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JOURNAL RIDERS

Dan Craven's New Round

Globetrotting Namibian wins in Cameroon. Next stop, Germany.**WORDS**

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PHOTOGRAPHS

Bike Aid

At the 2010 British national road championships in Barley, Namibian Dan Craven and Kiwi Jack Bauer set up a barbecue halfway up the stupidly hard climb out of the village on a pleasantly hot day.

The lure of cold beers and the smell of freshly cooked meat was too much for some of the bunch. A steady stream of the disgruntled joined the ineligible duo at the roadside. It was only the second lap but the race was effectively over, Team Sky having smashed the rest all over the Lancashire countryside. Grateful riders pulled in for a slug of lager, only too aware of the gulf in ability between WorldTour and UK domestic level. It was a sobering moment for some, despite the alcohol.

Lured by the burgers and beers myself, I talked to Bauer about his plans for the future and he seemed pretty clued up. It was a small scene in Britain, he said, and one where he was determined not to get trapped. Sure enough, a year and a bit later, he secured a contract with Garmin-Sharp and was on his way.

Craven, who came to Britain as African champion, never quite made it away from these islands, despite his ability. Illness and injury seemed to follow him around. Finally, in the middle of last year, working in conjunction with Garmin-Sharp chiro Matt Rabin, they got to what they believe is the root of the Namibian's troubles: a virus picked up at the Tour of Qinghai Lake... in 2009.

Seemingly at the end of the line in pro cycling and without contract for 2014 following a year



with Synergy Baku, Craven determined to come back. He still has a point to prove. He is better than the last few years suggest.

First stop: Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, December, 2013, to attempt to retrieve his African crown. Craven and his wild man beard finished one step away from top spot, the filling in an Eritrean sandwich. Behind him, the young rider signed to MTN-Qhubeka, tipped to go far by those in the know in Africa: Merhawi Kudus. Heading the podium, Tesfom Okbamariam.

Of the emerging cycling nations in Africa, the Eritreans seem to be progressing fastest. Did they turn over the experienced pro? "No, I kind of worked *them* over," Craven maintains. "I attacked with 3km to go and dropped them, but Kudus rode Tesfon back onto my wheel. Kudus dropped

off and was about to hit me with a flyer, but I saw him and he thought again. Tesfom did the right thing in the end, though.

“They still have a lot to learn technically. But I have done the African champs four times between 2006 and 2013. If you compare how the level has changed in those years, it’s crazy. In 2006, it was South Africans, one Mauritius, and Namibians. And now, Namibia is blown out of the water as a team, in comparison to the Eritreans, Ethiopians and Moroccans. It has improved every year. And the Rwandans have been going since 2006, but in the last half year or so, they have made a great leap.”

And what of the still-ambitious Namibian? Craven won the eight-stage Tour of Cameroon two weeks ago, a big boost to morale. (Dave Clarke, featured in [issue 41](#), won in Cameroon in 2009.) Now he heads to Germany to hook up with a first year Continental team, Bike Aid. “They are a group of people who formed a social cycling club that expanded to an elite racing team as well. They are not as strong as Baku or some of the British Conti teams, but it’s got that aid aspect to it, so we’ve got a guy from Togo on the team, and one from Eritrea, and as I speak German, they squeezed me in too.”

All being well, Craven hopes to get a couple of up-and-coming Namibians into the Bike Aid set-up for the following season. But in the meantime: “After last year’s virus, I am here to prove a point.”

The hirsute Craven has trimmed the beard back somewhat. I think he means business.

Part one of MTN-Qhubeka appeared in [issue 45](#). Part two will feature in issue 46, coming soon.

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