

Out of Africa: How MTN-Qhubeka's Model May Change Pro Cycling

The South African-based MTN-Qhubeka team has received a good deal of press attention this year, with its off-season signings of Tyler Farrar, Edvald Boassen Hagen, and Matt Goss among others, and particularly with its ground-breaking invitation to participate in this year's Tour de France. But apart from being the first African-registered team to earn a spot for the Tour's starting line, and its notable racing successes over the last few years, the team is also driven by a different and unique philosophy – one which may eventually impact pro cycling at the highest level, and help to evolve the sport towards a more sustainable model.

Team founder and owner Douglas Ryder sees his team as pioneering the future of African cycling in a way that will lead to more UCI events on the continent, and eventually to more African riders having the opportunity to race on top global teams. “If our success and visibility can help expose the incredible talent and people from this continent, we will help to drive interest and investment in Africa on a broader scale,” says Ryder. By focusing his team on developing and showcasing African talent, Ryder sees no reason why every WorldTour and Pro Continental team shouldn't include African riders in the not-too-distant future. In time, Ryder believes that this nascent program has the power to transform cycling, just like African athletes transformed endurance road running in the 1960s and 1970s.

The foundation for this team's success was laid down in the early 2000s. Ryder began to identify the athletes, secure the financial and sponsorship partners and set up relationships with the key people necessary for starting to build a future bridge to the European and WorldTour level of racing. The team started as a Continental Team in 2007 with MTN and Microsoft as the key sponsors. MTN is a major South African telecommunications company, which provides telephone and wireless services to over 200 million people in Africa and the Middle East, and has been the key financial partner for the team for the past eight years. Team management and the company forged a very close relationship. “I see them almost weekly,” says Ryder. MTN has supported cycling at many different levels in South Africa from the pro team down to local cycling clubs and events. As its riders performed better, and as the team became more ready to take on the international world of cycling, they were able to attract a broader array of potential sponsors.

When Samsung signed on as a co-sponsor three years ago, additional funds from this global electronics and manufacturing giant enabled the team to make the jump to the Pro Continental ranking. And since MTN and Samsung work very closely together in South Africa, this ensures that they are both strongly focused on gaining maximum leverage out of the team sponsorship.

“Perhaps because we have come from a different or ‘foreign’ place, relative to the historical origins of most other cycling teams,” says Ryder, “we have been able to approach our sponsors in a different way than many teams – to treat them more as a true partner. In turn, they feel more a part of the team; they are included in many team decisions and are not held at an arm's length, as is the case in many more traditional teams.”

In 2011, the team created a new relationship with the Qhubeka bicycle charity. Qhubeka is a Zulu word that means “to move forward,” and the organization aims to help rural communities progress by donating bicycles to children in return for work done to improve their environment and their community. Perhaps unique among pro cycling teams, Qhubeka is a named partner but does not provide any funding to the team. Instead, the team provides a platform for Qhubeka’s rural initiatives by donating the space and providing the exposure that would usually be occupied by a team sponsor. “By displaying the Qhubeka logo on our jerseys and carrying the charity’s mission in our hearts,” says Ryder, “we hope, in some small way, to be able promote greater visibility and awareness of the potential of the African continent.

This shift in the sponsorship model is different from any other in professional cycling. Rather than relying on publicity and viewership to inspire its target market, the team seeks to empower a new generation of riders by providing the very thing that drives participation in the sport: bicycles. What’s more, the gift of mobility – particularly to kids in rural and under-served areas of Africa – helps to improve education, economic, and healthcare opportunities by reducing the travel barriers between people. “And as more African kids get more bikes,” adds Ryder, “we will be able to develop more African talent at the top professional level.”

Ryder joined up with the Scotsman Brian Smith early on in the venture. Smith is currently the General Manager of the team, and a friend since the mid-1990s when they both raced together on the American Plymouth team. Dr. Carol Austin is the Head of Medical Support, and German Jens Zemke is Head of Performance; both have been influential in helping the team’s African riders to adapt to the rigors of training and racing at the European professional level. Veit Hammer heads up the Public Relations and Marketing efforts, and finally, Cervelo founder Gerard Vroomen advises on the marketing strategy for the team. All in all, the organization employs 24 riders and some 38 staff – an unusually high ratio of staff, which includes a general manager, four directeurs sportif, seven soigneurs, seven mechanics, two bus drivers, three service course managers, three coaches, three doctors, one nutritionist, three marketing and PR officials, and six in finance and general administration.

The team attracted a great deal of attention for its high-profile signings during this last off-season. “With our jump to the Pro Conti level,” says Ryder, “it was also important to bring in some race winners, so that we can stay in that top echelon of teams.” In addition to Farrar, Goss and Boassen Hagen, the team also signed Theo Bos, Serge Pauwels, Steve Cummings, and Matt Brammeier. But the strategy of bringing in prominent international riders is to not only to win more races and garner attention; it is also to mentor a growing group of African riders. “These more experienced international riders can help develop African riders, through their knowledge and understanding of top-level pro racing, helping to ‘fast-track’ the developing contingent of local African riders.”

A very similar transfer of experience from European professionals to younger riders was a major driver in the success of the first all-American team, 7-Eleven, in the late 1980s, and this effect could spark the same kind of growth for MTN-Qhubeka. It is also Ryder’s intent is that at least fifty percent of his riders will come from the African continent. The current roster includes the talented Eritrean riders Natnael Burhane and Merhawi Kudus, South African Louis Meintjes and the Rwandan Adrien Niyonshuti, who was featured in the recent film “Rising From Ashes.”

Ryder believes that it won't be long before the baton will move from his imported corps of international riders to the African riders, and "it will be the African riders who will be standing on the podium next to the world's great riders."

From a competitive perspective, the team enjoyed a rapid leap in international recognition in the spring of 2013 when newly-recruited German rider Gerald Ciolek took a surprising win at Milan San Remo. Finishing all nine riders (including six riders from Africa) at the 2014 Vuelta was obviously another big accomplishment – something only five other teams were able to do. "This really showed the guts and determination of our riders," says Ryder. Other highlights in 2014 included best young rider jersey and 5th overall for Louis Meintjes in the Giro del Trentino, and best young rider jersey and 5th overall for Merhawi Kudus in the Route du Sud (shortly after returning from a broken collarbone sustained at the Tour of Turkey.)

From a racing perspective, "we've had a pretty consistent and clear strategy over the past several years," says Ryder. "First, we wanted to become the best team in South Africa, then the best team in Africa, and then be able take on the best teams in the world. So we spent five years as a Continental team and now three years as a Pro Continental team. Obviously, the next step is for us become the first ever African-registered WorldTour team. This will create even more opportunities for riders from the African continent to get exposed to the highest levels of cycling – that's what we are all working toward."

Ryder has set several key milestones for what he would consider a successful 2015 season. Looking ahead, these include a stage win or a competition jersey win in one of the Grand Tours, a victory in a week-long stage race, a spring classic, and twenty or so total UCI-level victories. Additionally, he emphasizes that the team wants to continue raising more and more significant awareness and funds for Qhubeka. Asked about any other longer-term goals for the future, Ryder laughs and says he's been too busy trying to catch his breath, after the recent Tour announcement, to think about much else.

MTN-Qhubeka also takes a slightly different approach to engaging its fans and supporters. The core concept of this strategy revolves around the team's training location and camp in Lucca, Tuscany, where most of its riders live during the season. With so many of our riders and staff residing there, says Ryder, "it is an opportunity for fans to visit the region and come and ride with the team at any time during the year." Team advisor Vroomen adds further insight into the benefits of this model; "in other sports, the athletes live and train near the stadium where they play or in the region where the team is from, so why not follow a similar model in cycling?"

"Cycling is a sport that relies on precise team-work and split-second decisions, and teammates can only learn how to do this successfully if they live and train together," says Ryder. "The environment we have created in Lucca is like a permanent training camp; it helps develop our competitive edge on the bike, as well as off the bike in terms of fans and partner engagement."

When questioned on the ever-present challenge of preventing doping in pro cycling, Ryder mentions several points with respect to the team's systematic approach to maintaining a clean team. "Our rider monitoring and evaluation is something we take very seriously." In addition to the central location of the team's training center, each rider on the team receives the same

level of support and treatment from the performance and medical support staff – something which Ryder says does not always happen on pro cycling teams. “We test our riders regularly, we maintain our whereabouts program very transparently, and we obviously support all the testing protocols laid down by the governing body of the sport.” Ryder strongly believes that all riders must be treated equally – that it’s important to get the best out of all of his people. “It’s a team,” he says, “and a team is only as strong as its weakest link.” Ryder says that he does not hire anyone that has had a doping sanction in the past. “Why should people who cheated in the past continue to earn their living in pro cycling now?” asks Ryder. “It’s not fair.”

But perhaps the biggest differentiator from the doping perspective is that the MTN-Qhubeka team has a different or broader sense of purpose; it doesn’t seem to be quite as single-mindedly focused on winning at all costs, as is the case with many teams. “We don’t measure ourselves or our progress solely on winning bike races,” says Ryder. “Sure, winning more races helps us grow our brand, and it helps the Qhubeka charity and our partners leverage their investments. But our riders aren’t threatened with their jobs if they have a bad race or a bad day,” he says.

Ryder believes that this strategy provides two clear advantages over the longer term: it helps the riders feel more at home and relaxed, but it also helps them become better and more confident racers. As the team invests more time working with its partners, participating in Qhubeka events or helping with fundraising events, it builds greater pride in the team and its mission to improve communities. For example, says Ryder, “our guys that represented the South African National team at the recent African Championships spent a day with Qhubeka, World Bicycle Relief and World Vision in a community just two days before the road race – and they ended up taking the first four places in the road race. Those riders told me they were so inspired that it gave them extra motivation in the race to do more and work together. We’re trying to create an environment where riders don’t feel the need to dope.”

Indeed, Ryder and his colleagues have a different overall philosophy and perhaps broader perspective on what the role of sports team should be – and the way in which he hopes MTN-Qhubeka can impact the overall sport of pro cycling. “Sports teams are typically rather one-dimensional: competing with each other for the same victories and media exposure to create value for their sponsors,” says Ryder. “While this is important, it doesn’t necessarily create long-term or sustainable partnerships. Our involvement with Qhubeka goes back to our strategy of showcasing and building African talent – it’s good for Africa, but it will also be good for our team.”

More generally, Ryder hopes that the team can play a role in promoting the economic potential of Africa – a continent that often seems invisible to much of the rest of the world, and sometimes seems to have so little, but which simultaneously is rich with opportunity. “The people are what make this continent – their drive to succeed and provide a greater economic future for their families, communities and country,” says Ryder. “For us to have a greater pool of talent to choose from and for there to be competition out there, and hence we need to help get bicycles to as many young kids out there as we can, as fast as possible,” says Ryder. “Our team will provide the heroes and the icons to look up to – and Qhubeka will provide the bicycles – so that aspiring youngsters across Africa will have the opportunity to follow in their footsteps. The Tour

de France will give us the biggest opportunity yet to tell our story to millions of people, people who can make a real difference to the future of Africa.”

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Steve Maxwell and Joe Harris, February 23, 2015