

The Tour of RWANDA

Part One

words Tom Southam photographs Ben Ingham

"Music is, to me, proof of the existence of God. It is so extraordinarily full of magic, and in tough times of my life I can listen to music and it makes such a difference."

Kurt Vonnegut

The Tour of Rwanda has a publicity caravan. As you might imagine, it is not the grotesque affair that precludes races like the Tour de France, spewing out cheap sweets and souvenirs that are destined to be eaten or forgotten within seconds. In Rwanda there are no sponsors' vehicles at all. Instead the race organisers have secured the services of a

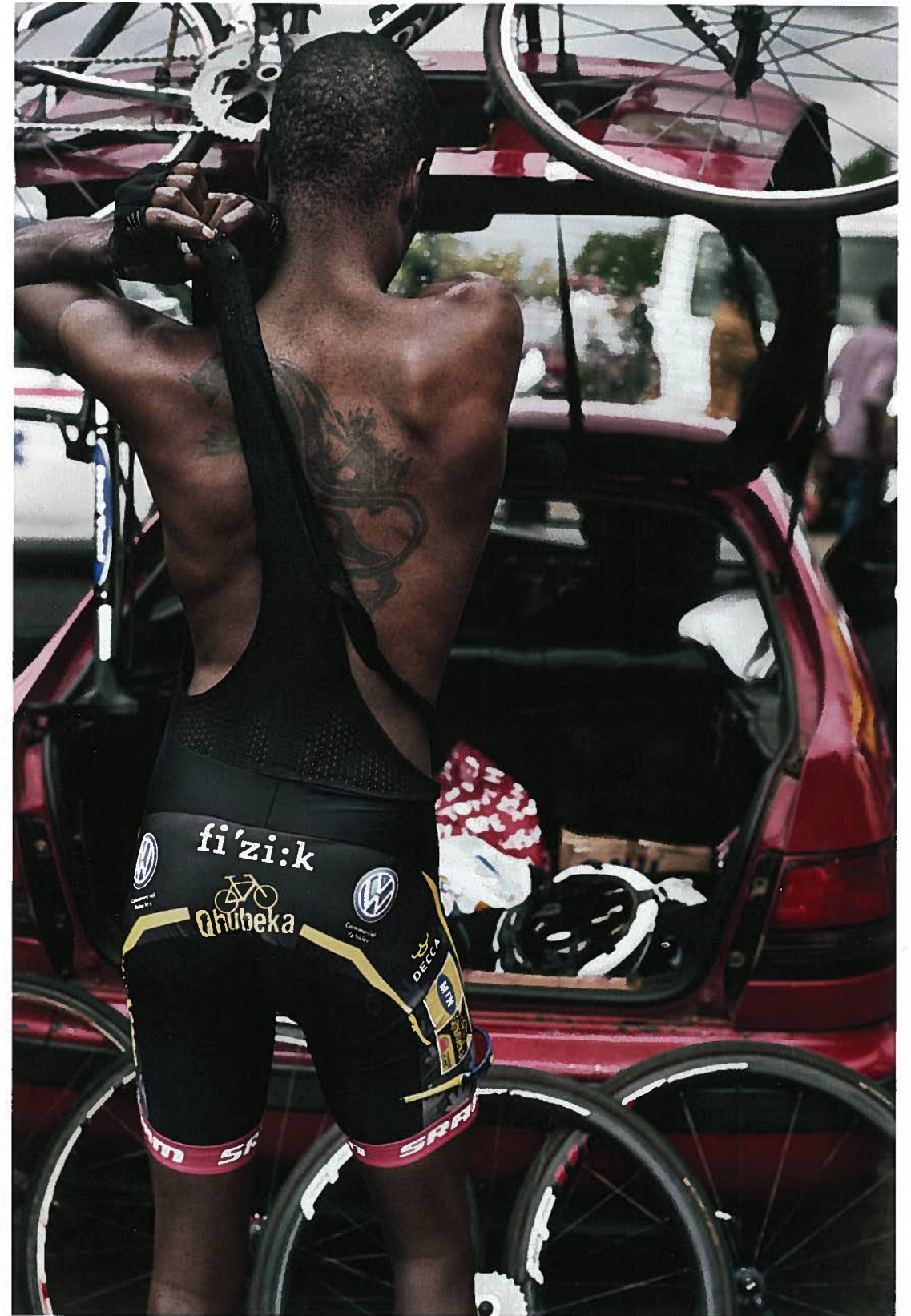
local sound system crew, comprising one MC and a few of his mates jammed into a pick-up truck with a PA system and an 8ft speaker stack piled on the back.

As this mobile disco drives through the countryside of Rwanda, it pumps out the message that the Tour is on its way by playing a blend of ragga-tinged R&B tunes at full volume at 30 miles an hour. As this one vehicle caravan speeds along something quite remarkable happens: people lose the ability to stand still.

Rwanda is a small, densely populated country with a disproportionately young

population. No matter where you go there are children by the side of the road. Some work in the tiny terraced fields that cover every inch of the rolling hillsides. Some play by the road. Some just sit or wait around. Many travel on foot to their destination, carrying siblings on their backs or balancing water containers on their heads.

Whatever people are doing – and even though they are only ever exposed to the briefest moments of music – the passing of the publicity caravan makes each and every single girl, boy, and infant start dancing. Kids come sprinting across fields





from hundreds of metres away, ploughing through thick grass or dropping off sheer embankments to break into dance and enjoy their moment of what looks to be total and irresistible joyous liberation. It is not a lot, but it is something.

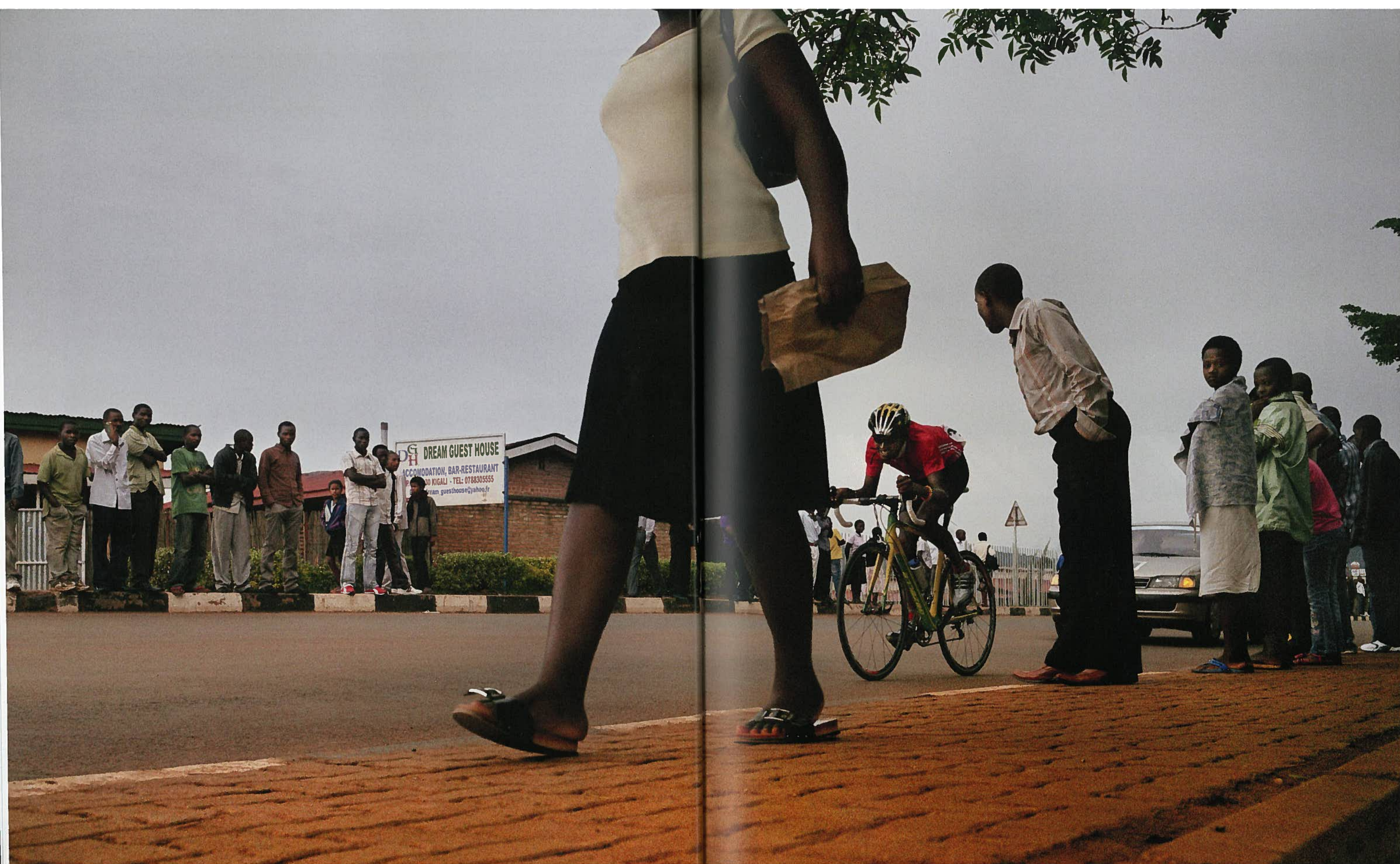
Rwanda is a brave and amazing country. It has passed through its post-genocide recovery period with remarkable speed. The scars of April 1994 are everywhere; some literal, some figurative and much deeper. But Rwanda is a country that has held its head up to the mirror and looked itself in the eye. Like all of Africa, it is hell-bent on rising up through the medieval horrors that stained the earth the blood-red colour that so distinguishes this continent. Like all of Africa, Rwanda doesn't want our pieties, it wants a chance, and it is acting swiftly to take it.

The bike race, like Rwanda itself, is unflinching in its recognition of the genocide. The first three stages all begin in the shadow of the Amahoro stadium that, in 1994, served as a temporary refuge for 12,000 Tutsi refugees under UN protection. That year, over a 100-day period from 6 April, the years of ethnic hatred that had existed since the Belgians colonised Rwanda – and clumsily defined and divided the ethnicity of the population – came to a head. The result was that Hutu militias ruthlessly slaughtered 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus.

The first road stage is duly billed in the programme as 'A la mémoire des victimes du Génocide' and finishes in the town of Rwamagana, on an innocuous-looking stretch of road where 5,000 people were murdered. It is also notable that the Rwandan Cycling Federation gives race invites to teams from Belgium, France and the USA. All these nations helped, or not, in the lead-up to and events of that spring of 1994.

The race, like the country, deals with the hard truths first, and then moves on.

There is a bike race in Rwanda for the same





reasons that there are bike races anywhere: there is a country that wants to show itself off, and a country that wants to compete.

In cycling, Rwanda has a powerful tool, not only for impressing the outsiders looking in but for giving something to a people craving hope, news and entertainment. The permanent secretary for the ministry of youth, sports and culture Edward Kalisa “followed daily the updates of the race, like everyone, like all the people” and was also present at several of the stages.

“The Tour of Rwanda is very important,” he told me. “Not only for the participants

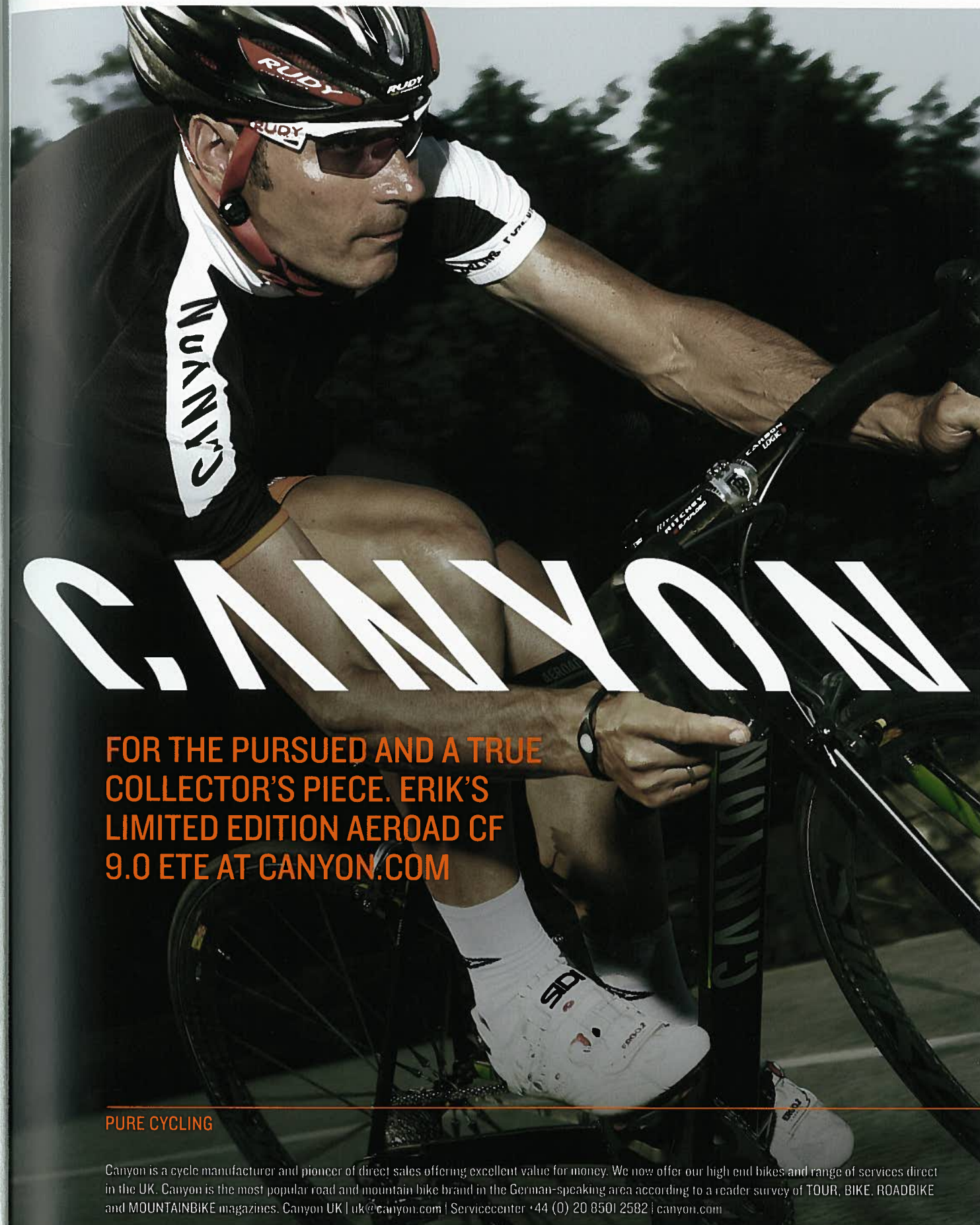
to improve their skills but also to attract different people to participate. People come here from different parts of the world, they come here and they understand Rwanda, they become our ambassadors.”

“You see alongside of the road how many people have come to watch the race, the people here love cycling and come together. It is important for integrating the community.”

Whether or not the people by the road had come for the actual racing or the spectacle I suppose is irrelevant. The important thing is that they were

certainly there. The crowds that lined the routes start to finish were among the most impressive I have ever seen.

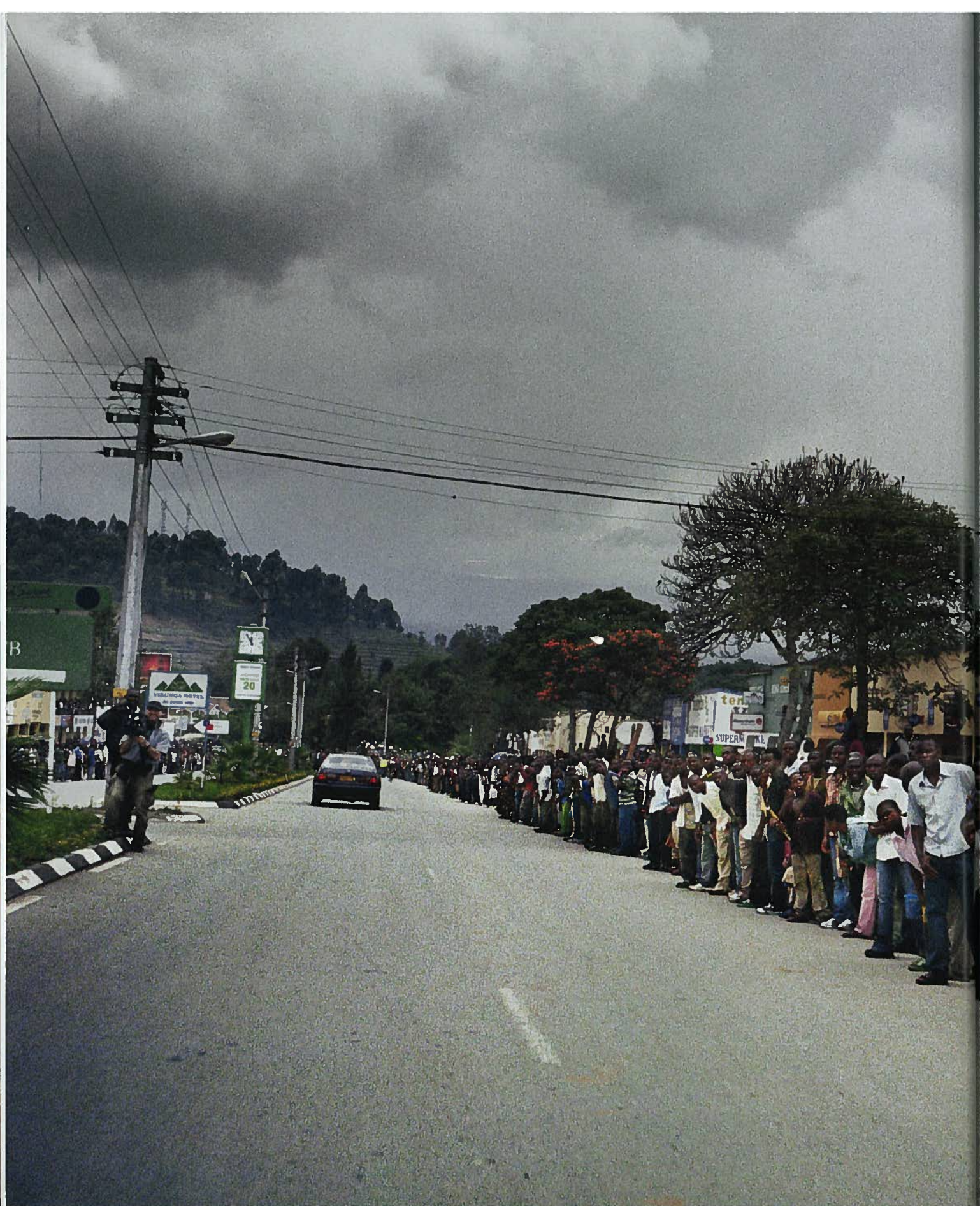
They were also the most sternly disciplined. With so many people – all of them so desperate to see what was actually going on – the crowd would constantly spill onto the road in the minutes between the beginning of the race convoy and the actual cyclists passing. The Rwandan idea of crowd control appeared at first to be startlingly heavy handed. Security guards patrolled the crowd wielding sticks and any woman, child or man deemed to have crossed the



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imaginary threshold they kept pointing at was whacked around the legs.

Standing outside a primary school on the first stage I was a little shocked at this, until I realised that it was nothing more than a game to the kids who spent their time deliberately running across the road as soon as the infuriated guard turned his back.

By the side of the road anticipation passed through the crowd like electricity. People were genuinely beside themselves with excitement at seeing the race. Kids squealed and jumped up and down, adults laughed out loud with a look of confusion that said they didn't really know how they should feel or why they were laughing, and – amazingly – mobile phones were drawn and filming began.

It seems that mobile phones are the must-have item for every Rwandan. As a rider in Europe you get used to passing through crowds lazily holding up phones in your face to record the action, but in a country where people still bring their chickens out to watch the race pass, there is something ever so odd about it.

The fact that Rwanda has taken cycling to its heart is down to two factors. The first is the Rwandan people themselves. Erik Esbjörnsson – an African correspondent for a Swedish broadsheet who I met as he prepared to smuggle himself into neighbouring Congo to cover the elections – told me with a smile and a shake of the head that “it is just like Rwandans to like cycling. It is so them, it is that little bit... different. They like to be different, they don't want to fit in.”

This is true. Rwanda, despite being about the size of Wales, has no intention of being lost in the expanse of Africa. The country visually defies any preconceptions you have of the continent to which it belongs: it is lush and green, it's hilly, and its climate variations run east to west instead of north to south. Led by president Paul Kagame, it is also one of the safest countries in



Africa. Little wonder Rwanda has been touted by the US as the continent's "biggest success story."

The second reason for cycling's popularity is Jonathan 'Jock' Boyer. The first American to ride the Tour de France has, for the past five years, been the head coach of the Rwandan cycling team and it seems that this appointment has turned Rwandan cycling around.

As well as a UCI race and a funded national team, there are now seven cycling clubs in Rwanda, the biggest boasting 17 riders and based in Rubavu on the shores of

Lake Kivu. Its president, Felix Sempoma, who was in charge of the Rwandan B team at the Tour, told me simply that: "Jock changed everything. If he hadn't have come we couldn't have any of this."

Boyer is surrounded by a team that works full-time on what must often feel like an uphill struggle; his amiable French mechanic Maxime Darcel seems to have become, by virtue of the squad being one of very few in Africa that has a reliable supply of equipment and spares, the go-to man for every team with a problem. Darcel's frustration was evident on the first night of the race when, while I was

chatting to him, he refused to help the mechanic from the Tanzanian squad.

"It's hard because I've already fixed his bikes once in Gabon at the start of the year, and from then on he is always coming to me. Their bikes are so bad that there is no point just fixing one thing, because everything needs fixing. I can help them once or twice but then I have to say no."

If Boyer is the figurehead of Rwandan cycling, 'Max' is the legs and feet of it. He initially came to Rwanda to help Jock for a few months, having met the squad at the Tour of Gabon. He has now been

working full-time with the team for three years and, like most ex-pats, the strain of being in a foreign land sometimes shows. His frustration with the disorganisation of the other teams and the reliance on him and his supplies bubbles ever so closely to the surface.

"It doesn't annoy me that they need it, or that they ask, but that they start to expect it. It is the way people from Africa operate. But it is totally the opposite of how cycling works."

Because while it is true that pro teams do help each other out from time to time,

the general idea of cycling is to gain every technological advantage you can by, to quote Lance Armstrong, keeping all 'The Shit That Will Kill Them' to yourself. In Africa it is expected that you share.

This same attitude awaits the riders themselves when they achieve any level of success. On Team Rwanda the riders are paid a wage and can make decent prize money in the year. Boyer's girlfriend Kimberly Coats, in charge of the logistics and marketing for the team, told me that the result is often an unbelievable pressure to help out family and friends.

"People come asking for money all the time, family members spring up everywhere – and what constitutes family here is pretty loose. For some guys it's a real problem. The pressure on them as riders is hard to deal with. It is a distraction. They all deal with it differently. Gasore Hategeka has a secret house in Kigali he built that no-one knows the whereabouts of. The guy is practically illiterate, but he is very smart."

Despite the bravado from the Rwandan government and the PR machine at Team Rwanda, the Tour seemed to be suffering this year. 2011 was the third edition of





the race as a UCI event, and you couldn't help but get the impression that it had peaked last year when the African nations needed UCI points to qualify for places at the Olympics.

It is a hard race. Over seven days the riders were due to climb a total of 13,608 metres at altitude – at least according to the programme, which duly proved to be wildly exaggerated – at a time of year that doesn't quite suit either the African or the European calendars. As such this year's race failed to attract a significant field. In fact only 55 riders took the start in Kigali, with the teams of the winners of the last

two editions of the race, Morocco and Eritrea, not bothering to turn up.

In the absence of the two of the strongest African national teams, the talk before the start was all about one man: Adrien Niyonshuti and how, perhaps unfairly, the no-show by the big teams meant that it would be his year.

Adrien is one of the few real graduates of the Rwandan cycling team. A genocide survivor who lost six siblings in 1994, he returned to Rwanda this year with the backing of his professional team, MTN. The South African outfit made

no bones about the reason for their presence at the race: they had come solely for their Rwandan national champion to take the win.

"We are here to help Adrien win, that is all there is to it. It is his country and he is their champion so we came for him," South African rider James Tennent told me before stage one.

But it wasn't just his MTN team-mates who were there to help Adrien win. Two Rwandan national teams were taking part in the race, and openly came out in support of the rider who has qualified

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Rwanda's only cycling place in the 2012 Olympics (he will compete in the mountain bike cross-country.)

Theoretically that meant that Adrien had 17 riders out of the 55 starters at his disposal. The rest of the race seemed already beaten; it didn't look like Rwanda cared how it got its home winner it just really badly wanted one. Like a Giro of old, collusion and favouritism didn't seem to be the slightest hint of an issue, more something to be proud of.

The varying quality of the riders in the small field quickly became evident, even among the African teams. The difficulty of the parcours was just too much for some. The Gabon national team, despite not being short of budget or support, felt the terrain was simply too demanding. Their national champion Armand Ontsatsi was less than impressed.

"It's just too hard. We have hills at home but there is nothing like this. How are we supposed to train for this? All this climbing... it's just bullshit."

Sure enough, after three days of sufferance the entire Gabon team withdrew from the race and took the plane home without even attempting the 30km climb that was the start of stage four.

So the race seemed to be made up of a lot of Rwandans ready to ride for Adrien, and other African teams that had few goals beyond simply finishing the race. But there was also a team there with a mission.

Team Type 1 came to the race with the goal of spreading their message of diabetes awareness to Rwanda. The American squad arrived with six riders and 16 personnel, a view to racing at the highest level (the team is aiming for a Tour de France spot in 2012), and a desire to promote and distribute the \$300,000 worth of diabetes test strips they had brought to Rwanda.

It seemed from the outset that it would be a battle between the highly professional







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American visitors and Rwanda's finest, while the remainder of the field simply played along.

The Americans struck first, with Kiel Rijnen winning the prologue and both of the split stages on day one. Despite this early dominance, it seemed that Rwandan cycling was going to come of age on a demanding third stage between Kigali and Gisenyi that passed over six categorised climbs.

Rijnen (who had lost a team-mate, forced to abandon because there were no spares in the neutral car after he

punctured) was constantly isolated and the Rwandan riders attacked mercilessly. While Rijnen played cat and mouse with an impressively tactically astute Adrien, it was another of Jock Boyer's protégés who looked set to become the pride of the nation.

Boyer discovered Gasore Hategeka in 2009 while he was still working as a taxi-biker, using his single speed bike to earn a living by ferrying people around his hometown of Sashwara. The story goes that Gasore would lie in wait for the Rwandan team on the descent to Gisenyi – the very same descent which served as

the end of stage three – and follow them on his taxi-bike. Eventually Jock invited him to try out with the team.

Gasore was more than two minutes ahead when he passed through Sashwara under the second huge thunderstorm of the stage, had only 30 downhill kilometres to the finish, and had one Rwandan team-mate for company. As he rode through the thick crowds in his hometown, four or five deep in places, people began to recognise him. Grown men leapt in the air and shouted his name "Gasore! Gasore!"; children ran alongside as he crested the summit. The



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atmosphere in the small hilltop village was ecstatic.

Yet at the finish line in Gisenyi it wasn't to be a triumph for Rwandan cycling. Instead it was another win for Team Type 1, as Joey Rosskopf swept to an unbelievable victory. Dropped on every climb, and at least four minutes behind the front of the race when Gasore had made his move, Rosskopf had ridden the descent of his life and somehow passed the two Rwandans in the final few metres.

In a European race with TV cameras and working race radio and an efficient road closure system, the feat would have been revered. In the Tour of Rwanda it was simply confusing.

The crowd, the president of the Rwandan Cycling Federation, and the journalists following the race were all either in disarray or disbelief. For Rosskopf – who had taken a great win – it must have been a little disconcerting. But a nation, a people and a rider that needed so badly the fairytale return from the ashes just couldn't hide its disappointment.

With its landslide-affected and unsurfaced roads, arduous stages, dubious goings-on and its cast of misfit cyclists, the Tour of Rwanda seemed to have stumbled upon all of the elements that make bicycle races great.

The event was being discussed and debated by people many hours after the moment when the riders had actually passed by. Only four stages in and the Tour of Rwanda was doing what Henri Desgrange set out to do when L'Auto decided it needed a vehicle to sell newspapers: it was getting people talking, it was getting people interested, and it was getting people hooked.

Up on the podium Rosskopf tried to look comfortable facing scepticism. Meanwhile I watched groups of kids trying to steal the bidons off the





Gabon riders' bikes. These children were significantly different to those we had encountered since the rollout from Kigali; something that was apparent in the slightly threatening feel of their desperation to steal a plastic drinks bottle (despite facing a swift kicking when they were caught.)

It was also apparent in their choice of footwear. All the children in Gisenyi were wearing the Boda-Boda, a green or blue plastic sandal that signifies the poorest of the poor. The shoes cost little more than a dollar, and the kids here were wearing them until they

were little more than a thin strip of plastic. In Rwanda it is illegal not to be wearing shoes and if you go to market barefoot, they'll apparently take your money off you at the door and give you shoes before you buy anything else. These are shoes that someone earning \$60 a month as a gardener claimed he wouldn't be seen in.

I hadn't noticed the Boda-Boda before but once we reached Gisenyi they were everywhere; on every small, muddy foot. Having moved north into the ominous shadow of the Congo – just 200m away and where horrific acts of violence by

rebel groups were being reported in the run up to their elections – I started to notice that things weren't quite as they seemed. On the tranquil and startlingly beautiful shores of Lake Kivu, just as the race results began to seem questionable and the racing itself quite wild, Africa's dark heart seemed close. As the poor seemingly got poorer, the sheen of the race began to dull a little. Reality sunk in and I wondered just what this race might yet have in store.

Tom Southam is an ex-professional cyclist. Part Two will appear in the next issue

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