

The 18th edition of the Tour du Rwanda rolls out tomorrow and there's a different kind of energy around this year's race. Bigger budget. New rules. Wider broadcast reach. And, as always, heavy expectation on the home riders.

Eight stages. 993 kilometers. No individual time trial. Just Rwanda's rolling and often punishing roads deciding everything.

This time, there's something new and significant in play: year; bonuses at stage finishes and intermediate sprints, an innovation organizers say will shake up the racing. It's not something the Tour has traditionally relied on, and it could open doors for aggressive riders willing to chase seconds rather than simply survive the climbs.

With the race budget rising to Rwf 2 billion, according to Rwanda Cycling Federation, the ambition is clear, the 2026 Tour du Rwanda 2026 is going to be exciting. As first vice president Valentine Bigango recently confirmed, every stage will also be broadcasting [live on YouTube](#), expanding the race's footprint beyond roadside spectators. "We shall race across the country but this time, people will be able to follow the race on their televisions," he said.

Well that said; let us dive deep in the Rwandan team to explore where hopes rely. National coach Ssempoma Felix this week, revealed a team of five selected riders to represent Team Rwanda in a field of 84 competitors. They form part of a wider group of 12 Rwandans on the start list, spread across three local teams; the national side, Benediction Cycling Club and May Stars.

But it's the national squad that carries the symbolic weight.

Leading them is Patrick Byukusenge, 34, still going strong and still driven. Earlier this month, he won the Amahoro Criterium; the traditional build-up race used to gauge readiness before the Tour. Afterward, he made it clear retirement isn't on his mind.

"I'm still in good shape," he said. "My focus now is to continue making history in cycling."

His best Tour du Rwanda finish came in 2018, when he placed fifth overall behind compatriot Joseph Areruya, who won the title that year. Fourteen participations later, Byukusenge remains the steady hand, and tactically sharp, calm under

pressure, and deeply familiar with every climb and corner on home roads.

Alongside him is Shemu Nsengiyumva, 28, the national time trial champion and one of the team's most aggressive climbers. If there are seconds to be gained through the new time bonuses, he may be the one hunting them.

Etienne Tuyizere, 22, continues to develop into a rider capable of challenging higher up the general classification (GC). Strong against the clock and increasingly confident in the mountains, he represents the bridge between experience and the future.

Then there's Shadrack Ufitimana, just 20, the only under-23 cyclist currently listed among the 12 local riders. He's largely untested at this level, though he impressed with a 12th-place finish at the Tour of Sharjah. That makes him something of a dark horse: raw, unpredictable, and perhaps capable of surprising more established names.

Rounding out the national lineup is Eric Nkundabera, the dependable road race champion who does the hard, unseen work, controlling gaps, protecting teammates, keeping structure intact when races fracture.

### **Not the Full Arsenal**

Notably absent from the national jersey this year are Moise Mugisha, Eric Manizabayo and Eric Mahozo. They'll compete instead for their continental teams; Benediction and Team Amani; adding depth to Rwanda's overall presence but shifting leadership responsibilities within the national squad.

One rider attracting quiet attention is 23-year-old Samuel Niyankuru of Team Amani. Fresh from finishing seventh overall in Sharjah, he could be one of Rwanda's strongest GC hopes across all teams. Benediction's Masengesho, 24, seventh at last year's Tour, is another potential stage threat, though his limited international racing since September raises questions about race sharpness.

Interestingly, the average age across Rwanda's main teams hovers around 26-27. There's experience, yes; but not a wave of very young contenders pushing through just yet. It raises subtle questions about long-term strategy, though in the short term, it could mean steady, controlled racing.

Rwandans are known for thriving in the hills. Climbing is their natural habitat. This

year's course, while still demanding, introduces slightly flatter dynamics in places. That could make things fascinating.

Eritreans (strong squad), and Ethiopians arrive as proven climbers. European teams bring tactical discipline. The new sprint bonuses may tempt aggressive riders to gamble early in this year's tour. [Read more about Tour du Rwanda 2026 entry list.](#)

And Rwanda? Perhaps, they'll need race rhythm. Most riders have limited competition leading into the Tour, though Sharjah offered some valuable exposure. The real pressure point is simple: Rwanda hasn't celebrated a major stage win at home in some time. By local standards, that drought feels overdue. Since Areruya's victory in 2018, Rwanda hasn't reclaimed the overall title, it's been eight years since the last home GC win, and that drought adds extra weight to expectations in 2026.

If everything clicks, Rwanda's hopes likely hinge on consistency rather than domination. Byukusenge's experience anchors the team. Nsengiyumva could chase bonuses and animate mountain stages. Tuyizere has the engine for a solid GC ride. Ufitimana offers unpredictability. Nkundabera provides balance. But the broader national hope may stretch beyond just Team Rwanda; to riders like Niyonkuru and Masengesho competing under different banners.

Though, it won't be easy. European teams remain a tactical unknown, and continental African outfits like the Eritrean are growing stronger each year. In this Tour, they will be the team to watch out for.

Still, racing at home brings its own advantage for Rwandan riders. These riders know how the altitude bites. They know which climbs split groups. They know how to suffer on these roads. By the time the peloton returns to Kigali, the story will have written itself.

For Rwanda, this Tour isn't just about participation. It's about progress. It's about proving that investment, structure and belief can translate into results. Now comes the hard part; turning potential into performance when the flag drops.

Listen to what experts have said about Tour du Rwanda 2026 in this Race Preview; [African Rising Cycling Podcast.](#)

The eight stages will test them all:

- Stage 1: Rukomo - Rwamagana (174 km)
- Stage 2: Nyamata - Huye (135 km)
- Stage 3: Huye - Rusizi (145 km)
- Stage 4: Karongi - Rubavu (127 km)
- Stage 5: Rubavu Criterium (82 km)
- Stage 6: Rubavu - Musanze (84 km)
- Stage 7: Musanze - Kigali (147 km)
- Stage 8: Kigali - Kigali (99 km)