

A film team discovered the story of the Kenyan Riders and followed them to the eight-day Tour of Rwanda to capture the event.

Words and images by James Walsh

EMAIL RECEIVED
on 11 October 2012:

Hey James
Hope you guys got the
footage you were after
in Winterton.

Back in Iten, Kenya with
the team, tough session today
into the valley and out again.
Guys moving well.

Wondering if you guys
were keen to film the Tour of
Rwanda 18-25 November?

Simon Blake
Kenyan Riders

Serendipity is a funny, mysterious beast. We went to film the Singlespeed World Champs in Winterton, South Africa, at the end of September 2012, where I met an Australian who happened to coach the Kenyan cycling team. That was the last time I thought about Simon Blake, until I received the email above. I now find myself writing this article in a coffee shop in a suburb of Nairobi called Karen, named after the author of *Out of Africa*.

Rwanda. Kenya. Road cycling in Africa. What did I know about any of these three subjects? Not much at all. Why don't South Africans know anything about the cycling scene north of the Limpopo? What is the imagery? Who are the players? What is the history? Are they any good? In another quirk of fate, I had seen Chris Keulen's beautiful book *Hot Splinters of Glass* online and promptly ordered it. It arrived in the post a week before Simon's email and its black and white

LEFT: Pre-ride stretching,
carbon bikes leaning against
cowsheds: African cycling is
decidedly different.

images of bike racing in Africa captivated me.

As with all independent film projects, funding is the major hurdle. The Tour of Rwanda would kick off on 18 November. Unsurprisingly, broadcast networks and corporate sponsors politely declined to get involved upfront. After all, who knows anything about Kenyan cycling and hence its marketability? 'Tour of Rwanda', that sounds a bit far-fetched. But the project and its story kept nagging at me. So I loaded up the credit cards, packed the gear and off we went.

ARRIVING IN KENYA

The magic of modern air travel meant we woke up in Cape Town and went to sleep in the Northern Rift Valley town of Iten on the same day. That early Friday evening taxi ride from Eldoret to Simon's home in Iten will always stick in my mind. Headlights and hooters piercing the twilight, packed roads and foot traffic, crazy intersections and no traffic signs. But it was the bicycles that caught my attention. Black mambas, as they are known locally (a singlespeed old English-designed bike made in China, and ubiquitous in eastern Africa) packed with exotic loads of milk or charcoal or furniture or onions or people. Muhammad Ali's words came to mind, "Impossible is potential. Impossible is temporary. Impossible is nothing."

Simon and the Kenyan Riders road cycling team welcomed us into their project and we immersed ourselves in filming. We didn't have much time before leaving for Rwanda and the Tour itself, but it was apparent this was a special bunch of people.

There were stories everywhere we looked.

THE START OF THE STORY

Nicholas Leong, a professional photographer from Singapore, was curious as to why there were no black riders in the Tour de France. If black athletes could dominate world running, particularly the longer disciplines, why weren't they performing at the highest levels in cycling? So, in December 2005, at the end of the Singapore Marathon he booked an air ticket to Kenya with the aim of following the athletes back to their homes to uncover their secrets of success. Sure enough, landing at Nairobi and waiting at the baggage carousel, he bumped into several Kenyan athletes. He jumped into the same *matatu* (taxi) as them and ended up sitting next to the winner of the Singapore Marathon, Amos Matui, on their journey back home to Iten. Amos hadn't received his Singapore winnings yet so Nicholas lent him some money, and the first seeds of the Kenyan Riders were planted.

UNEARTHING THE TALENT

Over the next few years, Nicholas proceeded to learn about Kenyans and their marathon running success while based in its running capital, Iten. How could these lessons be translated into some form of cycling success? What cycling culture did Kenya and East Africa have? Was there any cycling talent? Without any coaching or sporting background, Nicholas resorted to some unusual techniques to answer these questions and find some cycling talent. He would take trips on bicycle *boda bodas*

Out of AFRICA



LEFT: South Africa is hanging on to its lead in African Cycling... just.

THE RACE ROUTINE

Jumping on the bandwagon rather late with the event organisers meant we had press passes but no media motorbikes. So Dale Hunt, our legendary cinematographer, and I went to market and each secured ourselves a *piki piki* and driver. *Piki pikis* are the local motorbike taxis, but their engines are never larger than 125cc. This, together with our inexperienced drivers, meant we would be in for an interesting ride, to say the least. Did I mention that people drive on the right-hand side of the road in Rwanda?

We settled into the race routine: wake up at around 4.30 am, pack the bags, ready the camera gear, smash breakfast, pack the backup team car and luggage truck, and hit the start. On the back of *piki pikis*, Dale and I would work our way through the convoy of team cars, commissaires, medical vehicles, press, policemen and fellow photographers and cameramen until we reached the peloton. When possible, we'd do a bit of tracking before leapfrogging this circus to set up a shot that would either reflect the state of the day's race, the beauty of the Rwandan landscape or the local communities that the race passed by. Then we'd wait for the riot of colour to come past, through the shot, with the inevitable car horns blaring and crowds cheering. And then we'd repeat the process all over again. We were shouted at by race directors, given long bottles from the team cars and plenty of *mzungu* attention by the roadside crowds. Dealing with the speed of the peloton, the stress of the convoy, the tetchy descents and hairpin bends as well as the idiosyncrasies

(bicycle taxis) and secretly time them while doing specific routes. He would attend black mamba races or local markets to see which milkmen were the most successful. He even offered lucrative prize money for the person who could break the record on a specific time trial route. These efforts unearthed some raw potential and Nicholas formed a cycle team by recruiting some of this talent and paying them to ride.

Fast forward to the back end of 2012: through trial and error, quirks of fate and the financial backing of a French businessman, the Kenyan cycling team now has an experienced head coach (Rob Higley, Australian), a hands-on directeur sportif (Simon Blake, Australian), a full-time soigneur (Paddy Muiruri, Kenyan), a full-time bike mechanic (Nixon Sewe, Kenyan), a numbers man (Ciarán Phádraig, Irish), a full-time cook (Bernard Malide, Kenyan) and a dedicated development officer in the form of Nicholas. This eclectic group manages a team of 12 semi-professional athletes who

have seen racing action in Europe, on the Tour du Gabon and on previous Tours of Rwanda. Bizarrely, the common thread that ties all these people together is that nobody started out the project with any road cycling or professional cycling experience. This is a collection of diverse people united by an ambitious goal: to replicate Kenya's athletics success in the world of professional road cycling.

GOING TO RWANDA

From time lapses to interviews, from running with the Kenyans to breaking bread in their homes, we had an intense, crazy five days of filming before the team left for the Tour of Rwanda. We would fly to Kigali but the team was not so lucky. Because of financial constraints, they would take a bus with all their gear on a 48-hour journey via Kampala, with the aim of reaching Kigali a couple of days before the racing for the Tour of Rwanda would commence. This reflected the matter-of-fact, no-nonsense, laid-back, can-do attitude of the whole team.

We would learn that they would overcome any obstacles, from corrupt customs officials to lousy accommodation, with the same attitude.

For this jaded South African, unimpressed with the state of service delivery and accountability in his home country, Kigali and Rwanda were a breath of fresh air. It became evident fairly quickly that this was a country looking forward rather than waiting for solutions. And this is why the Rwanda Cycling Federation could boast that it hosts probably the toughest and most prestigious road cycle race on the African continent. This was in evidence during the opening stage, the short Prologue. Starting at the national football stadium with complete road closures, a tropical thunderstorm, and packed streets with teams from all over the African continent as well as Canada, US and France, it set the tone for the rest of the tour. All in all, 3.5 million Rwandans turned out to watch this race over the next eight days.



of filming on DSLRs meant we were spent by the time we got to the finish arch. We'd capture some brief finish-line interviews and prize-givings and then head off in search of our team accommodation. Lunch, more interviews, backing up footage, dinner, charging batteries and cleaning equipment, cleaning ourselves and then fighting off

the mozzies was how we closed the day. Only to start afresh in the morning. It was a Groundhog Day whirlwind!

Despite all of this, I love bike racing. The energy, the imagery, the unpredictability and the unscripted stories that emerge from each day of racing during an event like this makes this sport addictive. Headline stories

included Darren Lill in his last major road tour and coming off the back of an illness, was able to mentor a South African team to victory in the individual and team general classifications (GC). JP van Zyl, the South African former World Cup-winning cyclist, managed the UCI Continental Development Team to three stage wins and navigates his

TOP LEFT: Recruitment, Kenyan style.

TOP RIGHT: Energy gels grow on trees here.

BOTTOM LEFT: Running continues to dominate.

BOTTOM RIGHT: National pride on a European frame.

TOURING

18-year-old Eritrean prodigy, Kudus Merhawi, into yellow with some brave and intelligent riding. But there were many minor tales that added colour to each day: chapatis, bananas and Nutella are the breakfast of champions, Lake Kivu's islands are breathtaking, *habari yako* ("how are you?") gets you a long way, Ethiopians love attacking and climbing (a deadly combo), thunderstorms occur at any time, shower curtains are extinct in East Africa and beer is often cheaper than bottled water.

THE KENYAN TEAM'S RACE AND REVELATION

There were plenty of stories in the Kenyan Riders camp, too. Day three started off well with a top five placing in the morning stage. However, this was overshadowed by the disqualification of Paul Agorir in the afternoon stage as he finished outside of the time limit because of two punctures and a lack of technical support from the absent neutral service vehicle at the back of the race. In an effort to pace Paul back to the peloton, the team captain Samwel Mwangi sacrificed his individual GC chances and dug deep into the red. Ill-timed punctures in the final seven kilometres of two different stages put paid to Suleiman Kangangi's GC hopes. Thanks to an over-enthusiastic supporter stepping into the road, Sammy Ekiru crashed heavily during the bunch sprint, 400 metres from the finish of Stage 6. Despite these setbacks, the team stayed focused and patient. Their sole aim was to finish in the top five of the team GC, thereby improving on their performance from the previous year's tour. And boy did they improve! No longer were they also-rans, hanging onto the tail of the peloton. Each day yielded strong performances as the team were well represented in the front group, often riding tempo and keeping their top individual GC rider, Muya Njoroge, out of trouble.



Njoroge was a revelation. The team knew of his potential but he took everyone else by surprise. The quiet, calm and unassuming nature of this diminutive rider belies the power, talent and tactical nous he possesses. He used to deliver milk by bicycle for a living and has only been part of the Kenyan Riders set-up for two years. In his first Tour of Rwanda, the 2010 edition, he crashed out of the race on a technical descent midway

All in all, 3,5 million Rwandans turned out to watch this race over eight days

through the race because of a lack of bike-handling skills. In his second tour, in 2011, one week before the race in Rwanda, he was hit by a car. The collision put him in hospital with a broken collarbone and out of the race before it had even started. In this year's race, Njoroge finished on the podium, third overall in the individual GC. It was the first Tour of Rwanda he had finished! If ever there was vindication for Nicholas' dream, this was it. Njoroge looked as if he belonged at the front of the race. He continually finished

in the top 10 and on the queen stage; if it weren't for a lack of knowledge about the final corner, he may well have won the stage instead of coming across the line in third place. To put his performance into perspective, he was the highest-placed black African rider in Africa's toughest road race, behind South Africans Darren Lill and Dylan Girdlestone, who have both ridden (or ride) on professional teams.

A RARE PRIVILEGE

In the last three weeks we witnessed African cycling through the lens of the Kenyan Riders team. From a Singaporean pipedream, with Australian coaching, French backing and African pragmatism, from humble beginnings (the team and its management still have no running water, and intermittent electricity at their base in Iten; they train on water, bananas and home-made cake; they ride on chromoly frames with mid-tier groupsets; and they

ABOVE: Hard racing was witnessed by large crowds.

have no official sponsorship) to taking their place on the podium at the Tour of Rwanda, it has been a privilege to be party to their journey. We have learnt so much from this team and their fellow African competitors about dignity, passion, sacrifice and the beauty of this sport. It has renewed our faith in cycling and taught us to look north of our own border with respect. Now we're eager to get back home to review the footage and get stuck into the post-production.

I can't help but feel Pablo Picasso's words resonate with this project: "The meaning of life is to find your gift. The purpose of life is to give it away." [ride](#)

SINAMATELLA PRODUCTIONS

James Walsh's production company, Sinamatella, put together *An Epic Tale*, a must-see for cycling fans even if the landscape has changed with the fall from grace of one of its main protagonists. Visit www.sinamatella.com for more details, and raid the piggy bank to help him spread more African cycling stories around the world.