

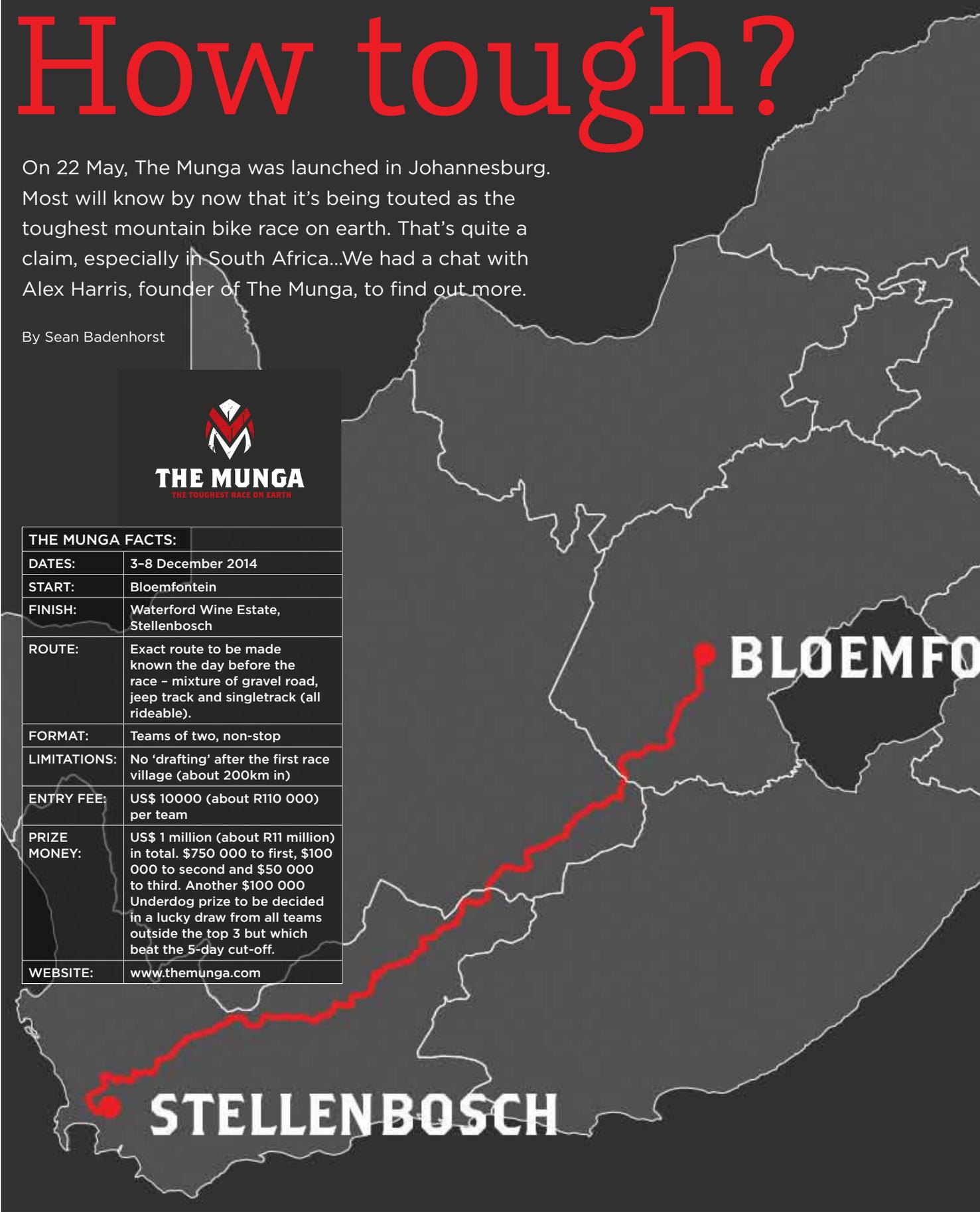
How tough?

On 22 May, The Munga was launched in Johannesburg. Most will know by now that it's being touted as the toughest mountain bike race on earth. That's quite a claim, especially in South Africa...We had a chat with Alex Harris, founder of The Munga, to find out more.

By Sean Badenhorst



THE MUNGA FACTS:	
DATES:	3-8 December 2014
START:	Bloemfontein
FINISH:	Waterford Wine Estate, Stellenbosch
ROUTE:	Exact route to be made known the day before the race - mixture of gravel road, jeep track and singletrack (all rideable).
FORMAT:	Teams of two, non-stop
LIMITATIONS:	No 'drafting' after the first race village (about 200km in)
ENTRY FEE:	US\$ 10000 (about R110 000) per team
PRIZE MONEY:	US\$ 1 million (about R11 million) in total. \$750 000 to first, \$100 000 to second and \$50 000 to third. Another \$100 000 Underdog prize to be decided in a lucky draw from all teams outside the top 3 but which beat the 5-day cut-off.
WEBSITE:	www.themunga.com



“The Munga is essentially a hybrid event. It’s not your average stage race and it’s not an extreme event. Everyone will be able to visualise themselves giving it a go.”

The Munga founder, Alex Harris, photographed during one of his Freedom Challenge wins.



Photo: Andrew King

Alex Harris knows the meaning of the word tough – undoubtedly better than most. Among other extreme achievements, he’s walked unsupported and unassisted (no dogs or wind-power assistance) to the South Pole; he’s climbed the Seven Summits (the seven highest mountains on all seven continents); and he’s won the Freedom Challenge, a non-stop 2300km mountain bike race across South Africa, twice.

Last year, at his first attempt, he finished third in the Tour Divide, a 4418km non-stop, unsupported mountain bike race ‘down’ the United States, starting in Canada and finishing at the Mexican border.

“You know what I got for winning the Freedom Challenge? A Basotho blanket. Every finisher gets one. And for finishing third at the Tour Divide, I got a handshake,” says Harris.

“I’m an extreme adventurer and for me, mostly, the achievement is reward enough. But you know, money is a great motivator. No matter what kind of person you are, there’s a something very attractive about a big financial reward. This is why we have put up a million dollars in prize money at The Munga,” explains Harris.

That’s around R11 million in cash for eight riders. First placed team gets US\$750 000, second placed team gets US\$100 000, third placed team gets US\$50 000.

And then there’s a US\$100 000 Underdog prize. All teams outside the top three but which finish inside

the five-day cut-off will go into a draw for the Underdog prize. That’s a pretty good incentive to be tough and finish, even if you’re well outside podium contention.

That’s a lot of money for mountain bikers. Athletes – let’s be honest, with that kind of money on offer, it’s not only going to be mountain bikers gunning for The Munga title. Any endurance athlete is going to find that reward worth deviating from his – or her – regular season plan for...

So the winners will split about R8.5 million. That’s over R4 million each. The overall winner of the 2014 Tour de France will get 450 000 Euros (R6 million), but he splits that at least nine ways...

“Mountain bike racing is tough. No races offer enough prize money to match the commitment and effort and suffering and skill and pace judgment required in mountain bike racing. We wanted to offer that from the beginning with The Munga,” says Harris.

How tough is The Munga? It’s not the longest mountain bike race in the world, or even South Africa. It’s at least 1000km in distance. But the cut-off makes it tough for most. The time limit puts pressure on every team.

Harris adds that he didn’t want the event to be considered extreme, otherwise only a handful would attempt it.

“The Munga is essentially a hybrid event. It’s not your average stage race and it’s not an extreme

event. Everyone will be able to visualise themselves giving it a go. In fact when my first creative guy heard what the prize money was, he excused himself from the project saying that he was going to rather race The Munga than be involved in promoting it,” smiled Harris.

“The Underdog prize is also a pretty decent reward and it should keep every team in the race motivated, even when they realise they aren’t in with a shot at the win. It’s still a good reason to dig really deep,” said Harris, adding:

“At any mountain bike stage race, the prize money on offer can only be within reach of very small percentage of the field. The rest of the riders in the race are pretty much racing to create, well, a great war story. We want everyone racing The Munga to create a great war story AND be in with a shot at a seriously decent reward.”

Harris reckons the winners should be able to complete The Munga in 2.5 days, which is how he settled on five days being the maximum for the cut-off.

“To beat the cut-off, you have to average 10kph for 20 hours a day with four hours to rest or sleep per day,” smiles Harris. “Sounds simple enough. Sounds achievable to most. But add in the heat – early December is hot – and the terrain – the Karoo makes up a big part of the race route – and it’s an unforgiving place to be pedalling a bicycle,” smiles Harris. “No, the The Munga is not extreme, but it’s tough, damn tough!”