



A Cycling

Success Story in Kenya

African competitors have been a rarity in the top levels of cycle racing, but that is changing and Kenyan riders are leading the way, says Patricia Scott.

John Njoroge was born in 1984 in a village 50 kms (kilometres) from Nyahururu. It was a nondescript African hamlet, seemingly isolated from both hope and calamity. He left school when he was still a child, vaguely aware that it had a connection to his family's poverty and some long forgotten tribal clashes that left schools in the area vacant. At some point in his young life, he was no longer a child and there was a need to work. He would wake up at 5 in the morning and cycle to the neighbouring farms, filling a milk container till it reached its 50-litre capacity, before heading off to the market.

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In his village, Njoroge became somewhat of an oddity, because unlike almost everyone who owned a bicycle, he pedalled not only out of necessity, but for pleasure. After the market run, and unencumbered by the weight of the swishing liquid, he would take the longer and hillier road home, always trying to go faster than he did the previous week. People ridiculed him. "What sense does it make for a man to ride in one direction, only to come back, with nothing, and for nothing?" At night, he would let those distractions drift away, to be replaced by images, romantic images, of a world of bicycle races and crowds, of hard men and the fierce European sun in summer. And always, he would be there, straining against his own weight up a mountain, climbing away from the peloton.

As you might expect of a man who left school early, John Njoroge speaks English haltingly. 'Always, in my mind is the bicycle. When I was younger, it was my livelihood, then my freedom and pleasure. Now it is my future.' Looking at him now, with his short and powerful physique, one can see the feral boy who had to hold his own among men. Where he comes from, it seems that anyone who looks like him can almost be counted on to be a world-class runner; the rural areas surrounding Nyahururu, a town situated 2,200 metres above sea level, supply, together with Eldoret, more than half the marathon winners in the world.

Half a world away in Singapore, Nicholas Leong, a commercial photographer and a cycling enthusiast, wondered if all that endurance talent in those isolated spots could be turned to cycling. He had watched the Tour de France since childhood, and had seen black players becoming ever more common at the highest levels in other sports. 'I just expected it would happen in cycling, and soon, I was in my late 30s, and it still hadn't happened.' So he wrote to a dozen teams, telling them to go there to seek out talent. One replied, and it was a 'sympathetic no'. So Leong decided to test his hunch out for himself.

Opposite: Motorpacing in France. John Njoroge is centre, in yellow.

He waited for the Singapore Marathon, and bought a flight to Nairobi on the night after the run, gambling rightly that all the Kenyan athletes would be on it. He approached them at the airport and said, "Wherever you're going, I'm going with you."

Leong went with a plan. Without any evidence, he just knew that an excellent climbing specialist lived among the marathoners, he was sure he would find him. Then he would give him a bike and take him to the most famous climb in the Tour de France, Alpe d'Huez. A few years earlier, Lance Armstrong had ridden up the mountain in 37 minutes 36 seconds.

That simple plan took two years. In August 2008, his first sponsored rider rode up Alpe d'Huez in 42

would equip the best cyclists with good race bikes and send them abroad for competitions.

Leong's recruitment process included the obligatory bicycle races, but also adventures into unlikely areas like Turkana-land and treks into forests to look for illegal woodcutters who would ferry their contraband on bicycles along under-used pathways. And on these journeys, Leong would hear of the mad milkman who rode more than he needed to.

The other men he found were just as hard. Until 70 years ago - the span of an old man's life - the pastoral tribes in the area lived in forests, hunting game and



Below: A rare sight in Europe. African cyclists at the foot of the Pyrenees.



minutes 10 seconds. Publicity about the feat helped to secure investment from a French hedge fund manager, enabling Leong to set up the Kenyan Riders project and open a full-time training camp in Iten, modelled along the lines of numerous high-altitude running camps in the area.

Everything since has taken longer than anyone initially expected. Until Kenyan Riders was established, cycling in Kenya clustered around the Nairobi area, where *mzungus* would ride fancy bikes and perhaps sponsor the odd African, and the national federation

herding cattle. They feuded with the Maasai, running hundreds of kilometres to the Maasai Mara and further afield, on cattle raids. With modernisation and a seven-fold increase in population, those tribes turned to farming, but what remained was the magnificent physiology that generations of cattle raids had produced.

It seemed to Leong that the way to approach the cycling project was to build on what he found, and not impose European training methods on them. 'All around me are the finest endurance specimens on earth. They have

been hardened by the cattle raids and the African sun, and they got here without me. It seems to me that our job is to apprehend the rhythms of African life - the languorous lulls when the sun is hottest, the intense labour-and identify and enhance the most important elements of this life. The evolutionary model that has got them here is indifferent and unflinching, and we ignore it to our detriment.'

That would prove tricky. The bicycle is an invention of the industrial revolution. A person plants himself on a seat, leans forward and turns his legs in circles, a motion that has no practical application in nature. 'It's almost mythical. Off the *shamba*, we get guys who can climb mountains very quickly. But they need to harmonise with this piece of technology, and innovative methods - African methods - need to be developed here.' The staff on board is eclectic. 'Our two coaches on the ground are Australians who come from a running and outdoor adventure background. We have an Irish exercise coach as well. It's a good mix, and we're making progress.'

The first major test for the team took place in July of 2011. Kenyan Riders went to France for the Etape du Tour. It was an amateur race that replicated the most iconic climbing stage of that year's Tour de France. There were 10,000 participants, and one-tenth of them were credible amateurs who took the race very seriously.

And Kenyan Riders finished second out of more than 70 teams. If not an outright victory, it showcased their potential to the world.

The race started with two massive climbs, and the Kenyans immediately took the lead. Up the second climb, the Kenyan cyclists rode with such relentless force and determination, the group of the first thousand riders had whittled to about 30. Ultimately, their inexperience showed. They had not paced themselves with sufficient precision, and Njoroge finished first among the Kenyans, in 13th place.

In 2012, they returned to Europe. This time for redemption - and Haute Route, which bills itself as 'the toughest and highest' amateur race in the world. In seven days of racing, cyclists would climb the equivalent of Mt. Everest 2 ½ times. There would be no mistakes. John Njoroge, the feral little milkman, was in the mix from the start, finishing on the podium on every stage. And Kenyan Riders finished 2nd out of more than 70 teams. If not an outright victory, it showcased their potential to the world.

That potential is rooted in the cyclists themselves. Every one of them has a story to tell, of herding cows for \$12 a month or hauling 95-kilogramme bags of maize up hills. It is a life of depredation, but



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Above:
Kenyan Riders
at the summit
of Col d'Aspin.

with it comes a fearlessness, because whatever life brings must simply be borne, and in this perverse way, the suffering on a bicycle is almost a relief.

For John Njoroge, a deeply religious man, all things are God's will. Fatalism in Africa is an indispensable quality for enduring hardship. He has assimilated a simple personal truth: that in life is a discernible order, a temporal and divine one, an unspoken but well-understood system of fate, suffering, sacrifice, victory and disappointment. As a young man, he ventured into the world believing that things are as they seem; that a man's story begins when he is born and his relations with others begin when he meets them. And in that simplicity, one sees life in the round.

'There's no reason to do this other than to race professionally at the highest levels one day. Kenyans know how to win, and they know how to suffer. I have complete faith in the project and everyone in it, from the cyclists to the staff to the investor. And in myself. It really is a matter of time.'

CYCLING

Since its inception, cycling and doping have been joined at the hip by the almost impossible feats that hard men were expected to endure on the bicycle and the desperate need of ordinary men to believe in that impossibility.

And so, over the decades, the dance of deception has evolved. On the one side, the fans, lavish with their adoration, laying flowers along the roads where their heroes rode, but also with the potential for unblinking venom at the first hint of betrayal.

Then too the strange sub-culture of the cyclists, with their mild disdain for the fans, their fierce and unstinting loyalty to each other, their own particular argot: a sub-culture that policed itself with its own code of honour, its *omerta* – the Mafia code of silence – and brooked no dissent.

The suffering on a bicycle is made to seem romantic when spun through the loom of a starry-eyed fan. And hardship, that great leveller, was the glue that brought fan and cyclists together.

In recent years, the façade has been crumbling. After many false starts, cycling might actually be cleaning itself up. In all of this is a golden opportunity for African cyclists.

There are almost no doping scandals attached to African distance running. Cyclists come into the sport as outsiders to that strange cycling sub-culture. And at least in Kenya, as insiders of another culture, a winning culture of their distance running contemporaries, one that places at its bedrock honesty, hard work, fair play, self-belief...values that seem to belong to another almost more innocent time.

The men in Africa on bicycles are pioneers on a great sporting and human adventure.