

Kaka aims to take 'role model' mantle



Luthando Kaka and other members of Team Medscheme prepare for a training ride. Among them is former SA champ Malcolm Lange.

KEVIN MCCALLUM

FOR 30 minutes in 2008, Luthando Kaka had the eyes of the South African cycling world focused solely on him. The young Cape Town cyclist took the Cape Argus Pick n Pay Cycle Tour, the country's signature race, by the scruff of its neck and for a glorious half-an-hour led the elite field.

This week, having just signed for Team Medscheme, Kaka laughed as he remembered the breakaway. As the race hit Misty Cliffs he had kicked hard and built up a lead of one minute as he went past the feisty fans at Oceanview.

"I don't think they saw me go away on Misty Cliffs," he joked. "Hey, that's why they call it Misty Cliffs; perhaps they thought I was just a gust of wind. When they heard I had a minute lead, they chased and I got caught at the bottom of Chapman's Peak. That was a big thing for me. It was live on television, my parents were watching, my friends were watching - it's the biggest race in the country. If you don't try something, then what is the point of racing?"

It certainly got him noticed. A product of the Lifestyle Cycling Academy in Khayeltisha, Kaka began cycling seven

years ago, starting on a BMX and graduating to a road bike, and then came success in local races. He spent last year riding for the Danish team Glud & Marstrand Horsens, racing in Europe and this week was announced as the eighth member of the Medscheme outfit owned by former Tour and South African champion Malcolm Lange. It is, the 24-year old believes, the right step for him at this time of his career.

"Amos Ziqubu got me involved with the Khayeltisha Millennium Cycling Club, which has become the Life Cycling Academy, under the Velokhaya organisation," said Kaka. "Amos got me my first road bike, which was not a top of the range bike, but as I got better, the LCA helped me get better equipment. Now I'm here on a professional South African team."

Kaka is trained by Dr Jeroen Swart of the Discovery High Performance Cycling Centre, based at the Sports Science Institute of South Africa, a man Kaka describes as the "backbone of my cycling". When Kaka told him he was going to move to Johannesburg to further his career, Swart organised him accommodation with his mother and continues to be a mentor. With Medscheme he will rely on the advice of veterans like Lange, Nic White and Neil MacDonald.

"I'm more of an all round rider. I can climb quite well and I'm okay in the sprint," said Kaka. "I'm probably not a sprinter like Malcolm or Arran Brown, but I can hold my own. In the past I've had to adapt.

"When I rode in Cape Town (on the development Acsis team), I didn't have a team that had a lead-out train or a sprinter; so if I could get a good wheel, then I would do okay. With Medscheme, I will have to look at myself and see what you can bring to the team, and what value you can add to the team. If they want me to work on my climbing or sprinting, well, that's what I will do."

A fifth place in the MTN Amashova Classic in Durban last year, as well as ninth in the South African championships and top 10s in the OFM Classic, point to a man with a good engine. With Nolan Hoffman banned in January for 18-months for doping, South African cycling needs a young black star to push the development of the sport. Is Kaka prepared to take on the mantle of poster boy for black cycling?

"If anything, me being on Medscheme just shows what can be achieved," said Kaka. "If I can be a role model for others, I would love that, but my first job is to be the best rider I can be."

