

One moment Annemiek van Vleuten had Olympic gold in her sights, the next she was unconscious with the world caring about her wellbeing, not if she could win a race or not...

"A day when every single detail mattered," wrote the cyclist Mara Abbott in the *Wall Street Journal*. When she races she is a climber. Annemiek van Vleuten, on the other hand, is a time trial specialist. The two had broken away from the peloton. The American and Dutch women were descending the Vista Chinesa at tremendous speeds. "I wasn't comfortable holding her wheel," Abbott explained. "I had to back off and go my own pace."

The road was wet. There was a sharp right turn. Annemiek van Vleuten clutched her brakes. She hit a curb. She flipped. And you probably saw it. We've seen this kind of crash many times before, a cyclist hurling over the handlebars straight into the unknown. You always expect riders to get back up, but something seemed very wrong about this. Van Vleuten's front wheel hit the cement too hard, the stop was too sudden. The presenter for Dutch TV said: "With a crash like this you're scared shitless – but then you think, I have to get up, *I have to get up.*"

Two and a half million viewers in her homeland waited several excruciating minutes for van Vleuten to get up, but when she didn't, they began waiting for the medical team.

There weren't many people alongside the road where the crash occurred. A lone spectator had filmed the entire thing with his iPhone, holding the camera up to a limp, lifeless van Vleuten for what seemed an eternity. He walked around – filming, filming, filming moving ever closer. One motorcycle

went by, then another. Would anyone stop? The man with the camera called out to the passing motorcycles. Then he called to van Vleuten. She was face down, half on the road and half off, cheek against the asphalt, ankles in the dirt.

The pack went by, including van Vleuten's team-mates, Marianne Vos and Anna van der Breggen. One of the motorcyclists finally stopped, directed traffic, warned the rest of the riders.

"I saw her lying there," said the defending Olympic road race champion Marianne Vos as they rounded the corner. "At that moment the gold was no longer important to me." Van der Breggen was certain van Vleuten was dead.

In the last kilometers of the race, Anna van der Breggen caught Mara Abbott. She shouted to Vos, "*Let's do this for Annemiek!*" Van der Breggen then sprinted to gold.

Afterward, van der Breggen immediately sent a text to Annemiek, apologising, hoping that her team-mate would find happiness in the medal as well.

When he heard about the crash, Dutch national team coach Johan Lammerts rushed to van Vleuten. Later he told *De Telegraaf*, "I didn't see the end of the race because all my concern at that moment was with Annemiek. I heard later that Anna got the Olympic gold and on one hand I was happy, but on the other, all my thoughts were with Annemiek. The gold is great, but the safety and health of the riders is the most important."



PHOTO: Yuzuru Sunada



PHOTO: Graham Watson



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In a teary interview a week later, heavy with the physical drag of someone suffering three fractured vertebrae, a concussion, and a black eye, Annemiek van Vleuten admitted that she was indeed happy for van der Breggen. As the tears poured, van Vleuten said that she was looking for something she could have done different, that it was all so hard for her to simply accept that this crash was her fate.

"It began to rain and I thought that I should ride more carefully." When van Vleuten spoke, it was almost as if she was repeating a memorised speech. "Then I felt my back wheel slipping away and the next thing I knew I was waking up in a hospital." She and Marianne Vos had watched the replay at her bedside. No explanation was necessary. Van Vleuten had obviously shown poor judgement descending.

"I have an angel on my shoulder," she concluded.

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With so many first-time viewers witnessing van Vleuten's crash, the Dutch press began to ask, how safe is the sport? It's not the only time that cycling come out of a broadcast looking like a dangerous pastime. Tom Dumoulin, another top Dutch contender for gold in the Olympics, crashed on the 19th stage of the Tour de France, breaking his wrist. Aike Visbeek, the coach of Giant-Alpecin, didn't hesitate when asked if Dumoulin's chances were ruined because of the crash. He dissected the 47-second difference between

Fabian Cancellara's Olympic gold and Dumoulin's silver. "He could have had the gold," Visbeek said of Dumoulin. "After the July crash Tom was not a hundred percent." They had been forced to manage the damage, Visbeek muttered with obvious annoyance.

Managing the damage and wrapped like a mummy, Alberto Contador, at a recent press conference at the Vuelta, asked why the UCI was promoting next year's races using crashes. "What I don't understand is: why in promotional videos for next year's race, they always put in crashes." He then asked, fairly, if they wanted to portray cycling as sport or spectacle.

But while van Vleuten was bringing the safety of cycling into the public eye, her crash replayed millions of times, very few were talking about Greg Van Avermaet's recovery from a terrible crash on the cobblestones at the Tour of Flanders earlier in the year, an accident that left him with a broken collarbone. Indeed, Van Avermaet came back to win the Olympic Gold in the men's road race.

Now, Annemiek van Vleuten looks to the 43-year-old Kristen Armstrong, 10 years her senior, who overcame controversy and won the Olympic time trial gold for a third time. There could be one, maybe two more Olympics left for van Vleuten. In the meantime, she will continue to run her cycling clinic in the Drentse Dwingeloo with the theme: "24-hours as a professional cyclist." I wonder if her clinic will also include how to *manage the damage*.

ERIK RASCHKE

ANOTHER DUTCH TRIUMPH... Anna van der Breggen (with Emma Johansson and Elisa Longo Borghini, above) became the fourth Dutch woman to win the road race gold medal at the Olympics. The others are Monique Knol (1988), Leontien Zijlaard-van Moorsel (2000) and Marianne Vos (2012).

It seems likely that another rider from the Netherlands was poised to take gold. Annemiek van Vleuten had raced ahead of her breakaway companion Mara Abbott (far left) but crashed heavily on the final descent of the race and shocked the world. She would recover and go on to race again within a few weeks.