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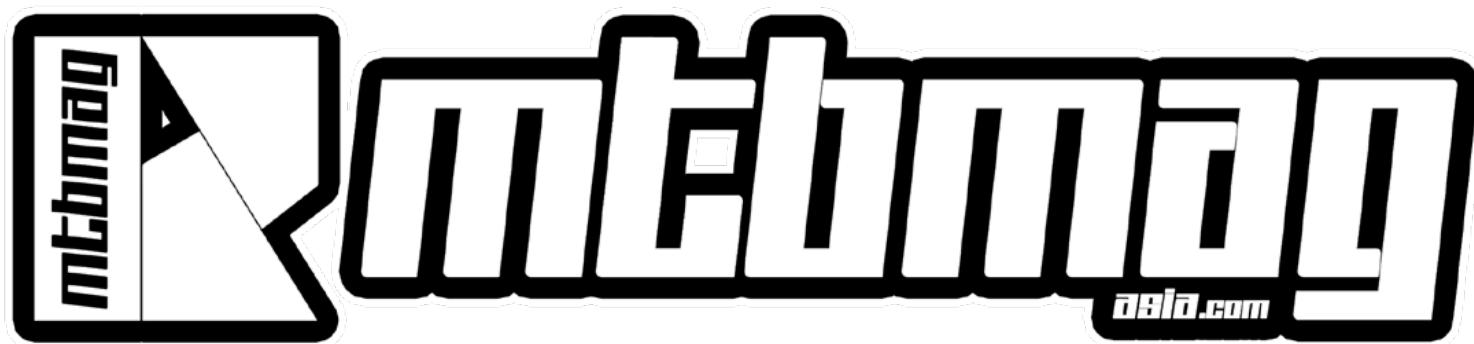
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Mio Suemasa

Still Racing
Still Winning
Still Riding



From World Champion to a devastating injury, and back to the World Cup at 43

There are comebacks, and then there is Mio Suemasa.

The Japanese mountain bike legend has been racing for more than two decades. A former Junior World Champion, World Championship silver medallist and multiple-time Japanese champion, Suemasa has already achieved more than most riders could dream of.

But her story didn't simply end with those achievements.

After taking time away from racing to balance life and motherhood, Mio returned to competition with the feeling that racing was still a part of who she was. Then, in 2023, a serious brachial plexus injury suffered while training left her unable to properly use her left arm for months.

For many riders, that might have been the end.

For Mio, it became another chapter.

After an intense rehabilitation process, she returned to competition and won the Japanese national title again in 2025. And in 2026, she took another huge step: returning to the UCI Downhill World Cup in South Korea after roughly a decade away from the World Cup circuit.

Her comeback was about more than simply pinning on a number again. Through her "Ride With Me" project, Mio also brought the Japanese mountain

bike community into the journey, turning her return into something people could experience together.

At 43, she is still lining up against a new generation of riders.

And she is still hungry to race.

We caught up with Mio to talk about the injury, her comeback, returning to the World Cup, racing against riders half her age, and what keeps her pushing after such a long and successful career.

The Interview

Back where it all began

MTB Mag Asia: Mio, after being away from the World Cup for around ten years, you returned to the World Cup in South Korea this year. When you look back at that moment now, what does it mean to you?

Mio: It was a very meaningful race for me. Over those ten years, I went through many different experiences — pregnancy, giving birth, raising my daughter, and my injury.

The World Cup was a place where I had raced in the past. But at the time, I never imagined that I would race in the World Cup again.

Then, after my injury, I reached a point where I couldn't even ride a mountain bike anymore. From there, I gradually recovered, and before I knew it, I was standing at the World Cup start gate again for the first time in ten years.





For me, it was a moment when I realised, “I’ve really come this far.”

At the same time, even now when I look back on it, it still feels almost unbelievable.

MTB Mag Asia: Before you could even think about racing again, you had to recover from a very serious injury in 2023. What was the hardest part of that recovery for you — physically or mentally?

Mio: In 2023, while doing trampoline training as part of my physical preparation to try to win another Downhill national championship title, I dislocated my left shoulder and suffered a brachial plexus injury. At the time of the injury, I couldn’t move my left arm at all, from my shoulder all the way to my fingertips.

Just getting through everyday life and taking care of my daughter was a huge challenge.

I was told that nerve recovery is like “running a long-distance marathon.” I didn’t know when I would recover, how much function would return, or what the recovery would look like. There were many times when I felt anxious because I couldn’t see what was ahead.

Even so, I always held on to the belief that, one day, my arm would move again.

MTB Mag Asia: Was there a particular moment during rehabilitation when you thought, “Okay, I really can race again”?

Mio: About six months after the injury, I started riding my MTB again, even though I still couldn’t grip the handlebars

properly.

At that point, I wasn't thinking about whether I could return to racing. I simply wanted to ride the way I used to.

But in the winter of 2023, when I had finally regained enough movement to touch the brake lever, I went to watch a local downhill series. That was when I started thinking, "I'm definitely going to race next year."

I told my therapist about that feeling, and from there, I began setting the goal of competing in the downhill series in the winter of 2024.

Ten years later

MTB Mag Asia: You chose South Korea as the place to make your return to the World Cup. Why was this the right moment — and the right race — to come back?

Mio: First of all, the fact that it was being held in Asia was a major factor. South Korea was also a realistic destination to travel to from Japan.

I also had an existing connection with an MTB club in South Korea that I had been in contact with for some time, so I felt a personal connection to the place as well.

If the World Cup had not been held in Asia, I don't think I would have considered taking on the World Cup at that time.

Rather than having always thought, "I want to race in the World Cup again someday," I think I needed something that could give me strong motivation to





keep working toward my recovery.

Because all of those conditions came together, I decided to take on the challenge of racing in the World Cup South Korea round this time.

MTB MagAsia: You had not raced a World Cup downhill event for roughly ten years. What was the biggest difference you noticed between the World Cup you remembered and the World Cup you came back to in 2026?

Mio: I think the biggest differences were that the race format had changed and that the overall scale of the World Cup had become much bigger.

The bikes have also evolved, and I felt that the course layouts had become faster and allowed for higher speeds.

UCI teams now have coaches and media traveling with them, so I also felt that the environment surrounding the teams had changed quite a lot compared with before.

Most of all, I was surprised to see that the course tape was gone and there were only poles marking the course. It felt really fresh riding it that way!

MTB Mag Asia: In Korea, your second qualifying run was significantly faster than the first. What did you change between those runs, and how did you feel once you crossed the finish line?

Mio: I didn't make any major changes between the first and second runs. My main focus was simply to stay on the bike and make it to the finish.

Actually, even during practice and timed training, I hadn't been able to complete a run without crashing or stopping. So for the second run, I just told myself, "Stay on the bike and make it to the finish."

In the end, I managed to complete the run without crashing, and my time improved significantly compared with the first run.

The practice time was shorter than it had been in the past, so I didn't really have enough time to think about the course strategy or suspension setup. And even if I had been able to do all of that, I don't think I was quite ready to ride the way I used to.

Even so, I feel that I gave everything I had at that moment.

Racing the next generation

MTB Mag Asia: You are now racing against a generation of riders who are considerably younger than you. When you stand at the start gate and look around, do you actually think about the age difference — or does it disappear as soon as the gate drops?

Mio: Rather than being very aware of the age difference, I found it really fresh to be racing alongside riders who were born around the time I was racing in the World Cup.

When I looked at the younger riders, I also felt a little nostalgic, as if I were looking at ourselves when we were younger.

But once I was standing at the start gate, I didn't really think about the age





difference anymore.

MTB Mag Asia: You have so much experience, but younger riders obviously bring incredible speed and physical ability. What do you think experience gives you that you didn't have when you were 20?

Mio: Compared with when I was 20, of course I have gained more experience, but stepping away from racing for a while also taught me to take a step back and look at things from a different perspective.

After my injury, when I couldn't move my body the way I wanted to, I needed to explain my physical condition and what I needed for my riding to my therapists as clearly as possible. Through that experience, I think I became better at putting my thoughts and feelings into words and communicating them to others.

I also had the opportunity to work as the Mountain Bike Head Coach for the Japanese Deaf Cycling Team for the Deaflympics. Communicating with the athletes through sign language interpreters made me more conscious of choosing simple and clear words so that my message could be understood.

MTB Mag Asia: And looking at the younger generation, is there anything you see from them and think, "I wish I had that when I was their age"?

Mio: Today, young riders can start enjoying downhill at a much younger age. They can gain experience riding high-speed bike parks and taking on big jumps from an early age.

Pump tracks have also become more common, giving young riders more opportunities to develop fundamental bike skills.

I think having an environment where they can develop their bike skills and sense of speed from a young age is a major strength for today's young riders.

Still winning

MTB Mag Asia: You won the Japanese national title again after your comeback. What does winning a national championship mean to you now compared with the titles you won earlier in your career?

Mio: When I was younger, I was racing in World Cups around the world, so the Japanese National Championships felt more like a stepping stone to me. I felt that it was a race I had to win, at the very least.

This time, after my injury and working my way back into racing, I was supported by so many people. I felt that gratitude much more strongly, and it felt like we were all working toward one shared goal together.

So even though the result was the same — winning the Japanese National Championship — this title had a very different meaning for me compared with the ones I won when I was younger.

MTB Mag Asia: And be honest — when you beat the younger riders and win another national title, is there a little part of you that thinks, “I still have it”?

2026 JAPAN NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIPS

MOUNTAIN BIKE DH1





Mio: Younger riders have more explosiveness and physical ability than I do. Those are things I had when I was younger too, so I think that's a natural part of getting older.

At the same time, I have the experience I've built up over the years. Once we're racing in the same place, age doesn't matter — it's a serious competition, and I'm confident that no one wants to win more than I do.

Rather than thinking, "I still have it," just because I beat younger riders, I felt that there are still things I can achieve and areas where I can keep improving.

More than racing

MTB Mag Asia: Your comeback was also connected to the "Ride With Me" project, which brought other riders and members of the Japanese MTB community into your journey. Why was it important for you to make this comeback something that other people could share with you?

Mio: This comeback was not something I could have achieved on my own.

So many people supported me — the doctors and therapists who helped create an environment where I could recover, as well as my family and friends.

Through Ride With Me, I also invited people to ride with me and become part of my challenge, and I received so much strength and support from everyone who joined me.

Because of that, I wanted the people who had supported me to see me take

on this challenge once again.

I didn't want my injury to end as something negative. Because so many people had supported me, I wanted to give something back in my own way by taking on the challenge again.

A puzzle cannot be completed by one person alone, but when everyone brings their own piece, it can come together. That's exactly what this comeback felt like to me.

MTB Mag Asia: You have achieved so much as a racer — World Championship medals, national titles and a long career at the highest level. But you are also involved in supporting and coaching younger riders. Has your relationship with racing changed from wanting to win yourself to also wanting to help the next generation?

Mio: In the past, I focused on thinking about what I needed to do to ride faster and win races, and then putting those things into practice.

Since my injury, thinking about how I can move more naturally has also helped improve my performance. At the same time, I have naturally started thinking about how I can communicate the things I have learned and the sensations I have experienced to other people.

I was able to race again because so many people supported me. So now, I hope that what I have learned through racing can help not only young riders, but anyone taking on a challenge or simply trying to enjoy mountain biking.





What's next?

MTB Mag Asia: The World Cup will return to South Korea again in the coming seasons. After experiencing the 2026 event, are you already thinking about racing the next Korean World Cups as well, or are you taking things one year at a time?

Mio: Having experienced the level of the course and felt the level I am at now, there are times when I wonder whether I should really be racing here again.

Even so, when I returned to the World Cup after such a long time, so many familiar faces warmly welcomed me and said, "Welcome back."

When I was racing the World Cup full-time, I was also the only female Asian rider competing. That is why I feel that there is meaning in having an Asian rider compete in a World Cup held in Asia.

If I have the opportunity again, I would definitely like to take on the challenge.

MTB Mag Asia: After everything you've been through — the titles, the injury, rehabilitation and now your return to the World Cup — what still motivates you to train, travel and put yourself on the start line?

Mio: I don't know how long I will be able to continue racing. But as long as I feel that there is value in challenging myself, I want to keep taking on that challenge for as long as I can.

In Japan today, there are still very few female riders competing in MTB races.

I hope that the Women's Class will still be there when my daughter's generation gets older.

For that to happen, I believe it is important not only to have more women participate in races, but also to share what makes racing so exciting and rewarding.

Through my own challenges, I hope I can show the next generation of girls the joy and appeal of racing.

Looking back

MTB Mag Asia: Finally, if you could go back and talk to the 20-year-old Mio Suemasa, knowing everything you know today, what would you tell her?

Mio: I was already thinking about my training in my own way when I was 20, and I was interested in understanding my body.

But now, after going through rehabilitation, there are so many things I wish I had known when I was 20.

I would tell my 20-year-old self to take more interest in my body and learn more about how it moves and works. Rather than simply training harder, I would want her to pay attention to her body and think about what methods work best for her, and choose what to incorporate into her training.

That is probably what I would tell myself now.



2026年中国山地速降联赛 (长白山站)

2026 China Mountain Bike Downhill Series (ChangBaiShan)

Racing Through the Autumn Colours
2026 China Downhill League – Changbaishan



WINNER - ZHANG SIQI - MEN YOUTH

PHOTOS: CHINESE DOWNHILL SERIES (CDS)

WORDS: CDS / MESUM VERMA



Rain, fog, mud and some of the most spectacular autumn scenery in China provided the backdrop for the 2026 China Downhill League – Changbaishan round, held on September 26–27.

Deep in the forests of Changbaishan, more than 100 riders from teams across China lined up for a weekend of downhill racing. The national-level event brought together elite racers, developing young riders and mountain bike enthusiasts, all chasing fast times through one of the most spectacular landscapes on the Chinese downhill calendar.

The event was organised by the Chinese Cycling Association, Jilin Provincial Sports Bureau and the Changbaishan Protection and Development Administration, with the local Tourism, Culture and Sports Bureau responsible for putting the race together on the ground. A professional event team handled course maintenance, race support and officiating throughout the weekend, while aiming to give both riders and spectators the best possible experience.





A Race for Every Generation

The opening ceremony took place on September 26. The China Downhill League continues to focus on both competitive development and broader participation, with a full range of categories designed to give riders at different stages of their development the opportunity to race.

The competitive categories included the Men's Elite, Masters, Men's Adult, Men's Youth, Men's Junior A, Men's Junior B and Women's classes. A Children's Experience

category was also part of the event, with the young riders taking part in practice only.

1,050 Metres of Changbaishan Downhill

The Changbaishan downhill course measures 1050 metres in length with 225 metres of vertical drop, running entirely through the dense forests of the mountain.

Steep consecutive sections, jumps, high-speed berms and large features come one

after another, demanding precise bike control, explosive power and the ability to stay composed.

In September, Changbaishan looks very different from its famous winter appearance. Instead of being covered in snow, the mountain forests are transformed into a mixture of red, yellow and green as autumn takes hold.

Riders blasted through the colourful forest at speed, their wheels throwing dust and dirt into the air as the bikes and riders became part of the landscape.

Qualification: The Race Is On

The event was divided into qualification and final competition, with the battle beginning as soon as the first rider rolled out of the start gate.

Qualification started at 1pm on September 26. Riders left the mountaintop start individually, racing against the clock all the way to the bottom.

The increasingly slippery surface forced riders to make different choices. Some





experienced racers opted for safer lines and concentrated on protecting a solid qualifying time, while the younger riders were more willing to attack the jumps and corners, pushing harder in search of every possible second.

Then the weather changed.

Fog, Rain and a Difficult Decision

Continued rain soaked the course while thick fog moved into the mountains. Water

began running across the track, with standing water developing in the corners. As repeated bike traffic churned the surface, the course became increasingly muddy and slippery, raising the risk level throughout the run.

By the afternoon, visibility had dropped to less than 10 metres as dense fog covered the mountain.

In accordance with the competition regulations, the organisers cancelled the final on safety grounds.

Instead, the qualification times from September 26 were used as the official final results for the Changbaishan round.

It meant that the expected final-day showdown never happened, but every rider had already faced a serious challenge in the changing conditions of the Changbaishan forest.

Champions of Changbaishan

Despite the cancellation of the final, the winners across the racing categories were confirmed.

Shenzhen XDS Little Bear Team took victories in both the Women's and Men's Youth categories, with **Zhou Peini** winning the Women's class and **Zhang Siqi** taking the Men's Youth title.





Chen Junxi “Kimi” of AKKI PRO TEAM won Men’s Junior A, while Tan Qingchi of Xinlicheng Huoyao Team took the Men’s Junior B victory.

In the Men’s Adult category, Xia Enjie of CYCGO Speed Team claimed the win. Li Guo of AEROX Downhill Team topped the Masters category.

And in the headline Men’s Elite class, the victory went to Que Wenxin of Harman Brothers Team.

“The Scenery Was Beautiful All the Way Down”

Men’s Junior A winner Chen Junxi “Kimi” came away impressed by both the track and the experience:

“The experience on the Changbaishan course was really great. There are many high-speed sections, and the scenery changes very quickly through the forest, so there are surprises all the way down. The autumn forest was incredibly beautiful.”

“The surface had already started becoming slippery during qualification, so getting this result was not easy. It’s a shame we couldn’t race the final, but wind and rain are also part of downhill mountain biking. This trip to Changbaishan was unforgettable.”

Women’s winner **Zhou Peini** was equally enthusiastic about the course:

“Changbaishan isn’t simply about steep slopes. The technical sections are laid out with a lot of thought. It is also one of the few ultra-high-speed downhill tracks in China.

“The atmosphere in the forest is incredible, and it’s difficult to experience this kind of

natural scenery at other downhill venues in China. The slippery surface today was a big test of bike control, so I tried my best to keep a steady rhythm. I’m very happy to stand on the top step of the podium here.

“This was also the first time I’ve experienced weather that changed so much during a race. It was a very special competition for me.”





Men's Adult champion **Xia Enjie** summed up the challenge simply:

"The Changbaishan course became very difficult after the rain. Taking every race seriously also allows me to enjoy the process of challenging myself."

Men's Youth winner **Zhang Siqi** highlighted the character of the course:

"The Changbaishan course is very distinctive. It was the first time I've ridden jumps and drops this big in China. The rain during qualification made the race more difficult, but it also

made it more fun.

"The scenery at Changbaishan is incredible. I hope I'll have the opportunity to come back and race here again."

Downhill in Its Element

The rain and fog may have taken away the final showdown, but they did little to dampen the riders' enthusiasm.

Instead, the racers had to deal with the raw side of downhill mountain biking: changing conditions, slippery ground, limited visibility and a course that became progressively more demanding as the weekend went on.

Through the colourful Changbaishan forests, the riders faced the mud head-on and pushed their limits. The combination of speed, unpredictability and determination showed exactly what makes downhill racing so compelling.

Looking Ahead

With its exceptional forest environment and natural terrain, Changbaishan is continuing to establish itself as a destination for mountain biking and outdoor sport.

The 2026 Changbaishan round may have lost its final due to the weather, but the event still delivered a memorable weekend of racing — and another step in the continuing development of downhill mountain biking in China.
made it more fun.



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Tsewang Norboo



PHOTOS: ASIA UNION TCS RACING TEAM

WORDS: MESUM VERMA



Let's start at the beginning. For readers who don't know you yet, could you introduce yourself — where you are from, your age, what you do outside of racing, and what life looks like for you when you're not on the bike?

I'm Tsewang Norboo, 19, from Saspol, Ladakh, India. I was born and raised at around 3,500 metres above sea level, where thin air, steep mountains and high-altitude terrain have been part of everyday life since I was a child. Growing up and training in that environment has shaped me physically and mentally as an athlete.

Today, I race professionally with Asia Union TCS Racing Team, carrying the experience of growing up at altitude onto the international stage.

Can you take us back to when you first discovered mountain biking? What was it about MTB that attracted you, and do you remember your first real ride or race?

I started mountain biking around 2019. I actually started on a second-hand bike, so in the beginning it was very simple — I just enjoyed riding and exploring.

What attracted me to MTB was the freedom. You can ride through places, trails and mountains that you normally wouldn't





experience, and every ride feels different. Later, when I started racing, I became more serious about the competitive side of it and realised that I really wanted to see how far I could go.

You come from Ladakh, surrounded by some of the most incredible mountains in the world. How much did growing up in that environment influence you as a rider? Did the mountains feel like a playground when you were younger, or did you only later realise how special your home was for riding?

Growing up in Ladakh definitely had a big influence on me. The mountains were always around me, so riding in that environment felt normal when I was younger. I didn't really understand how special it was until I started travelling and racing in other places. Ladakh gives you a very different kind of riding.

The altitude, long climbs, rough terrain and changing conditions can be tough, but they also build a strong base. I feel lucky that I grew up with those mountains around me.

When you were starting out, who supported and encouraged you? Was there someone in particular who believed in you and helped you take MTB more seriously?





My family and the people around me have supported me since the very beginning. When I started taking MTB more seriously, my coaches and the people at the SAI (Sports Authority of India) training camp played a big role in helping me grow as an athlete.

Getting selected for SAI and turning professional in 2022 was a major turning point for me. It gave me the chance to train properly, race more, and understand the discipline and commitment needed to become a professional athlete.

Joining Asia Union TCS Racing Team was another huge step in my journey. It opened the door to international racing and gave me the opportunity to train and compete in a much more professional environment.

Racing alongside strong international riders and having the support of my teammates and the whole team has pushed me to raise my level and keep improving.

Being part of an international team has given me experiences I could only dream about when I started riding. It has also given me more confidence to believe that a rider from Ladakh can compete on the world stage.





Racing at a high level requires much more than just being a good rider. What does your training look like, and what are some of the biggest challenges you face preparing for races from Ladakh and India?

My training is a combination of endurance riding, intervals, technical MTB riding, strength training, core work and recovery. A lot of the training is structured around power, heart rate and the demands of XC racing. One of the biggest challenges is travelling.

Racing internationally means flights, different climates, different altitudes, food, recovery and adapting to new courses. Coming from Ladakh, I'm also used to high altitude, so going to lower and hotter places can be a big change for the body.

But I've learned that these challenges are also part of becoming a better athlete.

You've already had some strong results in the Asian MTB scene. What do those results mean to you personally? Is there one race or result that you're particularly proud of, and why?

Every result has taught me something, but winning three events at the AMS UCC Asian MTB Series in Bir in 2026 — XCE, XCC and XCO — was definitely very special for



me.

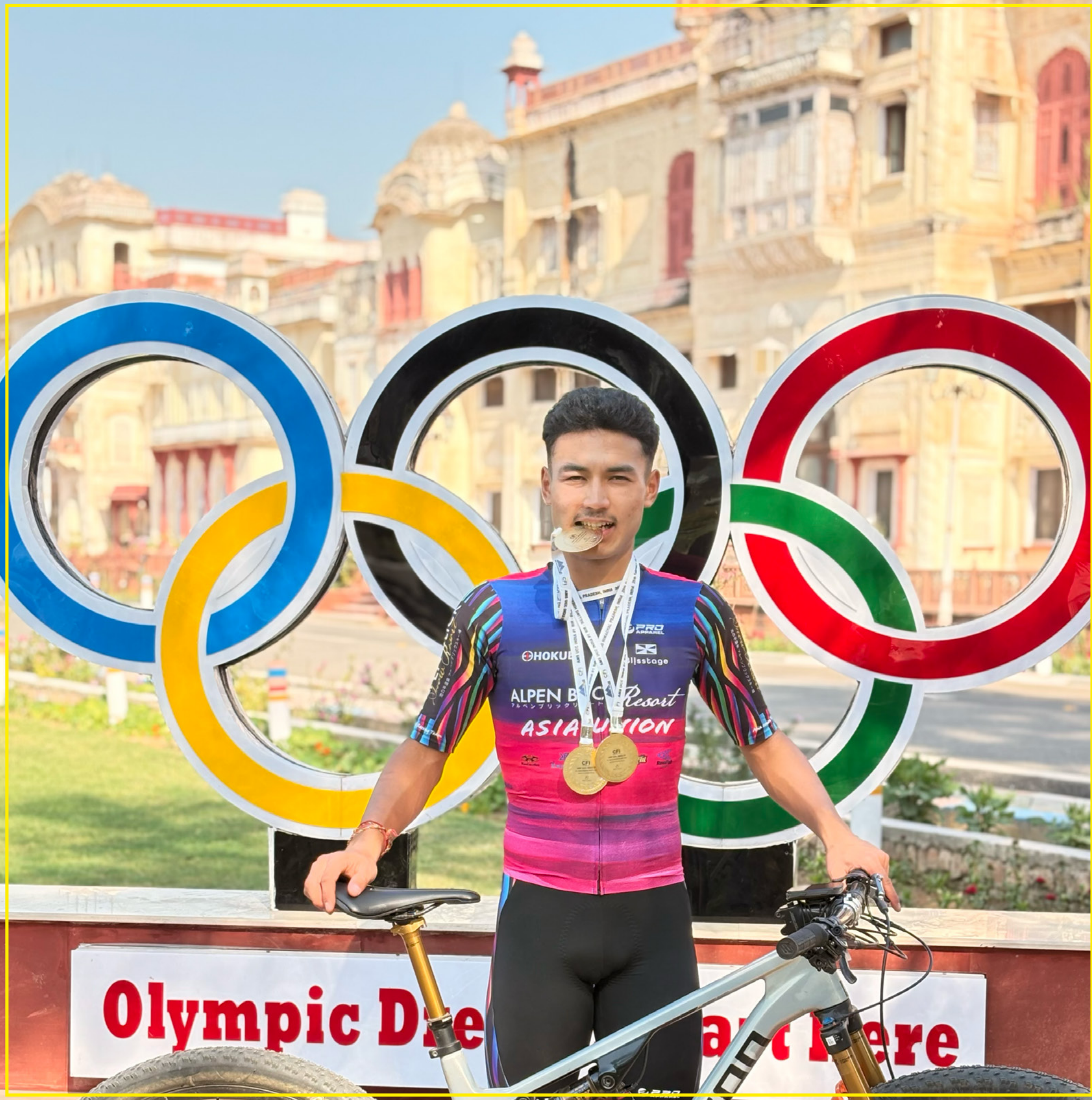
I'm also proud of getting the U23 win and the Golden Ticket at the Alegria Philippines race, because it gave me the opportunity to qualify for the World Cup.

But honestly, I'm more focused on the progression behind the results. Every race shows me where I am and what I still need to improve.

You recently raced in China, and you've also had the opportunity to race in different parts of Asia. How did the race in China go from your perspective, and how different was that experience compared with racing back home in India? What are the biggest differences you've noticed in the courses, competition and organisation?

China was a really good learning experience for me. I finished 5th in the XCC and 10th in the XCO. The course was flowy, with climbs, jumps, drops, and pumps, but there were also sections where you had to push really hard. From my previous experience with Chinese courses, I expected it to be quite power-based, and it was.

In the XCO, my legs started getting tired quite early, even though my breathing was still under control. That showed me that I still need to improve my race endurance





and my ability to hold high power for a full XCO race. The result wasn't what I wanted, but I learned a lot about where I need to improve.

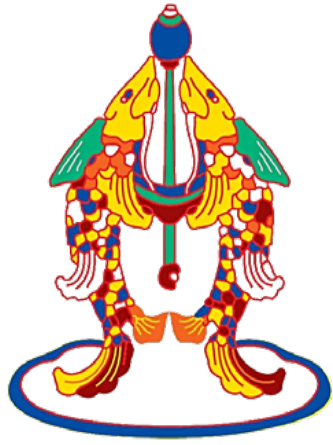
The biggest difference I notice in international racing is the depth and level of competition. The courses can also be very different from what I'm used to in India, and the overall organisation is at a very high level.

Racing in India gives me more familiarity with the environment, conditions and courses.

International racing pushes me outside my comfort zone, and that's exactly where I want to be. Every race at this level teaches me something and helps me get closer to the level I want to reach.

Looking at it from the other side, is there anything about racing in India that you actually prefer? What do you think India does well compared with other Asian countries, and what do you think still needs to improve?

Definitely. Racing in India has a different feeling because you are racing in front of people who know you and support you. There is also a strong community feeling between riders.



India has a lot of natural terrain and huge potential for MTB. We have mountains, forests, different climates and many places where really good MTB courses could be developed.

I think the biggest thing is that the potential is already there — we just need to develop it further.

Indian MTB seems to be developing and there is a new generation of young riders coming through. How do you see the future of Indian mountain biking, and what do you think young riders need if they want to reach the international level?

I think the future is really promising. There are many young riders coming through who are hungry to race and improve, and more riders are getting exposure to international competition.

My advice would be to be patient and enjoy the process. Don't focus only on results. Learn how to train properly, take care of your body, work on your technical skills and learn from every race. And most importantly, keep riding. There will be good races and bad races, but you have to keep believing in yourself and keep moving forward. I would also improve the overall support system for young riders.





Talent is definitely there in India, but young athletes need more opportunities to train properly, race internationally and get financial and technical support. International racing is expensive, especially when you have to travel with a bike and equipment.

If we can give more young riders those opportunities earlier, I think India can produce many more competitive riders at the Asian and international level.

What are your ambitions for the next few years, and where do you see yourself in five years? Is there a particular race, championship or level of competition you dream of reaching, and what would you like to have achieved both as a racer and as a person?

My biggest goal is to reach the highest level of XC cross-country racing and compete regularly against the best riders in the world.

The Olympics is a huge dream for me, and LA 2028 is definitely something I'm working towards.

Before that, I want to keep improving my international results, perform strongly at the Asian Championships and get closer to the front of World Cup-level racing.



I know there is still a lot of work to do, but that's what motivates me.

In five years, I want to be an established international XC rider, racing regularly at the highest level and fighting for strong results in World Cups and major championships.

I would love to have achieved Olympic-level racing and to have represented India at the biggest international events.

As a person, I want to stay grounded and remember where I started. I also want to be someone who can inspire younger riders from Ladakh and other parts of India to believe that they can reach an international level too.

Finally, if you could speak to the younger version of yourself — the kid who was just discovering MTB — what would you tell him now?

I would tell him: enjoy the ride and don't worry too much about how far you have to go.

When I started on that cheap second-hand bike, I never imagined that cycling would take me to so many different countries and races. There will be difficult days, bad races and moments when you question yourself. But keep working, stay patient and believe in





yourself. You don't need to have everything figured out from the beginning.

Just keep riding, keep learning and keep chasing the dream.

MESUM VERMA | CEO / EDITOR IN CHIEF

#PHOTOS#EDITORS

MESUM VERMA, HIDEYUKI SUZUKI, CHINESE DOWNHILL SERIES (CDS), ASIA UNION
TCS TEAM



#ADVERTISING #INFO

MV.MTBMAGASIA@GMAIL.COM

#DESIGN

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