

Paracycling UCI World Championship



The Sunbird who defied the sniper



Malachy Clerkin
After losing his leg to an Israeli bullet, Alaa al-Dali found his way out of Gaza and into the World Championships

Alaa al-Dali was watching the protest in his full cycling gear when he was shot in the leg by an IDF sniper. He was standing beside his bike, 300m from the fence that separates Gaza from Israel. It was March 2018 and he was 21 years old.

He had already qualified to compete in the Asian Games later that summer and was on track to become the first ever Palestinian cyclist to compete at the Olympics. But the gunshot caused 22cm of devastation to Dali's right leg and meant he'd have to get it amputated. No leg, no Asian Games, no Olympics. It was more than just his tibia that the sniper's bullet tore through.

Six and a half years on, a small miracle

will land next week. On Tuesday morning in Zurich, Dali will roll out for the time trial in the C2 category of the UCI World Paracycling Championship. Three days later, he'll take his place in the field for the C2 road race. He won't win but he will compete, in defiance of the odds, in defiance of everything. You don't need to be on the podium to claim a victory.

"It will be the first time the Palestinian flag is flown on the international cycling stage," says Karim Ali, co-founder alongside Dali of the Gaza Sunbirds Paracycling team. "It will be the first time any Palestinian has made it to a competition at this level. It's an honour to be taking this step. It's huge."

"Alaa only got out of Gaza in April. His family is still there, including his two young kids. He has travelled to eight countries through the summer and qualified for these championships even though he has had no permanent place to stay. In the space of five months, he has done something that takes some teams and countries years to achieve."

That he has got here at all is down, at least in part, to Mark Rohan. The Westmeath man, a double gold medallist in handcycling at the 2012 Paralympics, lives in Portugal now and coaches from his base in the Algarve. In Zurich next week, his stable comprises two Norwegian cyclists, one Icelander and one Portuguese, as well as Dali.

"It was very ordinary in how it came about," says Rohan. "I read about the Gaza Sunbirds and basically sent them a mes-

sage saying something along the lines of, 'I don't know how I can help but I'd like to.' I'm coaching Alaa but it's as much coaching his coach Hassan as anything.

"What they've done is amazing. They really had nothing. I mean, nothing. They were getting aid workers to smuggle bike parts into Gaza for them. People were taking bikes out of skips in Israel and trying to get them into Gaza so they could work on them and make them raceable. They didn't even have cleats to fit into the pedals – they were wrapping some of the cyclists' feet on to the pedals with duct tape. It's been such a hard slog for them."

It started with Dali getting shot that day. The Great March of Return was a nine-month-long protest by Gazans in 2018, where thousands turned up daily to demand the right to return to their ancestral lands from which they were displaced in 1948. Dali made a point of attending in his cycling gear – he was having major difficulties in securing the right to leave Gaza to compete in international competition. He has always assumed that made him a target for the IDF sniper.

The official UN report on the demonstrations found that the IDF deliberately shot at the legs of protesters and that 156 amputations took place as a result. Dali's was one of them.

Eight days in the operating theatre
"I begged the doctor to try his best before amputating it because my dreams as an athlete are tied up with these legs," he later told Al-Jazeera. "I spent eight days in the operating theatre. Every day I had a surgery on my leg. I felt so much pain and bullet fragments infected it all. I needed to make a choice – either the amputation or losing my life. After thinking a lot, I gave my consent to cut the leg. It was a very hard decision to make."

Undeterred, Dali took a few months and decided to become a paracyclist. More than that, he decided that since the Gaza Strip had one of the highest concentrations of amputees on the planet, there had to be a way to pull together a paracycling team. A short film telling his story was shot and made in Arabic. The job of translating it into English landed on the desk of a 19-year-old student in London, a Cypriot Palestinian called Karim Ali.

"Translating is a pretty intimate experience," Ali says. "You really have to listen to what the person is saying. What emotions are they feeling? What are the exact words or phrases that they use to describe their situation? I felt very close to Alla after translating his story. And as a result of that, I decided I wanted to help him. But I was super young and I didn't know much about the world."

“People were taking bikes out of skips in Israel and trying to get them into Gaza so they could work on them and make them raceable”

That was how the Gaza Sunbirds were born. Over the next few years, with Ali in London and Dali in Gaza, they cobbled bits and pieces of gear together and got up and running. They were, from day one, a paracycling team rather than a cycling team. They were a place where amputees could come and learn to ride a bike. And, in time, to race a bike.

"Our mission for year one was just to show that it is possible to train somebody under war circumstances," says Ali. "It wasn't to achieve any numbers. It was to see if it's possible to get bikes, to train any number of these guys consistently for any period of time. That was it. That was the whole objective. There was nothing else. It was like an early proof of concept – as in, is it even possible to cycle in Gaza?"

"How difficult is it to ride a bike? Very difficult if you only have one leg... Amputations in Gaza, they're progressive conditions. People get one amputation, then another, then another, then another, then another. Then they get complications in their limbs because the prosthetics are never correct. So even if you have a good leg, how good does that leg stay when your entire body weight is on it? And if you're prone to an crash and you get seen in the hospital or you get partial medical treatment for it, how can you continue to cycle on it? Maybe you can live a regular life with a slight leg injury, but then can you go and do professional sports?"

Bit by bit, they built it up. This time last year, the Gaza Sunbirds had 22 athletes, ranging in age from 12 to 50. They were getting a better supply of bikes and trained five times a week, up and down the Gaza Strip. The best of them, Dali included, were aiming to compete at the Paralympics in Paris, at the time just 10 months away.

Then October 7th happened.

Every day since, the world has watched Gaza be turned to rubble. The Israeli reaction to atrocities carried out by Hamas has made life on the strip intolerable. The death toll, as of this week, is 41,252 people, including 16,500 children. The UN says

more than half of the homes in Gaza have been destroyed or damaged. More than 90 per cent of the population have been displaced since this phase of the war began.

In a particularly grim irony, cycling became the best way to get around Gaza. With fuel supplies cut off and 65 per cent of the road bombed to pieces, the Sunbirds went from being the most immobile people in Gaza to among the most mobile. With life as a sports team immediately suspended, Ali and Dali came up with the idea of morphing into a delivery service.

"Alaa said, 'Why don't I get some bread and cycle around bringing it to people?'" Ali says. "We made a video of it and put it out on the internet to see if we could raise money to help people. We set up a Just Giving page. The video was kind of weird but it worked. We've kept doing it ever since."

All the while, Dali wanted to try to get to the Paralympics. To do so, they would have to get him out of Gaza and into Europe where he could take part in some qualifying races. It took three months for him to make it across the border into Egypt, along with three other cyclists and two coaches.

No going back
Everything since has been life on the hoof. They got to Ostend in Belgium to take part in a World Cup race in May. Dali finished last in his category but at least they were on the map now. That night, however, the news came through that the Israelis had begun their assault on Rafah and closed the border crossing they had squeezed out through only weeks earlier. There was, literally, no going back.

Four of the group of six decided to apply for asylum in Belgium, there and then. But Dali and his coach ploughed on, to see if they could get a wild card into the Paralympics. They raced in Italy, Kazakhstan and Malaysia, all to show their hunger for a spot in Paris. But when it came down to it, the IPC didn't grant him a spot. It was always going to be a long shot and this one didn't hit. But along the way, he qualified for Zurich. Having spent the past two months living in a church basement in Padova, Italy, they drove the six hours north on Wednesday. They don't know what the future holds past next week. Maybe Dali keeps competing where he can, maybe he waits out the war and tries to get back to his family. Nobody really has a clue.

For now, all they know is that on Tuesday and Friday, he will take his place among the sleek machines of the world's best paracyclists and start pedalling his one good leg.

Whatever the road in front of him holds, it can't be harder than the one behind him.

Motor Sport F1

Verstappen punished for swearing at press conference

GILES RICHARDS

Max Verstappen has been punished by Formula One's governing body for swearing in the immediate aftermath of a backlash by the world champion and other drivers against the FIA president, Mohammed Ben Sulayem, and his demand that drivers cease to use bad language.

It is a dispute Verstappen is expected to vigorously return to as this weekend's meeting in Singapore progresses.

Early this week Ben Sulayem had said: "We have to differentiate between our sport – motorsport – and rap music. We're not rappers, you know. They say the f-word how many times per minute? We are not on that. That's them and we are [us]".

He was subsequently accused by Lewis Hamilton of using stereotypical bias informed by a "racial element" in citing rap artists, while both Verstappen and his title rival Lando Norris insisted that sometimes swearing was part of the intense demands and emotional pressure of competing in a dangerous sport.



■ The FIA statement said Max Verstappen apologised for swearing

Verstappen then swore in the televised FIA press conference on Thursday, referring to his car at the last round in Baku as "fucked". Less than 24 hours later he was summoned to the stewards and after a hearing of 13 minutes was issued with a punishment for using language deemed under the rules to be "coarse, rude or may cause offence". He will be expected to "accomplish some work of public interest" yet to be defined.

The FIA regulations are clear that drivers are expected to be role models and specify against using words or deeds that can cause "moral injury".

The FIA statement said -Verstappen apologised and made his case that "the driver explained that the word used is ordinary in speech as he learned it, English not being his native language". This argument was dismissed.

The governing body's decision will only compound what is set to be a difficult weekend for the world champion in Singapore. He comes into the race with a 59-point lead over Norris but the Red Bull is expected to struggle at the Marina Bay circuit.

With seven meetings remaining and 206 points available Norris needs to outscore Verstappen by an average of nine points per race. While it is a tall order, the target could be markedly cut if Norris wins and Verstappen scores poorly in Singapore.

That the Dutchman and Red Bull are taking nothing for granted was made clear before this round when they announced they were to drop the proposed fan-inspired liveries for their car for this race and the following US GP. The decision was made after the team assessed that the new livery would add approximately 1kg of weight, translating to around three-hundredths of a second per lap. It is a tiny margin but indicative of how hard Red Bull feel they now have to push.

– Guardian

Briefs

Golf

Rahm's DP World Tour appeal may not end before Ryder Cup

Guy Kinnings, the chief executive of the European Tour Group, has conceded a crucial appeals process involving Ryder Cup duo Jon Rahm and Tyrrell Hatton may not be concluded before the event returns next September.

Kinnings appears hopeful a deal to unite elite golf can be formalised before then, which in theory would negate the case Rahm and Hatton have against his organisation.

Rahm and Hatton have been heavily fined for playing on the LIV circuit without releases from the DP World, formerly European, Tour. In order to remain eligible for the Ryder Cup, the pair have appealed against the sanc-

tions. They can play in Europe in the meantime.

This backdrop is a messy one for the European Ryder Cup captain Luke Donald. Should Rahm and Hatton lose their appeals – as is highly likely, based on precedent – they could be ruled out of Ryder Cup contention. An obvious way around that is to delay the formalities of the challenge until after the US host Europe at Bethpage.

"The lawyers involved will dictate the legal process as to when it gets done," Kinnings said. "There's no fixed, set formula to that, and so we'll just wait and see how long it takes to reach that appeal process."

Soccer

Fifa set to name eight venues for 2025 Club World Cup in US

Fifa are set to announce staging agreements with eight stadiums for the Club World Cup in the strongest indication yet that the controversial new tournament will take place as planned next summer.

Pasadena, Seattle, Atlanta, Orlando, Miami, Philadelphia and two stadiums in New Jersey have been selected as hosts by Fifa, who are in the final stages of completing contract negotiations with the venues.

Fifa have been beset by rumours that the 32-team Club World Cup may have to be postponed, as they have yet to confirm any venues, sponsorship deals, prize money or the sale of TV



■ Carlo Ancelotti has been a vocal critic of the plans

rights nine months before it is due to start.

Real Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti caused a diplomatic storm in June by saying that his side would "refuse the invitation" while the Premier League chief executive Richard Masters has claimed that players could boycott the event.

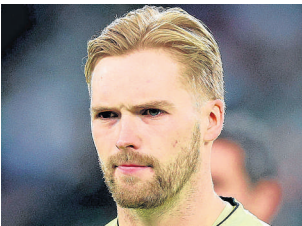
Alisson injury opens door for Kelleher to start for Liverpool

Republic of Ireland international Caoimhin Kelleher may be called in to replace Liverpool goalkeeper Alisson for their Premier League clash with Bournemouth today as the Brazilian struggles with a muscle injury, manager Arne Slot said yesterday.

"Alisson is still a doubt if he can train today, so let's wait (to see) if he can train," Slot told reporters. "If he can't, he probably won't play as well."

"He has a slight issue with one of his muscles, and we wonder if this game is coming too early or not."

Slot added Alisson felt the injury before Tuesday's 3-1 Champions League victory over AC Milan, and then



■ Caoimhin Kelleher: In line for game against Bournemouth

aggravated it during the game. "Now we have to wait and see if he's ready to be in goal (on Saturday) or we have to wait a few extra days."

Kelleher, who started Ireland's recent internationals against England and Greece, played the majority of pre-season for Liverpool with Alisson at the Copa America.

Boxing

Joshua insists Ruiz defeat will stand to him against Dubois

Anthony Joshua insists his shock defeat by Andy Ruiz has forged the mindset that will enable him to become a three-time world heavyweight champion at Wembley tonight.

Joshua challenges for Daniel Dubois' IBF belt knowing victory would complete a period of rebuilding after losses to Ruiz in 2019 and then twice to Oleksandr Usyk left his career on the brink. Now riding a five-fight winning streak, the 34-year-old from Watford views the seismic upset in New York as a seminal moment.

"I became mentally strong when everyone went against me after Ruiz," said Joshua,



■ Anthony Joshua will fight in front of 96,000 at Wembley

who was floored four times before being stopped in the seventh round by the Mexican-American.

Joshua is expected to join greats Muhammad Ali, Lennox Lewis and Evander Holyfield by winning a world title for the third time in front of a 96,000 crowd at Wembley.