

Dreaming beyond the barricades

Palestinian cyclist Alaa al-Dali tells CW about the devastating injury that changed his life but which hasn't stopped him from striving to compete internationally



Despite the blockaded Palestinian territory of Gaza being just 40km long with only one small hill, in the spring of 2018 cyclist Alaa al-Dali was on the brink of realising his greatest ambition as a cyclist – representing Palestine in the Asian Games, to be held that summer in Jakarta.

“I would train almost every day, doing a lot of cardio, and I was working on putting as many kilometres as I could in my legs,” the 23-year-old tells me over Zoom. “I was also working out in the gym, building muscles, and on a strict diet. No refined sugars, low-fat – a lot of fish, boiled chicken.” Sourcing good-quality protein wasn't easy. “It was really expensive – Gaza is like a refugee camp and that kind of food is a luxury – but I knew I needed the right food because the Asian Games were so close.”

Al-Dali had won a gold medal in the 2018 national championships and was now working hard to improve his climbing. Everything was going well until 30 March 2018 when, along with thousands of other Gazans, he made his way to the March of Return protest marking 70 years since the conflict in which hundreds of thousands of Palestinian Arabs were expelled from their homes by Israeli forces.

As he neared the fence that has enforced Israel's blockade since 2007, Al-Dali was shot in the leg by an Israeli sniper, shattering bone and blood supply to the extent that the only viable treatment was above-the-knee amputation. He was not alone; around 90 Palestinians lost limbs in the conflict that spring.

Talking about it now, he re-lives the pain and shock. “It was going to be a peaceful protest – you just don't think something like this will happen to you. Things were very, very difficult after the accident. I never imagined getting on the bike with one leg, and I was in a very bad spot.”

And yet al-Dali, who smiles often and shows only humility at the global admiration his struggle has inspired, was adamant he would make a return to cycling.

“The biggest part of my adaptation was my mental state. After I found my determination, I just learned how to get on a bike, as if I was a kid again, only this time with one leg.”

The roads of Gaza may bear the craters of war and underinvestment, but even in these conditions, a tight community of riders are united in the simple act of getting their heads down and pedalling.

“My team-mates were so important to me,” al-Dali reflects on his recovery. “They used to tell me, ‘your dream is still alive, you can still do it’. This support was also mirrored by my family and friends.” How did the loss of his leg leave him feeling about the ongoing circumstances in Palestine? “After the accident, to be honest, it actually filled me with

more anger and determination about the occupation and the situation we have to endure in Gaza.”

Remarkably, the life-changing injury has dulled neither his spirit of freedom nor his competitive ambitions. Al-Dali is training as hard as ever, and using a turbo trainer to simulate climbing efforts – he takes inspiration from the WorldTour and particularly admires Mark Cavendish for his dogged determination.

Al-Dali's dream

is to commission a bike specially adapted for him, but money and jobs are difficult to come by in Gaza, and even the most basic components are hard to get through Israel's blockade. Relentlessly positive, and despite being limited by his basic set-up, al-Dali sees an upside even in this obstacle.

“Clearly the lack of light bikes and aerodynamic equipment makes it really hard to train... but one day if I am able to compete with professional equipment, maybe I will be faster because of all the hard work I'm putting in right now.”

His first application for a travel permit to compete at the Paralympics was rejected, but he continues to adapt well to the challenge of para-cycling. Asked what his main cycling ambition is now, al-Dali doesn't hesitate.

“To ride for Palestine in the Paralympics.”

To get this far has required the support and strength of those around him, and he aims high not for himself but for his whole community.

“Really I want to set up a team for para-cyclists in Gaza, this is my biggest goal – to be part of a journey along with other fellow amputees who might have lost their legs but not their dreams. I want us to become a point of reference in the para-cycling world and hopefully one day we will get to the Paralympics together.”

Julian Sayerer

‘WHAT I LEARNT’

Value your community: My team-mates pushed me to go back to training and made me believe.

Turn misfortune into strength: That was an unexpected power I found inside myself; I decided that, no matter what, I wanted to get out to represent Palestine.

Never give up: The most important thing was to keep my athleticism and my muscles. Nowadays I also find swimming very beneficial, and I'm determined to ride every day.

THROUGH THE LENS

Photojournalist Flavia Cappellini on her experience photographing Gazan cycling

I've experienced another side of pro cycling in Gaza. Filming the riders training without professional bikes, in the dust and in a volatile war zone, it reminded me of those legendary Italian riders my grandfather used to tell me about, competing for nothing but the love of the sport.

Gazan riders follow WorldTour racing with interest. Most have never left Gaza,

so it's hard to imagine what it's like to ride uphill or have thousands of kilometres in your legs. The focus is on speed and the work behind sprint trains, simulating the fatigue of a long-distance race by going up and down the longest road they have – about 35km long. Last year Palestine gained full membership in the UCI. I hope this means the riders can finally leave Gaza to compete internationally – and hopefully climb a mountain for the first time.