

Eritrean Cycling Victory! “Richmond became Eritrean Garrison”

I would like to start this article by saying that I am absolutely thrilled and honored to participate in Richmond 2015 UCI Road World Championships and be part of the vast number of Eritrea fans cheering for the Eritrean cycling national team. To my expectation and delight I have witnessed a resilient and lively performance from our cyclists and the Eritrean fans were amazingly the biggest, loudest and spirited ones at the Richmond competitions.

This big cycling event took place in Richmond, Virginia from September 19 to 27, 2015. In total about 1,000 of the world's top cyclists from 75 countries (about 80% of them from Europe and only 5% from Africa) were able to qualify and participate in this year's world championships. Eritrea was one of the seven African nations who made it to this world championship. The others in alphabetical order were: Algeria, Morocco, Rwanda, South Africa, Uganda and Zimbabwe.

It is a very tough route to qualify and take part in the world cycling championships. If we look at the UCI (Union Cycling International) website we can understand how competitive and hard it is to qualify for the annually staged world championships. Qualification is based on performances on the UCI run tours during the whole year before the world final competition. Thanks to the hard working Eritrean cyclists for achieving excellent results in the UCI Continental Circuits across the world during 2014 sports- year. Therefore, Eritrea managed to qualify with flying colors and earn a spot in this world championship.

When my friend and I decided to start our journey from Boston by car to participate in this long awaited event, I thought it is going to be a long drive. Indeed it was a long trip, 10 hours ride to Washington DC and another 2 hours to Richmond, the excitement and anticipation however made the trip looked shorter than it actually was. I especially was very enthusiastic to see my friends and colleagues from the Eritrean National Cycling Federation (ENCF) and was also eager to meet the young riders who probably were in the under 12 age category (Medeb Hisanat) when I was with the cycling federation.

This was my second time to participate in a UCI cycling world championships. The first one was in October 1999 in the famous cities of Verona and Treviso in Italy when I was the Secretary General of the ENCF and a member of the delegation that traveled to Italy to participate in the competition. At that time, Eritrea was a young independent nation and our national cycling team was very new to the international cycling competitions. We had able riders but we were lacking experience in the international stage.

Now, after 16 years, in Richmond, UCI World Championship 2015, we have developed a strong team with young riders who have gained experience in the international cycling competitions. But it was not going to be an easy race, because our riders were competing with the elite and power-houses (France, Italy, Germany, Holland, Spain...) in this sport who spend millions of dollars to build their team of cyclists and equip them with the best and sophisticated bikes on the planet.

Personally, I was not much concerned about a podium places or collecting medals in this particular race, because from my experience I knew this was going to be a very tough competition. My wish first and foremost was if these young riders could make a good race for the fans. If they also could at least hunt

for top – 15's result that will bolster their chances to earn spots in the next World Championship to be held in Doha, Qatar in the summer of 2016. As the crowd who witnessed the race would agree with me our riders have fulfilled this wish hundred percent. In the under 23 age category, which took place on Friday September 25, 2015, our riders showed a lively team performance, which made the spectators go wild and the talented young rider Merhawi Kudus stood 11th out of 170 cyclists securing Eritrean participation in the next world championships. Bravo Merhawi Kudus!!

My second wish was, if the Eritrean fans could once again demonstrate to the world in general and the host nation (the U.S.) in particular how peaceful sport loving people we are, if we could dominate with our dances and chants and give life to the event and this to my satisfaction was also fulfilled completely. The Eritrean fans were very colorful and graceful waving their national flags and dancing on the streets of Richmond giving consistently full support to their riders. As one spectator said "This looks more like an Eritrean Carnival than a UCI organized World Cycling Championship".

It can literally be said that the Eritrean fans occupied Richmond from the beginning to the end of the tournament with their flamboyant presence, loud chants and stylish dances. The celebration continued at the Pentagon Sheraton Hotel in Arlington, where the legendary singer Tesfai Mehari (Fihira) rocked the crowd by his famous song from the armed struggle for independence: "Ereye, Erena, ketematat koynu me'askerna" (My Eritrea, Our Eritrea towns have become our garrisons), this time though the song was a bit modified as "Ereye, Erena, Richmond koynu me'askerna" (My Eritrea, Our Eritrea Richmond have become our garrison). Indeed Richmond was our cyclists and fans garrison, a joy to watch and be part of.

When the final men elite road race was completed on Sunday September 27th cyclist Mekseb Debesai, who was the sole rider representing Eritrea in this final race, wanted to thank the fans who were consistently cheering and supporting him during the race. He said "As you know the winner of today's race is the famous rider by the name of Peter Sagan from Slovakia, however I did not see any Slovakian fan or their flags. I am overwhelmed with the support and solidarity you have shown me, you have made me feel as if I was the winner of today's race".

My colleague Asmerom Habtemariam, who is the current president of the ENCF and head of the cycling delegation to the world championships, in his appreciation speech addressing the Eritreans who came from various cities in the United States during the evening celebration party at the Pentagon Sheraton Hotel, he very pleasantly and with humor explained the support given to the team from the Eritrean fans. He said "I felt like I am born again when I witnessed all the love and support showed to us during our stay in the USA. Have I not lost my hair and turned bald my hair would have stood up straight with all the delight and excitement".

With the resilient performance and lively competition shown by our riders on the one hand and the achievement and flamboyant presentation of the Eritrean fans on the other; Richmond Indeed was turned into an Eritrean garrison during the World Championships. It was an amazing nine days event!

Once again Eritrean fans have proved to the world the presence of Eritrea in any sports event means that the atmosphere will be sensational. Hopefully next summer in Doha, Qatar during the UCI World Championships 2016 the chorus of Fihira's famous song will continue to be:

'Ereye, Erena, Doha koynu me'askerna' (My Eritrea, Our Eritrea Doha have become our garrison).

Aklilu Lijam