

Tour of Rwanda wants to take Africa cycling up a gear

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KIGALI - Three years ago Janvier Hadi pedalled a single speed bicycle taxi: this week he won the prologue of the Tour of Rwanda, a success mirroring the growth of cycling in his country.

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Born into a family of modest farmers, the 23-year old took up the sport seriously after taking part in a race in the south Rwandan town of Butare.

"I heard there was a race for a single speed bike... it was like a test and I won, I got first place," he told AFP.

"At first I thought that because I was young I didn't have the strength like some of the others.. but when I beat them, I thought finally, I can do this cycling," he said smiling, and proudly wearing his winner's yellow jersey after his win in the capital Kigali.

Cycling in Rwanda, as in the rest of Africa, is growing as a sport.

"We started with five riders and five-speed cycles from the 1980s, but most of the gears were not working, they were wrecks," said Jonathan Boyer, the first American to have raced the Tour de France in 1981, and who in 2006 became the first coach of Team Rwanda.

Cycling in Rwanda "grows gradually," said Boyer, explaining that like Hadi, many racers are former bicycle taxi drivers, who transport people and goods, building strong muscles pedalling up Rwanda's rolling hills.

The Rwanda Cycling Federation has around a hundred members.

- One of Africa's toughest races -

"Cycling in Rwanda is still very young," said federation president Aimable Bayingana.

"We have not really a long history of cycling, we are building the sport, evolving at the same time as the Tour of Rwanda."

In June, the country opened a training centre in the northern town of Musanze with modern equipment, which is hoped to become a regional training centre for African cycling. The Tour of Rwanda is gradually gaining a place as a key race on the continent.

Experts say the tour of Rwanda -- dubbed the land of "a thousand hills" -- is one of the toughest races in Africa.

Riders on the eight day tour, which finishes Sunday, battle over 934 kilometres (580 miles) and climbing some 19,500 metres (64,000 feet) with peaks rising to 2,500 metres (8,200 feet) high. Cyclists race up and down through coffee, tea and banana plantations.

"This is a country where the hills are really tough," said Cameroonian competitor Damien Tekou. "But we came to win."

Organizers estimate over two million spectators will see the race, nearly a fifth of Rwanda's 11 million

people.

The race's reputation is growing, with 14 teams taking part this year, with cyclists from across the continent -- including Algeria, Burundi, Morocco, Eritrea, Ethiopia -- as well as from Europe too, from France, Germany and Switzerland.

"When we compete with Europeans here it means that we African are developing," added Tekou, adding his dream was the continent would soon rise up the ranks on a wider international stage.

- Changing image of Rwanda -

Yves Beau from the team Bike Aid -- which include Eritrean cyclist Mekseb Debesay, who is in the running to win the Africa tour ranking of the International Cycling Union -- say the sport is becoming more organised.

There are increasing numbers of competitions held each year across the continent, he notes.

But while for now African cyclists are sometimes hampered by a lack of often expensive kits and the best cycles, he believes things will improve in the future.

"I think they really have the qualities to make good cyclists," Beau said.

Boyer points not only to Rwanda, but to Ethiopia and Eritrea, which he said have a large pool of talent, although tapping that will require serious training and investment.

For Rwanda, it offers more than the sporting race alone.

Hadi says it provides a different image of Rwanda abroad than just the memories of the 1994 genocide when an estimated 800,000 people were killed in just 100 days.

"We must move forward, to change the image of the country, so that people think not just of genocide but say, 'Rwanda has good cyclists,'" he said.

"Like in Kenya, people talk about their marathon runners, so in Rwanda we in Rwanda we have strong riders."