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*Sthembiso Masango*

DURBAN: The Mandela Day Mountain Biking Dash could provide a perfect send off to KwaZulu-Natal's Sthembiso Masango before he heads over to Australia to where he will represent South Africa at the UCI Mountain Bike World Championships next month.

"I am going to be doing the Mandela Day MTB Dash as it will be very good training for me just before I leave for Australia. Obviously, Nelson Mandela was very special to me, as he was to all South Africans, so it makes me very proud to be able to race in an event in his honour," he said this week.

While the Mandela Dash attracts the cream of KZN mountain bikers, there are also 21km and 10km races in a weekend of Mandela Day Marathon events that also include a road running marathon, half marathon, and 10km run, trail runs, a youth run and a triathlon, all in honour of former President Nelson Mandela. All events are based at or near the Mandela Capture Site in Lions' River.

With a healthy prizemoney of R122 000 on offer, the mountain bike rides offer what is believed to be the biggest prize purse for a one-day classic MTB distance event which normally attracts a strong field of riders. Last year Alan Hatherly returned from competing at the Rio Olympics and in his first race back claimed the 2016 title.

Masango is hoping to match his South African teammate with a victory, but more importantly, Dash provides Masango with a chance to take on the best in the province in a tough, no-hold-barred event, the weekend before he goes to Australia for what is sure to be his toughest race yet.

"I did not have a good race in Germany. I had a few mechanicals, so I had to waste a lot of time fixing things. My chain broke twice, and so I did not get the result I wanted. But I learned a lot, and I am looking forward to going to Australia and representing my country again," said Masango.

Under the watchful eye of mentor Martin Dreyer, the talented RMB Change A Life Academy rider, Masango, has steadily improved in 2017, which has been his breakthrough year. In March he took part in the gruelling Absa Cape Epic and has caught the attention of the national team selectors.

In July Masango earned his first South African jersey when he lined up at the World Marathon Championships in Germany and finished 159th on the brutally tough Singen course.

Since then, Masango has been concentrating on the shorter, punchier cross country riding, and in July was part of the national team for the UCI World XCO Championships in Perth.

"I am so happy to have been selected for the South African team again. It was amazing to be chosen.

KwaZulu-Natal MEC for Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs Nomusa Dube-Ncube believes that this year's edition of the Mandela Marathon will see course records tumble.

"We know that all athletes have been training hard and we expect over 15 000 participants through the weekend of (August) 26-27. As the provincial government we are looking forward to seeing thousands of people from all walks of life, take part as we remember the values that Madiba left us with" said Dube-Ncube

Mayor of the uMgungundlovu District Thobekile Maphumulo said that this year's edition of the Marathon and all the activities that accompany it will bring much needed economic activity to her district, which is where former President Mandela made his final public appearance before being arrested by police before he spent 27 years in prison.

The Mandela Day Mountain Biking Dash is scheduled for August 26.  
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**SUNDAY TRIBUNE**