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Cross Country 147

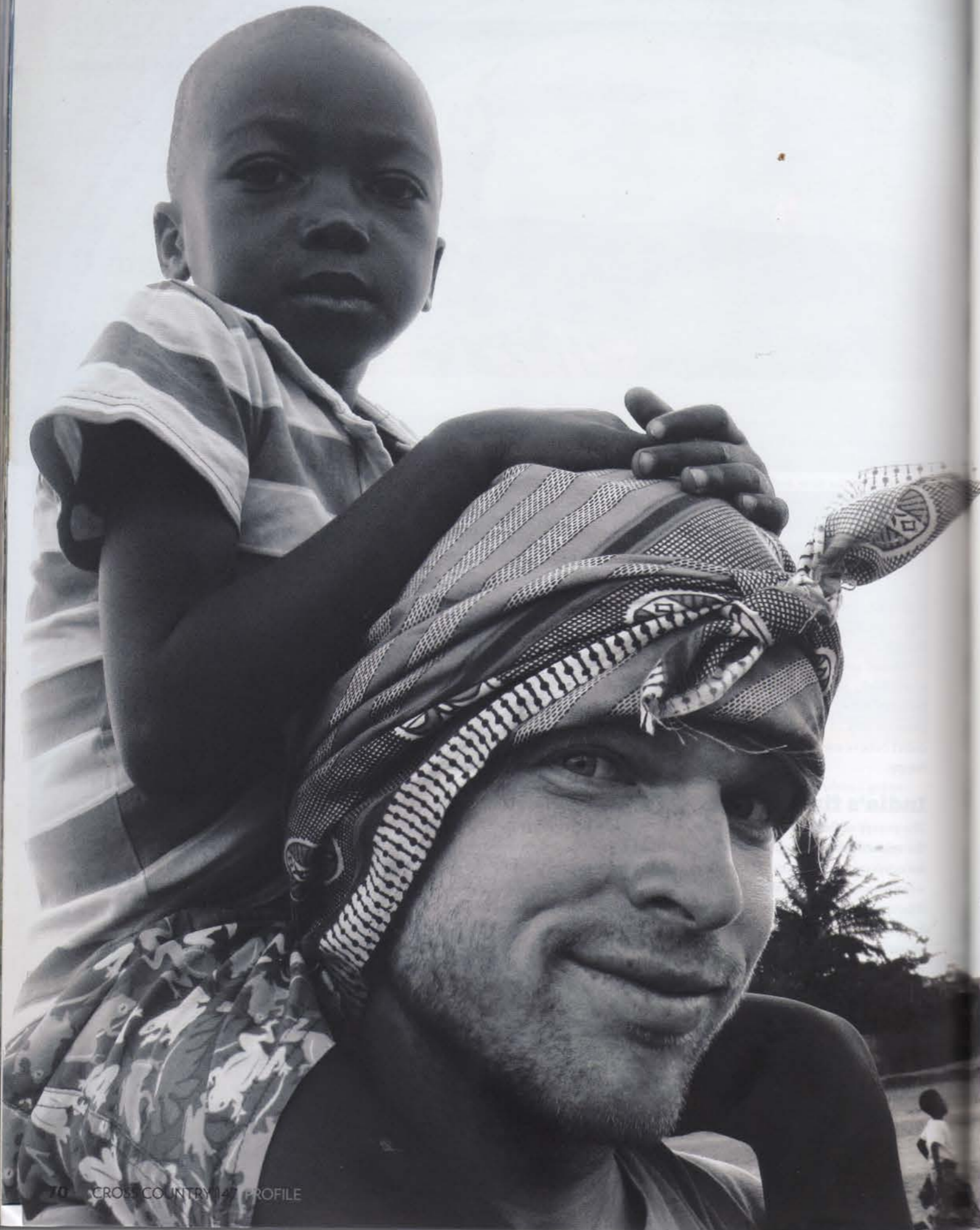


WHO DARES TO LIVE FOREVER?

Following the wind in the Spanish Pyrenees
Delta 2 / BGD Tala / Asia / Malawi / Alps by tandem / 300km in Chile

**“Inspirational and humbling,
a rare filmmaking feat!”**

-Cross Country Magazine



the *Kite Flyers*

Ben Jordan and Godfrey Masauli met in Malawi. One had a dream about making a film, the other a dream to fly. The result is *The Boy Who Flies*. Ed Ewing spoke to them

In 2010 Ben Jordan was at the Coupe Icare in St Hilaire, the world's biggest free flying festival, where he was sleeping on a balcony, his sleeping bag covered in blankets to avoid the rain. He was over from his home in Canada to present his film, *Above and Beyond*, which documented his 8,008km coast-to-coast paramotoring adventure. (It won the Critics' Award.) Ever since he'd learnt to fly he'd wanted to fly non-stop across his home country, and he did it in 2009, setting a Guinness World Record in the process for the longest point-to-point paramotor flight in the world. As he went he made it his mission to drop into schools along the way, to show them paramotoring, give talks and inspire them with the idea of the impossible made possible. The resulting book and film raised money for charity and once completed, Ben, now 30, felt he had achieved a lifetime goal.

A year later and Ben was back again at the Coupe Icare, this time sitting on the judging panel. He came by the Cross Country stand and mentioned a new project in passing, although didn't make much of it. Then a few days later, after the festival, three of us were sitting around a computer screen in a greyed-out Chamonix. "You have to look at this," my colleague said. Colour, light, music and energy burst out of the laptop. For

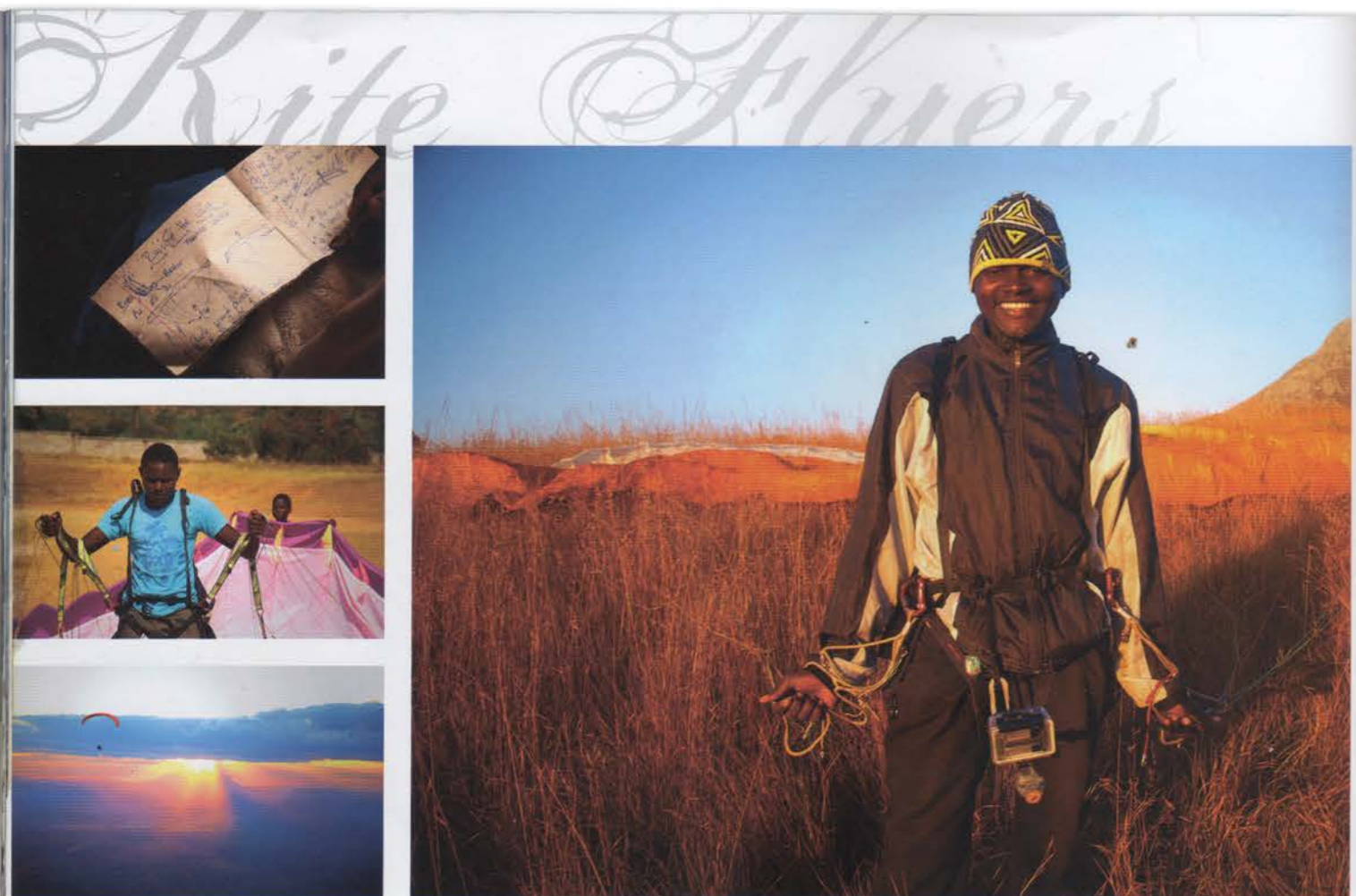
two minutes we sat agape as we watched a Vimeo clip for Ben's new "project". "What was that?" I said, looking around the now seemingly dull and lifeless room, "Is that Ben, in Africa, teaching people how to fly?"

"The whole *Boy who Flies* project has taken me two years now," says Ben over Skype from Bir, India, where he has spent the spring free flying. The new film is about Ben's journey to Malawi in Africa, where he makes friends with a young guy called Godfrey. It is Godfrey's dream to fly and so Ben sets out to teach him how. Along the way they learn a lot about each other, about Malawi and, for Godfrey, about flying. The film culminates on Mount Mulanje, Malawi's highest massif, and Godfrey's first flight. It's a remarkable film, not least because it was made on a single hand-held camera and edited and produced entirely by Ben to professional documentary standard.

The idea of making a film in Africa had been on the cards for a while. Restless and slightly disoriented after his trans-Canada project it was at a screening of *Above and Beyond* where his Africa idea started to take shape. "Someone asked me 'What next?' I said 'I'd like to go to Africa and work with kids.'" It just so happened there was an Africa travel specialist in the audience. "He introduced

BEN JORDAN

After paramotoring across Canada Ben was looking for a new challenge. He found it in Malawi, where he taught Godfrey Masauli to fly. All photos: Ben Jordan



PURPLE DRAGON

Godfrey learnt to groundhandle using an old glider before his first flight from Mount Mulanje. The film documents the highs and lows of the three-week journey.

himself ... I went for a coffee with him and asked him where I could go where I wouldn't be treated as just another tourist." The expert suggested Malawi. The fact that "there wasn't a stitch of information" about any paragliding in Malawi was a bonus. He went.

"I had this idea to make this film where there are two fish out of water. You know, white guy in Africa learning the ropes and being laughed at, and the African guy learning this new sport." He guessed he'd be in Malawi for a "few weeks" while he did some research. "I thought I'd do the groundwork, meet someone who wanted to learn to fly, then come home and get some sponsorship to put it all together."

Instead he met Godfrey Masauli. In the introduction to the film Ben says the idea for the film came from a dream he'd had about flying kites in Africa surrounded by laughing children. A neat bit of story-telling for the film, surely? But no, says Ben. "I did actually have that dream." And so it was that Ben really was flying kites and showing children how to make them, when Godfrey turned up.

Godfrey, talking via Skype from Malawi, explains: "The village in the movie is where I met Ben," he says. "In the past I have done some work for a lodge, called Fisherman's Rest, and that's the place Ben found accommodation when he came to

Malawi. That's when I saw Ben."

He adds, "It was really hard for me to approach him, but when I heard from other guys that this guy flies a paraglider, something that I'd just seen in magazines, then I said, well, he's a guy worth talking to."

Godfrey is 22 and, like a lot of Malawians, under-employed. The country is largely rural and one of the least developed in the world, with a devalued currency and all the big issues associated with Africa's developing nations. Problems are many while opportunities are scarce; many migrate to Zimbabwe or to South Africa to find work. But it wasn't always this way. It turned out Godfrey's uncle had once flown and owned a fleet of private planes as a business, some of which are still mothballed in a hangar today. "The currency crisis came, and he could no longer afford fuel," Godfrey explains in the film.

Ben had clearly found his star. "It was too good to be true," says Ben. "The first really friendly English-speaking guy to come up to me happened to be Godfrey, and it just so happened he'd always wanted to fly." There was nothing to be gained in waiting. "I didn't really have to sell him on it. So I decided to keep going, and we put all the wheels in motion and went for the training and the big flight."

As part of that training Ben and Godfrey took to bicycles and decided to ride to the base of Mount

Mulanje – a three-week journey. Along the way they demonstrated their groundhandling glider – a 20-year-old porous thing nicknamed the Purple Dragon – in schools as they passed through villages and held kite-making workshops for the children.

In the West, where 'chuggers' ('charity muggers') hit you up on the street for a donation every day, where terms like 'compassion fatigue' and 'donor apathy' are understood by everyone, it would be easy to be cynical about this. What hope can one do-gooder Canadian and his new-found local buddy bring to children growing up in this poor, forgotten country? It's a question dealt with in the film: no one pretends to be anything but a dreamer, but the message they bring, that dreams are ok, and that sometimes they can come true, is perhaps hope in itself. Kids by the thousand cheer Godfrey on as he struggles again and again with taming the Purple Dragon, trying to make her go in a straight line on one dusty football pitch after another.


Finally the day comes for Godfrey to fly. The resulting footage, self-filmed by Godfrey, as he takes to the sky for the first time from the grassy high slopes of Malawi's biggest mountain is simply joyous. This is what it felt like the moment you first flew, you remember, as Godfrey, intelligent and always ready with wise words drawn from some deep hidden well, laughs, cries, shouts and gives thanks at what he is experiencing. It is both inspirational and humbling, a rare filmmaking feat. Back on the ground Godfrey is breathless with excitement. "It is possible, it is possible," he says again and again.

All this happened in the summer of 2011. Back in Canada Ben worked on the film over winter. In Malawi, Godfrey continued to tour schools on his own, making his parents shake their heads but impressing his uncle and little brother. "Sometimes they see hundreds of children following me, so my family is becoming more supportive now." His three sisters however have taken more convincing. "Sisters are always teasing, as you know," he laughs. "They say, 'Ben has shared with you the madness.'"

Madness or dream, the reality is Ben's film has proved a hit. After initially being rejected by the St Hilaire film festival in 2012 Ben re-worked it, made it sharper and shorter. He hopes it will be accepted this year. A festival cut of 45 minutes has won rave reviews and is currently part of the Banff Mountain Film Festival World Tour, being shown to hundreds of audiences worldwide, and it is due for release on DVD on 1 June.

Meanwhile, a few pilots who have seen the film have donated usable equipment to Godfrey in Malawi. Nick Bamber of Pembrokeshire Paragliding in the UK has gone one step further and has raised money so Godfrey can travel to Europe in the summer for further pilot training. "We were really impressed with his positivity and the positive effect he is having on his community," Nick said by email, "we decided to get involved." He added: "Pledges have rolled in, and hopefully Godfrey will be over in June, July or August."

From Malawi, Godfrey says his life will never be the same again. "My life has completely changed. The way I look at things. I wake up every day and the first thing I do is look up at the sky and say, 'Wow! I can't believe this. I can get up there.'"

To everybody, he adds, "I say, may they follow their dreams." 

Find out more at www.theboywhoflies.com

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The Kite Flyers (text version)

In 2010 Ben Jordan was at the Coupe Icare in St Hilaire, France, the world's biggest free flying festival, where he was sleeping on a balcony, his sleeping bag covered in blankets to avoid the rain. He was over from his home in Canada to present his film, DREAM, which documented his 8,008km coast-to-coast, Canadian paramotoring adventure. (It won the Critics' Award.) Ever since he'd learnt to fly he'd wanted to fly non-stop across his home country, and he did it in 2009, setting a Guinness World Record in the process for the longest point-to-point paramotor flight in the world. As he went he made it his mission to drop into schools along the way, to show them paramotoring, give talks and inspire them with the idea of the impossible made possible. The resulting book and film raised money for charity and once completed, Ben, now 30, felt he had achieved a lifetime goal.

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Author: Ed Ewing / Cross Country Magazine.