

100TH RONDE VAN VLAANDEREN



Belgium was in crisis and a special edition of a celebrated bike race offered a small sense of solace. World champion Peter Sagan raced ahead of his rivals to score a stunning victory in the 100th edition of the Ronde van Vlaanderen.



ANTICIPATION FOR THE 100TH
The crowds were out in force for the start of the centenary edition of the Tour of Flanders or, as they say in Flemish, de Ronde van Vlaanderen (main shot). While the world champion signed autographs (top right) and the clouds cleared, the formalities in Brugge included a tribute to Antoine Demoitie, who died after an accident in Gent-Wevelgem, held by his team-mates (centre right). Three former winners – Fabian Cancellara, Tom Boonen and Alexander Kristoff – lined up for the start beside each other (bottom right).



Spring had finally come, and when I mean “spring” I don’t mean the weather. I mean Peter Sagan riding a wheelie, guzzling dark beer, boasting “no one wants to work with me, so I have to drop them all”. During those last final kilometres, when Fabian Cancellara simply couldn’t catch Sagan, it was obvious that after many, many years, winter was over. Before I explain the Sagan “spring,” let me start with the real weather. For the 100th Tour of Flanders, it was one of those days when you dress for winter, but after an hour you’re in shorts. By the time you’re heading home, you’re looking for an excuse to stay out.

It was the kind of weather where you could climb all morning and never get hot, descend all afternoon and never

get cold. It wasn’t typical Belgian Classics weather yet it was fresh, heavy, mammalian.

Belgium’s vice-premier Alexander Croo spent the entire race in the gold pace-car, with window down, hair mashed left, non-stop Tweeting selfies. Jan Janssen, Jean Forestier, Ludo Peeters, and 14 other Flanders winners took photos with white hair capped and bright-cherry foreheads. Sep Vanmarcke bumbled the champagne cork spraying bubbly over sunburnt Belgian citizens – *burgers* – cheering in the Oudenaarde square. Even a dapper Francisco Moser, who seemed to have made a wrong turn from the VIP tent and was subsequently mobbed by drunken Belgians, had a darker than usual Mediterranean-Italian tint.

On this Centennial Sunday, everything was green or edging toward green. The Flanders hills which birthed de Ronde’s hardest climbs rolled and rollicked like the opening of the TV show *The Simpsons*, replete with nuclear power plant just off to the distance of the Kwaremont.

Depending on which crotchety old spectator you asked, the Kwaremont means “difficult climb” or “bad recovery”. For the latter, visitors vacationed in the Vlaamse Ardennen to recuperate, but a walk up the Kwaremont threw them back into ill health. The racers clamber up it three times in de Ronde. There’s a beer named after it whose alcohol content matches the gradient. Unfortunately, the day before the Tour of Flanders, a 56-year-old Irish tourist, riding up the Oude >>



PHOTOS: Marcus Enno x 4



>> Kwaremont with his son, had a heart attack. It was tragic, but indicative of the climb.

The night before the 100th Tour of Flanders, 16,000 amateurs raced and rode into Oudenaarde and either dispersed to their hotel rooms or took off their shirts, drank excessively, and mobbed the medieval square. If you want to see half-naked, lycra-clad accountants dancing in a misty rain, singing their hearts out to Blondie, Oudenaarde on pre-race Saturday night was the place to be. Even Luca Paolini was pedalling around with the *plebeians*, literally riding out his 18-month cocaine-ban, probably miffed that fellow coke-snorter, tax-avoider, and three-time winner Tom Boonen was still camped out team-side, heralded by the press as a possible four-time favourite.

That same Saturday an anti-immigration protest strode through the Brussels Flandrian neighbourhood of Molenbeek, a terrorist hotbed. My wife and I had stopped for lunch and were perhaps the only people there that day admiring the 20th century socialist architecture. We stood in a massive Arabic-speaking crowd as youths hurled rocks just near the Eddy Merckx subway stop. A police helicopter hovered the entire Saturday. On Sunday, that same helicopter loomed over the Flanders countryside, deftly dodging the television helicopters.

The Tour of Flanders had some of the strictest security in the race's history, perhaps even more than when the Nazis policed during their occupation of Belgium. On the Sunday of the 100th edition, backpacks were not allowed near the beginning, finish or along the many cobblestone climbs. Jackets were made to be opened, purses checked, metal detectors employed. In true Belgian style, the police were friendly, hardly intimidating, almost apologetic, and seemed to be enjoying the festivities just as much as everyone else.

The bombing in Brussels had only happened two weeks before so caution was understandable, but awkward against history. The Tour of Flanders survived two wars. Belgians who saw some of the worst of the trenches carried their tactics over into the peloton. Bombs, mines, tanks, they've all played a role in the Tour's history'.

Belgians are notoriously tough cyclists. They don't prance to the top of mountains, they charge. To see Tom Boonen and Johan Museeuw ride in the 2002 Paris-Roubaix was to witness Belgian forces of might and grit, indistinguishable under mud, wet cobblestones pillowy under their girth, not cycling but fighting the earth, sky, and road.

Interviews with Eddy Merckx are always strangely tense, almost combative, even though when he does explode he bounces around almost like a caricature of himself. It says something that Lance Armstrong, with his own Texas

temper and orneriness, considered Merckx his European father-figure. Armstrong even gives props to Merckx's wife in a *Sporza* documentary, saying any woman who can put up with Eddy is a saint.

In the last 100 years, the Belgians have seen more death than any other time in their history; 130,000 Flemish and Walloons died during the two World Wars. To the men returning from the trenches, racing the Classics was not only a good way to finance their farms, but a way to exorcise demons.

The stories behind the Tour of Flanders are coloured with war heroes. Henri van Lerberghe – who came straight from the front – employed soldier strategies in the peloton, trash-talked through every race, pulled Bugs Bunny stunts like faking his identity and stealing competitors' food bags, jumping through moving trains instead of waiting for them to pass, or when he had a good lead, stopping off at a bar for a beer, shouting to the crowds, "Come back tomorrow, I've got half a day's lead!" There's Paul Deman who used his talent in team Nazi Resistance to ride with documents into Holland, locked away in a gold tooth. And Jules van Hevel, a rider who got his legs from dodging bombs as he cycled from trench to trench, delivering messages.

Most inspirational of all was Karel van Wijendaele, the founder of the race. The Tour of Flanders museum in Oudenaarde is as much about him as it is the race. After failing at cycling, he took on writing. Thankfully, Carolus Ludovicus Steyaert adopted the pen-name 'Karel'.

Using originality, brashness, wit and Belgian bluster, Wijendaele penned some of the first cycling legends into existence. In the days before helicopters, he wrote about parts of the race based on the testimony of spectators, hearsay, or simply making up parts, arguing that the truth did not matter nearly as much as the adulation. Wijendaele was far more Howard Cosell than Phil Liggett.

Wijendaele was a man who founded *SportWereld* which eventually became *Het Nieuwsblad*, the official race sponsor. Karel loved cycling, loved literature, loved colourful cycling stories. When the race first started, velodromes were dying, cycling was in a rut. Through his bravado Wijendaele retrieved northern European cycling from the historical dustbins, transforming his merry, torturous race into a source of national pride.

Johan Museeuw, a Belgian star, said in a 2002 *Cycling Weekly* interview, "As a Belgian, winning Flanders for the first time is far more important than winning the maillot jaune in the Tour." This is coming from a Belgian who won Paris-Roubaix and the Tour of Flanders three times each as well as pretty much every other Classic, Museeuw who

came from a cycling family and is revered as a legend.

Through both wars, the Germans allowed the race to continue. After WWII, some say that Wijendaele allowed the paper to be a mouthpiece for the invaders. Later, when reparations were made, Wijendaele was accused of collaboration, banned from journalism. The ban was later lifted and he was bestowed with the *Ridderkruis van de Leopoldsorde*, which is essentially the Belgian equivalent of a knighthood. Over those years he wrote thousands upon thousands of articles, a vibrant figure who loomed large over the 100-year anniversary celebrations.

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The Tour of Flanders is just as much about history as it is the race. Debates revolve not only around the heroes, the winners, the failures and the crashes, but over the actual race course itself. Throughout the festivities there were speeches and old-man chatter about the shameful switch, in 1998, of the race-start from Sint-Niklaas to Brugge. There was head-shaking over the fact that the race was not the same when the finish was moved from Oudenaarde to Gent. There were old films, exhibitions, veterans expositing fond recollections of when the race used to go to the sea, where men lined up against the wind, one against the other, coining the term "fanning".

Kop in Dutch means head, cobblestones being called *kinderkopjes* (small children's heads). *Kopje* is a loving term, employed throughout Dutch and Flemish children's rhymes and books. Perhaps this is where the unnecessary controversy arose, when the Koppenberg was resurfaced with Italian cobblestones, setting off a Flemish fury over the southern import.

The road up the Koppenberg sinks before it lifts out of the trenches. It's in the trenches that the peloton bottlenecks. Those on the margins are sidelined. Getting back on your bike isn't usually an option. Riders collide then carry their bike up the Koppenberg, stumbling up "kids' heads hill".

The Paterberg is where Cancellara said that the race is won. Indeed, this is where Peter Sagan sprinted away from Cancellara in the 100th Ronde and was never caught again.

The Paterberg is so narrow a rider can give high-fives to spectators on both sides of the road simultaneously. A hill that was nothing until 1986 when it was paved by a cycling-crazed farmer, then embedded with cobbles by the county, all aptly nicknamed "priest hill". It is the site where so many photos are taken, the riders expending what little they have left in their legs, the pack splitting apart, the knobby cobbles cresting into an asphalt 13km straight-shot, soft descent to the finish in Oudenaarde. >>



PHOTO: Marcus Enno



>> The Muur van Gerardsbergen, or literally “the wall of Gerard’s hills”, was removed in 2012 for vague safety reasons. With its nearly 20 percent gradient the Muur was another leg-breaker, the kind of climb that even the best climbers walk up. Considered Flanders’ own version of Alpe d’Huez, its removal is seen by many as sacrilegious.

These debates are silly. The race is not about the course but the chaos. We don’t come to see the peloton rush out of Brugge, but the clamber up steep cobblestone climbs, the elbows thrown, the wheels breaking, dirt coating bikes and faces masked, a race where the superstars, logos, and fancy bikes are camouflaged under a coat of equalising mud.

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The mud is of course appealing to the farmers who work the land. A sport as dirty as their profession. Flanders is wealthier than Wallonia now, but when the race started it was the opposite. Flemish farmers saw the race as a quick way to make money. They could kill themselves in one day for the same salary they made killing themselves in the fields for half a year.

Now, Flanders has the money while Wallonia struggles. The country is more divided than ever, some Walloons refusing to speak Flemish or Dutch and vice-versa. The government is a divided disaster that has only become apparent to the world with the poor police situation after the Brussels attacks. Anyone driving through the Flanders countryside sees the bad shape of the roads; understand that taxes aren’t appropriated like they are just north in the Netherlands. Belgians have some of the worst paved roads in all of Europe. The irony is that asphalt was invented by a Belgian who immigrated to America.

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The bad roads have never stopped the parade of cars following the race. In the early days the procession went on for hours, a parade through sleepy Belgian towns. Crashes involving spectators were common. Fights regular. There are still plenty of booze buses trailing the peloton and every year there are a dozen arrests, but most of the spectators sit in bars or by the *Jumbotrons*, spending upward of 14 million euros a year, making the race one of Flanders’ most profitable annual events.

George Hincapie, America’s one-time best shot at winning the Tour of Flanders, showed up to promote his clothing line, ride around, and sign autographs. The 193cm tall Grand Duke *domestique* wrote of the Tour of Flanders: “What seems like a million corners, combined with 20 to 30 steep pitches and narrow roads, none of which go the

VAN AVERMAET CRASHES OUT
As always there were several strong challengers for the title from the host nation but the best from Belgium was ultimately Sep Vanmarcke in third place.
Greg Van Avermaet (below) was third in 2015 but this year his race was over with a “displaced fracture of the right collarbone”.



same direction for more than a mile, all mix together to make it war on a bike.”⁹²

This year, Hincapie’s old BMC team had a terrific crash, one that put Greg Van Avermaet, fresh from his win from the Omloop, in the hospital. (Curiously, he’s one Flemish rider who has asked specifically for his name to be spelled with a capital ‘V’ for ‘Van’ – while most have lower-case as it’s simply the Dutch equivalent for ‘of’. No explanation was given for this request.)

I once wrote an article in *RIDE* where I was perhaps a little too harsh on Taylor Phinney and now, two years after a serious crash, he was back in the Classics, holistic healing his way through severe pain. Having grown up in nearby Denver, his Boulder way of speaking about positive thinking through rehabilitation grated on me, but I was nonetheless rooting for him. The son of Connie Carpenter and Davis Phinney, he is American cycling royalty. And making a comeback in the Classics showed real character. It’s just too bad his Belgian team-mate, Van Avermaet, a favourite, was sidelined into shoulder surgery.

I was standing there pre-cobblestone, pre-crash, as the BMC squad wooshed past. We all heard the pop and ping of their spokes hitting the first patch of cobblestones. The finest modern cycling technology has to offer tested on a road primarily built to withstand the weight of plow-horses. Hundreds of top-of-the-line, finely tuned, lightweight, composite pieces trembling as they smashed onto millions of medieval hand-carved rocks is unlike anything you hear in racing: foreboding, ominous, cycling at its most primitive.

The northern Dutch newspaper, the *ND*, claims that every Flemish town has at least one “grandfather” who had ridden in the race. Most Flemish citizens have at least one relative who’s competed. In the Sint-Blasius parish in Lendelede, Easter services were once delayed for a few hours while de Ronde rode through. Even the oldest Flemish citizen can’t remember a year without the one-day Classic.

An easy, clean summary of the 100 years of the Tour of Flanders would be, in itself, sacrilegious. Truly, the race is about the mess that comes when you combine Belgian character, Belgian farmland, the best road racers, and *kinderkopjes*. Rarely does a feathery Contador or light-footed Schleck brother win in Flanders. It’s the powerful riders like Cancellara, Boonen, Kristoff, and Sagan who take home the twisted iron trophy. >>



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Now, back to the Sagan spring. Cycling has undergone a few cold years. One look at the website *Dopeology.org* and you see the winter of discontent. Long lists of riders who all at one time or another made serious faces and either admitted or denied their drug use. But cycling seems to be cleaning up or at least hiding its secrets better. Those that survived the coldest years are close to retirement. The younger generation knows about the heart-attacks, depressions and aggressions linked to steroids. In general, they seem more focused on the natural thrill that is road racing.

Rivalries make up as much of the history of cycling as



PHOTO: Yuzuru Sunada

the races. Think Anquetil and Poulidor, Merckx and De Vlaeminck, Cavendish and Kittel, Hinault and LeMond, and of course Boonen and Cancellara, their faces strained as they duelled. And now it was Cancellara and Sagan, but this is far less a rivalry than a taking over of the helm.

Cancellara is known for his grooming and his good looks. He is Swiss, a culture not ordinarily connected with the common man. Swiss is equated with mechanical precision which might explain the accusations that he was one of the first mechanical dopers. But his nickname Spartacus comes not out of some gentle metrosexual snark, but out of Cancellara's tenacious riding style.

Peter Sagan has long hair and that Czech Bohemian scruff about him. He calls his mum and wife every day. He pinched a podium girl's bum once and was forced to publicly apologise. In the 2012 Tour de France, he bet his Liquigas team's owner, Paolo Zani, a Porsche if he kept the green jersey. He did. Thus his nickname became 'The Hulk'. Later, it changed to 'The Terminator' when it was revealed that he regularly cracks dozens of mountain bike frames per year from his hard riding style.

Sagan and Cancellara have a familiar affability about them. Watching them warm up in Brugge, I sensed they knew something that no one else did, a smirk that suggested that surprise motivated them more than winning.

There's a moment, in the 2016 Gent-Wevelgem, just after Sagan out-sprinted Cancellara: the Swiss rider pats the Slovak on the back, congratulating him. Sagan looks back, returns the gesture and they hold hands for a brief second. It's touching, two riders killing each other in a sprint, reaching out immediately afterward, like two friends high-fiving over a failed dare.

For much of the 2016 Tour of Flanders, Sagan was studying Cancellara. Then he broke away and Cancellara was forced to chase. Somewhere was Boonen, no longer the strongest and fastest plough-horse.

By the end of the race, I was surrounded by hundreds of spectators who all fell silent on Peter Sagan's charge up the Paterberg. To watch the way he dropped Sep Vanmarcke who almost seemed as if he were going backward in comparison, you see the best of mountain biking and road racing, Sagan pulling on the handlebars, never standing, trunk-legs pushing pedals over cobblestones although it very easily could have been mud. The silence amongst the crowd was more than admiration. It was amazement.

Cancellara was always chasing. Always trying to catch. Vanmarcke was doing what he had been doing for most of the race, holding on. Fabian's face was twisted in struggle, but it was never an expression of anger nor resentment. It



PHOTO: Yuzuru Sunada

was something even more pure. An admission that this was how it would end. That this was indeed the changing of the guard. Cancellara pounded up the Paterberg, reminding us of his greatness. But, while it was valiant, it was also useless.

Sagan's final charge towards the finish in Oudenaarde was an exclamation point to his Paterberg statement.

It was Cancellara's last Flanders. For days, the press leading up to the race had been filled with Cancellara's declarations that he wouldn't settle for second.

In something of a preview, Cancellara was anxious at the start, waving on the interviewer to hurry things up. He sat nervously in the peloton, bouncing about in his pedals. He snapped and shouted at those who wouldn't help catch the lead groups. He had made it abundantly clear that he wanted his fourth win, unheard of, but ambitious on his part. Out of the six three-time winners, only Cancellara and one other had non-Belgian nationalities.

A decade went by before someone in the rainbow jersey won the Tour of Flanders and it makes sense that Sagan was the one to do it. He has the grace of Kobe Bryant, he's mercurial like Zlatan Ibrahimovic. Last year in the Vuelta a España, he was taken out by a motorbike that left him fuming for days. This year, in Paris-Roubaix, during a huge pile-up, Sagan literally jumped his bike over Cancellara. The Dutch presenter called him "*kunstenaar en acrobat*" – an "artist and acrobat".

Cycling has long suffered a lack of personality. To be on a bike, riding six, seven, or even eight hours a day, often alone, does not encourage strong personality. In fact, cycling has a way of bringing about an inner peace that is often anomalous to the wild celebrities we expect of sports superstars. Perhaps what makes Sagan such an apt winner for the 100th Tour of Flanders is that, while not Belgian, he has one of the most important Belgian traits, swagger.

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In the early days of the race, the riders were just as much characters as they were racers and if they weren't van Wijendaele rewrote them as such. If van Wijendaele were alive today, he would have had a great time writing about Sagan riding a wheelie at the end of the race, guzzling beer and letting it spill down his chin. He would have admired Cancellara's determination, a Roman general fighting to the death, going out not in a whimper, but with a bang. There would surely also be admiration for the humility of the best Belgian in the 100th edition of his race: Vanmarcke insistent that he should be there, riding on the wheel of Cancellara during his impressive – yet unsuccessful – pursuit of Sagan. He typified Belgian pride, stubborn until



PHOTO: Yuzuru Sunada

the end. But he also showed respect and refrained from stealing the limelight from Spartacus' farewell to Flanders.

The runner-up and third place finisher rolled to the line defeated but proud.

Cancellara would raise his hands and salute his second place and Vanmarcke, touching his brakes and deliberately remaining a few lengths clear, bowed his head in acknowledgement: beaten by better riders but pleased to be able to appear on the podium.

Van Wijendaele would have been proud that the tradition of colourful characters winning the Tour of Flanders was perfectly exemplified on the Centennial. >>

SALUTING HIS FAREWELL...
The winner would celebrate with two arms aloft and the expected wheelie shortly after the finish line. The runner-up also raised his hands to acknowledge the cheers at the end of his final campaign in Flanders (above). And Sep Vanmarcke graciously followed Fabian Cancellara over the line after a valiant chase.

#RVV

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There is almost something patronising about writing about the women's race in the last few paragraphs, but it is a race most worthy of comment. Women have only been racing since 2004 and they only complete the last 55km which, granted, are the most extreme. And only a handful of female cyclists can turn professional. Most have other jobs. Their training schedule is limited.

Quentin Tarrantino once said that violence between men is fascinating, but violence between women is hypnotising. To watch women's cycling in the Tour of Flanders is something fascinating and hypnotising. Women charge hard up the Kwaremont, bikes rattling, bodies trembling. While their faces are contorted like the men, there is so much more to their suffering, as if the short steep climbs and the cruelty of the cobblestones is emblematic of women's cycling as a whole. It's bumpy. It's uneven. It's unfair.

On the 100th Tour of Flanders, Lizzie Armitstead and Emma Johansson both battled for most of the race. British-born Armitstead recently took over from Marianne Vos as the best in the world. She'll probably go home with lots of gold this summer. The Swede Johansson has many Classics under her belt. Both women are professionals and both women led the pack almost the whole race.

In the end, it was Armitstead who won in a sprint. When she stood on the podium with Sagan it was remarkable, two world champions, two rainbow jerseys, side-by-side. Armitstead and Sagan both have that sweet, gentle winner's charm that translates nicely through the camera.

At one point, a Welsh spectator kept referring to the Tinkoff winner as Carl Sagan. I couldn't help but think of the now deceased astrophysicist's quote: "There is a place with four suns in the sky – red, white, blue, and yellow; two of them are so close together that they touch, and star-stuff flows between them." Add the colour green to the mix, and the same could be said of the two world champions' jerseys on the Tour of Flanders' 100th anniversary. ■ ERIK RASCHKE

Footnotes: 1. *Tour of Flanders: The Inside Story*. By Les Woodland. While his writing is more circuitous than mine, there is a very colourful history here. McGann writes anecdotally and often pulls it off, while other times it leads nowhere. Still, I am heavily indebted to this for gaining an understanding of this fascinating race.
2. *Hincapie*, George The Loyal Lieutenant, HarperCollins 2014



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