

WHEN WILL BRITAIN HAVE A

British riders have won six Tour de France titles since 2012, but there has never been a black British rider start the race, and there are currently no black British riders in the male or female pro ranks. **Dr Marlon Moncrieffe** asks when this might change

BLACK RIDER IN THE TOUR?



◀ Dave Clarke (l) achieved good results in Conti level races



DR MARLON MONCRIEFFE

Is an academic and senior lecturer at the University of Brighton, and a former elite level track sprinter and road racer. Moncrieffe has almost 30 years of experience in cycling, as a racer but also a coach, alongside his previous work as a primary school teacher. Among his achievements on the track are medals won at the British, European and World Masters Championships. After watching the London 2012 Olympics, when British cyclists were riding high during a golden summer, Moncrieffe was struck by the lack of diversity among the athletes, and began looking into representation of black athletes at the highest level of cycling. His work, *Made in Britain: Uncovering the life-histories of black British champions in cycling* was published in 2016, featuring stories from black British riders. In 2018, he hosted an exhibition based on his work.

The Black Lives Matters protests across the world this year have exposed how systemic racism is deeply embedded in all aspects of society. The micro culture of professional cycling cannot hide nor be in denial about this. Some national bodies of cycling have fronted up. USA Cycling recently produced a public statement acknowledging their failures with ethnic diversity, and have now committed themselves to championing anti-racism. However, there has been no detailed statement about anti-racism from the UCI on what they will do in policy. British Cycling has also remained silent and hidden on this matter. This is in contrast to other prominent national bodies of sport such as the Football Association, the English Cricket Board and Rugby Football Union; where all have spoken or acted in support of Black Lives Matters and anti-racism.

In Britain, white athlete representation continues to dominate elite and professional cycle sport. The dearth of

elite and professional black road racing cyclists has remained an unspoken subject in the cycling media. Unsurprisingly, post Black Lives Matters protests, some white cycling journalists are now seeking to write about this issue; following the flow of the moment. How long will this continue for?

When thinking about participation at grand tours over the last few years, we have seen a number of black athletes race: Yohann Gène and Kévin Réza (France); Daniel Teklehaimanot and Merhawi Kudus (Eritrea); Nicholas Dlamini (South Africa) to name a few. When adding this presence to the recent British dominance and successes at the race, it presents a question: When will Britain have a black rider in the Tour de France?

Perhaps this is a question that would not be conceived by the white dominated cycling media, particularly where an exclusive white privileged default position is able to inflict on them a blindness to such a possibility. For some white cycling commentators, this question may be a ludicrous suggestion. ▶



Still, it is a question that comes very readily for me, a British man of African-Caribbean ethnic origins who has been involved in cycling for close to 30 years as a former road racer and elite track sprinter. I knew that black British-born athletes had excelled in their chosen cycling disciplines, but had not represented Great Britain at the Olympics, and so were not able to become as widely known as their white peers. I wanted to know more about their stories in relation to each other. I began academic research in 2016 out of the University of Brighton with the aim to examine more deeply the history of grassroots access to the sport by black cyclists, who had then progressed to elite level and professional cycling over the last 50 years. This was my life-history study entitled, *'Made in Britain: Uncovering the Life Histories of Black-British Champions in Cycling'*.

From this study, it seems two outstanding black British professional road racing cyclists, by the evidence of their domestic and international racing and successes, could have coped well with racing at the Tour de France, had they been given the opportunity to compete.

First is Mark McKay. As a stage racer and climber, he raced at a professional level between 1988 and 1997 for a variety of British teams including DiamondBack, Ribble Cycles, Team Ambrosia, and Team Harrods. McKay was a multiple winner in Britain and all over the world. Some of his most notable achievements include winning the Star Trophy Series (the Premier Calendar) in 1992 and the King of the Mountains titles at the 1993 Milk Race and the 1993 Rás (Tour of Ireland).

"Getting more black British riders in general needs to happen before success at the professional level can be achieved for this group," McKay says. "The pool of

talent needs to be wide enough, to start. How this is achieved needs to take into account making bike racing

◀ Teklehaimanot was one of the first black African riders in the Tour, in 2015

CYCLING'S DIVERSITY PROBLEM

as attractive as other sports that black British people are interested in, like athletics and football, and to look at ways of making bike racing as accessible as these other sports."

He continues: "From my experiences of high level bike racing, there is no reason that black riders, other than Colombians, cannot compete well in the Tour de France. However the journey to the Tour de France starts with filling the pool with enough riders and perhaps requires

"HOW GOOD WOULD WE HAVE BEEN IF WE HAD THE BACKING OF A WORLDTOUR TEAM AND BRITISH CYCLING?"

DAVID CLARKE, FORMER PRO RACER

a specific project over a number of years to start the process."

David Clarke is another high achieving black British road racer. He, like McKay, was a multiple winner in Britain and all over the world through a professional career stretching from 2001 to 2016. Clarke raced for a variety of British and international teams including UCD Nord 87, ACBB, Le Col, Endura, Pendragon, Team Nippo, Node 4, Synergy Baku, and KTM. He has a long list of achievements. Perhaps most notably he was the King of Mountains winner in the Tour of Alsace in

2004, the general classification winner of the 2009 Tour du Cameroun; and the King of the Mountains winner in 2012 at the Rás.

"For a black British cyclist to compete in the Tour de France, I think it could happen," Clarke says. "Lots of riders in your study would have been at a level where they could have competed in the Tour. We got to that level without the help of a team like Team Sky and we had to fight the system all the way. How good

would we have been if we had the backing of a WorldTour team and British Cycling helping us all the way? I was never really offered much by a British team and it was hard to make a way as a black British cyclist on a foreign team. Being a black British cyclist, you can face racial discrimination just to get on a team."

Systemic racism embedded in the European cycling framework on which the Tour is built is the significant barrier, even with the recent increased black presence of African cyclists. As journalist Jeremy Whittle puts it: "Given the total absence of black British riders in the WorldTour peloton, and the difficulty in seeing when that will change, it's hard to see a black British rider in the Tour de France in the immediate future. There is no willingness to accept the extent of the exclusion of black athletes either at domestic or international level or to instigate genuine change.

European cycling still thinks it doesn't have a problem with ethnic diversity, despite everything that has happened this year."

The undermining of the black presence at WorldTour level racing has been well documented. The experience of the MTN-Qhubeka team during the 2014 Vuelta a España is one example, as team principle Douglas Ryder recounted: "One of the biggest teams in the world... when we were trying to bring one of our riders to the front going into the mountains, shouted, 'You guys don't belong here, ☹"

f*ck off to the back of the bunch.” Another is the racial abuse directed at Réza by Team Sky (now Ineos) rider Gianni Moscon during the 2017 Tour de Romandie, and the lightweight sanction (a six-week suspension from his team) that was imposed on him.

McKay recounts: “I remember being in a race in Belgium or Holland and facing racist abuse in the peloton from one or two Dutch riders, I think simply because they had never experienced racing against non-white opponents before.”

Still, does the increase in black Tour de France cyclists and recent British success mean the possibility of seeing more black British athletes in the future?

“If Britain were to produce a black Tour rider, then it won’t be any time soon,” says Ned Boulting, writer and television commentator at the Tour for ITV. “There are, seemingly, no candidates in the pipeline. The number of black riders in the two highest tiers of the sport has been

stagnant at best, and in the case of NTT, Africa’s only WorldTour team, has actually reduced year on year. The British Cycling scene has done nothing to buck that trend.”

Boulting’s signposting towards the British Cycling scene is important, particularly to comments made by Dave Brailsford in 2009 when he was the Olympic Team GB coach. Brailsford said then, “Breaking down the barriers to wider participation from black and ethnic minority groups remains the great unconquered goal for British cycling.”

But we are now in 2020, some 11 years later, and nothing has changed. Despite all of the nation’s successes on the track and road at the London and Rio Olympic Games, and in British Cycling’s growth to over 160,000 members, the wider participation by black and ethnic minority groups is a goal that British Cycling has failed severely in achieving, especially at elite and professional level.

The domestic road-racing scene in Britain is near void in elite and professional representation of black cyclists.

However, a few aspirant black road cyclists have emerged over the recent years. One is 21-year-old Red Walters from Hampshire. In just four and half years he has progressed from a fourth category racer to an elite licence. “I want to make it to the top, I think it’s important to set lofty goals, and I’m not too shy to say I want to win races at the highest level. One of my dreams is to win a stage of the Tour de France. I’d really love to be the first Black British rider in the Tour de France,” Walters says.

Another aspiring black British road-racer is 17-year-old Kai Watts from London. Unlike Walters, he speaks more modestly about steps in his future as “progressing firstly in the U23 scene, racing around the globe”.

So, when will Britain have a black cyclist racing in the Tour de France?

In a recent conversation with the cycling writer and broadcaster Matt Rendall, I said, “It would be great if [Britain] could produce a black world track champion or Tour de France winner. Apparently a man did walk on the moon. Maybe not in our lifetime. But I think as a collective force: media, cycling industry, British Cycling, we could do anything.”

Rendall’s response was, “You know, funny you say, ‘A man did walk on the moon.’ I had an argument with my editor about Nairo [Quintana]. I said, the journey of where he comes from to the podium of the Tour de France is further, culturally speaking, than the journey it took to put an American on the moon. He told me I was being silly...”

I’d never spoken with Rendall before this, but our congruent thinking in using this analogy shows what a gigantic mission it will take for non-white cycling athletes to enter the cycling atmosphere of Eurocentrism; to survive; to make it big; to be given respect.

It seems that for black British cycling athletes to ‘walk on the moon’ and to race at grand tours in the future, such as the Tour de France, there needs to be a genuine want and desire for this. To create these is our essential starting point. ■

▼ Mark McKay celebrates third place in the 1992 Lincoln GP



Images: Phil O'Connor