

## Eritrea's Teshome aims to get the best out of his journey to Qatar



Eritrea's Meron Teshome, 23, arrived in Qatar as part of Germany's Stradalli–Bike Aid team and has stayed back to compete in Individual Time Trial and the Elite Men's Road Race.

Eritrean Meron Teshome has a dream — to make it big in the world of European cycling. Coming from an African country, where the sport is still in its infancy, he has had to face a lot of challenges. But that has only made him even more determined to succeed. The 23-year-old arrived in Qatar as part of Germany's Stradalli–Bike Aid team and competed in the Team Time Trial of the UCI Road World Championships Doha 2016. Although his team finished a distant 17th, it was still a great achievement for the side. Teshome was quite happy with the way his team performed at the UCI Road World Championships.

"I think my team did wonderfully well in Doha. We are a small group and do not have the budget of many bigger teams. We did our best under the circumstances. Personally, I felt the race was OK because the weather was very similar to what we have in Eritrea," he said.

"While the Stradelli Bike-Aid team already left Qatar, I am staying back to compete in Individual Time Trial (October 12) and the Elite Men's Road Race (October 16) in Eritrean colours. I'm so looking forward to the experience," he said.

The idea behind Bike Aid itself is quite unique. Bike Aid is a cycling community that was founded in 2005, in Germany, as a non-profit organisation.

One of the biggest such unofficial communities in the world, they operate a Third Division team that competes in small races. Earlier this year, the team signed a three-year deal with Stradelli Cycles and that has given wings to their dreams.

Meron spoke about how his association with the team changed his life for the better.

"Cycling is quite popular in Eritrea and I began my riding career in 2008. My uncle was an Olympic competitor and that motivated me. I became the Eritrean champion in 2013 and joined the national team a year later. Soon after, I got a contract with Bike Aid and my life has never been the same again," he said.

“Bike Aid, although small, takes part in many big races. It was a huge step up for me. Suddenly, I found myself competing in higher-profile races, in different countries. My presence in Doha itself is unbelievable. I am only getting used to the idea that I took part in a UCI Road World Championships. Life is good right now,” he said.

He rued the situation holding Eritrea back from realising its full potential.

“We have some great riders in my country. However, there are some major issues holding us back from making it big in European cycling. I am 100 percent sure that if Eritrea did not face problems with issuance of visas, we could have at least two or three riders in world tour teams. Sponsorship is another big issue. I am hopeful all that will change in the future,” said the rider.

Teshome, who hopes to become a classics rider like Tom Boonen, said his ultimate dream was to ride the European classic races.

“Most Eritrean riders like stage races and mountain climbs. But my style is different and so are my dreams. I am best suited for one-day classic races. I am hoping to regularly ride at that level within the next five years,” he said.

He recalled some of his most memorable races.

“I took stages in the Tour of Rwanda and Tour of Eritrea, in addition to winning the Eritrean National Championships. I was also Individual Time Trial champion at the 2015 African Games and a member of the Eritrean team which won Team Time Trial at the 2013 African Continental Championships.

“The stage win in Tour of Rwanda holds a special place in my mind as it was a mountainous course. I climbed almost 2,000m during the stage. Winning it was a special feeling. The African Games win was also memorable as it proved I was on the right path to becoming a good time trial rider,” he said.

Teshome, who has had to fight extra hard to make an impact, is a name we are likely to keep hearing in the coming days.