



Heavily-backed. The Katikkiro of Buganda Charles Peter Mayiga (3rd L) unveils the kit for the Kabaka Birthday Run alongside the Deputy Katikkiro Twaha Kaawaase (3rd L), Buganda sports minister Robert Sserwanga, Nation Media Group (NMG) Uganda MD Susan Nsibirwa and other officials. PHOTO/COURTESY

Journey to 120k strong

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BY GEORGE KATONGOLE

KABAKA BIRTHDAY RUN

Date: April 12, 2026

Venue: Lubiri-Mengo

Theme: “Men for Good Health to Save the Girl Child and the Fight to End HIV/AIDS by 2030”

Kit Price: Shs25,000

Main sponsor: Airtel Uganda

When the Kabaka Birthday Run first started more than a decade ago, it was a modest, joyful celebration of Kabaka Ronald Muwenda Mutebi II’s birthday. Today it has grown into one of Uganda’s most powerful community mobilisation platforms, drawing more than 120,000 kits sold last year and becoming a genuine vehicle for public health, unity, and grassroots action without ever drifting into elite competition.

In its earliest years, the Run focused on raising funds and awareness for health challenges such as obstetric fistula and sickle cell disease. A mere handful — about 1,000 runners — participated in the inaugural edition, making it a local celebration of fitness and unity.

By 2022, an estimated 80,000 people took part, a sign that the event was becoming much more than a race. Around this time, the theme “Men Are Stars — Abaami Munyenyeny” was introduced to

engage men and boys in Uganda’s HIV response, especially in the Buganda region. Last year saw a record turnout, with more than 120,000 kits sold, translating into proceeds of up to Shs 2.4 billion invested into HIV/AIDS awareness, testing and community outreach.

At the official 2026 launch at Bulange, Charles Peter Mayiga described the Run as “a mobilisational tool” in Uganda’s HIV response.

“Awareness, engagement, communication — in short, mobilisation — is the strongest force against the HIV/AIDS scourge. When the Kabaka added his voice to the fight, behaviour change gained stronger traction, especially among young people and men,” he said.

A movement

One of the most striking aspects of the Kabaka Birthday Run is its refusal to become an elite athletic showcase. There are no prize purses, no professional pacers, no “challengers” chasing times. Instead, the Run’s inclusivity is its strength — designed for families, schools, workers, the elderly, youth groups, and diaspora participants alike.

Prof. Twaha Kaawaase, First Deputy Katikkiro and chair of the organising committee, says this is deliberate: “The Run is a unifier — it is for every Ugandan and friend of Uganda who wants to make a difference. Its power comes from numbers, not trophies.” Soumendra Sahu, Managing Director of long-time

KBR BY NUMBERS

Year launched: 2014

Participants (2014): ~500

Participants (2025): 120,000+

Distance categories: 5km, 10km, 21km

Official partners: Majestic Brands, Airtel Uganda, I&M Bank, dfcu Bank, Nation Media Group, UNAIDS, Pilsner Lager, Uganda AIDS Commission.

sponsor Airtel Uganda, highlighted the campaign’s dual force: celebration and advocacy. “We are proud to be part of the Kabaka Birthday Run, which celebrates the Kabaka’s life while addressing pressing health challenges in our communities. Thousands of Ugandans have participated over the years, uniting to fight a cause that touches every family — the end of HIV/AIDS,” Sahu said at the 2026 launch.

The Kabaka Run’s role in the fight against HIV/AIDS is now widely acknowledged by health agencies. Data shared at the 2026 launch notes that national HIV prevalence among adults aged 15–49 dropped from 7.3% in 2010 to 4.9% in 2024, with new infections falling from 96,000 to 37,000 over the same period — changes attributed in part to expanded testing and prevention messaging that events like the Run help amplify. At a partners’ accountability breakfast, representatives highlighted further strides: in Buganda, antiretroviral treatment coverage climbed from 81% to 89%, and new infections declined by 21% between 2020 and 2024. Critics warn that new infections among ba-

bies remain a concern, but officials say these outcomes show the value of community-based messaging linked to annual events. Robert Waggwa Nsibirwa, Second Deputy Katikkiro and chair of the organising committee, told partners that infection rates in the region have dropped sharply since the Run began targeting HIV/AIDS. “We are seeing real behaviour change — more people are testing, seeking treatment and protecting themselves,” he said.

Partners power progress

No movement of this scale stands alone. At its core, the Buganda Kingdom, through Majestic Brands, has orchestrated partnerships that sustain momentum. Longtime sponsor Airtel Uganda has helped with mobilisation, payments and outreach, with Managing Director Soumendra Sahu emphasising the dual purpose: “When we wear this kit, we are not just runners but advocates. . . every year we make a promise that the next generation will live longer, healthier and stronger.”

Financial partners like I&M Bank Uganda and dfcu Bank back the cause, while media partner Nation Media Group brings the stories, data and messages into homes nationwide. “As a media company, we join because this is a national public health cause,” said Susan Nsibirwa, NMG Uganda Managing Director. Health institutions like UNAIDS and the Uganda AIDS Commission offer critical technical guidance, data, and evaluation — making the Run’s advocacy not only emotional but evidence-based. Health partners like UNAIDS and the Uganda AIDS Commission provide data, technical support and credibility to the Run’s HIV focus. At the 2025 impact accountability event, UNAIDS Country Director Jotham Mubangizi recognised the Run’s contribution.