

What Next for Africa's Team Qhubeka-Nexthash?

On September 30, unable to find sufficient future sponsorship funds to meet an October filing deadline for the 2022 UCI WorldTour, [Qhubeka-Nexthash](#) team principal Doug Ryder [released his riders](#) from their contractual commitments to the squad.

Several were quick to move on to other teams, including top riders Victor Campenaerts [back to Lotto-Soudal](#) and Giacomo Nizzolo [off to Israel Start-Up Nation](#). Meanwhile, Ryder continues his struggle to nail down new sponsors and keep the South Africa-based team afloat at the WorldTour level.

Ryder spoke with [The Outer Line](#) on October 20, laying out the team's situation and plans.

"We have basically been working non-stop since September of 2019 [when title sponsor NTT pulled out] to secure our longer-term future," says Ryder. "We've fought through the challenges of COVID, and we've been able to bring some new partners into the team. We didn't quite meet the October 15 deadline, but we are in deep discussions with a couple of partners, and we are optimistic about being able to remain at the WT level."

Ryder says that the UCI has been flexible and very supportive of the team staying at the WT level, particularly with the [recent announcement](#) that the UCI's world road championships will be held on African soil in 2025, and given the team's instrumental record in promoting African cycling and developing top-level African talent—sometimes with recruits racing for the UCI World Cycling Center's developmental team.

With its longstanding commitment to Qhubeka (the African bicycle charity) and a focus on building and developing African racers, Ryder's team has always had a unique position and objective relative to the rest of the pro cycling community.

"We try to measure ourselves by our 'return on impact'—not just our return on investment or our 'return on ego' like some of the other teams," said Ryder. "It's part of our heritage and our *ubuntu* culture—'I am, because we are.'"

Ryder continued. "I was with [IOC president] Thomas Bach earlier this year, and he thanked us for being the only first-division team in any Olympic sport on the African continent."

Although the team currently sits at the foot of the UCI team rankings, it has had its moments of competitive success, challenging that oft-repeated but not entirely accurate maxim that [money is everything](#) in pro cycling. Despite having one of the lowest budgets in the WorldTour, Ryder's teams have achieved notable successes over the years.

Earlier this season, Campenaerts, Nizzolo, and Mauro Schmid all picked up unexpected stage wins in just one week at the Giro d'Italia. Ryder believes that the team has had a pretty good rider development program even though it doesn't get much credit for it. "We've punched way above weight," he said.

So, given the unique mission and philosophy it brings to the WorldTour and its record of competitive success, it seems peculiar and unmerited that the team is having such a hard time finding sponsorship.

The experience seems akin to that of Bob Stapleton's once highly successful High Road team that, despite a dedication to clean cycling and good success on the road, was ultimately unable to find sponsorship after the 2011 season. Ryder noted the team did enjoy MTN as a sponsor for eight years, while telecom giant NTT was with the team for six years.

“We have had some good and longer-lasting partnership arrangements, but we have obviously suffered the last couple years,” he said.

However, besides COVID making the sponsorship hunt more challenging, Ryder points to the increasing visibility and sponsorship opportunities that global companies have in other areas of entertainment, including online gaming and music.

Ryder says he laments inaccurate media reports about the team’s financial status and sponsorship situation that haven’t helped things. With respect to questions about controversial sponsor NextHash, Ryder admitted to a few ups-and-downs, but indicated that many of the recent media speculations about the viability of that company are inaccurate and also damaging to the team.

“The company [NextHash] went through the full review process with the UCI and they are currently doing what they committed to do,” he said.

In terms of the minimum budget needed to support a team in the WorldTour, Ryder said, “Well, you’ve got 27 riders, let’s say at an average salary of \$100K, so right there is \$2.7 million. Then it costs about \$4 or \$5 million in operating costs to run the logistics and management of the team. So, I’d say an absolute minimum level would be about \$6.5 to \$7 million.”

For reference, there are probably a few second-tier ProTeams that run on budgets approaching that size, but they typically employ fewer riders and at lower salaries.

“There are some very good and honorable teams operating at the ProTeam level, and we’ve had discussions with some of them,” said Ryder. “In some ways, they could be a great fit for us, but we don’t have anything in the works right at the moment.”

He also dispenses with rumors connecting the team to Canadian sponsor [Premier Tech, which recently cut its ties with Team Astana](#) and is rumored to be looking for a new team to support. According to Ryder, Premier Tech has decided to “take a sabbatical” and sit back to consider its options.

Ryder believes that the planned 2025 road worlds in Rwanda could be a transformative moment in African cycling. “All sports start with an iconic event that happens locally, that drives people to get involved, that opens doors. When you bring an event like this to Africa, and people can see it and feel it, it will drive a massive amount of interest and it will help us develop greater talent.”

Despite the challenges, Ryder projects confidence that he will be able to put together the funds to keep the team alive. While he has already lost some top riders, he is confident about being able to find rider talent, even at this late date.

“There is so much young talent out there. This younger generation is much more aggressive. If we give them the chance, they will raise their hands. Of course, we are very sad to lose Campenaerts, Nizzolo, and [Fabio] Aru [who has retired], but we will find new talent.”

Ryder is very straightforward about the fact that time is running out for his team. “The bottom line is, we have until about mid-November to get things pulled together,” he said.

“It will be a very sad day if this team can’t survive,” Ryder added. “Maybe we have been a bit ahead of our time, but I believe we have done some amazing things; a lot of teams talk about things but we actually do them. We’ve always been consistent in terms of our message — how bicycles can affect Africa. We wanted to achieve at the highest level...and to take African riders to the highest level.”

But at the end of the day, Ryder concludes, “this sport is not just about money. Money helps, but the passion sits inside you. We can succeed at that level without the big money.”

Written by Steve Maxwell, October 21st, 2021