

## Eritrean Women Riders Winning Spurs

Written by Tedros Markos

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The history of bicycle in Eritrea stretches back to early 1900s. Seasoned beyond a means of transport, it took, at the pinnacle of its evolution, virtually three decades to qualify a competitive sport. The first men's cycle race, which was held here in Asmara in 1937 organized by Italian colonizers, was contested exclusively amongst Italians; as was the case in other arenas. With time, the popularity of men's road racing continued to gain muscle by drawing a large number of spectators. In the face of colonial ban, however, our forefathers began to take part in cycling contests and instituted the proud tradition. It was in early 1950s that women in Eritrea started to mount a saddle for bicycle competition. So were Italian women in the saddle, according to senior citizens. Italians such as Sicilia Di Cagno and Mille Plegato are among the pioneering women riders on record. Although it is not well documented as to who could have been the first Eritrean woman to pedal alongside or against Italian women, Mrs. Hywet Gebre is credited to be among the few Eritrean pioneers to have ridden for road race.

The first women's bicycle racing was conducted on Asmara-Beleza- Asmara route. Records chronicle that Anna Ciprina then had her best season well enough to win the trophy. Unlike that of men, women's road racing was short-lived during the imperial reign of Haile Selassie. Despite the Derg regime made almost on its last legs a move to resuscitate the waning interest, Eritrean women barely participated in such competitive events. In the wake of independence, women's race was well under way reorganized to enhance their sports experiences, whereby Tmmit Grmay, Suzy Dini, Ruth Msgna and Tsehaynesh Beyn among others were squaring off in competitions that won broad acclaims. What impressed onlookers most was the contest women riders used to carry on in the 2nd division road racing. Reports from the Central Region Cycling Federation indicate that, in 1990s, around 30 km-long multilap races were arranged for women riders.

With the mounting sports enthusiasm, women in good condition started to organize in divisions for better individual and team pursuit. Mbrak Tewelde, Suzy Dini and Tmmit Grmay with the Red Sea Club, Ruth Msgna, Tsehaynesh Beyn and Rahel Sahle with Adulis Club, as well as many others managed to join a number of cycling teams and conducted worthwhile road races. Mbrak Debesay is one of those cyclists who competed in the first half of the 1990s through 2000 and won trophies in domestic sporting contests. She is now in charge of women's affairs at the National Cycling Federation of Eritrea albeit off saddle.

"Ongoing interest in sponsoring sports expenditure on equal footing with men," explains Mbrak, "was the most impelling cause which uplifted women's zeal to stick to 2nd division road racing." In the second half of the decade, however, women's passion for sports activities was losing ground due to decrease in length of sporting contests and obligatory nonparticipation. In an interview Hadas Ertra's Ermias Ghebreleul held with her, she says that sports events that were conducted at team pursuit had been of the essence in creating enabling environment for women to prove their physical fitness. In 1995, a seven member national women's cycling team

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performed best in tournaments that were at full blast in Ethiopia. Eritrean road riders marshaled in 1998 to safeguard the country's sovereignty from TPLF's invasion. By the turn of the 21st century, women's tournaments were utterly off schedule.

Since 2003, nonetheless, women riders trickled to make a comeback at the starting line. Contestants, who became accustomed to mountain bikes, were once again on racing saddles. The awakening of sporting events in the period between 2003 and 2006 breathed life into women's road racing. Accordingly, Tmnit Hayelom, Melat Aregay, Amleset Tewelde, Letemikael Fsehaye, Helen Gebretnsae and Tsehaynesh Beyn— just to mention a few—played a part at the national Tour of Eritrea and Cycling Championship of Eritrea.

Tournaments that were organized in 2004 for these road riders were quite challenging for their performance of excellence. At a time trial set in 2004, for instance, Tmnit Hayelom accomplished her 8 km long chronometric race at 13:05.25 minutes with flying colors at the speed of 37.6 km per hour. With the exception of very few appearing at the starting line, nevertheless, women road riders once more dropped behind 2009 onwards in the road racing.

Cyclists, who were already at home with road racing, became confined to mountain biking. Lack of racing bike is the cause often invoked foremost compounded by the deficiency of proper coaching for the relegation of women's road racing. Added to their lack of exposure, cycling teams have also fallen short of due focus on empowering women riders. But the Central Region Sports Commission has taken the lead as of 2010 to arm road riders that have already been on racing saddles and those women that have been conversant with mountain bikes with the latest racing bicycles. In spite of their physical fitness, the participation of Eritrean women road riders in continental or international competitions thus far amounts next to nothing. The performance of Eritrean women's road race team at the friendly cycling tournaments organized in Ethiopia in 1995, as well as Senayt Araya's participation at the youth's Olympic Games in Singapore are, as yet, matters of record. Some women riders have now appeared in jersey of the National Cycling Team of Eritrea at the 2011 African Continental Championship. Composed of Senayt Araya, Wehazit Kidane, Senayt Mengs, Tsehaynesh Fitsum, Yerusalem Gebru, Msgana Gebrehywet, Yodit Gebretnsae and Merhawit Haylemikael, the National Cycling Team of Eritrea has for almost three months been engaged in vigorous road racing exercise. More interestingly, this year's African Continental Championship seemly gives significant impression for women riders than does for men.



This is so because the winner in this race shall advance to the 2012 London Olympic Games. Unfortunately, this same team has missed the mark in yesterday's 18 km single, lap Individual Time Trial (ITT) preceded By two South African and a Mauritian riders respectively, it stands to reason that Wehazit Kidane ranked fourth finishing the race in 27:31.16 minutes followed by Senayt Araya

in 28:25.22 minutes. Contrasted with the internationally renowned professional contestants, the speed and bike handling of our amateur road riders, to fans' amazement, is promisingly praise-meriting. Tomorrow's 63.7 km road race is, nonetheless, decisive for the fate of every

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rider in the forthcoming Olympic Games.

Some sports analysts have predicted that Eritrea's National Cycling Team ought to carry the day against its tough competing counterparts tomorrow in order for the medalist of the Seventh Continental Championship to book a place in the Olympic Games ahead. Preparations by South African, Egyptian, Mauritian and Namibian cycling teams have been in full swing, and thus, are rated at the forefront in this competition. As stated above, the long established women's cycling competition in Eritrea has not made the grade as that of men to reach the summit of sporting contests. Hence, at a time when Eritrea makes modest preparations for hosting 2011 African Continental Championship, as well as a window opens for our women to take the opportunity in continental and international sports events, the role of sportspeople, concerned bodies, teams and the society at large in empowering women's road race is not to be viewed lightly.