

– BAUKE VS WOUT TWO DUTCH STARS OF THE PELOTON: TWO DIFFERENT ROLES –

There's a resurgence in Dutch cycling and, for a few days at the Tour de France, Bauke Mollema was Chris Froome's main GC rival. Meanwhile, Wout Poels was the key *domestique* for the eventual champion in 2016. Erik Raschke considers the two Dutchmen.



– TEAM LEADER VS SUPER-DOMESTIQUE –





ASSISTANCE AND LEADERSHIP... Chris Froome crashed in stage 19. He swapped bikes with Geraint Thomas and got to the finish just 36 seconds behind the winner thanks to the help of Wout Poels (left). Bauke Mollema also crashed and was left to pace his own chase and limit his losses (below). He dropped from second on GC to 10th.

Others in the history of cycling have built teams with a similar approach, but they have lacked Rupert Murdoch's deep pockets. Watching Mollema struggling while Poels and Sky led a blistering pace, the race became a kind of David and Goliath moment, but where David loses.

Mollema had shown enormous promise early on but he faded in the final week and ended the Tour in 10th.

Poels on the other hand finished in Paris on a celebratory note, holding hands aloft with Chris Froome, who suggested that next year Poels would be given more rein.

For added interest, it's worth considering the nature of the two Dutchmen, how their upbringing varies and what influence that has on them as professional cyclists.

Mollema is from the far north of Holland: the province of Groningen – underdog country, a cold, spartan land consistently sucked dry by the more prosperous south. Poels is from the south: Limburg, a province close to Belgium, where some of the greatest beers are brewed and where life is about pleasure. As Poels was doused in champagne in Paris, one could almost imagine Mollema standing at a distance, observing the celebrations under the long shadow of the perpetual underdog.

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They were two of the four Dutch Olympians waving into the camera. Bauke Mollema, Tom Dumoulin, Wout Poels, and Steven Kruijswijk. This collective bound for Rio was considered one of the strongest Olympic teams the Dutch have had in years. In the Tour de France, Mollema had been in second place in the general classification inside the final week, Dumoulin had won stages nine and 13 and Poels had taken over Richie Porte's role as the loyal lieutenant, successfully helping Sky defend the yellow jersey against Chris Froome's self-admitted biggest rival, Mollema.

Once in Brazil and while strung out from the Tour, Mollema and Poels were still patient and gracious. They are the kind of riders people thronged to for autographs and left with a smile. They are self-effacing, and generous to a fault, and even though Dumoulin was the only one of the Dutch group to walk away with a medal at the Olympics, all came back to the Netherlands as stars and were greeted and celebrated by entire towns and provinces.

The Wout Poels fan club had an enormous barbecue, closing off the centre of his hometown of Blitterswijk.

Meanwhile up north, Mollema went on a ride through the Groningen countryside with hundreds upon hundreds of riders, littering social media with smiling selfies. It felt after so many years of having lacklustre success in cycling, the Dutch were finally proud of their Grand Tour charges.

Wout Poels and Bauke Mollema are two men aged barely a year apart, who quickly rose in the ranks of cycling, all in a country of cycling fanatics.

They are riders who represent the very essence of their native provinces: Poels as the affable Limburger, kind and loyal almost to his detriment, it seems impossible to dislike him; Mollema is the typical Groninger *nuchter* – or sombre – as they say, a man deeply uncomfortable with celebrity and who viewed his success with fascinating modesty.

Earlier this year Poels won Liège-Bastogne-Liège while Mollema won the Clásica San Sebastian in July. Both were consistently at the front in the Tour. Both are from two very different places. And the power of their respective teams was apparent on stage 12 of the Tour. They are from two very different parts of the country, but they are now in position to do great things in the years to come. >>

It was hard not to get excited on the 12th stage of the 2016 Tour de France as Richie Porte, Chris Froome, Thomas De Gendt, and Bauke Mollema charged up Ventoux. Every so often Dutch cycling tends to produce a climber, but Mollema has something about him that day that other Dutch riders in the peloton lack, a certain unpolished grit. Froome sensed Mollema's quiet, almost passionate drive, looking constantly over his shoulder as the Trek-Segafredo leader stuck to his wheel. What happened near the end of that abbreviated Ventoux stage is an absurd chapter of cycling history: high winds, a moved finish line, frenzied spectators, a stalled motorcycle, a crash, Froome forced to run awkwardly toward the finish and then unable to properly use the spare bike.

Froome, Mollema and Porte were all eventually awarded time concessions because of that bizarre sequence.

Mollema carried second place on GC valiantly until the 18th stage when Froome's spectacular time trial dropped the Dutchman to almost four minutes behind him in the classification. But there were still climbs left and Mollema seemed to have gained the legs of a superstar.

On the 19th day, Froome and Mollema crashed, but Froome had his reliable Dutch *domestique* Wout Poels by his side. Together with others from the Sky team, they lifted their captain through the beautiful Alps and up to the finish of Mont Blanc. Mollema struggled entirely alone, fighting and slogging without team-mates while Sky blazed along in splendour. Poels led the charge, radiant as he heard of Mollema's retreat through his ear-piece, inspired by the look of suffering of his countryman's face.

During that 18th stage, it felt like something in cycling had changed, that the Tour de France had suddenly become like football or baseball, and Sky was no different than Manchester United or the New York Yankees – one bought and paid for, stocked with the best, supplied to the hilt.



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• **BAUKE MOLLEMA (TREK-SEGAFREDO)**  
BORN: 26 NOVEMBER 1986, GRONINGEN

The trees of the Groningen countryside tilt into the wind. Massive wind farms line the edge of the North Sea and can be seen from miles around. Recently more than 100,000 homes were destroyed due to earthquakes from natural gas extraction. Money from the extraction, gas which feeds the populated middle of Holland, was supposed to go back into Groningen but it was in the end diverted elsewhere.

Throughout history, the far northern Dutch provinces have been neglected by the rest of the country. Groningen and neighbouring Friesland are exceptional places, harsh yet beautiful because of the stark simplicity. Unlike the rest of Holland, a good bike ride can be comfortably done for long miles, without traffic. There are no hills, but the wind will build your muscles in a way that no climb can.

My wife was born and raised in Groningen and her parents have a farm there. When we visit I'd get up and go for a ride early in the morning. The farmers are usually up and they'll wave and say a few words, looking at my riding gear and bike as if I were an alien.

"Beautiful day to be out," I'd say, waving to a hard blue sky and warm breeze.

"Jaaa," they'd reply expressionlessly.

I often joke that Groningers are like the people from the movie and television series *Fargo*. They contemplate everything heavily, never showing more emotion than absolutely necessary. Bauke Mollema was often ridiculed by the Dutch media. A reporter bursting with enthusiasm about his second-place standing in the Tour, asking how it felt to be one of the highest placed Dutch GC riders to have emerged in years and the response would invariably be, "Jaaaa. I don't know. Everyone is racing so good so I guess I'm lucky." Or, "Jaaaa, we'll see how long it lasts."



The town where Mollema grew up, Zuidhorn, just outside of Groningen city, has become infected with Mollemania. Posters and banners celebrating the down-to-earth, quiet, seemingly un-tannable rider. His group rides bring out followers by the thousands. They are a stoic lot, used to fighting for everything, Calvinistic and pessimistic. To see so many dispassionate Groningers cheering on Mollema with passion and fervour is quite a sight.

Mollema was discovered at the age of 13 as he rode his bike the 26km from Zuidhorn to his school in Groningen (the capital of the province which, clearly, shares the name). It was an old bike without any gears, but he'd still pass the men on their racing bikes. They got together and bought him a proper bike and found him a spot on the Rabobank junior team. Soon he was winning races.

Ex-Rabobank rider Michael Boogerd has charisma that is well suited for media, he's consistently on the biggest talk shows and writes often for *De Telegraaf*. Three years ago he bashed Mollema, but retracted his statements after this Tour, calling Mollema "bizarrely good". He wrote: "I was sure that sixth place in 2013 was the best Mollema could do. But now, as I watch him ride, I know he can do better... I realised that Bauke is a rider who can do more."

Fellow rider, Steven Kruijswijk, said in an interview in Helden: "I didn't find the Tour as exciting this year because of Team Sky's domination. I enjoyed watching the Dutch, especially Tom Dumoulin and Bauke Mollema, especially Bauke who was really strong."

To Kruijswijk, Mollema was once the rider who hung back and followed, but now he was taking more and more initiative. And with that initiative, Mollema was coming closer and closer to the podium.

Recently, in *Le Monde*, Antoine Vayer, the notorious ex-trainer of Festina and social media muckracker, doubted the successes of outsiders like Mollema. He claimed that Mollema was pedalling at 391 watts in 2013. In 2014 and 2015 his power plateaued at 388. Now, Vayer claimed, in this latest Tour, Mollema had an output of 422 watts.

"I have to laugh at that," Mollema replied, with his standard straight face. "It doesn't bother me at all."

Bauke sleeps and reads a lot, devouring a total of five books during this last Tour, the latest being Dino Buzzati's book on the Giro d'Italia. He was happy when, in the previous year, the team stayed at castles and quiet places where he could put in long nights. Now, they overnight at the more efficient and less quiet Ibis hotel chain, which Bauke has hinted as hindering his performance.

"He has a lot of intellectual baggage," his team manager, Luca Guercilena told *de Volkskrant*, "and that helps him to concentrate while on the bike, in the race." As team leader he is "atypical". He can switch on the light when the team meetings begin and immediately turn it off after the race. But he needs his rest.

During the Tour this year, Alberto Contador was signed to race with Trek-Segafredo for 2017, bringing along his coach from Tinkoff, Dutchman Steven de Jongh, as well as another Spanish rider, Jesus Hernandez. Once again it seems as if the Groninger will be set back by someone flashier and with more power, just as he was by Poels and Sky in the Tour. The question will be whether Contador will use his wisdom and tactical know-how to help Mollema place in the top of the Tour. If Contador does decide to help Mollema, then perhaps Sky will find a new challenge to its powerhouse status.

• **WOUT POELS (TEAM SKY)**  
BORN: 1 OCTOBER 1987, LIMBURG

Not very long ago, Wout stood by his older brother Norbert and watched as the medical team hooked up their euthanasia equipment to his father's bed. They were a family of cycling fanatics. Together they spent weekends driving around the country to races. The two Poels brothers rose through the Dutch amateur ranks of cycling together. Their father, Henk, was Wout's biggest fan.

As Wout stood by his father's bed, he told *de Volkskrant* that he had struggled with his father's choice for euthanasia. When he questioned the decision, his father said to him, "they'll let a dog die, but they'll make me live?" He knew then, all he could do was respect his father's decision.

"When people heard that my father had cancer," Wout explained, "they'd say, 'You have to keep fighting.' But that doesn't mean anything, really. It is more a matter that one survives and the other doesn't."

The tall rider who joined Team Sky in 2015 is from the opposite end of Holland to where Mollema was discovered all those years ago as he rode to school. There is pedigree and cycling history in the Poels family and this part of the country is also famous for its races.

The area of Limburg where Wout Poels grew up, Venray, is as much Belgian as it is Dutch – although to say this aloud is treasonous. The Limburgers have accents as strong as their beers and meat sauces. They live in a perpetually green province of rolling hills and magnificent blue skies. The Amstel Gold Race is held in Limburg because it is where one of the only climbs in the Netherlands can be found (it's also here that the world championships were contested in 2011). The Dutch anti-immigration party leader is from the area. Limburgers have a strong nationalist streak.

Even though Wout and Norbert raced together back in the day, they did not train together. The two boys went out on the same days, but Norbert got up early while Wout rode in the afternoon. Their youth-trainer said that the two boys had such completely different characters that training together was nearly impossible even though, during races, they worked well together.

Their deliberate separation during training made sense largely because of their personalities. Norbert was the more conservative rider, training while studying in school. To him cycling was something one did until a certain point. Norbert used to tell his brother that "it was a slim chance that you'll ever become a professional cyclist." But he said his warnings fell on deaf ears.

All Wout Poels ever wanted to do was race for a living.

The Dutchman at Sky is unlike Dumoulin (also from Limburg), who studied at the very highest level of high school (Gymnasium) and only became a cyclist after failing to get into medical school. And while he has similar abilities on the bike to Bauke Mollema, who excelled at the second-highest level of schooling in Holland (VWO), the education of the two was a contrast.

The Dutch high school system categorises students early and the grade of school often serves as a precursor of what kind of career may follow. Poels studied communication and management (VMBO) at one of the lowest-level schools, always keeping his eye toward a sports career.

When the split arrived in 2007, it was an emotional day for their father. Norbert decided it was time to stop racing. Everyone understood his choice to become an accountant at Deloitte. His brother went on though. Unsurprisingly, six years later, having survived a terrible crash in 2012, almost losing a kidney, Wout – who had been a professional since



2006, became the first Dutch cyclist to sign with Sky.

"Little Wout became big Wout," Norbert told *de Volkskrant*. "He's more serious and focused on the sport. He lives like a professional cyclist. Thankfully, he's stopped being so nice and has become more egotistical."

According to Michel Cornelisse, the *directeur sportif* of the Vacansoleil team which Poels jnr raced with from 2009 until 2013, everyone got along with Wout. The coach even suggested he was "too nice."

"It's true that in the final, when you have to fight for your place, I have to work a little bit on that," Wout replied with a laugh. "But too nice? I don't know if it's a problem."

You could say that his character has actually helped endear him with people who have helped him become the formidable rider he is in 2016. Last year, when Froome was asked who the most amusing team-mate on the bus was, the answer came promptly. "Oh that's Wout Poels," laughed the leader of the team. "He's the one who always has the best soundtrack and the best jokes."

When Wout was signed to Sky he had only seen Froome on television or from afar in the peloton. It was when Froome invited Poels to train with him in South Africa, at altitude, that they spent two weeks riding together, bonding. It made sense, this couple – Froome the introvert and Poels the bubbly extrovert.

Such is his development that there have been questions in the press about Poels challenging Froome. Time and time again, however, the Dutchman answers that he has pledged loyalty to Froome. At the end of the Tour, Froome thanked his team, singling out Poels from the others.

Now, at 29, Wout Poels has been on numerous lists as a 'rider to watch'. He's on the biggest team in cycling. He has proven himself on the climbs as well as in the one-day Classics. He's been raised in cycling, he's driven, and he's proven himself a leader. He's been working most of his life for this moment. Let's hope it comes.

