



Achtergrond Wielrennen

# In Eritrea ontvluchten mannen met de fiets hun legerdienst



Latere winnaar Biniam Girmay Hailu (Intermarché-Wanty-Gobert) beklimt de Kemmelberg tijdens Gent-Wevelgem. Beeld BELGA

Het leek een sprookje, hoe Biniam Girmay als eerste Afrikaan ooit Gent-Wevelgem won. Een supertalent

# In Eritrea, men flee their military service by bicycle

It seemed like a fairy tale, how Biniam Girmay became the first African ever to win Ghent-Wevelgem classic cycle race. A super talent from a cycling crazy country. But the reason why cycle racing is so popular in Eritrea turns out to be a lot less fairytale-like.

Cycling competition. Its supporters and signallers. Its cobblestones, fans and abrasions. Its cycling tourists with a Trappist beer after the Sunday stage. Little is as quintessentially Flemish as cycling. A good 7,000 kilometers further south is another cycling-crazy country: Eritrea, ten times larger than Flanders but with about the same number of inhabitants. They cycle, just like Flemings, en masse.

"Cycling is the fifth state religion in Eritrea," *the Economist* magazine said a few years ago. Dictator Isaias Afewerki, in power since independence in 1991, uses cycling as a propaganda tool. In October last year, he approved a subsidy of 15 million nakfa (911,000 euros) for the development of cycling.

"Top athletes do not have to fulfill their military service. They make their contribution through their sports activities," Zuned Tekle, the Eritrean minister of sport, said in a report by the Dutch *RTL News*. Cyclists receive financial support and material from the government and are as popular as rock stars.

Conscription is permanent for eighteen-year-olds and the UN considers it forced labour, which is just one of many human rights violations in the country. Officially, Eritreans have to spend eighteen months in the army, but since that law in 1994, not a single conscript has been relieved. In fact, soldiers are not only used for military campaigns but also have to work in mines and large construction sites for 60 euros a month. It is not for nothing that more than 500,000 Eritreans are trying to get asylum in both Europe and Africa.

The fact that Biniam Girmay will miss the Tour of Flanders on Sunday is therefore no coincidence: he has to return to Eritrea every three months to get his visa renewed. This strict rule for sporting Eritreans who stay abroad was introduced after almost the entire football team did not return in 2015 after an international match in Botswana. Since then, state aid for football has also been cancelled by presidential decree. Only athletics and of course cycling still receive money from the government.

### GIRO DELL'ERITREA

A name one needs to remember for showcasing your knowledge about cycling in Eritrea: Ghebremariam Ghebru. The man won the Giro dell'Eritrea in 1939.

The country was an Italian colony and the expats wanted to practice their cycling hobby there. Under no circumstances were the local population allowed to participate in these competitions. Until 1939 the Italians – it was the time of Benito Mussolini's fascism – wanted to make it clear that Africans would never be their equal physically and the Eritreans were allowed to participate. Great was their surprise when the Italian champions received a suit for the pants from Ghebru.

A clandestine circuit had arisen, where Africans trained and raced hard. Suddenly cycling was a form of rebellion against the colonial occupier: first against the Italians, after the Second World War against the Ethiopian emperor-dictator Haile Selassie.



Girmay has been received as a hero in his home country after his second place at the World Cup for Promises in 2021. Image Instagram

"We never stopped cycling. Even when people died in the war, we continued to organize races. Making it as a cyclist is the dream of every young man," said 75-year-old race organizer and cycling official Giovanni Mazzola, son of an Italian and an Eritrean woman, in a report in *The Guardian*.

#### A MASS OF PEOPLE

Since Ghebru's victory, cycling has been deeply rooted in Eritrean culture. They do not have a word for bicycle in Tigrinya, the official national language, but use the Italian *bicicletta*. Fans along the road shout "*Dai! Dai! Dai!*" to the passing cyclists, just like Italian tifosi on the flanks of a mountain.

An Eritrean who lives abroad and sends a gift to the family chooses a cycling jersey rather than a football jersey. The tours of France, Spain and Italy are broadcast live on national television. At cycling competitions,

people line up thick along the roads and there are even grandstands that are as full as those of large football stadiums. On finish photos of stages in the Tour of Eritrea or the Tour of Zoba Maekel (the region around the capital) one can see the crowd swarming across the street by the thousands behind the sprinting leading group.

Last year Girmay received a state reception after his silver medal at the Promises' world championship in Leuven. Daniel Teklehaimanot also received that honour earlier, after he had worn the finishers' jersey for four days in the 2015 Tour de France. In the streets of Asmara they are already getting ready for another big party. President Afewerki has already written his speech, because tomorrow the great hero will come home.

*Little freedom under President Afewerki*

One man holds total power in Eritrea: Isaias Afewerki (76). Since the country's independence in 1991, after a thirty-year civil war with Ethiopia, he has been president. He seized power during the conquest of Asmara, the current capital, from the Ethiopian army and his government was ratified in a 1993 referendum on independence. Not a single election has been held since then. The constitution, which was voted on in 1997, was never implemented. In 2001, Afewerki abolished all opposition parties, as well as all independent media. Those who called for democratic changes were arrested. In 2015, the United Nations accused Afewerki of crimes against humanity.