

"Rising from Ashes": Bike racing documentary chronicles rise of Rwanda cycling team

Written by Kam Williams



Over the course of a hundred days in 1994, the East African nation of Rwanda experienced an ethnic cleansing which consumed the lives of nearly a fifth of the population. The mass slaughter came as a consequence of a revolt by the majority tribe, the Hutus, against the Tutsis, a minority which, with the help of the country's European colonizers, had enjoyed a higher social and economic status for centuries.

A few years after the cessation of the civil war, American bike racing legend Jock Boyer was looking for a chance at redemption in the wake of being paroled after serving time in prison for lewd behavior. He found that opportunity he needed upon moving to Rwanda at the suggestion of a friend.

There, he took on the unenviable challenge of coaching the national cycling team. And over the next six years he trained them while teaching them how to compete on the level of World-Class athletes with the hope of one day qualifying for the Olympics.

That seemingly impossible quest is the subject of "Rising from Ashes," an uplifting,

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overcoming-the-odds documentary directed by T.C. Johnstone. Narrated by Forest Whitaker, the film introduces us to the ragtag crew of raw recruits, including prima donna Abraham, mischievous Nathan and strongman Nyandwi, that Jock had to try to whip into fighting shape.

But besides athleticism, the intrepid coach had to worry about his young protégés equipment, since they were riding on quarter century-old, brakeless, wooden bikes ordinarily employed as taxis or to deliver huge sacks of produce. An even bigger hurdle had to do with the fact that each was also still suffering from deep, psychological turmoil caused by the mass slaughter they'd witnessed of a million fellow citizens.

For instance, the team's star, Adrien, had lost sixty members of his family, including six brothers and everyone on his mother's side of the clan. For that reason, besides salaries, health care and education, some of the squad's funds were devoted to addressing daunting mental health issues.

An inspirational illustration of how the Olympics came to serve as a unifying step in terms of exorcising the demons ever haunting Rwanda's grisly killing fields.

Very Good (3 stars)

Unrated

In English and Kinyarwanda with subtitles

Running time: 80 minutes

Distributor: First Run Features

To see a trailer for "Rising from Ashes," visit:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bXfq0DxS4KM>