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## A LETTER FROM... ERITREA

A competitor in the Giro d'Eritrea follows the road to Dekemhare

# RIDERS ON THE SANDSTORM

In one part of Africa, the World Cup was a mere sideshow. **Xan Rice** sees the peloton dodge camels in a cycling-obsessed nation.



**A**lthough firmly attached to the Horn of Africa, Eritrea may as well be an island. To get there from Kenya, where I live, you first head to Dubai. You wait around for half a day and then board an Eritrean Airlines flight back south to Africa. The rare foreign visitor to Eritrea may find the capital, Asmara, safe and tranquil, both in its architecture and its handsome inhabitants. He may find it depressing and depressed.

He may also see a blur of neon on wheels cutting through the light of dawn, as I did, and wonder what it is all about.

A clue emerged a few nights later, after Germany had beaten Costa Rica 4-2 in the World Cup opener. My taxi driver said that he thought that England could lift the trophy. But only if Wayne Rooney was fit. 'He is strong and a fighter. Like Armstrong.' It took me a while to work out what he meant. 'Lance Armstrong, the cyclist?' He nodded.

'Football is the game everywhere else in Africa,' Aklilu Lijam, the affable head of the Eritrean Cycling

Federation, explained one afternoon. 'But here it is cycling. People are mad about it.' He was not exaggerating. Cycling is the national sport, practised and followed with a rare zeal. Everywhere you go there are people on bicycles; from old men in suits pedalling lazily through the capital on heavy old machines, to youngsters on cheap 'Snow Lion' mountain bikes. But it is the obsession with racing that is most remarkable. Where else in Africa is the Tour de France shown live on state television?

In Asmara alone, there are more than 800 registered competitive riders. Weekend races through the capital attract thousands of paying spectators and the top teams have their own fan clubs. So great is the interest that this impoverished east African

**, THEY EARN JUST \$130 A MONTH, BUT THE FAME MEANS IT'S WORTH IT'**

country of 4.5 million has at least 100 professional riders. With salaries of about \$130 a month, several times the typical wage, they are surely among the world's worst paid full-time sportsmen.

But the fame and the free gear appear to make it all worthwhile. For though no local rider has ever competed in a major tour abroad, Eritrea's top cyclists are the country's most recognisable sporting stars.

Like the Catholic cathedrals and the taste for cappuccinos, the passion for cycling is a legacy of Italian colonial rule. The first Giro d'Eritrea, a multi-day race, was staged in 1946. No local riders were allowed to enter.

In 2001, eight years after independence from Ethiopia, the Giro was resurrected and the 10stage, 700-mile race is now the highlight of the local sporting calendar. Out of 97 riders, all but one were Eritrean.

At 6.30 one Sunday morning in June, Lijam pulled up outside my hotel in his white pick-up. We headed south towards the edge of town, where we stopped at a cafe. Inside sat

a dozen or so cyclists in the colours of their sponsors. While eating scrambled egg and tomato with heavy brown bread-rolls and drinking mugs of sweet tea, the snake-lean men, all in their late teens or twenties, argued about their heroes.

Suddenly they strapped on their helmets and sunglasses and hopped on their bikes parked outside - shiny Pinarellos, Treks and Bianchis, each worth thousands of dollars - and sped up the road to where several dozen riders had congregated.

This was one of the six road races that decide the Asmara state championship. Behind the cyclists were their team cars: pick-up trucks carrying a couple of spare bikes, a crate of bananas and a few bottles of water. Soon the peloton was deep in the countryside, a swish of colour as it descended the rough road that cut through the landscape of jagged hills and stony fields.

With a police outrider clearing the way, the riders swept past donkey carts carrying old men and women in white shawls, past villagers who lined the streets shouting 'F orza!' and 'Bravo!' Soldiers at the numerous checkpoints dropped their guard to wave. After two hours the peloton swept past a UN roadblock near the border with Ethiopia, before turning around. Msgane, the crowd favourite, suffered several punctures. He was not among the five who maintained their furious breakaway until the end, where a large crowd had gathered.

The victor punched the air. In time, the rest crossed the line and carried on riding, homewards. Lijam said, regretfully: 'To be a top international cyclist you should be tall and slim with muscles. Eritreans are not tall and don't have much muscle.' Then, with a smile, he added: 'But we still love cycling.'

Turn over ~

## Cycling Tour of Britain

# Culture clash as capital suffers rude interruption to its Sunday

Richard Williams  
The Mall

Unmoved by official entreaties, Londoners go about their business as if nothing is happening

Leaving their cups of espresso macchiato to cool on the pavement tables of the restaurants of Primrose Hill, the owners of some of London's most desirable private houses lined the sides of a sunlit road to wait for the Tour of Britain.

Many had little idea of what they were about to see. But they were joined by a smattering of gnarled figures who had ridden there to watch one of the day's few climbs of any consequence, leaning their gaudy racing bikes against the fence bordering the steep ramp up Primrose Hill Road.

The race was due to pass by at three o'clock, exactly half an hour after the riders had left Greenwich Park, the first of five royal parks on the itinerary of the final stage of the 2006 Tour.

On the grassy mound of Primrose Hill and in the elegantly raffish streets that surround it, the sun always seems to be shining. And after a week of wind-driven showers, so it was as the hour approached yesterday afternoon. You could almost have been in a small town in Provence, waiting for the Grande Boucle to pass by.

At eight minutes to three a volunteer marshal spotted a man parking a people-carrier on the outside of the bend where the riders could swing while trying to maintain their momentum for the short climb.

This was obviously not a cycling fan. Unmoved by the marshal's entreaties, he locked the vehicle's door and walked away. Unimaginable in France, Italy or Spain, where bikes and bike racing are

part of the fabric of life, and motorists take care to give cyclists extra room on the road. In London, they sometimes aim straight at you.

The first police motorcycle sped past at 2.53, its siren wailing. Two minutes later it was followed by another, which stopped at the junction and furiously signalled to a woman in a Mini, trying to come out of a side road, to stay exactly where she was. At 2.57 a marshal flapped his hands helplessly as a VW Golf potted down the hill and turned right, into what would soon be the path of the race.

At 2.58 the carefully choreographed ballet of the police motorcycle outriders began. One motorcycle would halt at the mouth of the junction, waiting for the next to appear before roaring off. Perhaps a dozen policemen played this game of tag, the method by which many of the hundreds of roads leading on to the course were temporarily sealed to allow the race to proceed unhindered.

Given the basic incomprehension of most of the people out shopping or visiting friends and relatives in London on a late-summer Sunday afternoon, it was an impressive performance.

Not much could be done, however, about London's street furniture. By

Here was disturbing evidence that the city has much to learn about hosting a cycle race

the time the riders came into sight at the bottom of Primrose Hill at one minute past three, behind the red car of the race director, they had just covered a 300-yard stretch of Regent's Park Road interrupted by a dozen sets of speed bumps, ranging from little domed asphalt jobs, two abreast across the width of the carriageway, to dreadnought efforts featuring cobbled mini-ramps on either side.

To the sound of polite applause from the macchiato-drinkers, the survivors of the original field of 96 swept up the hill, led by four riders in the black-and-red shirts of the CSC team. Behind them came the procession of service vehicles, rows of glittering spare bikes racked on their roofs. Tom Boonen, the world champion, was a surprising straggler, accompanied by a team-mate who had dropped back in order to help him regain contact with the bunch after some misfortune or other.

Finally came the broom wagon, the last vehicle in the race, whose function is to provide transport for competitors who have given up the struggle. By three minutes past three the last police motorcycle had moved away, the marshals were releasing traffic out of the side roads and Primrose Hill was returning to normal.

Boonen was safely back in the bunch and heading for a stage victory by the time the field hurtled out of Regent's Park on the return leg and down Baker Street through a score of junctions whose traffic lights had been set to green, with dozens of police attempting to hold back crowds of Sunday shoppers. But when the cavalcade hit The Mall for the first time, after an hour's racing, all that carefully co-ordinated work by police and marshals came apart as two motorcycles collided just before the finish line, the machines sliding into the crowd and injuring seven people.

Here, in front of a vast and good-humoured crowd, was disturbing evidence that London has much to learn about hosting a big cycle race. Out of a sunlit afternoon came a brutally unexpected lesson. And there is less than a year in which to learn from it.