

Rwanda is hosting the 2025 UCI World Cycling Championships which kicked off today, for the first time the event is held on African soil. Rwanda Dispatch journalist Jejje Muhinde spoke with Jeremy Ford, marketing professional and long-time advocate for African cycling through Team Africa Rising, about the sport's growth on the continent, opportunities for young riders, and what the championships could mean for Rwanda.

Could you introduce yourself to our readers, so that they can know who Jeremy Ford is?

Jeremy: I'm a professional in marketing. I worked for 25 years in law firms. For the last 10 years, alongside my day job, I've been involved with Team Africa Rising. The organization mainly focuses on two things: rider development, helping teams, clubs, and federations with training, development, and equipment, and advocacy. We have about 100,000 social media followers, and we speak for African cycling at both grassroots and professional levels. The most important thing is that we're trusted by the media, suppliers, and bike companies around the world.

What do you think about Rwanda hosting the World Championships for the first time as an African nation?

Jeremy: I think it's historic. The World Championships started in 1921, and for more than 100 editions they've never been held in Africa. Considering the size of the continent, it's about time. So it's truly a historic moment that the World Championships will finally take place here.

More importantly, it's happening in East Africa, which I see as the heart of African cycling — with countries like Eritrea, Ethiopia, Rwanda, and Uganda producing many of the continent's top riders. Of course, South Africa is also a big name, but that's a little different.

For me, East Africa is the real hub of African cycling. Rwanda has been on the map for a long time, Eritrea is a big name, Ethiopia as well, and Uganda is growing. So it makes sense that the World Championships will be held here.

Will hosting the World Championships create a lasting legacy for Rwanda in the future?

Jeremy: I believe so. If you think about last year's Tour de France, Biniam Girmay

stood on the podium alongside stars like Tadej Pogačar and Jonas Vingegaard. He became the first Black African rider to reach that level. For young riders across Africa, seeing someone achieve that was powerful.

Now, to have the World Championships in Africa is even more significant, because unlike the Tour de France, Giro d'Italia, or Vuelta, which will never be held here, the World Championships are the most important one-day race of the year. It will inspire young men and women to believe that cycling can be their sport too.

The exposure is also critical, the race will be broadcast by over 20 international networks, including SuperSport in Africa and the BBC, ensuring millions across the continent will watch African cyclists competing at the highest level. For children who have never seen that before, it will be transformative.

When I spoke to David Lappartient, the UCI President, I told him that we need to start calling cycling the 'second sport of Africa' after football. This kind of moment has the power to spark that change. It can be a catalyst for a generation of African youth to see cycling not just as transport, but as a real sport and career path.

From your experience following African cycling for many years, how has the sport evolved, especially in terms of getting young riders onto bikes compared to other continents?

Jeremy: One of the biggest challenges Africa faces is access to bicycles. For example, I did my first race when I was four years old on a BMX. But in Africa, most children don't get a bike until they're 12, 13, or even 14. By that time, their European or American counterparts already have nearly ten years of cycling experience.

The good news is that things have changed over the last decade. The number of road and mountain bikes available in Africa is higher than ever before. Ten years ago, a cycling club in Rwanda might have had no bikes at all. Today, you'll find clubs with proper equipment.

Access to equipment remains the biggest hurdle, because cycling is an expensive sport. Unlike running, where you only need shoes, or football, where you need a ball, cycling requires a bike, helmet, shoes, gloves, spare parts, and these are costly.

The World Championships are helping, though. In preparation, the UCI and the World Cycling Centre, along with Olympic Solidarity, have been providing bicycles to African nations for the last three or four years. Now, at races, you'll see African athletes riding quality Scott bikes in blue and grey, something you never saw before. That access is beginning to level the playing field.

What makes cycling unique in Africa compared to other parts of the world?

Jeremy: I was recently speaking with an Asian cycling federation, and they said that in their country the bicycle is seen as a poor man's transport. The culture is to get a car as soon as possible to show success.

In Africa, it's different. Everywhere I've been people value bicycles. Of course, many use them for transport or work, but there's also a genuine joy in riding. Children enjoy it, young adults enjoy it. That passion is very similar to Europe, where kids join cycling clubs simply because they love it.

What I see in Africa is a strong cultural connection and passion for cycling that isn't fading the way it has in parts of Asia. That makes cycling unique here.

What do you think will be the highlight of the UCI 2025 World Championships in Rwanda?

Jeremy: That's a tough one. I don't think we'll see an African winning a medal in the elite races this time. The course is very demanding and designed for climbers at the very top level.

But the real highlight for me will be the women's U23 race the first time it will ever take place. It's an important step for equality in cycling, as there are no qualification barriers. Any country can send up to five riders.

That means you'll see a peloton made up of world-tour professionals racing alongside women from Africa, Asia, or South America who have never raced outside their country. It will be chaotic, but it will also be one of the most exciting races of the championship.

The U23 and junior races are where surprises can happen. You'll see names you've never heard of before making an impact. For example, I'm watching a young Ethiopian rider, Siga Karse, in the junior women's race. She's a strong climber, has already raced well in Europe, and I think she has the potential to win a medal.

Do you see opportunities for riders like Siga to turn professional?

Jeremy: Yes. If Siga finishes in the top 10 or 20, she'll almost certainly get a professional contract. The same goes for Rwanda's Gisèle, who is currently the country's best female rider by a long way.

Cycling is not like football or basketball where it's binary, you win or lose. In cycling, progress is about experience, finishing races, being part of breakaways, and learning strategy. Even if African riders don't win medals in Kigali, just racing alongside the best in the world is a huge opportunity.

The key is for riders not just to show up, ride until they're tired, and quit. They must try something, finish, attack, or get into a breakaway. This is the best chance for African riders to learn directly from the world's best. That knowledge is as valuable as a medal.

Many African riders struggle with preparation and sometimes fail to finish races. What is your view on this challenge?

Jeremy: They have to make the best of what they have. Riders like Tadej Pogačar arrive with the best nutrition, equipment, coaches, and infrastructure. African teams often lack those resources, but there are still basics that can make a huge difference, bikes must be clean, well-serviced, and properly oiled.

I once saw an Ethiopian rider competing in a top-level race with a dirty, poorly serviced bike. That's unacceptable. Good sleep, good nutrition, hydration, and equipment maintenance are the fundamentals. If African riders focus on those basics, their performance will improve.

How do you assess Benin's chances at the World Championships?

Jeremy: For Benin, it's all about participation and experience. They're mainly bringing U23 and junior riders. The priority is simply to finish races and learn. These riders rarely get opportunities to race internationally, so this is their chance to test themselves against the very best.

Do riders who race more events have an advantage?

Jeremy: Absolutely. Cycling is a sport built on experience. Professional cyclists typically race 80 to 100 days a year. That teaches them how to respond to

breakaways, how to recover, when to attack, and when to hold back.

In Rwanda, many of the male riders haven't raced enough internationally. That puts them at a disadvantage. Riders who compete regularly in Europe or at high-level races will always have the upper hand, not necessarily because of tactics, but because of experience.

What do you think about Rwanda's ability to organize the 2025 World Championships?

Jeremy: I have no doubt it will be excellent. The Tour of Rwanda is already the best-organized race in Africa, on par with many professional races in Europe. The officials, security, and logistics teams know what they're doing.

Rwanda has shown it can host major events not just in cycling but across different sports and conferences. The World Championships in Kigali will meet international standards.

When the championships are over, what legacy do you think they will leave for Rwanda and Africa?

Jeremy: I hope the legacy will be twofold: first, for African riders and federations to understand the level required to succeed internationally; and second, for the rest of the world to finally recognize Africa as part of the global cycling community.

This World Championships isn't just a one-off event. It represents nearly 20 years of development to bring African cycling to this point. The next stage will be building on that momentum so Africa becomes fully integrated and respected in the world of cycling.