

The Weekly

WOMEN TAKE OVER TOUR DE FREE STATE

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Women's race winners ... South Africa's Ashleigh Moolman Pasio (Team Lotto Belisol), Sweden's Emma Johansson (Team HiTech Mistrel Home), and Germany's Hanka Kupfernagel (Team RusVelo)

The new women's race added to the Tour de Free State has proved a resounding success as more than 100 entered the race.

This year's Tour de Free State provided a platform for the first UCI Ranked Women's Tour on African soil.

Sweden's Emma Johansson from Team HiTech Merisol was the overall winner of the race, which ended in Clarens on Sunday.

In the men's race, Johann Rabie successfully defended his title and Team Bonitas came out on top. The race boasted a new format this year – instead of elapsed time, the standard format for stage races, it followed a points system, rewarding the most consistent top daily finishers.

"When I saw this format for the tour I decided to ensure I was in the top 10 after Stage 3. I simply raced to the format and it worked out well for me," said Rabie. Men and women from around the world lined up at the starting line of the race at the Tikwe Lodge in Virginia last Wednesday.

Besides being the first ever UCI women's road cycling tour in South Africa, the tour was also the last opportunity for nations to increase their national rankings before the UCI's May 31 deadline for qualification for the London Olympic Games. Tour de Free State is based on the Tour de France concept, where cyclists from all over the world compete against each other. Tour de Free State visited 12 towns in the Free State this year.

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Premier Ace Magashule, Tourism MEC Mamiki Qabathe, ***the executive mayor of the Lejweleputswa district municipality, Mathabo Leeto***, and the executive mayor of the Matjhabeng Local Municipality, Sebenzile Ngangelizwe, welcomed the 124 women cyclists.

Magashule said Virginia was chosen as the starting point of the Tour de Free State this year because the town is an important tourist attraction. “A kraal of King Moshoeshoe is situated outside Virginia on the road to Ventersburg and mammoth fossils, believed to be four million years old were discovered on the banks of the Sand River near Meloding.

“Merriespruit was destroyed by a mudslide and has been rehabilitated. The whole community, both black and white, came together to rebuild the area. This truly represents Ubuntu,” said Magashule. Qabathe praised the involvement of women in the race.

“The Department of Economic Development, Tourism and Environmental Affairs is very proud that the success of the Tour de Free State event last year has secured the inclusion of the event on the annual cycling calendar by Cycling South Africa. This makes it the only Olympic qualifying road cycling race for women in Africa,” Qabathe said.

“Tour de Free State is an ambitious initiative, aiming to unlock and demonstrate the Free State’s tourism potential through cycling to national and international audiences,” she added. In order to boost cycling as a sport in the province, government has donated 50 bicycles to 10 primary schools in Virginia – including Tikwe, Harmony, Boaze Saaiplaas, Ditsebeng, and Diketseng.

Tikwe Primary School principal Amelia Mofekeng said she has identified a group of learners who are not involved in other sports to be part of the school’s cycling club.. “The children are very excited. It was surprising to learn that not many of them even know how to cycle, but we will appoint someone to teach them the basics and by next year this time we will have participated in a variety of cycling competitions.

“This is a start for the children to be part of teams such as these in the future. We cannot just have a race. We must invest in the communities residing here.”

One of the women who participated in this year’s Tour de Free State, Jutatip Maneephan from Thailand, said she was very excited to be a part of such an amazing event.

She has been cycling for the past 11 years and is Thailand’s number one female cyclist. “This is my first time in South Africa. We have not been to a lot of places yet, but so far I must admit I love the weather,” Maneephan said.

PelaPela Events and Marketing media liaison officer Carin van Vuuren said eco-tourism has taken off across the world and travellers want to experience the outdoors from a different vantage point.

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