



THREE CLASSICS. THREE WEEKENDS. THREE COUNTRIES A RACING TRILOGY FROM THE ROADSIDE

It's the sequence of the one-day races in April that adds to the anticipation and grandeur. After Milan-San Remo, it's time for the northern Classics in Belgium, France and Holland. Erik Raschke took in the full experience of a succession of historic contests: the Ronde van Vlaanderen, Paris-Roubaix and the Amstel Gold Race.

FLANDERS. ROUBAIX. AMSTEL. "THAT'S WHAT CYCLING REALLY IS."

Words: Erik Raschke





HOW I CAME TO THE CLASSICS...



“What’s that got to do with cycling?” my mother liked to ask, when she saw my poster of Sean Kelly’s 1986 Paris-Roubaix win hanging in the basement.

“That’s what cycling *really* is,” I would say. That mud-covered Irishman fighting to stay upright, mouth gasping, eyes riveted. Me looking at him everyday on my way to school – a skinny teen who failed European history but knew the exact number of Napoleonic stones leading north out of Compiègne where it always seemed to be raining and frenzied spectators flocked with patriotic umbrellas. It was so unlike my America, my Colorado, where third-rate stories about a Broncos linebacker’s new chicken shacks pushed European cycling classifications to the border of the personals and ads for escorts.

Now I live in Amsterdam, the opposite of Colorado, an American cycling mecca where even the most dedicated cyclists drive 20 minutes to start a ride, and the European races are finishing as everyone is enjoying their morning coffee. Now I live in the Netherlands, a country jam-packed with bicycles, where everyone rides, where the wind and rain is the biggest challenge, where cycling is in the blood, even though the racing culture is more prominent two hours away, in Belgium and France.

The Classics were for families. I had a family now and I wanted them to experience first-hand what I had, growing up, seen only as highlights. I wanted to share my enthusiasm and have my boys to remember what these Classics were, some over a century old, and why riding a bike was more than just a means of transportation. It was a drive.

“Poppa, that man is bleeding,” my son said to me, at Paris-Roubaix as the Kiwi, Shane Archbold – who crashed at 60km/h in the Arenberg Forest – wove his weary way through the exiting spectators clogging up the roads. We watched him wobble by, that same look in his eyes as Kelly. The race was over. We were all going home.

Archbold was second to last. You could only see the whites of his eyes between the dust and the blood and the pink rivulets from his drink glistening on his chin. Of course he was going to finish. “That’s what cycling *really* is,” I said again, almost 30 years later. Even if you’re hit by neutral car, even if you cut in front of a high-speed train, even if you go down on centuries-old cobblestones and split open your forehead, even to attempt during the Classics what these riders attempt, at the speed in which they attempt it, to see what those farming roads do to the pace cars, much less a man’s body, Archbold’s 34 minutes behind the leader isn’t a humiliation. It’s a damn achievement.

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RONDE VAN VLAANDREN

“There were the hand-slapping, flag-waving, traffic-causing drunks who were only hooligans in that they loved cycling a bit too much. There were the techno-heads, guys covered in all sorts of gear, getting the millisecond feed of the race developments and sharing it with us all. And there were the kids with their stats and their photos...”

Part one: Tour of Flanders. My mum was one of the dozens of single mums who drove their kids to the crappy criteriums and weekend races in backwater places like Jasper, Wyoming or Monument, Colorado. Cycling requires a certain abstract resilience and that’s probably why some of the best riders came from broken homes. When there was a crash there was rarely a father, but always a dozen mothers rushing to the scene.

My mum’s last wish before she died was to see Bruges. So the last time I was in this tourist epicentre, almost a decade ago, cancer had eaten away her body and she was pale and frail and had only weeks more to live. So this year,

even though the early April frost coated the barriers and the sky was a crisp blue and the sun was waking everyone up with that perfect spring warmth and the church bells were ringing and the birds were flying from one medieval perch to another, what should have been a perfect, beautiful Bruges morning, this beginning of one of the great Classics, was only bittersweet for me.

The crowd was talking low, for the sight of the buses and cars all filled with million-dollar gear and riders clicking around with their relative winter chubbiness left any true-blue Belgian with that kind of awe reserved for royalty. There were fathers with babies, men in wheelchairs, a dog

in a carriage, staff from the Orica-Greenedge team were passing out hats to sleepy kids, and MTN-Qhubeka riders were trying out their GoPro cameras. The first burst of energy came from the Top-sport Vlaanderen-Baloise bus where the riders were awakened by rowdy spectators and mobbed when they mounted their bikes and cheered like rock stars as they warmed up, cruising the streets of Bruges. Tickets for Bradley Wiggins hour record attempt might sell out in one hour, but the Belgians come out early and arrive in the thousands to cheer for their countrymen, all with equal enthusiasm. From the cheering you could never tell who was known and who was unknown... >>



PHOTO: Graham Watson

FLANDERS: A NORWEGIAN FIRST... Try as Greg Van Avermaet does, he just can't reach the top step of a Classics podium. The Belgian leader of the BMC team had impressive support from Daniel Oss (left) but ultimately had to settle for third behind Kristoff and Terpstra (below).

There were the hand-slapping, flag-waving, traffic-causing drunks who were only hooligans in that they loved cycling a bit too much. There were the techno-heads, guys covered in all sorts of gear, getting the millisecond feed of the race developments and sharing it with us all. And there were the kids with their stats and their photos and their newspapers debating and arguing over each breakaway. These were fans, but not the Basque-kind of fans that line the roads in Le Tour, but the kind of fans that knew the name of every rider who passed and would always know just a bit more than you ever will about cycling. And there are the braggadocio fans who were the first to tell you that next year, the Tour of Flanders will be a hundred years old and that it had survived even thrived during the German occupation and that the *Nieuwsblad*, one of the original sponsors is the best newspaper in Europe and that the Tour of Flanders is the far better than say, Milan-San Remo.

We watched Team Roompot do everything to keep pace in this race and of course I was cheering them because they were Dutch and young, and were trying to make a good, clean team from the ashes of Rabobank. But it was obvious to everyone they had a long way to go. There's a bit of the romantic in all of us who grew up on the movie *Breaking Away* so I imagined them making it through this year and into next with more vigour and strength than ever before and winning at least one Classic and cheering the cheer of the winning underdog.

The peloton headed toward the finish in Oudenaarde, and we all returned toward the big screen, hundreds of us, the sun setting over the Flemish countryside and the crowd felt like one big community, gasping when Vandenberg crashed, muttering comments when Kristoff urged Terpstra to do a turn, reluctantly cheering for the Dutchman over the Norwegian. But when the Norwegian won and gave interviews with his son on his lap, and the tiny boy shrieked when the champagne popped, everyone's disappointment melted and Kristoff was quietly accepted as the winner.

There was something beautiful and pure here, these rough and tumble Belgians making a day out of this race. The kids, the sun, the smell of blossoming trees, the Belgian beer... It all came together organically, classically.

(Classics Triple: continued on next page: Paris-Roubaix.)

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PHOTO: Yuzuru Sunada

DE RONDE

On the drive to the climbs, we were almost run off the road several times by team cars driving into oncoming traffic, so when the Shimano neutral service car hit Jesse Sergent and later Sebastien Chavanel, it wasn't a surprise. The organisation was sloppy and messy, but somehow that was part of the fun. As an outsider, you had to navigate or get hit. Surviving made you feel like an insider.

We went to the Kruisberg and later the town of Ronse where they had set up a sort of carnival and there were hotdogs and hamburgers and beer.

The cobblestones of Flanders weren't as big as in Paris-Roubaix, but they were scaly and prickly and if you were sitting on the ground they looked like a landslide shooting straight up into the sky. Under the big-screen television a band was playing traditional Flemish music. In a country divided between Wallonne and Flemish, you could feel the pride. Men waved flags while the women and children wrapped themselves in black and yellow. Since Rodania watches had sponsored the event, every time the pace car passed they played the Rodania theme while little old men in funny hats waved to their fellow Belgians. It wasn't much different than a Shriner's parade.



PHOTO: Yuzuru Sunada

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PHOTO: Yuzuru Sumada

Part two: Paris-Roubaix. Even though it was another glorious day, sun shining like summer, first day of the year with no jacket, narcissus and tulips crowding front yards, Roubaix is still depressing. The factories made a mess of it, immigrants are pouring in by the thousands, the farmers are angry because the suburbs are encroaching, the Arenberg forest has been gutted by mining, then replanted so it resembles an arboretum.

On the day of the race however, people were lining each and every street and were smiling and chatting and discussing the race live-fed on their cell-phones. The police, in a very French way, had shut off the roads kilometres from the actual race itself, so while there was relatively more organisation than in Flanders, the Paris-Roubaix had a sort of cold, inefficient organisation where one had to walk almost an hour just to get to any cobblestoned section. But once there, you could lie on a grassy embankment with the sun on your face and the smell of fresh buds craning from the fields. And since Paris-Roubaix is sponsored by the same Mohair loafer capitalists who do the Tour de France, the parade begins early, hours before the riders arrive and there's an endless stream of promotional crap thrown from windows – key-chains, paper-thin cycling hats, and Haribo gummy bears which gave my son reason to crow.

And the cobblestones aren't those tidy little things they put around shopping malls and quaint fountains and town squares. These cobblestones are massive, bigger than my son's head, and instead of being dulled by time, they're sharp-edged, as if defying rather than being subdued by hundreds and hundreds of years of transport.

The French are subdued observers, politicking more than gambling, Cancellera's name is whispered as if he just died, 'Wiggins' is muttered in awe but punctuated with a condescending sneer, 'Paolini', 'Kristoff' and 'Katusha' are huffed as one might huff about Putin and the illegal annexation of the Crimea. The Sky Team's choice of Jaguar as team car, while everyone else drives Skoda, offends the crowd's socialist sensibilities and they clapped each time one of the expensive British wagons bottomed out on a particularly bad part of cobblestone. "LeMond", LeMond," everyone murmured and concurred, although over what was not clear, when the talking head appeared on their iPhone screen, giving his take on the peloton.

Again, there were fathers and sons, happy to be away from mum and we all sat together, gasping when a tyre punctured or a fan strayed too close, whispering each time the peloton cracked and cracked again and, at 56 kilometres to go, cracked for good. The man next to me told me how young all the riders were and how the playing field was level

PHOTO: Bernard Papon (Presse Sport)



PARIS-ROUBAIX

again and how his son – standing there, no older than three – would someday win the world championship. But the man didn't look like a sprinter or a climber and was probably like the rest of us amateur cyclists, just a dreamer.

This is Front National, Le Pen country, but there were Arabs and Turks and Nigerians – fresh immigrants, hungry for this strange western entertainment. Cheering until hoarse, compared to the Belgians, the new Europeans were timid, leaping away from the road when the peloton passed screaming and clapping, "They ride on the grass as well!" Beware of the young Kenyan who exchanges his running shoes for cycling shoes.

There are handlebarcams, helmetcams, noseams, buttcams, cam for cams offering many angles, but none of these cams come close to the roar of the lead motorcycles and two helicopters almost crashing into each other over some schmuck's wheat field and squeal of brakes averting collision and Sagan kicking at his bike which costs more than the annual salary of most of these spectators, and the breakaway of Lampaert, Degenkolb, and Van Avermaet, men cursing so loudly at each other that my son gives me a look of horror and delight. Bikes crashing into spectators, frames cracking like plastic, an empty water bottle thrown accidentally into someone's apartment window. The peloton

of Grand Tours go by fast, but Paris-Roubaix is a tempest.

In the end, after the violence, the Roubaix Velodrome was grotesque. The smooth track, the clean seats, the arrival of the riders beaten, battered, dusty, and bloody, jockeying for position like keirin racers. Come watch the riders sprint smoothly, one by one, all the while sipping a beverage and munching a tasty French snack! Watching the hipster-mustached Degenkolb, only the second German ever to win, leave a bad taste in all their collective French mouths, was freakish if not unforgettable.

(Classics Triple: continued on next page: the Amstel Gold race.)