

The SURVIVOR

*After living through the Rwandan genocide, **Adrien Niyonshuti** is now the No 1 mountain biker on the biggest cycling team in Africa and will be, without doubt, the most extraordinary athlete at the 2012 Olympic Games. BY ANGUS POWERS*

Photographs by JACQUES WEYERS



Two hours away from Johannesburg, on Wednesday 27 April 1994, the rising sun signalled not the birth of hope but the descent of despair. While South Africans of every colour and creed streamed from their homes to vote for a bright new future, ordinary Rwandans – a short plane hop to the north – finished up breakfast, shouldered their machetes and trudged out to look for their neighbours. That's how it had been for 21 days, and how it would be for another eighty. As long as the world turned its back, in Rwanda daytime meant killing time.

Seven-year-old Adrien Niyonshuti did exactly what his mum and dad told him, and started running.

For one hundred days, the Rwandan genocide matched the industrialised efficiency of the Nazi death camps in the Second World War. Spurred on by government-sponsored media, and hounded by Hutu *interahamwe* militias, Hutus everywhere turned on their Tutsi countrymen. Belgium's withdrawal from the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR) prompted the extraction of thousands of UN personnel, leaving just 270 UN soldiers in the country as the slaughter entered its second week. Tutsi women and children were particularly targeted in an effort to make the extermination permanent. Massacres took place in soccer stadiums, schools and churches. Nowhere was safe.

The fugitives fled for the bush. By day they were hunted; at night, while the murderers feasted, they foraged in the abandoned fields. Starved and brutalised, Adrien Niyonshuti somehow survived. Miraculously, so did his parents. Not all of his family were as fortunate. By the time the rebel Tutsi army, invading Rwanda from neighbouring Uganda, had seized control of the capital city of Kigali, almost 800 000 people had died. The scenes were beyond horrific. Nothing could be the same again. Once a boy starts running from something like that, in many ways, he never really stops.

"WHAT HAPPENED IN 1994... I WAS TOO YOUNG," ADRIEN MURMURS. HIS MOST HARROWING WORDS NEVER STAND ALONE, IN SILENCE.

They ride wooden bicycles in Rwanda. Made entirely out of wood (even the wheels), the bikes are usually used to haul up to 200kg of farm produce, often without brakes. So, when American mountain bike pioneer Tom Ritchey decided to hold a mountain bike race in Kibuye, Rwanda in September 2006, coming up with a name was a no-brainer. The Wooden Bike Classic. Ritchey brought some of his mates over to ride. Jonathan 'Jock' Boyer, the first American to finish the Tour de France, was there, as was Alex Stieda, the first American to wear the yellow jersey. All the district cycle-taxi and transport riders turned up, along with a pack of single-speed racers, but a kid named Adrien Niyonshuti – on a bike borrowed from his brother – beat them all. The talent on display in even this motley crew fired the Americans' imaginations and five months later Jock Boyer returned, backed by Ritchey-inspired funding from the USA, to establish Rwanda's first-ever cycling team.

Team Rwanda had big-budget goals, but they operated on a shoestring. Jock set up shop in Ruhengeri, a densely populated town near the mountain gorilla sanctuaries in the north-west of the country, and started testing riders' heartrate and power profiles on a stationary indoor trainer. Of the dozens of riders tested, 20 were taken aside. Of those 20, five made the team, every one of them the product of a brutal past. A couple of weeks later, they flew to South Africa to race the 2007 Cape Epic, the Tour de France of mountain biking. A tougher introduction to elite off-road racing is not possible to find. Adrien (still at school) and Jock (the long-retired pro) were Team Rwanda's top-placed pair, finishing 33rd overall. The Team Rwanda dream had begun.

If Jock's equipment could test for a determination threshold, he would have discovered that Adrien was off the charts. The kid had always ridden to school and back, but by 2003, armed with an old steel bike from his uncle Emmanuel, he was already eyeing the local racing scene, specifically the 160km Tour of Kigali. "Don't race until you have trained enough!" warned his brother, Abdurwahabi. Undaunted, the 16-year-old mixed it with the best for 90km before dehydrating, cramping badly and being carted off to hospital in an ambulance. Abdurwahabi brought him an orange juice, and some fraternal wisdom. "I told you! Don't do this until you are ready!" he admonished his kid brother. Chastened, Adrien agreed. "Yes, I see now what I have to do," he said. "Don't worry, I am going to do it."

Adrien's second race was a year later: the 2004 Tour of Rwanda. He finished sixth overall in the multi-day stage race, and kept training. In November, Abdurwahabi was fatally struck down by tuberculosis. Adrien treasured the yellow aluminium Trek bike Abdur had passed on, and kept riding. Could tragedy be left behind if you rode fast enough? In the 2005 Tour of Rwanda, he finished seventh, and kept training. By the time Ritchey and Boyer arrived, Adrien was an automatic pick for any serious cycling team. "I feel good when I'm cycling," he admits, "because often there are a lot of problems with my country." His voice trails off. "Genocide."



The thugs came in broad daylight. Four of them, armed with knives and guns, stormed into the house, shouting and herding everybody into one room. Adrien had just folded up his prayer mat and was headed to the kitchen when he heard the uproar. He quietly closed the door to his bedroom, climbed into his cupboard, pulled that door shut too, and shrank into the darkness. If he could have stopped his heart beating, he would have. Someone burst into his room and snatched up the valuables. In another part of the house, people were being beaten. A knife flashed. Screams.

"I was very scared. When I saw those guys I was thinking about genocide," Adrien says quietly. Even by South African standards, it was a terrifying experience. His Algerian teammate had been stabbed in the leg and was whisked away to hospital; the rest had just been kicked around. Adrien escaped physically unscathed. This was South Africa in 2009, in Team MTN-Qhubeka's athlete house in the heart of Pretoria, but it might as well have been 1994 again.

For Rwandan rider Nathan Byukusenge the flashback to the genocide was simply too much to bear. He had lost his father fifteen years previously and, his nerve broken, he returned home to Rwanda as soon as his contract expired. His departure put Adrien's refusal to be cowed into perspective. Douglas Ryder, owner of Team MTN-Qhubeka, the biggest and most successful cycling team on the continent (and the world's first bike team to be sponsored by a corporate charity initiative), had hand-picked five of Africa's finest cyclists from the UCI's African Continental Cycling Centre in Potchefstroom – and now, for reasons beyond anyone's control, only one was left.

"I asked Nathan, 'Why? Even if you stay in Rwanda, someone will come and rob you and steal your stuff'," Adrien says. "I don't think about this. There is nothing I can do about it. Everywhere you go, you can get robbed. I say to Allah, 'I want to be strong in cycling'. If I go back to Rwanda, how am I going to get strong? How am I going to focus on my cycling future? This is a job. I have to keep going if Douglas continues to give me a chance to ride."

**WHILE THE HUTU MEN
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ON THE CHARGE

Despite getting on a mountain bike for the first time only five years ago, Adrien's improvement has been so dramatic that he'll be racing at the Olympic Games in London in 2012.

In Africa, not all athletes are born equal. In those early years with Team Rwanda, Jock Boyer saw why. When are you leaving us, the youngsters kept demanding, voices raw with desperation. *When?* His riders were on intimate terms with abandonment, and they all knew the price of trust. One, Rafiki Jean de Dieu Uwimana, had been separated from his parents during the genocide and didn't see them again for five years. In the interim, he had become an urchin on the streets of Kigali.

"Rwanda is the land of a thousand NGOs," explains Jock. "They come in, and then leave. And when they do, projects often disintegrate." Team Rwanda would be different. They would race all over Africa, all over the world if they could, in an attempt to change other nations' perceptions of Rwanda and to change Rwandans' perceptions of themselves. They would tirelessly petition bike manufacturers for gear. They would train like men possessed. And despite the sometimes maddening setbacks, they would not give up.

It worked.

Adrien found himself on the mother of all learning curves. In George, he laid eyes on the sea for the first time. In Cape Town, he visited the aquarium and marvelled that all those creatures actually lived in that sea. In California, he saw his first train, and his first quite-a-lot-of-other-things too. He revelled in hotel-room luxury: hot water on tap and beds

so opulent that he sometimes preferred to sleep on the floor rather than disturb the extravagance. And he got stronger. Much stronger. In 2008, he finished the Cape Epic in 26th position (riding with Nathan), and then returned home to win the Tour of Rwanda. With his rider in that kind of form, Jock put Adrien straight back on the plane to South Africa, to the UCI centre in Potch to be precise, and placed a call to Ryder informing him that he had unearthed a gem.

The rest of 2008 was a blur. When Ryder offered Adrien a contract – Team Rwanda's first professional contract! – Jock would have broken out the champagne... except he'd only ever had two beers in his life. Adrien's trademark grin stretched from ear to ear. Now he would have a salary to send back to his parents so that they could install electricity and running water, and lay a cement floor in their modest homestead. Perhaps even better, he'd be in a position to pass on training tips and old racing kit to Godfrey, the genocide orphan he loved like a brother and who was the rising star of Team Rwanda back home. All the pieces of the jigsaw were falling into place.

Then the nightmares of the past – or was that the future? – returned. In November, Adrien received an alarming message from his mum: his father had fallen terribly ill, and was on his way to hospital. There was barely time to think. Within 48 hours, his dad had passed away. Adrien hurried back to Rwanda, but the disease was never identified. A few weeks

later, Adrien and Godfrey were taking it easy at the back of the bunch in a minor single-speed race in their home town of Rwamagana. Not racing, just following on their bikes. Godfrey's handlebars got tangled up with those of one of the backmarkers he was chatting to, and they both went down. At no significant speed; one to left, the other to the right. Yet it was Godfrey who fell under the wheels of the race organiser's car and was instantly killed. And now, in the MTN-Qhubeka team house in 2009, the memories would come crowding back.

Hiding between two mattresses. For days. Without food or water. Outside the slaughter rolled remorselessly on. While the Hutu men killed, their wives looted. Swamps and forests provided the best concealment, but even there, the terror reached in.

"What happened in 1994... I was too young," Adrien murmurs. His most harrowing words never stand alone, in silence. They are always offset by a soft, sad chuckle, as though something should distract the listener – or the speaker – from the appalling images they conjure.

"Mum and my father came and called me. 'The people are now coming to our place! We have to move now!' We went into the bush. We stayed there for a week, and then heard the news that the killing is coming to the bush. We went further. If you are not running, they kill you. Like that. My father said

I have to leave and go to another place. This scar on my leg is from that time. I was running. I don't know what happened.

"In genocide, the people kill the people. I lost my family. I lost my grandmother. I lost six of my brothers.

"So... after that... genocide finished. It is a big story. I don't know how I can say it in English. I don't know. I am sorry."

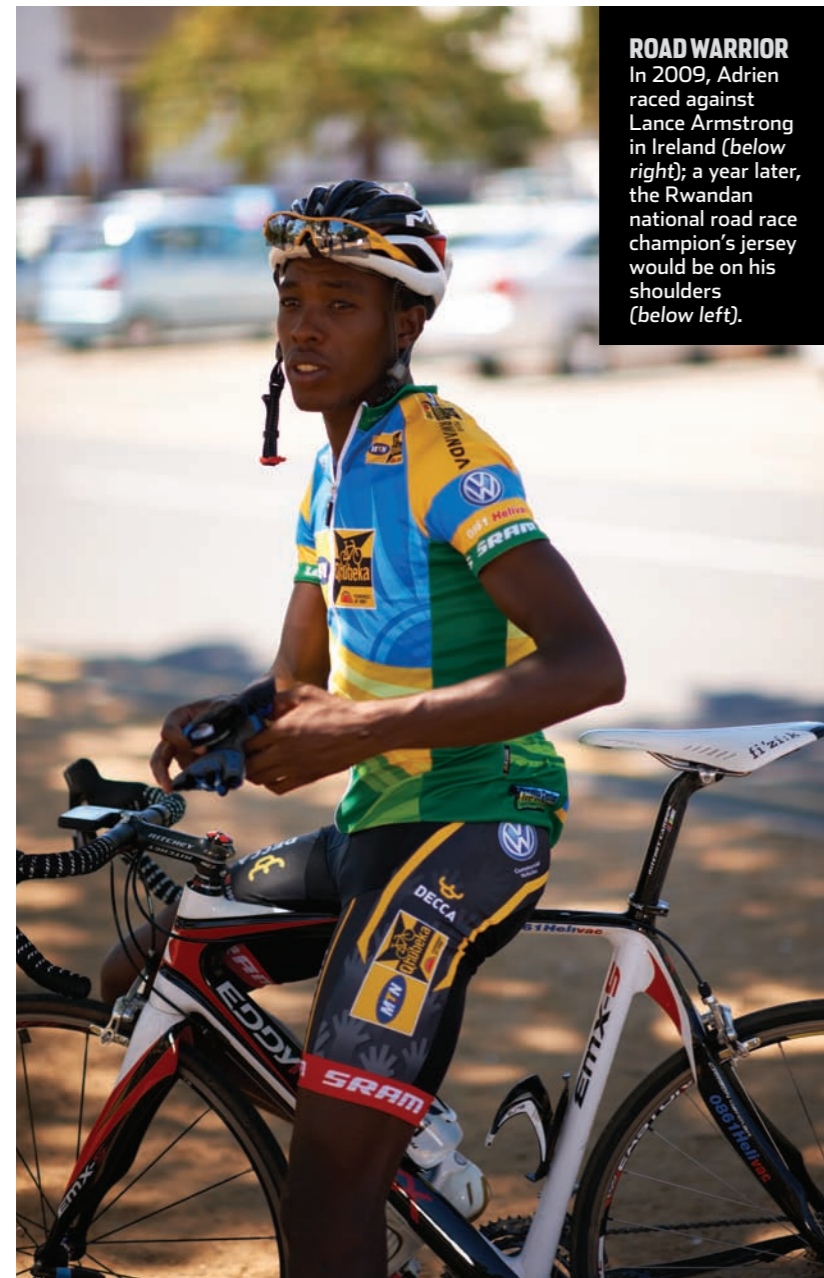
His gaze drifts off. It is unspeakable.

Modern Rwanda is an African success story. Africa's Switzerland, some say. Eleven million people inhabit a territory the size of Wales (or the Kruger Park), yet the public spaces are fantastically clean. Education is 75% free. People's identity documents are no longer stamped with 'Hutu' or 'Tutsi', only with 'Republic of Rwanda'. Every conceivable means once used – by both the

Belgian colonists and the rulers who followed – to aggravate ethnic divisions is now strictly outlawed. Remarkable levels of reconciliation appear to have been achieved, often through the traditional *gacaca* court system. Life in the new Rwanda is well regulated, and the Tutsi-led government – possibly for darker reasons of their own – are anxious that the genocide be consigned to the history books.

But April can be a difficult time. The second week of the month is given over to national mourning and remembrance, and the pain, suppressed for the rest of the year, is revisited. Old scars throb. The monuments scattered across the lush and hilly landscape, like those which litter the First World War killing fields in France, invite ghosts.

Away from the ceremonies, making peace with the past is a lonely matter. Those who know Adrien well speak about his single-mindedness with awe. Jock recounts the debilitating headaches that used to plague him, which Adrien could only banish by riding his bike for hour after hour after hour. JP van Zyl, who coached Adrien for a year at the UCI centre, ascribes his resilience to a profound religious faith, that "secret place where he goes when he needs to find himself and find peace". Carol Austin, his trainer at MTN-Qhubeka, takes a more prosaic view. "Maybe the extreme racing and extreme suffering on the bike help him cope a bit better," she says. "Sometimes when you go through extreme pain, you use other extreme pain to help block it out again." What is never in doubt is the phenomenal willpower Adrien has at his disposal.



ROAD WARRIOR

In 2009, Adrien raced against Lance Armstrong in Ireland (below right); a year later, the Rwandan national road race champion's jersey would be on his shoulders (below left).



NIYONSHUTI/ARMSTRONG PHOTO BY JONATHAN BOYER

"I don't think long about genocide. Not often," Adrien says softly. "As an example, when I win a race or when I do very well, I want to be happy and celebrate. I think, 'Ah, if I can be with my family now, it would be easy. I'd be happy with them.' Then I realise I don't have my family. Sometimes it's coming like that. But I tell myself, 'I don't have to think a lot about this'. I have to think about what is going on *now*. I have to continue to work.

"Some guys don't have parents or any family. It's different to hear about that and to survive that. To survive, people focus on their own lives. But yes, sometimes I dream about my family. I think it's not only me; a lot of people in Rwanda dream about that, especially during April. We have whole days to remember about that time and what happened. But now people have to work together, and not be separate."

The encounter at the 2009 Tour of Ireland was one of the classic meetings of worlds in professional cycling. When Lance Armstrong heard that there was a Rwandan in the bike race, he insisted on greeting him. They shook hands, much to Adrien's surprise. He had imagined the king of the Tour de France to be a giant among men. And when Adrien realised he could live with the pace of the pro peloton, yet another intangible, but potentially crippling, performance barrier had been vaporised.

"When I saw him on the news, I thought Armstrong was a big, big man!" he remembers. "But when I saw him face to face, he was quite small. Whenever I thought of cycling in Europe, I thought it must be hard. All those guys are big guys! I didn't think they were riding bikes like me!"

Adrien might make amazing PR copy, but his numbers stack up for real. At 63kg, with a VO2 max of around 75ml/kg/min, a haematocrit in the 46-49% range, body fat at 5.5%, and the ability to sustain a power output of more than five watts/kg for several hours, he is an exceptional athlete by any measure. Undeterred that most of his opponents had grasped the full spectrum of technical mountain biking skills before he had even climbed on an off-road machine, Adrien set about playing catch-up with grim resolve. And like all outstanding Muslim sportsmen, he trains through the Ramadan fast with relish.

His fiercest rivals are his biggest fans. "Adrien's got a super-fighting instinct. He always looks like he can suffer like crazy," says Burry Stander, one of the world's leading mountain bikers and a genuine medal hope for South Africa at the London Olympics in 2012. "He's very humble. He's obviously very grateful for what the sport has done for him. A lot of athletes forget what the sport does for them, and just worry about what they can do for themselves."

"I've tried to put myself in his shoes a few times, but I don't think you can even begin to comprehend what he went through," says former teammate Kevin Evans, who is the man to beat when Stander's not in town. "Cycling is a hard sport. Usually the best guys come from a harder upbringing, but Adrien reminds me of how lucky I am. He is one in a million."

Some day someone will sit down and make a list of the hurdles that have stood in this athlete's path, only to be swept

A BLACK AFRICAN MOUNTAIN BIKER ON THE WHEELS OF THE WORLD'S BEST? LAST YEAR IT WAS UNTHINKABLE.

aside. Move to a new country? Check. Learn a new language? Check. Computer illiterate? Check. But saved up to buy a second-hand laptop to download and master training data? Check. Facebook-savvy (433 friends) and Blackberry- and Skype-enabled? Check. Superior mechanical skills from years of riding disintegrating hand-me-down bikes? Check. Refusal to goof off training when privileged South African teammates beg for a Coke break? Check. Model professional cyclist? That's what they say.

Times are changing. South Africa can no longer pitch up at continental cycling meets and expect to sweep the boards. At the 2010 African road championships, rising Eritrean star Daniel Teklehaimanot won every title on offer: road race, individual time trial and team time trial. At the 2011 African mountain bike cross-country championships in February, South Africans made up the bulk of the field, but they managed only three of the top six positions. More importantly, the next African to ride the Tour de France will probably be a black athlete, with Teklehaimanot and Ethiopia's Tsgabu Gebremariam Grmay currently topping the big European teams' shopping lists for next season.

Adrien has the horsepower to take on Germany's Karl Platt and Stefan Sahn of Team Bulls, three-time winners of the Cape Epic and widely feared as the top mountain bike stage racers in the world. But by qualifying for the 2012 Olympics, he's now shown he has the temperament too. He had one shot at qualification, and he made it count. Not even Stander could match his intensity and focus at the African champs. It was another huge leap forward for an athlete who, incredibly, is set to surpass everything he's accomplished so far. A black African mountain biker on the wheels of the world's best? Last year it was unthinkable.

Other things that cannot change, will change. From the sides of South African roads and singletrack, shouts of "Rwanda! Go Rwanda!" are already ringing out, and by the time Adrien rolls up to the start line of the Olympic cross-country race next year, those individual cries will have become a great roar of encouragement. A man who has lived for so long in the land of forgetting, Adrien Niyonshuti is now going to be remembered. He will never ride alone. **SI**