in them.

It took over a year of planning but TACT's first UK based project i-TANG launched in January 2013, offering 12 young 'NEET' candidates, (Not in Education Employment or Training) the opportunity to learn fundamental business skills. Each candidate attends a 6- week programme including lectures held by specialists, practical learning sessions and a two-week internship. The

next intake of 12 will start in October.

10% of the people he supports in the i-TANG programme must have been in care or the fostering system. Kriss knows how important it is to be given an opportunity to break from the cycle and get a foot on the ladder. 'One in three homeless people in London were brought up in care. People who grow up in care are 80% more likely to serve time in prison.'

In the next two years Kriss' aim is to develop the infrastructure so that he can oversee a nationwide i-TANG programme. He was a world-class athletic performer, and fully intends to be world class in helping young people find work. His motivational speaking business funds his charitable work and he's walking the talk, and studying for his MBA and 'getting with it so I don't get left behind.'



## Akabusi's Track Record

### Competitor for Great Britain

#### Olympic Games

Silver	1984 Los Angeles	4x400 m relay
Bronze	1992 Barcelona	400 m hurdles
Bronze	1992 Barcelona	4x400 m relay

#### World Championships

Gold	1991 Tokyo	4x400 m relay
Silver	1987 Rome	4x400 m relay
Bronze	1991 Tokyo	400 m hurdles

#### European Championships

Gold	1990 Split	400 m hurdles
Gold	1990 Split	4x400 m relay

#### Competitor for England

#### Commonwealth Games

Gold	1990 Auckland	400 m hurdles
------	---------------	---------------

## We Only Have The Life We Have

Over time they formed a bond, but in the absence of parents, he needed a strong role model somewhere in his life, so the army sergeant had filled her place. He doesn't blame his mother. She did what she thought was right for everyone at the time. She sacrificed her relationship with her son, for her country, when she chose to return

to Nigeria without him. And he has created his amazing life because of those circumstances.

What would that parallel life have held for Kriss, if she'd taken him with her to grow up in Nigeria, if he hadn't joined the army, met McKenzie, been discovered and become a world class athlete? Britain would be one sporting hero down and the world a lesser place because of it.

**K**riss' strength comes from the realisation he made at the age of 12, that deep within himself, he is enough. He quotes Albert Camus' line "In the depth of winter, I finally learned that within me there lay an invincible summer." He had had to accept at 12 that his mother wasn't coming back. But what it taught him, along with the insights from Sergeant Ian McKenzie, is that if you can face the harsh reality of the situation you are up against, accept the brutal facts, then you can go from good to great. But you have to properly acknowledge the facts, because it's when you tackle something head on that the fear disappears; you control it and bring it back down to size.

After his parents returned to Nigeria, it was to be 11 years before he next saw his mother. By then he was 15 years old, and playing football in the garden at the children's home when someone called out the words he'd so desperately wanted to hear all those years, 'Kezie, your Mum's here'. This was the 'mother' who had never tucked him in at night, or been there when he was scared, she hadn't soothed him when he was sick. He didn't know her. She didn't match up to the fairy-tale he had in his head.



If it moves me, I'll gladly write about it. [Helen Collier](#), owner of Just Words, writes for businesses, magazines, philanthropists and always ...for pleasure.

