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UCT student working with global company to develop unique performance enhancing drink for elite athletes

A University of Cape Town (UCT) PhD candidate Shaun Sutehall is working with elite athletes to develop Swiss company Maurten's new "hydrogel" drink, which has the potential to enhance sporting performance.

Sutehall has seen success among elite marathon runners in East Africa who have taken the drink during major international races – and he has high hopes that these results can be expanded to other athletes.

The drink was initially tested on elite athletes training in Ethiopia, where it was found to be very well tolerated at carbohydrate concentrations much higher than would normally be possible to ingest while running.

Sutehall commented: "I believe this drink is a big success with the elite marathoners as many of them suffer from stomach problems while running. This drink now allows them to consume carbohydrates without these negative feelings."

At the 2016 Berlin Marathon, the drink was tested when it was used by top Ethiopian long-distance runner Kenenisa Bekele, who narrowly missed the (then) world record. His winning time of 2:03:03 was an Ethiopian record and the second-fastest time in history on a record-eligible course.

More recently, at the 2018 Berlin Marathon in September, the drink was also used by Kenyan long-distance runner Eluid Kipchoge when he smashed the world marathon record, lowering it to 2:01:39.

Now, sports scientist Sutehall believes it is imperative to assess the drink's effect on performance.

"This then allows us in the [Sub2hr marathon project](#) to make an evidenced-based decision on providing the carbohydrate drink during a marathon." The Sub2hr marathon project is

dedicated, through science, to promote the achievement of a sub-two-hour marathon-without drugs.

The drink is unique in that it contains sodium alginate which, when in contact with a low pH, forms an encapsulation around the carbohydrate in the drink. This “hydrogel” then flows into the intestine, bypassing the receptors which normally detect carbohydrates.

Sutehall said he finds great satisfaction “working at the forefront of research and pushing the limits of human knowledge”.

“Working on research questions which no-one knows the answer to and seeing the data answer these questions is the best job in the world.”

Sutehall is studying for his PhD under the co-supervision of UCT’s Professor Andrew Bosch and Professor Yannis Pitsiladis of the University of Brighton in the United Kingdom.

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