



This is my final *On the Road* volume. I began these pieces in July, 1999. The June, 2024 column will complete 25 years of these once-a-month scribblings: 300 columns. Those are nice round numbers, of years and columns. That's enough. I woke up one morning in March of 2024 with a big head's-up display floating in front of me, saying: time to retire. Time to know when to walk away.

I turned 77 in that month of March. I was 52 when I began writing these pieces at the BikeCal site. 52 is not exactly a spring chicken in terms of cycling fitness, but I did feel as if I were still in something approaching my fightin' prime. I was just one year removed from finishing in the top 20 in the California Triple Crown Stage Race, one of only two riders over 50 to make that list. I was still doing double centuries and was knocking off dozens of centuries every year...52 of them in 2006, for instance. I wasn't a fast racer but I was still riding with the alpha dogs of our local bike community. And I occupied leadership roles in all sorts of cycling events and projects. I was in the thick of things.

Now? Not so much! Many of my latter-day columns have been about what I might call elder-cycling. As the years went by, I sort of reinvented myself as the poster boy of the Old Farts, celebrating still being out there, logging the miles and stretching out the smiles, well past what we think of as middle-aged. The benchmark birthdays of 60 and 70 came and went, and eventually, inevitably, so too did my enthusiasm and dedication to the activity of cycling. I'm still riding and still enjoying it, when I get around to it. But it is no longer the driving, motivating engine in my life. I no longer schedule the rest of my life's activities around my cycling plans and agenda. Rather, I fit the cycling in around other activities and priorities that are more important for me now. So it goes.

All that being the case, I've come to understand that I have less to say about cycling, in these essays, than I once did. The fires that a few years ago had me in the saddle for 8000 miles a year have been damped down...and so too then have my ideas about new columns become a bit thin on the ground...not much in the way of inspiration. So, time to hang it up. Time to move on. But it has been a good ride!

Table of Contents

Topics

C: Cycling...the simple act of riding, bike culture
B: Bikes...as tools, technology, maintenance
R: Racing...reports, reviews, reflections on racing
A: Advocacy...laws, regulations, car-bike conflict
T: Touring...multi-day tours, travel, planning
W: Weather...rain, heat, wind, seasons
S: Safety...risk, injuries, car-bike interaction
H: History...of cycling, of the world around us
L: Landscape...scenery, environment, roads, trails
P: Personal...philosophical ramblings
M: Medical...cycling-related health issues
 (Many columns embrace multiple topics.)

01/19	What's in a Name? R	3	10/21	Back to Touring (!) T	86
02/19	Back Road Brainstorming TP	6	11/21	Top Ten of 2021 R	87
03/19	Are We All Crazy? P	7	12/21	Bikes and Cars...a Different Spin H	92
04/19	The Care and Feeding of Roads A	9	01/22	The Comfort Zone C	96
05/19	May: Brought Back by Popular Demand R	12	02/22	Here We Go Again WC	98
06/19	Whose Side Are You On? A	14	03/22	Dumb and Dumber CP	99
07/19	Sam's 45-minute Terrible Two C	16	04/22	Friends P	102
08/19	Road Kill We Have Known CL	17	05/22	Racing into Springtime...Prime Time R	103
09/19	Time Spent Outdoors CP	20	06/22	In the Pink R	106
10/19	Racing Wrap-Up R	22	07/22	Life in the Slow Lane CP	108
11/19	Top Ten Riders of 2019 R	28		A Jumbo Helping of Tour de France R	109
12/19	Giving Thanks P	30	09/22	Anatomy of a Tour T	112
01/20	2020 Hindsight P	32	10/22	The Reign in Spain is Over R	118
02/20	Ode to Not-Quite-Springs WC	34	11/22	Top Ten of 2022 R	122
03/20	A North Bay 200-K Triple Crown C	36		Out With the Old, In With the New PB	127
04/20	Cycling Through a Pandemic MC	38	01/23	To Slam or to Slide? CSM	129
05/20	Cycling in Place MC	39	02/23	Club Tours: A History HT	131
06/20	Virtual Touring T	42	03/23	Interactive Tourism T	132
07/20	Just Do It! M	44	04/23	Memories P	133
08/20	The Death of a Road LH	48	05/23	Spring Fling R	135
09/20	Pro Racing: Better Late Than Never! R	50	06/23	<i>Il Giro Magnifico!</i> R	140
10/20	Youth Will Be Served R	51	07/23	In Between the Grand Tours R	142
11/20	A Season-Ending Double Header R	53	08/23	The Little Great Dane R	146
12/20	2020 Racing Wrap-Up R	57	09/23	<i>Tots Ziens, Douwe</i> P	148
01/21	A Happier New Year CP	61	10/23	Three for Three R	151
02/21	Dream Globally, Meander Locally CL	63	11/23	2023 Racing Wrap-Up R	157
03/21	A Journey to the Gold Mine C	64	12/23	It's Green Again! WC	160
04/21	Time Trial Bikes RS	67	01/24	Ida Clayton? Yes! CL	161
05/21	Bike Stuff BP	70	02/24	Bikes and Dogs C	162
06/21	The Show So Far R	73	03/24	What if... P	164
07/21	Along the Trails CL	78	04/24	April = Wildflowers WC	167
08/21	No Doubt About It R	80	05/24	Who? What? Where? When? R	169
09/21	Three in a Row R	84	06/24	The Happy Assassin RP	170

What's in a Name?

The little world of professional bike racing was knocked back on its heels in December when news broke that Sky and 20th Century Fox were going to terminate their sponsorship of Team Sky after the 2019 season. I mean, this is (was) the best-funded, most powerful team in pro cycling, with six recent Tour de France victories, plus a Giro d'Italia and a Vuelta a España, not to mention a zillion other race wins over the past few years. It was like learning the New York Yankees were disbanding. Okay, not quite. But it was a jolt.

Blame it on Big Business. When Comcast outbid Disney to take over Sky's TV enterprise, they had no interest in supporting a bike team, no matter how successful that team might be. It's no reflection on the merits of the team or its riders. It's just...sorry, we have other things to do with our money.

As important as bike racing is to its participants and its fans, it is worth remembering that the whole enterprise is not valued at the same level as many other major sporting activities. Professional football (both kinds), baseball, and basketball franchises are worth absurd amounts of money and bring in absurd amounts of money and pay their players absurd amounts of money. Ditto for at least the top tiers in tennis, golf, auto racing, etc. Cycling teams, on the other hand, limp along on what amount to shoestring budgets. The best riders are paid well but still at a rate of slightly more than pocket change for other top athletes in more lucrative sports.

Cycling does not play out in arenas—except for the tiny niche of track racing—so admission cannot be charged (nor can the fans be induced to pay for food and drink and souvenirs while at the ballparks). Where is the revenue stream for cycling? Mostly it comes from team sponsors.

Trade teams, we call them. I'm not enough of an historian of the sport to be able to document this precisely but my superficial take on it is that, somewhere around the late '50s, bike jerseys started sporting the names of some company that had paid the team to put the name there. Molteni, Cignus, Bianchi, Bic. As long as the jerseys were wool, there was a limit to how many logos could be worked into the knit (hideously complicated Christmas sweaters notwithstanding). But eventually traditional wool gave way to some form of

miracle fiber upon which could be printed (or sublimated) as many colors and logos as a busy marketing department could envision.

No turning back after that! Now we take it for granted that every available inch of jersey and most of the space on shorts is going to be plastered with logos, paid for by the assorted sponsors. In somewhat oversimplified terms, those sponsorship arrangements are what keep our pro peloton rolling down the road.

But cycling being one of the poor stepchildren of the sporting world, those sponsorships and that revenue are always hanging by a thread. If you've followed the sport for even a handful of years, you've seen dozens of sponsors come and go, with teams scrapping and begging to find some new sugar daddies to foot the bills for the next season or two. There are any number of reasons why a company or a government-sponsored agency might decide it makes good sense to drop a medium-sized bucket of money on a bike team. Those reasons are too various and occasionally mysterious to get into in this column. Let's just be thankful that enough high-rollers decide it makes sense. Without them, we'd all be just amateurs.

We watch the races and see the riders whizzing by in their harlequin colors. We hear or read or see the names of the teams. But do we know what they mean? Do we know who those sponsors are and what it is they are promoting—about themselves—when they pay money to put their logos on the backs of bike racers? I'm a die-hard bike fan and I confess I have not known what at least half of the sponsors were promoting...who they are, what they make or do or sell. The UCI WorldTour is still a decidedly Eurocentric package and that is reflected in the sponsors: they are mostly based in Europe and target that market. If we lived and worked and played in Europe, perhaps many of these names would be more familiar to us.

As we launch off into a new year, looking forward to the races ahead, I thought it might be a useful service to my readers to provide a cheat sheet on sponsors: who is it behind those names and colorful logos? I have done a little digging around the internet and have put together short thumbnails for all the UCI WorldTour teams. My primary interest here is in the sponsors. I added the lines about marquee riders because I think it puts real faces on the team names. However, I have been working off 2018 team rosters mostly and may have missed some transfers during the off-season. I caught a few of them but may have

missed a few too. I think the sponsors are correct, but take the rider names with a grain of salt.

Almost all of these teams have evolved over the years from previous embodiments with different sponsors. As noted, sponsors come and go and the teams reinvent themselves, with new kit and new team cars and new websites, etc. I doubt that over the past half century we could find two years in a row where all the teams stayed the same. Nailing down a list of this sort is like hitting a moving target. It is—probably—accurate at this moment. Here are the 18 top-tier teams in alpha order...

Ag2r La Mondial

France • Established 2000

Marquee riders: Romain Bardet, Mathias Frank

Sponsor: the Ag2r La Mondiale Group, which is a French-based international group for supplementary pension and estate planning insurance.

Astana Pro Team

Kazakhstan • Established 2007

Marquee riders: Dario Cataldo, Jakob Fuglsang, Miguel Angel Lopez, Luis León Sánchez

Sponsor: Samruk-Kazyna, a coalition of state-owned companies from Kazakhstan and named after its capital city, Astana.

Bahrain-Merida

Bahrain • Established: 2016

Marquee riders: Gorka Izagirre Insausti, Jon Izagirre Insausti, Vincenzo Nibali, Domenico Pozzovivo, Rohan Dennis

Sponsors: the government of Bahrain and the Taiwanese bicycle manufacturer Merida.

BORA-Hansgrohe

Germany • Established: 2013

Marquee riders: Peter Sagan, Sam Bennett, Emanuel Buchmann, Rafał Majka

Sponsors: BORA, a German manufacturer of home appliances, and Hansgrohe, a bathroom fittings manufacturer.

CCC Reno

USA • Established: 2006

Marquee riders: Damiano Caruso, Richie Porte, Dylan Teuns, Greg Van Avermaet

Sponsor: CCC, a Polish-based shoe retailer. Up through 2018, the team was BMC, owned and sponsored by Swiss businessman Andy Rihs (manufacturer of BMC bikes) until his death this past year. After his death the

team passed to Jim Ochowicz and Dariusz Milek, who lined up CCC as the new sponsor. Reno is the name of their chain of shoe stores in Germany.

Dimension Data

South Africa • Established: 2014

Marquee riders: Edvald Boasson Hagen, Mark Cavendish, Stephen Cummings

Sponsor: Dimension Data is a company specialising in information technology services. Based in Johannesburg, South Africa, Dimension Data focuses on services including IT consulting, technical and support services, and managed services.

EF Education First-Drapac p/b Cannondale

USA • Established: 2007

Marquee riders: Pierre Rolland, Rigoberto Urán, Michael Woods

Sponsors: EF Education First, a Swedish–Swiss education company, and Drapac Capital Partners, an Australian–American real estate firm. Cannondale Bicycle Corporation, an American–Canadian bicycle manufacturer, is the presenting sponsor.

Groupama-FDJ

France • Established: 1997

Marquee riders: Thibaut Pinot, Sebastien Reichenbach

Sponsors: Français des Jeux, the operator of France's national lottery games. Groupama is an abbreviation for Groupe des Assurances Mutuelles Agricoles (English: Group of Mutual Agricultural Insurances), a French insurance group headquartered in Paris with operations in 12 countries.

Katusha-Alpecin

Russia • Established: 2009

Marquee riders: Marcel Kittel, Tony Martin, Simon Špilak, Ilnur Zakarin

Sponsors: sports clothing company Katusha Sports and German shampoo manufacturer Alpecin.

Jumbo-Visma

Netherlands • Established: 2015

Marquee riders: Robert Gesink, Dylan Groenewegen, Steven Kruijswijk, Primož Roglič

Sponsors: Formerly LottoNL-Jumbo, with the lead sponsor the Dutch national lottery. As of this year, LottoNL is gone. Jumbo is a Dutch supermarket chain. Visma is a privately held company based in Oslo, Norway. The company provides business software and IT related development and consultancy.

Lotto Soudal

Belgium • Established: 2008

Marquee riders: Tiesj Benoot, Thomas De Gendt, Andre Greipel, Tim Wellens

Sponsors: the Belgian lottery and Soudal, an adhesives and sealants manufacturer.

Mitchelton-Scott

Australia • Established: 2012

Marquee riders: Johan Esteban Chaves, Roman Kreuziger, Simon Yates, Adam Yates

Sponsors: Mitchelton is an Australian winemaker. Scott is an Australian bicycle manufacturer.

Movistar Team

Spain • Established: 2005

Marquee riders: Mikel Landa, Nairo Quintana, Marc Soler, Alejandro Valverde

Sponsor: the Spanish mobile telephone company Telefónica, with the team riding under the name of the company's brand, Movistar.

Quick-Step Floors

Belgium • Established: 2003

Marquee riders: Julian Alaphilippe, Philippe Gilbert, Bob Jungels, Niki Terpstra, Elia Viviani, Enric Mas

Sponsor: Quick-Step Floors, a manufacturer of flooring.

Team Sky

Great Britain • Established: 2010

Marquee riders: Egan Bernal, Chris Froome, Michal Kwiatkowski, Wout Poels, Geraint Thomas

Sponsor: Sky UK (formerly British Sky Broadcasting Limited, BSkyB and Sky) is a telecommunications company which serves the United Kingdom. Recently purchased by US media giant Comcast, their sponsorship will end after the 2019 season. After that...?

Team Sunweb

Germany • Established: 2009

Marquee riders: Tom Dumoulin, Wilco Kelderman, Michael Matthews, Sam Oomen

Sponsor: Sunweb Group, a company coordinating and booking holiday vacation accommodations and packages.

Trek-Segafredo

USA • Established 2014

Marquee riders: John Degenkolb, Bauke Mollema

Sponsors: Trek is a US bicycle manufacturer. Segafredo Zanetti is a chain of espresso cafes.

UAE Team Emirates

Italy • Established: 2001

Marquee riders: Fabio Aru, Rui Costa, Alexander Kristoff, Dan Martin

Sponsors: the United Arab Emirates (the country) and Emirates (the airline).

There you go! Don't you feel better, knowing all that? There are also 27 UCI Pro Continental teams and 45 UCI Continental Teams, two groups we might refer to as the minor leagues, like Triple A and Double A baseball, sort of. A few of those teams will be invited to a Tour or Giro or Vuelta and definitely to any number of less exalted events. But if you want to figure out who their sponsors are, you'll have to do your own digging.

We already know Team Sky will be different for 2020. They may find some new fat cats to bankroll them going forward. Or the team may fold, putting some very high-priced talent on the auction block. In which case, someone else would inherit their WorldTour license and a new team will be created. However it shakes out, we can say for sure this list will not be the same two years in a row.



Back Road Brainstorming

This column is about creativity; about the process of creating something new and fresh, something that adds to the sum of our experience and perhaps makes the world a tiny bit different. Before you begin to worry if this is going to be about bikes, let me reassure you that the form of creativity I am considering today has to do with dreaming up bike routes.

The verb “create” means “to bring something into existence.” Its origins are from the Latin “*creare*” (“to produce”) and from Middle English: “form out of nothing.” The adjective “creative” and the noun “creativity” both mean “relating to or involving imagination or original ideas.” All of that seems about right for where I’m going with this.

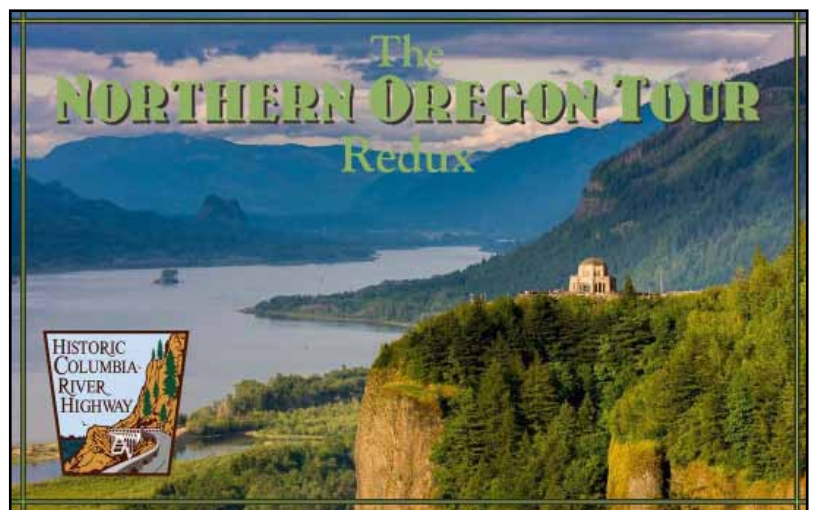
The words are now rather tired old workhorses in our vocabulary. They can apply to anything from a clever ad campaign to an innovative real estate development; from a wily financial ploy to a new offensive formation in football. All those uses are valid and acceptable, although my own take on creativity is that it should have some artistic context.

I like to think I know a little about creativity. I have spent most of a long career toiling away as either an illustrator or a writer. (Not a great or famous artist or writer but competent at both of those crafts.) However, my point today has only a little to do with those areas of allegedly creative or artistic activity. The type of creativity I’m considering now is the laying out of bike routes and in particular the extended, multi-day tour. I’m guessing some of you may say, “What’s so special about laying out a bike ride? I do that every week.” That’s a good question and a valid point of view, as far as it goes. But mostly in this column I’m thinking about tour routes, far from home. Rather than just throwing together a loop along the same old roads in our own backyards—something we do all the time—a multi-day tour in a far off region brings all sorts of more complicated issues into play. And that’s where it blossoms into the realm of creativity.

Mostly I lay out tours for the members of the Santa Rosa Cycling Club. We have not only the basic bike rides to plan but also the logistics involved in the overnights and the care and feeding of 40-plus people moving through an unknown piece of country. Having planned over 30 such tours, everywhere from North-

ern Oregon to Northern Italy, from Southern Utah to Southern France, I can tell you they are challenging to pull together. (I’ll set aside for this discussion most of the more tedious aspects of the logistics, except to note that, if the stages are going to work, we need to find viable overnight accommodations between each stage: campgrounds, motels, even a high school football field. Somewhere we can pitch our tents or dive into beds, and where we can either prepare our own dinners or head out on the town, foraging in the local restaurants. Don’t underestimate the importance of good overnights spaced out around a tour route in convenient spots. On a multi-day tour, all the best roads amount to nothing without them.)

I got to thinking about tour planning as a creative, even artistic process recently while laying out a tour in Northern Oregon with the Historic Columbia River Highway as its marquee attraction. I had planned, organized, and staged a similar tour back in 2007. It was an epic adventure but also pretty darn hard: 90 miles a day for seven days, with hills, heat, and headwinds in abundance. A dozen years later and a dozen years older, that much work seems like more than I or most of my friends want to contemplate anymore. But the best parts of the tour, especially the Columbia River section, were so awesome! The idea of reinventing it kept simmering away on some back burner in my bike brain and then, in a flash of inspiration I hadn’t seen coming, it occurred to me out how to shorten and massage the stages to get them down to around 60 miles a day for seven stages.



After that first brain wave, the really creative part kicked in: a few days of fine-tuning the first premise; of drilling down into the little roads and the possible camps and hotels and all the other elements along the way. This is where it really starts to feel like art or cre-

Are We All Crazy?

ativity as vital and pure as anything a painter or author or composer might tackle. I'm not saying the final tour is on a par with a *Pieta* or a *Starry Night* or a Bach concerto, but in the world of tours it will be its own sort of masterpiece, as good as tours get.

Are you familiar with the term flow-state? It's used to describe a time when, whatever we're doing, it all comes together in some perfect, in-the-moment synergy; when time seems to slow down and everything becomes effortless and beautiful and dynamic. I like to think it's what's going on when Steph Curry all of a sudden starts draining threes as easily as tossing pebbles in a pond. How does he do that? The same flow-state or something like it is at play in most creative efforts: inspiration strikes and the artist revs up into a fever of productivity. The words spill down the page, the paint flies... They forget about lunch, then dinner, then sleep. The moment is too charged with that vital spark to give way for anything as mundane as everyday life. It is the ultimate intoxicant and wickedly addictive.

Once again, not to conflate my own experience with that of a great artist or even with a Curry Flurry, I will still assert that when it comes to poring over maps and puzzling out dinky roads through the woods—considering climbs and descents, paving and scenery, traffic and distances—I too end up in that flow-state where I don't want to stop...can't stop, almost...locked in, pumped up, in the zone. It's just too much fun, and doubly fun because I know when all the puzzle pieces have been put in place, I'll have a tour that will be a blast to ride, for me and for anyone else who wants to come along. Some folks might say that's not really art. I say they haven't been there to experience the process and they probably have not done the tour that spins out the other end of that frenetic, creative whirlwind.

The "art" of laying out bike routes is not anything that is going to capture the world's attention. Cycle-touring guide books don't end up on best-seller lists and millions of newly minted riders don't clog up the little roads through the back country. It's our little secret. Few people would ever stop to consider it as any form of art or even as modestly clever creativity. But when it's done well, it is most certainly a creative event and a lively, magical one at that. I guess my point is this: if you go on a bike tour this year and if, out in the middle of some exotic wonderland, you ask yourself, "How the hell did they find these roads?"...then you might want to tip your hat to someone who had a flash of creativity in the little world of back road brainstorming.

My brother is a rugger. That is, he plays rugby and has done so for most of his life. Our parents moved from Oregon to England in 1966. I was already away at college so never really lived there, aside from the delightful summer of '66, which I spent pedaling around the back roads of Berkshire on my Raleigh road bike. But my brother, ten years younger, passed several formative years of his young life attending one of those classic boys' prep schools in the English countryside, which is where he picked up the passion for rugby.

He's still at it, although at the age of almost-62, he now plays something called touch rugby, which frankly seems a bit oxymoronic: like tackling the other guy and beating the living snot out of him can be taken out of the game?

He has been as involved in the world of rugby the way I have been in the world of cycling. For as long as I have occupied some leadership role in the Santa Rosa Cycling Club, he has been just as involved in the very good rugby club in Missoula, Montana. Just as we have our Wine Country Century in May each year, they have a rugby tournament in the summer that pulls in teams from all over the Rockies and the Northwest, including Western Canada.

Because my brother and I are friends and take an interest in each other's lives, he always perks up when the Tour de France brings cycling onto regular TV and into the pages of the standard sports sections each summer. He follows along and always asks a few questions about tactics and who's who this year. I do the same with rugby. I've never studied the sport closely enough to have a thorough grasp of the rules, let alone the more subtle world of strategy, nor any sense of the bigger picture: the stronger teams and their stars, etc. But I get the general idea: one team trying to move the ball down the field to make a touch or a try; the other team trying to stop them and gain possession of the ball. It's probably overly simplistic to make this observation but it's clearly where American football has its roots. Still a lot of similarities in spite of a world of difference...although, as a rugby bumper sticker puts it, it's quite basic: "The difference between rugby and football: No pads, bigger balls."

Anyway—there is a cycling theme in here somewhere—as I was idly surfing through the Saturday sports options on TV recently while taking my lunch

break, I settled for a few minutes on a rugby test match between Wales and England. This was apparently a very important match, made all the more so when Wales upset England in a dramatic comeback, in Cardiff, no less. None of that meant much to me. I was essentially just browsing the optics: watching the action unfold without much appreciation for any back story or tactics or anything a true fan would grasp. To an under-informed layman, the action seems mostly to consist of strings of laterals occasionally interrupted by tackles and scrums and a lot of blunt trauma mayhem.

Anyway, anyway...what I came away with after watching for a while is the same thing I come away with whenever I watch rugby: these guys are crazy! At this point in my creaky old life, I don't much enjoy getting bumped into or jostled roughly. Getting tackled and thrown to the ground and mauled by some 250-pound hardbody does not seem like anywhere I want to go. As a kid with too much temper and not enough sense, I got into my share of schoolyard and back alley brawls, right up into my 20s. They were never much fun—painful, win or lose—but the reasons for getting into them seemed important at the time. I haven't been in that kind of a rumble for a long, long time. But these guys, these rugby players, have taken the back alley brawl and turned it into a sport. Or they turned a sport into a brawl. You know the old joke about hockey: "I went to a fight and a hockey game broke out!" Same with rugby. (My brother plays hockey in the Montana winter. You can sense a trend here...and yet he's the nicest, most mild-mannered guy when not pursuing his sporting activities.)

It's the "these guys are crazy!" observation that brings this back to biking. I have often, over a long cycling life, had people say to me: "You guys are crazy!" That's after we've told them about cycling 200 miles in a day or bombing down an alpine pass at 50-plus on skinny little tires. Even a 40-mile afternoon cruise at a sedate pace—the cycling equivalent of touch rugby—seems off-the-chart extreme for those who aren't steeped in the lore of cycling; who haven't been there and done that.

When viewed from a disinterested distance, we often think the other guy's sport is crazy, whether it's rugby or rock-climbing or BASE jumping or whatever other lunatic-fringe activity we can dredge up...and that reminds me that most people view cycling through that same filter. They say, "That's crazy!" We say, "That's so crazy it just might work!"

I will always make the case that cycling is not a crazy thing to be doing, just as I am sure my brother would assert that rugby is not all that crazy either. But I expect we would both concede, if pressed on the point, that there is an element that might be termed "crazy" or at least extreme or risky when either activity gets out around its limits...when the envelope is pushed. I suppose all the livelier sporting activities are predicated on the assumption of some risk.

We're all gamblers of one sort or another. I hate real gambling: risking my hard-earned dollars on a bet or a wheel or a deal. Can't stand it; gives me the heeby jeebies. But I willingly fly down a narrow mountain road, trusting to this little two-wheeled contraption to hold together and calculating the odds on having a front-wheel blow-out while I'm railing it around a fast corner. I assume the risk of sharing the roads with thousands of very large cars and trucks, knowing about half of them have distracted or demented or impaired drivers at the controls. And I do it all without wearing anything in the way of protective armor except for that little helmet up top. Most of the time it doesn't seem crazy to me but I can see why a lot of other people might think it is.

I don't ride as far or as hard as I used to, nor do I attack the downhills the way I did back in the day. But even a medium-speed descent can still turn nasty if Murphy's Law jumps out and grabs at us. So, risk? Yeah. Gambling a bit? Sure. Crazy? Maybe, just a little.

Last month I wrote about a tour I'm planning for up in Northern Oregon. On one stage of that tour, we pass a spot along the Santiam River where massive cliffs choke the river into a deep, narrow gorge. Several years ago, my brother and I were at that spot and he challenged me to jump off the highest rock outcrop into a dark green pool below...maybe 30' down. Well hell, if your little brother throws down a challenge like that, you pretty much have to do it. So we did do it, side by side. If the jump didn't pucker me up, the cold water certainly did. Crazy? Absolutely!

I can promise you I won't be jumping off that same cliff when we bike through there on that tour. No way, no how. But I will at least be visiting the same gorgeous gorge and getting there on my own little two-wheeled contraption, powered by these still somewhat functional old legs. And that might be a crazy enough proposition, all by itself.

The Care and Feeding of Roads

When I first thought about the topic for this column—local paving—I worried that it would seem like the proverbial broken record, skipping back into the same old groove, over and over (because I have written about this before, more than once). But then I dug into my archives and discovered the last time I talked about paving was way back in late 2013...almost five and a half years ago. That's enough time to make it fresh again and to revisit the matter and see what progress has been made since the last look at it.

My column from December, 2013 was a top ten wish list for the Sonoma County roads most in need of new paving. Behind that list was this basic back story, covered in a couple of earlier columns: Sonoma County is blessed with a vast and dense network of little country roads—thousands of miles of them—ideal for cycling. But because of the complex formula employed in allocating funding for road work, this county ends up as the poor stepchild of Bay Area counties, receiving a fraction of the dollars some other counties haul in, even though we have by far the most miles of little roads to maintain. The result—for many years—has been that Sonoma County is judged to have the worst paving on its secondary roads of any area around the bay.

But that sorry report card seems to have been changing for the better in more recent years. Speaking almost entirely as an uninformed observer—not privy to the inner workings of the County budget—I get the sense of a new and more proactive attitude about our little roads. No longer are those in charge simply throwing up their hands and repeating their old lament: “So many roads, so little money!” Instead they're aggressively digging around for funds and putting whatever they can find to good use on our country lanes. Passage of an updated state gas tax helped to swell the budget for such work.

That is essentially where things stood when I drew up my wish list back at the end of 2013. Given that the public works department and the high hats who dole out the money seemed to be doing a better job of getting ahead of the paving backlog, I was asked by the head of the Sonoma County Bicycle Coalition to provide some input on which roads cyclists consider high-priority projects. My list favored smaller projects that would be relatively easy and inexpensive and that would benefit both drivers and riders. (You can get a longer take on my rationale if you read that column.)

I wasn't wishing for some pie-in-the-sky projects like King Ridge or the Geysers. Just some handy, everyday roads closer to towns.

That brings us to the present moment and the ride I did yesterday where I found yet another of the roads on my wish list has recently been repaved. My primary reason for covering this topic again is to salute and encourage those on the front lines of road maintenance in Sonoma County: over the past five years, since that wish list was drawn up, they have paved almost every road on my list and quite a few other roads that I might have consigned to that hopelessly pie-in-the-sky category. While there are still many miles of crappy pavement to be found out in the hinterlands, overall, things are much, much improved from the dark ages of ten or more years ago.

Here's a recap/update of the roads on my 2013 wish list and what has been done to them since. Again, refer back to the prior column for the specifics on why the roads were on the list and what needed to be done to them over which miles.

1. Willowside Road/Hall Road

Very popular biking connectors between the Santa Rosa Creek Trail and areas to the west and north; used in the Wine Country Century, Levi's King Ridge GranFondo, and the Terrible Two. Of the two miles of Willowside, the southern mile—between Guerneville and Hall Roads—was nicely paved last year. The northern mile—between Piner and Guerneville Roads—is slated for paving this summer, as is the section of Hall between Willowside and Sanford, plus all of Sanford to Occidental Road.

They've made a good start on it and if all goes according to schedule this year, it will be a clean sweep off my wish list, with Sanford thrown in as an unexpected bonus.

2. Faught Road/Chalk Hill Road

Faught Road—one of the last “country” sections on the Wine Country Century—was paved to a beautiful, black satin standard three or four years ago. (It was so bad and now it's so good! Woo hoo!) The nearest end of Chalk Hill got better-quality chip seal. Not as nice as a real paving job but probably appropriate for its needs.

3. Mark West Station Road

A smaller project on a somewhat obscure road. Some of the worst sections of cracks and potholes have been repaved. They haven't done the whole road but at least

fixed the worst stuff. *(Note: they just—in 2023—re-paved the eastern half of the road to a very high standard. Why they didn't do it all is a puzzle, but we're happy for what they did do.)*

4. Healdsburg Avenue

This is not actually a County responsibility as it lies within Healdsburg's city limits, even though it looks like a country road. I speculated in the prior column that the city was waiting for some developer to come along and build off that road and improve the road as a condition of the permit to develop. That appears to be what is happening. It is currently all torn up in the middle of a makeover associated with a nearby development. No idea when it is supposed to be done but probably not too many months from now. *(Note: that project is now finished and is very nice. It even includes a bike path along the western side of the road, although the new shoulders were good enough.)*

That reminds me: the City of Healdsburg has finally finished the big roundabout at the south entrance to town and that project ties into a new bike trail that leads from the roundabout to Memorial Bridge...a nice way to get around the south edge of town. But wait... there's more: the city also completed, not that long ago, the delightful Foss Creek Trail that runs from near Dry Creek Road on the north side of town all the way down to City Hall...a great transit through the NW part of town. *(Note: they have more recently added another section to the Foss Creek trail...all good.)*

5. Lynch Road

This one is right in my backyard on the south edge of Sebastopol, a couple of hundred yards from my back fence as the crow flies or less than half a mile by road, so it was a personal wish of mine when I put it on my list. I guess the powers-that-be agreed with me because the whole road was repaved to a high standard a couple of years ago. What used to be a perilous, teeth-rattling descent at the end of so many of my rides is now a silky downhill delight.

6. Middle Two Rock Road

This quiet lane west of Petaluma has been a minefield for bikes for years. Now some of it has been repaved. (This is the one I stumbled upon on my ride yesterday...the one that finally prompted me to resurrect the paving topic.) It's a bit of a good news, bad news deal. They repaved the eastern end of the road, from Bodega Avenue to Eucalyptus Road and threw in a nice repaving of that latter road as well. That was probably

the worst section of Middle Two Rock so it's wonderful to have it nicely paved. And paving it plus Eucalyptus makes sense as perhaps the section with a higher traffic count. But the more lightly traveled western end of Middle Two Rock did not get paved and it contains some funky pavement that I know has caused at least a couple of nasty bike crashes. So that's the bad news. But getting the eastern section done, plus Eucalyptus: that is good news indeed.

7. Canfield Road

This is another minor road more or less in my backyard: four miles south of Sebastopol. It had received the dubious benefit of a really slapdash repaving several years ago that at the time seemed typical of what the County was doing. Pathetic, lousy work. But now they've made up for that with a best-quality repave on the northern half of the road. In my prior piece I had said the southern end of the road could get by with just some spot TLC but that the northern end was where they needed a total makeover. And that is what has happened. In addition, they have recently repaved several long sections of Roblar Road, which is what Canfield connects to at its southern end. So heading out into the country south and west of Sebastopol has become much more pleasant lately.

8. Spring Hill Road

This is kind of a sister road to Middle Two Rock. They're both west of Petaluma and both head out toward the coast, both with some really scenic miles but also with some really decrepit pavement. I think this is the only road on my wish list that has not been touched, except for the usual smattering of patches. This now probably ranks as the worst-paved road in the county, unless you count some really obscure dead-ends up in the backwoods somewhere. I don't see it on the list of roads scheduled to be repaved in 2019 either. With all the good work they're doing, I can't quite see how this dreadful old road is not right at the top of their list.

9. Sonoma Mountain Road

When I got to numbers eight through ten on my wish list, I conceded that I was straying away from the obvious, relatively easy roads near towns, where higher traffic counts—for both bikes and cars—made them pretty much no-brainers. At this point on my list I was starting to think about the more exotic back roads, and for reasons mentioned in the prior column, this was a good candidate for a scenic back road repave.

They paved one section a while back and have another section on the calendar for this summer. That still leaves some bad sections unimproved. But whatever they can do will be an improvement over what's there now. They have also repaved some sections of Pressley Road, which is one of the better roads for connecting to Sonoma Mountain Road.

10. Everything else

This is where I went off the deep end and started waxing prolix about the really wonderful but really remote and esoteric back roads that make Sonoma County such a cycling destination (or such a year-round heaven if you happen to live here). I didn't hold out much hope that the County's still-strapped budget would extend to doing much on these obscure byways...but color me surprised: quite a few little roads have been dressed up with silky new paving.

Just a few months ago both Harrison Grade and outer Green Valley—from Harrison Grade to Hwy 116—received best-quality repaves. Add to that such out-of-the-way roads as Irwin, Ferguson, Furlong, Franz Valley, Franz Valley School, Jonive, part of Trenton, part of Trinity, Crane Canyon, the remote (other) River Road (near Cloverdale), Annapolis Road and parts of Skaggs Springs Road...on and on. If this litany of little lanes hasn't already made your eyes glaze over, I could for sure send you into back road overload if I listed all the projects that have been done in the past two or three years or that are on the docket for 2019.

This spring we are emerging from another of our bad winter storm seasons: not the worst ever but right up near the top of the list. These monsoon dumps of rain always put the public works department behind the eight-ball for a while. Saturated soils let go and slide down hills, either burying roads or slumping clunks of road down a hillside. The road gangs have to hit "Pause" on some of their scheduled road work and take care of the emergencies. Case in point right now: a few fairly large sections of the infamous Skaggs Springs Road—along the routes of both the Terrible Two and the Bad Little Brother—got trashed in the storms. The road is open, barely: several one-lane gravel sections. That will take some work to get it all cleaned up.

Fixing the emergencies takes time and money that would have, could have gone to nice new paving on other little roads. So some of the 2019 projects might get back-burnered for a spell. But aside from those little setbacks, we are doing great.

When it comes to the places bike riders roll their wheels, one little fly in the ointment is the desultory pace at which the SMART folks are building the promised bike path adjacent to the rail line between Windsor and San Rafael. This is not on Sonoma County's plate, so don't blame them. This is the Sonoma Marin Area Rail Transit agency dragging their feet on the much-ballyhooed election pledge to build the trail in conjunction with the rail line. A lot of people in the North Bay were finally convinced to vote for the 1/4-cent sales tax to fund the project because of the promise of the trail running up the north-south length of the North Bay.

Once they complete the rail link from San Rafael to the ferry terminal in Larkspur, there will be 45 miles of line for the trains. Yet only 16 miles of trail have been completed and plans for upcoming additions are few and far between. The SMART folks will offer all sorts of excuses for dropping the ball on this but the bottom line is they made a promise and they have not delivered on the promise. Cyclists are well justified in feeling they have been the victims of a bait-and-switch scheme: funds promised and allocated for the trail have been diverted to other parts of the project.

This has been covered extensively in the local press, so I don't need to beat it to death again today. I only mention it at all because it relates to places bikes travel. I'm happy to ride the few new miles they have finished, but more than a little bit restive about their snail's pace on the overall project.

Well...setting aside the SMART slowpokes for the moment, let's all raise our glasses or our chapeaux to the hard-working, underfunded road crews who are jazzing up our Sonoma County biking lives with so many fresh applications of inky black asphalt. Keep it up!

In the five years since this article appeared, many more roads have been repaved to a high standard. Hessel, Blank and Bloomfield, and, amazingly, Cavedale, that great, world-class road up into the mountains out of Sonoma Valley. Trintiy Road, which ties into Cavedale, also got best-quality asphalt. It had once been excellent but had been slowly deteriorating for years and is now tip top again.

Also, although still lagging badly on their promise, SMART has added some miles of paved trail along the train line, including one section through Cotati and Rohnert Park and another through Santa Rosa.

May:

Brought Back by Popular Demand

It's May again! How did that happen? Seems like only a few weeks ago we were dealing with monsoon rains and widespread flooding around NorCal. The Russian River was up on its hind legs and thrashing about, catapulting poor old Guerneville into the evening news once again. Even my little town of Sebastopol had water, water everywhere for a few days. The Chevron where I gas up the Honda was so far underwater only the top of its roof was visible...12' deep? And that goes for the bike trail that runs near the gas station. You would have needed scuba gear to ride the trail then.

My, how things have changed. More recently we have experienced another sort of weather extreme: on April 24, records were broken all over the region, not for flooding but for heat: 97° in Healdsburg, 98° in Petaluma...still April, remember. (What global warming?)

The combination of loads of water followed by many warm, sunny days has led to an explosion: everything that grows is going whole-hog, full speed ahead, and anything that blooms is busy doing it, from roses to rhodies, from daisies to daffs. It's intoxicating and it makes every bike ride a walk along the garden path, with visual treats around every corner and frequently fragrant teasers as well. Aside from hay fever, how could anyone not love this season?

If May marks that magical transition from Winter-Spring into Spring-Summer, it also marks a transition in the calendar for professional cycling. As I write this on the morning of Sunday, May 28, Liege-Bastogne-Liege has just concluded. It's the last of the spring classics. After a hectic run of months with sometimes more than one important race per week, there will not be another significant one-day race until San Sebastian in August.

Meanwhile, mixed in with the classics has been a series of stage races from three or four days long up to a bit over a week. If we count every race on the UCI World Calendar up to this point, there have been 15 of them, dating back to the ones in Australia and South America in what would be summer down under. There have been many other races that aren't part of the top-level UCI calendar, but it's more than I can keep track of to follow all of them.

It has become my custom in recent years to devote

this May column to a first look at the pro season: what has happened so far and what, if anything, can it tell us about the months ahead? Remember that May brings us the first of the three Grand Tours, the Giro d'Italia. We have the Tour de Romandie beginning this coming Tuesday, the Tour de Yorkshire on Thursday, and then the Giro launches on May 11. Prime time!

I'm having a harder time than usual summing up what has happened so far this year, at least in any way that might support any major themes or some compelling narrative. The results have been so mixed up and unexpected that very little connects or makes sense. The only common thread is that there is no common thread. Rather than being able to read the tea leaves at this point, it is more like the tea cup has been knocked off the table and has shattered on the floor. What the hell?!

Let's take the classics first. It is understood that one-day events can often produce weird results. But overall, given enough events, we like to think some elite cohort of established stars will dominate. There has been a little of that this year but not much. Many races were won by guys I've never heard of. That may say more about me than it does about the races and racers. I'm not a pro journalist covering the pro races. It's not my day job to know every single detail. But I do follow along pretty closely and yet these names were all new to me: Simone Velasco, Florian Senechal, Alberto Bettiol, Fabio Jakobson. C'mon now...how many of those names do you know? The most shocking of those was Bettiol, a 25-year old Italian, making the monumental Tour of Flanders his very first professional win.

Two classic sprinters—Elia Viviani and Alexander Kristoff—won classics with more-or-less conventional sprint finishes. Old warhorse Philippe Gilbert added a new line to his already glossy resumé by winning Paris-Roubaix. Zdenek Štybar, always one to be taken seriously in the classics, won twice, Bob Jungels won once.

The two names that jump out as really notable for this spring campaign are Julian Alaphilippe and Mathieu van der Poel. Alaphilippe is a name most of us will recognize at this point. Only a couple of years ago he was the brash new kid crashing the grown-ups' party. Now he will be on most pre-race lists of favorites for the big classic races. Sure enough, he pulled off a hat trick this spring, and a pretty impressive one at that. His first win was Strade Bianche on March 5, with its grinding uphill finish through the old streets of Siena. He followed that up with a win in la Primavera: Milano-Sanremo (March 2). They don't get much bigger than that. Finally, this past

week he won Flèche-Wallone—for the second year in a row—edging out Jakob Fuglsang on the brutal finishing wall of Mur de Huy. (Fuglsang got a measure of revenge by winning Liege-Bastogne-Liege this morning with a solo breakaway off the last big climb,) I still think it's remotely possible for Alaphilippe to blossom into a legitimate stage race rider but I'm more inclined to think his career will resemble that of someone like Philippe Gilbert: stage wins in Grand Tours and lots of classics success.

24-year old Dutchman Mathieu van der Poel came out of nowhere this season, if you count cyclo-cross as nowhere: he is the current World Champion in that discipline. But he had not done anything of note on the pro road circuit until now, when, in the space of three weeks in April, he won Dwars door Vlanderen, De Brabante Pijl, and Amstel Gold. He had been working his way from cyclo-cross into mountain bike racing but with these road results, who knows what lies ahead for this young man, described as the hottest property in racing right now.

That does it for the classics and monuments. What about those stage races?

I will repeat my disclaimer that it is possible to get weird results in spring races, although it is harder to pull off an out-of-left-field, WTF? result in a multi-day race than in a one-day event. That said, consider the following list of 2019 stage race winners whose names might not be familiar to the average bike race fan: Daryll Impey, Winner Anacona, Alexey Lutsenko, Tadej Pogacar, Diego Rosa, Felix Grossschartner, Pavel Sivakov. Okay, I do at least know some of these names from past seasons. But they aren't what anyone would call big stars. Not yet, anyway!

There have been some bigger stars opening their accounts for 2019 in the spring events. Not the superstars of years past but what I think of as the new, emerging class of future stars, perhaps destined for really big things in the not-too-distant future.

I have been touting Egan Bernal for a couple of years now. He won the important spring race Paris-Nice, 39 seconds ahead of Nairo Quintana.

Miguel Angel Lopez arrived in prime time with his third place finishes at both the Giro d'Italia and Vuelta a España last year. This spring he has won the Tour of Colombia and the Volta a Catalunya, 14 seconds ahead of Adam Yates and 17 ahead of Bernal.

Jakob Fuglsang won the Vuelta a Andalucia, 7 seconds

ahead of Ion Izaguirre.

Ion Izaguirre won the Volta a Comunitat Valenciana, 7 seconds ahead of Alejandro Valverde. He also won the Tour of the Basque Country.

Primož Roglič won the UAE Tour, 31 seconds ahead of Valverde, and he won the prestigious Tirreno-Adriatico by 1 slim second over Adam Yates, with Fuglsang third at :30.

If you look down through the top ten at most of these races you can see the same names over and over, plus a few more who may not have won but were always in contention. You can see a trend beginning to build, but will it carry over into the weeks and months ahead?

Of the riders on my own Top Ten list for 2018, almost none of them has shown any sort of form for the new season. Alaphilippe, Roglič, and Valverde are the only ones from my list whose names have appeared in this spring wrap-up (and Valverde barely squeaks in). Simon Yates (not Adam, his twin), Geraint Thomas, Chris Froome, Peter Sagan, Tom Dumoulin, Thibaut Pinot, Michal Kwiatkowski: not much so far. Simon Yates has won a couple of stages. Pinot won the Tour de Haut Var, a minor league stage race. A podium here or there for a couple of others. Slim pickings.

It's not uncommon for the biggest names to take a backseat during some of the spring events. They will ride in support of their lieutenants in the smaller races...the lieutenants who will support them in the Grand Tours. But it seems to me a bit out of the ordinary to see such a sweeping lack of results from the riders who have dominated the sport in recent years. Can they all be simply keeping their powder dry for the big events or are they really off-form? We will find out soon enough.

Full rosters for all teams at the Giro have not yet been announced but the names that are available so far make for rich speculation: Miguel Angel Lopez for Astana; Vincenzo Nibali for Bahrain-Merida; Simon Yates and Esteban Chaves for Mitchelton-Scott; Alejandro Valverde for Movistar; Primož Roglič for Jumbo-Visma; Egan Bernal for Sky; Tom Dumoulin for Sunweb. A lot of big guns there. Lots of possibilities. Bring it on

It's funny to read through my list of unknown newbies for 2019 and see the name Tadej Pogacar. And Primož Roglič also in something of a new, up-and-coming role. If we knew then what we know now...

Whose Side Are You On?

I had a weird encounter on a local “bike trail” recently. This was on the West County Regional Trail, if you know your Sebastopol-area geography. It’s an old railroad grade with a mildly uphill pitch in the direction I was going, so I’m cruising along at a leisurely speed...

Up ahead I see a woman with a golden retriever (on a leash) walking toward me. She is walking on my side of the path, more or less; that is, on the left side of the path for her. I could have swung wide to my left and gone around her but there was something about her body language that caught my attention. She seemed ready to block me, whichever way I went, kind of like a defender trying to block a player from driving to the basket. I got the impression she wanted to confront me, so rather than just blow past—with the potential that she would actually jump into my path—I decided to put a foot down and find out what was on her mind.

She didn’t waste any time letting me know. She wasn’t quite yelling but was very assertive: “This is a WALKING TRAIL! I am supposed to be on the left and you are supposed to pass me on my right!” Keeping my voice calm, I replied, “Excuse me, but I believe the same rules of the road apply on this path as out on any road: we each stay to the right.” But she wasn’t having any of that: “No no no no! This is not a road! Do you see any cars here? And by the way, you’re rude!”

Honestly, I was not being rude. I was as polite as can be and at that point that was all I had said. But she had a serious burr under her saddle. I don’t think she was a nut job...just really cranked up over this issue. (Doesn’t it seem sometimes that the more wrong a person is, the more hunkered down they get in their bunker of righteousness?) I tried to reason with her but she became increasingly abusive. I figured this wasn’t going to get any more civil or productive so I clipped back in and went on my way.

But as I rode away from that silly little confrontation, I was thinking. I was 99% sure that I’m right about which side of the trail I should be using. But that little 1% of uncertainty niggled at me. So I looked it up when I got home. Or rather I threw it out to the members of my bike club on our chat list. I briefly described my encounter and then asked: is there a body of laws or rules or regulations covering how we are supposed to behave on so-called multi-use trails? We have the Vehicle Code for roads and highways, and

a big fat book it is. But as far as I can tell, there isn’t a single, one-size-fits-all set of rules for trails. It seems as if the people who build any given trail can pretty much apply whatever rules or standard—and signs—they think are appropriate. This strikes me as kind of nuts, really.

My query prompted a lively discussion on the chat list. It soon devolved into the usual opinions and theories about how to get along with other trail users. That’s a fertile field for discussion but not exactly what I was after. But amidst all of that were some useful nuggets.

One person who keeps up-to-date on advocacy and legal issues wrote this: “There are actually very few State laws about bike paths. Including no universal speed limit. That is, all jurisdiction-specific and local governments are able to set their own regulations for some aspects of path use. Sonoma County has no such regulations as far as I have been able to find although there are posted speed limits and signage about sharing paths in certain areas.”

Another person sent a link to the Marin County Cycling Coalition web site, which has a page outlining general conduct on bike trails, including this: “KEEP RIGHT, PASS LEFT. No matter which way you’re going on a shared path, keep to the right. Faster users should pass on the left.”

Someone also offered a link to a trails guide prepared by Sacramento County Regional Parks (the folks responsible for the American River Parkway, one of the longest, oldest, and best developed trails in the state). Under the “Bike Riders” heading, it has this: “Pass on the left. Be sure that when you are passing someone on the paved trail, stay on their left side and move to the right after you have passed them.” (That supports the riding-on-the-right premise.) And under the “Pedestrians” section, this: “Use the left shoulder when it is accessible to you. Joggers and walkers should stay on the dirt shoulder off the pavement to minimize the chance of an accident.”

That almost appears to support the contention of my dog-walking friend: “Use the left shoulder...” But note the use of the word “shoulder” and the more explicit “dirt shoulder off the pavement” that follows. You can see where she might have picked up the idea of walking on the left from this or something similar posted on another path or web site or whatever. It harks back to what we were taught as kids: to walk facing oncoming traffic so we can see what’s developing right in front of us (as opposed to behind our back). But the

language is very specific about doing so on the shoulder, off the pavement.

I've ridden that excellent trail a few times and I've just refreshed my memory of it with a quick look at Google Street View. There are wide shoulders of compacted gravel...most of the time, although not always. They say use the shoulder when it is accessible to you but they don't tell us what to do if the shoulder is not available. Get on the paved trail and stay on the left? Switch over to walking on the right side?



Someone else, no doubt feeling a picture is worth a thousand words, simply sent this photo, taken on the trail I was riding when I had that awkward confrontation. Just the two words: KEEP RIGHT. Absent any other distinctions between cyclists and walkers, roller bladers and equestrians, etc, I would guess we are all expected to abide by that same, simple directive. I wonder what would have happened if there had been one of those signs nearby when I had my little kerfuffle with the walker. I expect she would have figured out some way to bend the logic around to where the sign did not apply to her.

Anyway...my beef is not with that woman exactly. It is more with the lack of any overarching regulations that can (and should) be applied to all multi-use trails in a consistent and predictable way, whether in Sebastopol or Sacramento or Sausalito. We can understand why the Vehicle Code has those hundreds of pages of rules:

with cars and trucks as big and powerful and fast as they are, we all really need to know what's expected of us. We need to be confident we're all on at least approximately the same page about the basic rules of the road. But even at the relatively sedate speeds we usually see on trails, things can go wrong in a hurry if we are not all in agreement as to how we should be using those trails. Just as we rely on our fellow motorists to stay in the right lane out on the highways, we ought to be able to assume all trail users will do so as well...or walk on the left, but off the pavement.

You will have heard me say before that I am the last person to want more laws and rules hedging me about, but in this case, I think I can live with the rules, assuming they exist. Right now, with every county and municipality just winging it, we are left with a confusing mish mash of improvisation, with anyone remotely in charge making it up as they go along. As I found on that ride, we end up in situations that, at best, can be confusing and frustrating, and occasionally have the potential to move from confusion to collision, with some measure of blunt-trauma nastiness inflicted upon those involved. We can do better than this.

I can remember, many years ago, riding on an extensive trail system in Tucson where the path was divided clearly with a center stripe and many signs stated in no uncertain terms that bikes were to stay in the LEFT lane... exactly the opposite of all these other trail directives. Presumably, some planner felt the "left" lane was the "passing" lane, the way it might be for traffic on a divided, four-lane freeway. But what was the cyclist supposed to do if and when they approached a walker coming from the other direction? It was nuts.

It was bike policy created by a non-biker, who didn't have the first friggin' clue as to what actually happens out in the real world. It's because of such moronic decisions and policies that we need a uniform code of standards for multi-use trails.

Sam's 45-minute Terrible Two

Have you got 45 minutes to spare? If you do and if you like bike stuff—presumably you do, if you're reading this column—then you might want to wedge out a little time to watch this YouTube video (see below).

It was put together by a guy named Sam Addison, 30, of Santa Rosa. It's 45 minutes of handlebar cam shot from Sam's bike on his way to a 15th-place finish in this year's Terrible Two Double Century, put on by the Santa Rosa Cycling Club and run this year on Saturday, June 15.

If you think nearly an hour of watching back-country roads roll by at bike speed is going to bore you to tears, this might not be for you, although give it a few minutes and I predict most of you will stick around for the duration. If you have any interest in the Terrible Two, you will be fascinated. If you've done the ride—completed it or just attempted it—or if you worked the ride as a volunteer, you will find it essential viewing. Even if you haven't done it or helped on it, you might be interested. Anyone who has done a ride long enough to test their limits, be it a 100-K or a century or whatever, this will take you on a journey you will appreciate.

Unless you're well acquainted with the event already, a little background might help in your appreciation of what's in the video. There is a link to more TT info at the end of this piece. The link goes to the official Results page, which includes not only the results and a report for each year of the event, going back to its origin in 1976, but also links to course records and a display of most past graphics for the event. The graphics are of interest because the prize a rider receives for finishing the event is a t-shirt with whatever the current graphic is, plus the hallowed subscript: "I DID IT!"

As this year's report notes, this was one of our mild years on the weather front: not too hot and not too windy. In addition to the miles and the hilly terrain, hot weather is the occasional gremlin that turns a typically terrible Terrible Two into something much worse. So for a little perspective on just how bad it can get, read our report from the 2012 event, which most folks who were there agree was the worst ever.

Finally, if you really want to drill down into this topic—as prep before watching the video—I devoted one of these columns—back in 2006—to an informal history of the event. Much has changed since then, including all of us growing 13 years older. But it provides

a good back story and probably does a good enough job of setting the scene for the present moment.

One thing we didn't have 13 years ago was dinky cameras that could mount on our handlebars, with battery life to last out a 13-hour ride. We're getting older and more decrepit but the technology is getting younger and fresher and more capable. So now, even if we can't do the TT anymore, we can still watch the video and recall our days of glory, or at least our days of suffering and travail.

No long-distance ride/race that covers 200 miles and lasts at least 12 hours—and for some over 17 hours—can be condensed into a 45-minute film clip without losing something. But who would watch the whole things for half a day? Sam has done a good job of stringing together snippets of rolling road that capture the essence of the event. He has all the important elements in there: the famously brutal climbs and gnarly descents; the pacelines and the many miles of lonely solo riding. He doesn't waste a lot of minutes on the climbs. Things happen slowly on those unforgiving walls. It's nasty when you're experiencing it in the real world but it makes for dull video. He's put in far more of the wiggly, whirling dervish descents. Those are always fun viewing. There is of course an equal amount of climbing and descending on any loop ride, but with the climbs chugging along at under 10 mph and the descents whizzing by at over 20 or 30, obviously much more time goes by while climbing...and much more suffering as well. But we don't see that in the video. Bear that in mind as we are magically teleported up the toughest ascents in no time flat. I understand why he edited that way, but it's a little misleading.

He has put together a sound track that is acceptable, although a few elements give me pause. There was, for instance, no countdown at the start: "five...four...three...two...one..." and so on. I know because I was the one waving the riders off and I didn't do that. I told the group to ride safe and strong and to remember to enjoy the scenery along the way, then sent them on their way. No big drama. Not my style. But overall, it's okay, with a looping back beat that stays just this side of becoming tedious. Turn down the sound if it bothers you.

I expect the video appeals to me especially because of my long relationship with the Terrible Two. I've completed the ride four times—always as a solid, stolid mid-packer—and have done either the first or second half countless times...sometimes as training rides and

sometimes during the actual event. (I used to do the first half with the group and then lead the bail-out ride down the valley from the lunch stop, a 142-mile ride.) In addition to riding the course so many times, I have been Chair or Co-chair of the event since 1992, getting on for 30 years now. I've marked all or part of the course each year. I've seen the riders off in the morning and welcomed them back in the evening. I've been the bad guy at the lunch stop who tells the later riders they can't continue onto the second half of the course if they've fallen behind our time windows. I hurt just a little bit every time I hear about a bad wreck or medical meltdown out there, and over the years there have been many of them. I visit the riders in the hospital. Having been there and done that myself, I feel the joy and the pain of all those tackling this implacably hard challenge.

So as I watch the countryside rolling by in Sam's video, I am recalling all the riders who crashed in this or that spot we're passing. I am recalling just how leg-breakingly, head-bakingly hard it is to get up some of those climbs and how fun-but-sketchy most of the descents are. If you haven't been a part of this event the way some of us have, all those miles of forest and meadow and sea cliffs might not mean anything more to you than just a long travelogue through the North Bay back country. If it is only that, it is at least scenic! But I expect most of you will relate to it with a cyclist's eyes and with some muscle memory in your legs and cardio that makes you feel it, rather than just looking at it.

Give it a try. You can hit "pause" and move on if it doesn't do it for you. If, on the other hand, it does speak to you, well then...enjoy!

Sam's YouTube video...

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xIIcsa110Hc>

SRCC Terrible Two Results page...

<https://www.srcc.com/TT-Official-Results>

Road Kill We Have Known

Why did the chicken cross the road? To show the possum it could be done.

Road kill can't be high on anyone's list of favorite topics. But they are out there, an all-too-common feature of our back road bike rides. The more miles we log, the more of them we encounter. Most of the time we try not to notice; to avert our eyes from the ugly mess and to hold our breath until we've moved beyond the olfactory range of that thing—ugh!—whatever it once was.

But like hills and headwinds, potholes and panoramas, dead things in the road are a staple of our rides. We can't help but notice them, even as we try not to. And if you do log enough miles, sooner or later you will come to some larger sense of the scope and nature of those poor ex-critters. Any veteran rider, for instance, can tell you that the possum is the hands-down champion of road kills, at least along the roads of Northern California. (In the wide open spaces of the American west, jack rabbits seem to be high on the list as well, and although we do have them here, they're not as prevalent as road kills. I've never ridden in Texas but I am told armadillos occupy the same niche in the road kill hit parade as possums do here.)

Possums. Technically known as Virginia Possums (all the ones in North America, although there are dozens of other varieties in other parts of the world). I see them around my country place all the time. I have a grudging sort of fondness for the homely marsupials. They are truly prehistoric survivors: they have been around, doing their possum thing, in pretty much their current state, for hundreds of thousands of years. By any yardstick of Darwinian survival of the fittest, they have to be considered a great success. And yet nothing in their long career down the ages has prepared them for life in the world of cars and trucks. They never got that memo. And frankly, for all their success at sticking around, no one would ever suggest they're brilliant thinkers. So, 100-plus years into the age of the automobile, they still haven't figured that one out.

Next on my personal accounting of local road kills are probably skunks. Boy, do we ever give those road kills a wide berth when we roll up on them. Skunk road kills seem to proliferate at certain times of the year and although I haven't done any research on this, I'm guessing those waves of dead skunks correspond

with mating season. Randy male skunks get a whiff of irresistible girl skunk spunk and they're on the move, along the way forgetting anything they ever might have learned about passing cars. We males of the species can relate. Anytime you let your little brain do your thinking for you, trouble is never far away.

Next up—or down: squirrels. Red squirrels or gray squirrels...doesn't matter. They are both traffic-challenged. They are said to be quite bright when it comes to outwitting squirrel-proof bird feeders but they too are having a hard time getting up to speed on life in the world of cars. Or even bikes: I know of a number of bike-squirrel encounters that have resulted in dead squirrels and crashed bikes. Their tiny brains somehow decide it would be a good idea to try and jump through a bike wheel...call that one a squirrel-o-matic. I have a theory about squirrels. (File this one with my theory about skunks.) Their movements are so erratic that we have a term for it: "squirrely." My thinking is that, to survive being captured by foxes or hawks, they need to be unpredictable to keep the predator from learning their behavior. So in moments of stress, those little brains go into random-sort mode, like a bingo-ball popcorn machine. They jump forward, then back, then to the side...who knows which way they're going to jump next? They don't even know themselves so how can the hawk get a read on it? That may work well with their traditional adversaries but not so well with cars. Cars don't care. A driver—or bike rider—may try to swerve around one but all too often, the squirrel's patented avoidance antics don't work. Their zig-zag path still leaves them under the wheels.

Tied for fourth place, just off this podium of dubious distinction, are racoons and house cats. Racoons are another animal said to be very smart but they also have a hard time with cars. I once came upon the sad sight of a mama coon with four little ones, all laid out in a row along the side of the road. I say "house" cats to distinguish them from other wild felines like bobcats and pumas, but I have to guess some at least of the dead cats out there were feral, with no house to call a home. Although some of the dead cats may have been unloved and unmourned, most will have been someone's pet. As much as we think our kitties are domesticated and tame, there is still that streak of wild in all of them. It's part of their charm. And if they are outdoor cats—as most rural cats are—they will roam and occasionally not return. I found my old pal Sooty curled up at the foot of my driveway one chilly winter

morning. He looked like he was taking a nap until I noticed his gray fur was covered in white frost. His night-time rambles took him across the road one time too many.

Then there are the more exotic road kills, from deer to buzzards, from wild pigs to weasels. Over a long cycling life, I think I can say I've seen almost all of them. Perhaps the most remarkable and saddest one I ever saw was a gray fox along a road down in Santa Ynez Valley. It was lying there, looking entirely untouched. Not a hair out of place. As handsome a creature as this world will ever produce. I stopped to admire it and perhaps to mourn for it a little, and that's when I saw it had a big fat mouse in its jaws...hind legs and tail out one side, head and front paws out the other. If it were feeding only itself, the fox would have simply chewed that mouse up and swallowed it. But I figure that mousey morsel was being carried home for a den of kits. I pictured those hungry little kits, waiting for mom to return with something good to eat. Perhaps they were old enough to eventually fend for themselves...but probably not.

On a happier note, there are the road kills that turn out not to be dead after all. Climbing—slowly—up Spring Mountain Road out of St Helena, I passed what appeared to be a dead gray squirrel. Didn't think anything of it until a rider behind me said, "Oooh, that squirrel is still twitching!" I circled back to see. Got off my bike and gave it a nudge with my toe. The little eyes popped open. It looked up at me, got at least some of its brain back on-line, and suddenly rolled over and scampered off into the woods. Maybe it had been whacked hard by a front bumper in mid-leap and got its bell rung but was not otherwise damaged...?

On another ride, on a small climb just north of Marshall, I saw a tiny fawn lying next to the road. It looked as perfect as that gray fox. No obvious damage. I thought it would be a shame for that lovely little body to end up mushed into pulp by passing cars, so I decided to lift the body off the road and put it back in the tall weeds. But when I picked it up, the eyes popped open and the four spindly legs unfolded like assorted implements on a Swiss Army knife. I set it back down and it stood there for a few minutes and finally wobbled off into the trees. I hope its mom was nearby, watching. I hope it did not have serious internal injuries.

We even had an encounter with a human road kill once...or not-quite road kill. On a quiet side road

out near Monte Rio, four of us rolled around a bend and pulled up short at the sight of a man lying in the middle of the road, apparently dead. Certainly out cold anyway, with blood running across the road from a head wound. Wearing a pair of jeans but nothing else. This was back before cell phones so I went racing up the road, looking for the nearest country cabin with a phone, but before I got there the Monte Rio fire chief went flashing by in his red pick-up. So someone else had already called it in (But had not stayed with the body? Weird.) I never read anything about it in the paper over the next days so I figure, whatever was ailing the guy, it wasn't a fatal condition.



But my best back-from-the-dead road kill encounter happened on Crystal Springs Road, over in Napa County. I and two friends were climbing an easy grade when we passed a bird standing in the road. I assumed it would fly away as we approached but it didn't. It just stood there, not three feet from my bike as I passed. Then I realized I was looking at an owl. How often do we see an owl, anywhere, let alone up close? This was too good to pass up so I got the guys stopped, gave my

bike to someone to hold, and squatted down in front of the bird. It was a saw whet owl...a small, beautiful bird (below). It just stood there looking up at me. Perhaps it had flown into the side of a car and got knocked silly? I put my hand down on the road, palm up, right in front of the owl, and without any other prompting from me, it took a couple of steps forward and walked into the palm of my hand. I stood up and held my hand up, right in front of my face, eyeball to eyeball with this wonderful creature, those two big owl eyes like beaten gold medallions. Each of us got an up-close look at this fierce little ambassador from the wild world. Then I walked over to the side of the road and held my hand out at arm's length and the owl took wing and flew off into the manzanita scrub, seemingly none the worse for whatever had befallen it. What a moment...what a magical, what-just-happened? event. A treasure plucked out of an everyday bike ride.

Not too many of the road kills out there get up and walk—or fly—away from whatever had happened to them. Most of them are toast...food for scavengers. We may feel that little thump when we run over a critter in our cars. We may feel badly about it for a minute but that's about all the bandwidth we devote to the matter...unless it's a deer through the windshield. But out on our bike rides, we see the full spectrum of carnage inflicted on the citizens of the wilder world by our cars and trucks. It's hard to imagine too many road kills resulting from collisions with horse-drawn buggies. I suppose they must have happened but not too often. Now? It's a whole new equation. 40,000 human road kills each year in the US alone. How many possums, skunks, snakes, deer, birds? Countless millions. It's a heavy toll of death and pain we inflict on all our companions along the roads when we tootle around in our big metal boxes. Remember the witty bumper sticker:

"My karma ran over my dogma"? Funny but all too true. Seems to me, there is probably a rising tide of karma chasing along behind our cars...a billion or so ghosts, from spotted fawns to fox kits. And remember that other equation: a bike on the road means one less car on the road. Now, if we can just keep from running over anything on our bikes—even crazy squirrels—we'll be headed in the right direction.

Time Spent Outdoors

I have been off on a series of bike tours over the past few months, riding everywhere from the red rock hills west of Denver to the rocky beaches of Oregon; from the wild rivers of Northern California to the Columbia River Gorge. Each day of biking has been supplemented with at least one other day of off-the-bike activities, from hiking in the woods to zinging frisbees on the beach.

It has been a good few months. But all that activity, outdoors and often a long way from TV or the internet, has meant I've not been able to watch, in any sort of everyday, real-time way, the big bike races going on over in Europe. By this time in most years, I would have devoted a couple of these columns to reviews of the Giro d'Italia and the Tour de France. I did catch up with each of those big events when I was home between vacations, but I always seemed to be out in the boonies, climbing some mountain of my own, when it came time for what would have been my customary post-race observations.

I had thought to do an end-of-Summer racing wrap-up this month. But now, with the Vuelta a España going strong, I've decided to wait one more month and then do one big dumpster dive into all of the big races when this last one is over.

Meanwhile, I want to head off in another direction and introduce you to my old biking buddy Dan. He lives a few blocks from me in Sebastopol. Our wives are friends too, so we see them socially. Nice folks, really nice folks. Way back in the day—in this case the late '80s and early '90s—Dan and I were regular riding companions. We were each other's default settings when it came to hooking up with someone for a ride. Lots of miles and smiles together.

But somewhere around 1994 we started drifting apart when it came to our bike lives. I was hit with a fairly intense dose of “hammer” fever and started wanting to go faster and harder and longer, down the path of centuries and double-centuries. Not quite racing but feeling a little bit like it: keeping score and counting coup. Dan went down a different road. Got a fixie, for one thing, and also got into slow, fully-loaded touring. Two very serious heart surgeries along the way changed his whole life view and priorities as well.

We stayed in touch because we're still part of the same social circle and our wives are still pals. So we see one

another fairly often and usually end up talking about biking. (That would be one topic among many: we are by no means bonded only around biking.) We're both at an age now where tapering off a little bit seems to be the order of the day for our cycling. Recently, while sharing our tales of tapering, I mentioned I had stopped keeping a bike log a couple of years ago.

(I had been a long-time hardcore logbook keeper: over 30 years of recording the numbers for every ride I did. When I stopped, I kind of backed into it accidentally, which seems to be the way a lot of my life plays out. I sat down one day to enter my most recent ride in my never-ending log and was stunned to see I had simply forgotten to enter the numbers for the previous three weeks of rides. WTF? I sat there debating what to do. Could I beat on my brain hard enough to remember all the details of those assorted rides? (No.) Okay then, maybe I could just fabricate some numbers that seemed about right? (No!) That I even considered filling the log with fabricated data was all I really needed to know about the issue. It was time to stop. Time for my biking life to roll on without any documentation. For about a year, I didn't have a cyclometer of any sort on my bike. I have lately picked up an inexpensive, really basic unit that cranks out just a few numbers. I am aware of them at the time but then almost immediately forget them.)

Anyway...I mentioned this to Dan, the ending of the long affair with my logbook. He laughed and said he'd stopped keeping a log years ago. However, he says he still keeps a log of sorts. It might more accurately be called a journal but he puts real numbers in there along with the narrative copy. He calls it his TSO Log. Time Spent Outdoors.

This would of course include cycling...all the hours and days spent rolling down the road, including everything from an afternoon noodle from home to a multi-day tour in a far off locale, such as the Netherlands-Belgium tour he and his wife are doing in a month, or all the tasty tours I've done over the past few months. But it includes a lot more than cycling.

I won't presume to guess how much time you spend outdoors. I spend a lot of my life out there. But I also know I spend a lot of time right here in this chair, indoors, in front of this monitor, surfing the web or rattling off e-mails to my friends or banging out bike copy like this column. Cooking, eating, sleeping, reading, watching TV, snuggling with my honey, puttering in my workshop...a lot of time indoors. Now, I will not

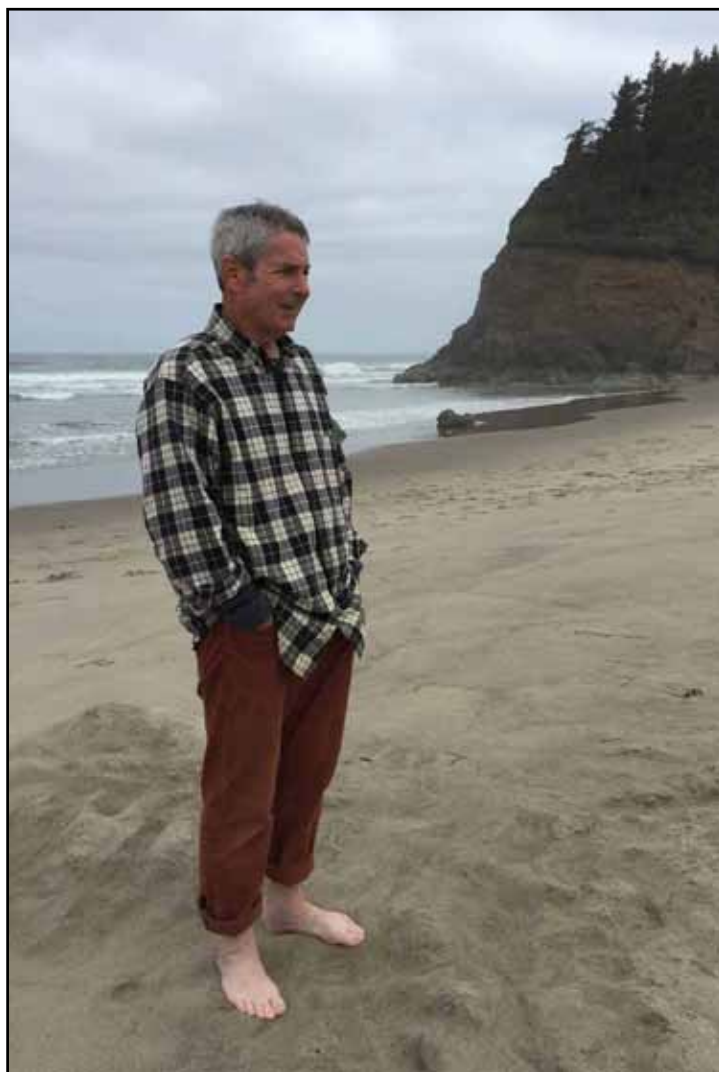
try to argue that much of that indoor time is not quality time. It is. And I'll add this: we just bought a really nice, tournament-grade ping pong table and the wife and I have been loving it, playing at least an hour every day. It's fun and builds hand-eye quickness and is a really nice workout. Not a brutal grinder of a workout but enough to get into a bit of a lather, with a shower starting to look like a good next move. It's so frisky it almost feels like time spent outdoors. So indoor time can be good.

That said, I like Dan's basic premise: that time spent outdoors is usually going to be more active and more attuned to the cadence of nature: the changing seasons; the smells of trees and flowers and mulch; the kiss of a breeze and the dance of the clouds. Even a sedentary outdoor hour spent cozied up in a hammock is quality time: letting the cares of the world go while lying there looking up into the tree canopy.

I'm not sure I would want to record it all in a logbook. Do I count the two minutes it took to run out to the garden and bring in a colander full of tomatoes and peppers? Do I count the time I spent with the webster, sweeping out the spiderwebs under the house eaves? In our happily moderate climate in Sonoma County, we live an indoor-outdoor life for more than half the year. The doors are almost always open and our decks and gardens function as additional "rooms" in our house. So there's all that outdoorsy stuff right off the back porch. But then there are the dedicated outdoor activities: the 9-mile hike we did along Tomales Bay last Sunday. A long weekend camping in Pinnacles National Monument, watching the condors. The evening walks around town. Dancing on the lawn in the city park while a good band rips it up onstage. Flying kites. Playing softball or disc golf. Building sand castles on the beach with the grandkids. Kayaking. Whole days spent in the garden...planting, digging, weeding, mowing, sawing, chipping, pruning... Building fences or bean trellises. Tending to our bees. Stargazing. Whale watching. Bird watching. Washing the cars (or cleaning the bike). Stopping what we're doing long enough to watch the sunset. Or being up early enough to watch the sunrise. it's all good. It's all out there under the big sky.

But even if I don't keep a TSO Log, I like the idea of it...the metaphor of it: what it suggests about a life well lived. I can say now—after beaver-ing away at it for 30+ years—that keeping a cycling logbook only documents a part of the whole picture. It may be a very

important part of the picture for you. It certainly was for me for most of those years...until it wasn't. Now, although I still love my cycling, I am looking up from that little cyclometer at the wider, wilder world around me. I am remembering—for the umpteenth time—that a well-rounded cycling life is about more than making the wheels go 'round. Cycling is bleeping, eff-ing brilliant for sport and exploration and exercise and transport...still the best human-powered value out there. But the best cycling includes some not-cycling: all the other activities that contribute to the complex texture of our days. With or without an actual logbook or journal, we can still be mindful of that larger picture, cherishing and appreciating all the time spent outdoors, on two wheels or two feet, or even suspended between the two hooks holding up the hammock.



2019 Racing Wrap-Up

Covering the Giro, Tour, and Vuelta in one go will make this a long column. You will have to be a big fan of bike racing to wade through it. If you're not, hey... bye! See ya next month!

There's an old saying I like: "Life is what happens while you're making plans." We can all recall times our big plans have been derailed by some unexpected kink in the fates. Everyone gets ambushed like that sooner or later.

I'm adopting that old bromide as the theme song of the 2019 racing season. Not much went according to the plans of riders or teams (or the media) and it would have taken an almost uncanny prescience to predict the final results of the three Grand Tours. If they have betting pools for picking the winners of the three big tours, the way they do for the March Madness basketball tournament, I am pretty sure no one in this entire world would have gotten the results right:

Richard Carapaz, Ecuador, at the Giro d'Italia; Egan Bernal, Colombia, at the Tour de France; Primož Roglič, Slovenia, at the Vuelta a España.

Although these were their first Grand Tour victories, Bernal and Roglič were not exactly earth-shaking surprises. I and a lot of other people have been predicting big things for both of them. It wasn't so much a question of if they would win a major tour, only when. Carapaz pretty much blind-sided me at least, although perhaps he wasn't that much of a dark horse: he finished fourth on last year's Giro...a rather distant, non-factor fourth, but still a noteworthy result.

That makes five first-time winners in the last five Grand Tours, which bears out my closing thoughts after last year's Vuelta: that we are seeing big changes in the ranks of the top tier of stage racers. New kids are coming along and shunting the old warhorses aside. That said, the record—and this report—will note that some of those old warhorses did pretty well this year.

The first little bit of "life happens" preceded the Giro. Rising star Egan Bernal had been named by his team—Ineos (formerly Sky)—as their leader for the race. But it was announced on May 4—one week before Stage 1—that he had broken his collarbone in a training crash. (Flashback...last season Bernal might have been team leader for Sky at the Vuelta but after a grisly crash during the Classica San Sebastian he

missed that tour as well.) So that was one of the favorites out before the Giro even started. The all-conquering Ineos team had Chris Froome and Geraint Thomas already lined up as co-leaders for the Tour de France and they didn't really have any other GC contender they could pop into the line-up on short notice for the Giro.

Other possible GC hopefuls? Simon Yates (Micheltoun-Scott), winner of last year's Vuelta. Miguel Angel Lopez (Astana), third at the Vuelta. Mikel Landa was the team leader for Movistar, with Richard Carapaz supposedly in the role of one of his top lieutenants. Primož Roglič (Jumbo-Visma) has been looking just about ready for a big break-out performance. As for the old warhorses—the veterans with impressive *palmarés*—Tom Dumoulin (Sunweb) and Vincenzo Nibali (Bahrain-Merida) were both entered...both past Giro champions. Looking back through the start list now, with the benefit of 20-20 hindsight, I can't see anyone else who was a serious threat for the overall.

Roglič won the first stage. (They called it a stage but it was really just an 8.2-km prologue.) He's just about the best thing going right now in time trials and he drilled this one, with Yates, Nibali, Lopez, and Dumoulin rounding out the top five. Carapaz was way down in 14th, 47 seconds back. That's a lot to give away over eight kilometers.

The next notable thing to happen was Dumoulin crashing out on Stage 4. Although he limped over the finish line, with blood pouring into his shoe from deep gashes in his leg, he was too badly ripped up to start the next day. So there goes another of the top guns. (His injuries required surgery later in the season and that kept him out of the Tour.)

Roglič never intended to hang onto the *Maglia Rosa* for the whole tour. As has been noted before, it takes about an hour a day and a lot of attention and stress to be in the leader's jersey, what with podium ceremonies and press conferences and all that hoohaw, not to mention the stress it puts on the whole team, being expected to control the race each day. So he surrendered it to a minor rider out of a breakaway on Stage 6.

Stage 9 was the only full time trial (34.8 km) and Roglič won this one just like he won the prologue. (The final stage would be a time trial too but only 17 km...I would call that an epilogue.) That put him in 2nd place, conveniently near the top but not having to hassle with the leader's chores. Next closest among the GC big shots in the ITT was Nibali at 1:05, which left him 1:44

behind Roglic. Carapaz conceded 1:55. Taken together with other time he'd managed to lose over the first week—a little here, a little there—he was down in 20th, a hefty 5:06 behind, or 3:36 behind Roglic. But even at that he was ahead of his ostensible team leader, Landa, who was at 6:42 after the ITT. Yates and Lopez were in about the same pickle, down 5:36 and 6:19 after the time trial.

Over the off-season, Yates' Vuelta victory seemed to have gone to his head a bit. He was as cocky as a rooster at the pre-Giro press conference, saying he was the odds-on favorite and that the other riders should be so afraid of him they would be "shitting their pants." Yeow! Even if you can back that up on the road, it's still offensive. But if you end up 5:36 back after just nine stages, it starts looking shabby and embarrassing. You win these things with your legs, not your mouth.

Anyway...things stayed about the same until Stage 13, the first serious uphill finish. There, Movistar teammates Landa and Carapaz went off the front of the Roglic-Nibali group on the final climb and Roglic either wouldn't or couldn't respond. He appeared more concerned with marking Nibali than with chasing down the Movistars and it cost him. Carapaz took 1:19 out of him and trimmed the gap between them from 3:36 down to 1:57. Meanwhile, Nibali was hanging in there, 1:40 behind Roglic. Nibali—the wise old vet—was critical of Roglic's tactics in marking him but letting Landa and Carapaz go. He said he was too passive, too conservative. Roglic would need to be more aggressive if he hoped to win the Giro, according to Nibali.

That may all have been true, but then again, perhaps Roglic was simply at his limit and had nothing more to give. The next day Carapaz launched a daring attack on the second-to-last summit, got a gap and kept it all the way down the far side of the ridge, then widened it considerably on the final climb while Roglic and Nibali and a few others hesitated. This was the decisive move of the Giro. Carapaz won the stage, finishing 1:54 ahead of an elite group containing Nibali, Roglic, Landa, and a few others. Add to that the 10-second bonus for winning the stage and he took over the lead of the Giro by seven seconds.

So 1:19 on Stage 13 and 2:04 on Stage 14 and just like that a 3:36 deficit turns into a 7-second lead! But wait: there's more! The next day Carapaz put another :40 into Roglic. How that happened is one of those devil-in-the-details stories. Just after having passed bottles up to the team's *domestiques*, midway through the

stage, the guys in the Jumbo-Visma follow car decided to take a pee break. Hey, they're human, it happens. However, just after they pulled out of the long file of cars on the narrow mountain road, Roglic radios them to say he needs a new bike because his shifter isn't working. But now the car is at the back of the line. So Roglic grabs the bike of one of his *domestiques* and soldiers on, jamming to catch up. But it doesn't really fit him. And on the next tricky downhill, on the not-quite-right bike, he overcooks a corner and crashes. (Remember when the same thing happened to Chris Froome last year?) So, what with a hefty serving of Murphy's Law, another 40 seconds are lost.

It just gets worse for Roglic each day, Stage 16 was supposed to end in Ponte di Legno after climbing up and over Mortirolo, one of the steepest, nastiest ascents in all of pro cycling, (I've done it. It is brutal.) When they hit the start of the climb, Nibali attacked and gapped all the others. This was in a dreadful storm, with visibility cut down to almost nothing. The weather was so bad that the organizers decided to end the stage at the Mortirolo summit rather than carrying on another 28 km to Ponte di Legno. With the help of Landa, Carapaz eventually clawed back up to Nibali. But Roglic couldn't do the same and lost another 1:22 to Carapaz, Nibali, and Landa. Could he have bridged back up to them over those last, lost 28 km? Half of it is a steep descent off Mortirolo and half of it is a moderate climb to Ponte di Legno. We'll never know, as they took the times at the summit. (When we get to the decisive moment in the Tour de France, remember this.)

Nibali, the old warhorse, who has been called washed up by the Italian press year after year, now leapfrogged Roglic into 2nd place. Can it get any worse for Roglic? Yes it can. On Stage 20 he loses another 50 seconds to Carapaz and Nibali and :52 to Landa. This includes a 10-second penalty imposed on him because a fan—presumably Slovenian?—gave him a push on one of the steep pitches. Landa takes over 3rd place, bumping poor Roglic off the podium. However, there is that short time trial on the final stage and Landa sucks in ITTs. Roglic has just enough left to get back past Landa, scrapping his way back onto the podium, eight seconds ahead of Landa.

Carapaz wins the Giro. Nibali—the supposedly washed up old nag—finishes a fighting 2nd at 1:05. And Roglic staggers to the finish, down 2:30. Carapaz is the first rider from Ecuador to win a Grand Tour. He did it with dash and daring, a classy victory.

A brief aside... While the Giro was playing itself out, another Slovenian rider, 20-year old Tadej Pogacar, was winning the Tour of California. He had won the Volta ao Algarve back in the spring and in my season preview in May, I mentioned him as one of those new kids I'd never heard of before. More about young Tadej later.

So...on to the Tour de France! But—oops!—not so fast. Another dose of “life happens,” and this was a really nasty one. While doing a recon ride around the time trial course of the Critérium du Dauphiné on June 12, Chris Froome crashed into the wall of a brick house at a speed estimated to be around 40 mph. Dan Martin was also doing recon but from his team car and was right behind Froome when it happened. He said it was probably the ugliest crash he's ever seen. Froome suffered extensive injuries, most significant among them a fractured right femur, fractured elbow, and fractured ribs.

That was the end of the plan for Froome and Geraint Thomas to be co-leaders for Ineos at the Tour. Thomas also crashed on June 18 during the Tour de Suisse but his injuries were less serious and he was able to start the Tour. Froome's departure opened the door for Egan Bernal to co-lead with Thomas, or at least to enter his first Grand Tour in a support role. He had recovered sufficiently from the broken collarbone (May 4) to enter the Tour de Suisse on June 15. Not only did he enter, he won the whole 9-stage tour, taking out the mountain-top finish on Stage 7 along the way. Good recovery!

So Team Ineos was all set with Bernal and Thomas. Which other GC hopefuls were entered? On paper anyway, lots. Movistar had Nairo Quintana, Mikel Landa, and Alejandro Valverde. Groupama-FDJ had perennial Great French Hope Thibaut Pinot. Vinnie Nibali was there, going back-to-back with his fine Giro. Simon Yates was also attempting the Giro-Tour double. Jakob Fuglsang (Astana) was there, fresh off his victory at the Dauphiné. Steven Kruijswijk represented Jumbo-Visma. Richie Porte was there for Trek-Segafredo. And then there was Julian Alaphilippe (QuickStep) the other recent French hope. Although he has proven himself to be a real force in one-day classics, no one expected him to be able to take out the GC at a Grand Tour

The first notable moment at le Tour was the 27-km team time trial on Stage 2. Jumbo-Visma was first, followed closely by Ineos and QuickStep, leaving Kruijswijk, Geraint Thomas, Bernal, and Alaphilippe in good shape. Others didn't fare so well. Movistar lost 1:05, putting Valverde, Landa, and Quintana in a hole right

out of the gate.

Stage 3 had a profile like a rusty saw blade: no major summits but many little, lumpy climbs, including a short but fairly testing uphill dig to the line. It looked like one of those Flemish classics stages from the spring and Alaphillipe—who excels in those races—rode this one as if it were a one-day classic. (I've said before he reminds me of his teammate Philippe Gilbert...that he rides *a la Philippe*. Yeah, it's a silly play on his name but it's also pretty accurate.) He attacked late in the stage and kept the hammer down all the way up the last incline to the finish, putting around a half-minute into all of the pre-race faves. That netted him the *maillot jaune*.

And there he stayed until Stage 6, the first uphill finish, with a wickedly steep last ramp on hard-packed dirt. A few riders from a breakaway managed to stay ahead of the big boys and take the first three placings. Behind them, coming into that last brutal pitch, Alaphillipe attacked and only Thomas and Pinot were able to stay with him. All the other big shots lost anywhere from a few seconds to a minute or two. Bottom line: Alaphillipe gave up the leader's jersey to a guy from the break but put time into most of his rivals.

On Stage 8, Alaphillipe took the yellow jersey back with another classics-style attack late in the day. Only Pinot could hang with him and the two of them picked up bonus seconds over the last summit and then more at the finish. In the end they both put time into all their rivals. Audacious, flamboyant aggression! The word *panache* has been much overused in the annals of cycling, but with these French guys, it's still *le mot juste*.

Stage 10 was the last stage before the first rest day and should have been fairly uneventful. Not so! It should have been a typical sprinters day and those fast boys did duke it out up to the line. But behind them, the race was ripped apart by crosswinds and echelons. When side winds pounded the peloton, Team Ineos got on the front and pounded the pace, almost immediately opening gaps in the group. Some of the best-placed riders caught onto their coattails and even helped to drive the pace, Alaphillipe among them. Others who were less attentive lost time...1:40 for Pinot and Richie Porte, for instance, and as much as ten minutes for some. In my wrap-up after last year's Vuelta I said Porte and Pinot showed “an uncanny knack for snatching defeat from the jaws of victory.” This stage exemplified that tendency in spades. Catching rivals out in crosswinds is a ruthlessly efficient tactic and a time-honored tradition

in big stage races. Recall Stage 2 of the 2015 Tour de France, when Froome and his Sky team took 1:28 out of Nairo Quintana rolling across the breezy Dutch polders. Quintana finished 1:12 behind Froome that year, and he lost more than that in just one miscalculation in the wind. Perhaps he learned his lesson: this time around he managed to get in the lead group.

So...at the first rest day, Alaphillipe was still in yellow, with Ineos teammates Thomas and Bernal at 1:12 and 1:16, and Kruijswijk hanging tough at 1:27. The likable, ebullient Alaphillipe was reveling in his glory and the French media and fans were lapping it up. Things stayed that way up to the only full-scale time trial—27 km—on Stage 13. Everyone expected Geraint Thomas to win or at least to be first among the GC rivals, and he did post the fastest time at the finish...except there was still one rider out on the course: Alaphillipe in his flashy yellow skinsuit. They say the yellow jersey will inspire riders to feats of valor they've never managed or imagined before and that was the case on this day. The upstart Frenchman crossed the line ten seconds ahead of Thomas, and he looked like the king of the world as he did it.

If the nation of France had been excited before, it was now doing backflips of rapture. And it only got better over the next two stages, both of which featured monster mountain finishes in the Pyrénées. On Stage 14, up to Col de Tourmalet, Pinot won with Alaphillipe and Kruijswijk six seconds behind (scooping up the bonus seconds). Bernal was another two seconds back but Thomas lost half a minute and a lot of the other hopefuls lost so much time the word “hopeful” no longer applied to them. Simon Yates won Stage 15 in a miserable rainstorm, :33 ahead of Pinot and Landa. The other best-placed riders were all close behind but Alaphillipe finally cracked a tiny bit, coming in at 1:49. Still, he was doing better than anyone would have predicted. At the second rest day, we was still in yellow, with Thomas at 1:35, Kruijswijk at 1:47, Pinot—back in the hunt—at 1:50, and Bernal at 2:02. (Think where Pinot would have been without losing 1:40 in those crosswinds.)

It was status quo through a couple of transition stages heading for the Alps and then the battle was rejoined on Stage 18, which ended with the long ascent of the combined Lauteret-Galibier and a final descent to Valloire (another route I've done, which, at least at tourist tempo, is not too hard). Nairo Quintana, no longer a threat for the overall, won the stage out of a break-

away. Most of the big guns finished together, except for Egan Bernal, who launched a little attack and put about half a minute into all the other contenders. That left him in second, just 1:30 behind Alaphillipe and five seconds ahead of his teammate and team leader, Geraint Thomas. (How would all this have been playing out if Froome were there?)

Stage 19 is where we get that *deja vu* all over again feeling, harking back to the truncated, weather-shortened Mortirolo stage at the Giro. The big challenge on the mountainous parcours was Col de l'Iseran, a massive, *hors categorie* ascent. But that was not supposed to be the finish. There were another 38 km to go after the summit: first the long, long descent, then some flats across the valley, and finally a smaller climb to Tignes. On the big climb to Iseran, Ineos had Bernal attack off the front of the yellow jersey group. We don't know exactly what their team tactics were. Either he was going off the front for himself or he was going up the road where he would be available to help Geraint Thomas later. Whichever way they played it, they had more options than any of the other teams.

Thomas bided his time with Alaphillipe and the other leaders, letting Bernal toot off into the distance. Then the team cars got the word and passed it along to the riders: torrential hail and a soupy landslide across the route had caused the organizers to shorten the stage, using the times over the summit of Iseran as the official finish placings. Bernal won the stage with Thomas and Kruijswijk in a small group at 1:03. Alaphillipe cracked a little bit again, coming in alone, 2:10 behind Bernal. That left Bernal in the lead, :48 clear of Alaphillipe, with Thomas and Kruijswijk not far behind.

Just as Carapaz had used two strong climbing days to get past Roglic at the Giro, Bernal had parlayed two strong climbs into a winning margin over Alaphillipe. Losing the *maillot jaune* seemed to knock Alaphillipe back on his heels. Or maybe he was just shot. On Stage 20, a very short route but with a long uphill finish, he finally, comprehensively blew up, losing three minutes to Bernal and most of that to the other remaining leaders. He dropped all the way down to a distant 5th place; not even a podium to show for his spectacular Tour.

As has often been pointed out before, there is a classic French ethos that can be summed up thusly: while winning is all well and good, it is better to lose gloriously than to win cautiously. At the moment, Alaphillipe seems to embody that gallic mindset. But “Chapeau!” to him all the same. Conventional wisdom

said he couldn't win a Grand Tour and so far that conventional wisdom has proven correct. But he did much, much better than anyone could have predicted and he did it with flare and charm and...*panache*.

After the champagne flutes had been passed around on the road to Paris, 22-year old Egan Bernal beat Geraint Thomas, his team leader and the defending champion, by 1:11. Thomas was diplomatic and philosophical about how life had happened—in the form of hail and landslides—while their team was making plans. Had that Stage 19 been run under blue skies, there is no doubt he would have come back up to Bernal before the finish. Whoever would have won we'll never know, but it's unlikely there would have been that minute-plus gap between them. Last year Chris Froome was diplomatic and philosophical when his teammate Geraint Thomas finished ahead of him at the Tour. One way or another, it seems Ineos/Sky has a lock on the TdF, winning seven out of the last eight editions. They may have changed their livery but not their winning ways.

And now we've arrived at the Vuelta a España, run from August 24 to September 15. There weren't any of those unexpected "life happens" moments ahead of the Vuelta, unless perhaps we count the first and second-place finishers from last year electing not to defend their positions this year. (Simon Yates attempted the Giro-Tour double and ended up 8th at the Giro and 49th at the Tour, although he did win two mountain stages. Enric Mas (QuickStep) confined his ambitions to the Tour and finished a quiet 22nd.)

Movistar trotted out its two old warriors, Nairo Quintana and Alejandro Valverde. They had finished 8th and 9th respectively at the Tour, so were attempting back-to-back Grand Tours. EducationFirst's Rigoberto Uran—another old vet—was entered. He had finished 7th at the Tour so was also doing the back-to-back thing, as was Steven Kruijswijk, who had finished 3rd at the Tour. Astana's leader was Miguel Angel Lopez, 3rd at last year's Vuelta and 7th at this year's Giro. Rafal Majka (Bora-Hansgrohe) was entered. He had finished 6th at the Giro. And then there was Primož Roglič, presumably a co-leader with Kruijswijk at Jumbo-Visma. So JV was fielding the 3rd-place finishers from both the Giro and the Vuelta. I can't think of anyone else who ought to have been taken seriously at the start of the Vuelta, but as we shall see, that assessment needed adjusting by the end.

Stage 1 was one of their short (13.4 km) team time trials. Astana finished first but the top few teams were

all within a few seconds of each other. JumboVisma wasn't one of them. They had a disastrous run, including a crash that took down half their riders. Roglič and Kruijswijk lost :40 to the winning team and almost that much to all their chief rivals. Astana's Miguel Angel Lopez donned the first *maillot rojo* of this year's Vuelta.

He didn't hold onto it for long. Stage 2 had a chunky profile that was going to hurt a few people but most folks figured it would still come down to a bunch sprint. But an elite six-rider break—including Nairo Quintana, Rigo Uran, Nicholas Roche, and Primož Roglič—went clear with about 20 km to go and never looked back. Quintana jumped off the front at 3 km and won, with the others right on his tail. Lopez, Valverde, and most of the other GC hopefuls finished :37 back. That left Roche with a slim lead over Quintana, with Uran and Roglič not too far adrift.

Stage 5 was the first mountaintop finish and that shuffled the placings a bit. Lesser lights from a break took the first three spots but then the big boys came across the line: Lopez, Valverde, Roglič, Pogacar, and Quintana, in that order. That produced an overall placing of Lopez, Roglič, Quintana, Valverde, Roche, and Uran, all covered by a minute.

Three out of the next four stages had uphill finishes so the standings were juggled almost every day. Lopez lost the jersey to a guy from a break on Stage 6, then got it back on Stage 7, then lost it again on Stage 8. Through all those stages, whether they were at the top of the standings or momentarily behind some breakaway riders, Lopez, Roglič, Valverde, and Quintana remained within a few seconds of each other, usually in that order.

Stage 9 was the biggest and baddest of the mountain finishes so far and it proved to be every bit as hard as anticipated, with a nasty storm dumping on the final climb to make things worse. The storm turned a gravel section near the finish into a stew of mud and caused both Lopez and Roglič to crash. Neither was too banged up and they finished okay. Before crashing, Lopez had launched the first serious attack of the day, at least among the GC leaders. He did this fairly frequently during the Vuelta: fired off the front early but then blew up before finishing what he started. He reminds me a bit of Joaquim Rodriguez from just a few years ago: lots of climbing spunk and flash but not a lot of staying power.

Anyway...in the midst of the storm and struggle, neo-pro Tadej Pogacar flew off the front of the GC group and soloed away to an impressive victory. Quintana, Roglič, and Valverde were around a half-minute back and Lopez

a bit further back. That brought us to the first rest day with the standings looking like this....

1. Quintana
2. Roglic...:06
3. Lopez...:17
4. Valverde...:20
5. Pogacar...1:42

But looming on the other side of the rest day was the only full time trial (36 km). As expected, Roglic finished first. The nearest of the GC riders was fellow Slovenian Pogacar at 1:29. Valverde and Lopez were at 1:38 and 2:00 and Quintana did his usual wimpy ITT and gave up 3:06. Now the standings looked like this...

1. Roglic
2. Valverde...1:52
3. Lopez...2:11
4. Quintana...3:00
5. Pogacar...3:05

Things stayed that way until Stage 13, the next mountaintop finish: a brutal climb to HC Los Machucos. The Movistar duo of Quintana and Valverde threw the first punches on the final climb but Roglic countered with two strong attacks of his own, first dropping Quintana and then Valverde. Perhaps he was thinking of Nibali's critique from the Giro: you can't win by just sitting in and relying on a good time trial. This time he went proactive and it worked. The only person who could stay with him was Pogacar. The compatriots worked together over the final 3 km to put time into everyone else. Pogacar took his second mountain win with Roglic right behind him, adding to his lead over all the others. A great day for Slovenia!

More mountain finishes were ahead on Stages 15, 16, 18, and 20. The standings at the top remained essentially the same through the first two of those climbers' days, except for Quintana losing ground and falling well out of contention. However, Stage 17, a supposedly innocuous, rolling stage, not one where anything special was expected to happen, turned out to have plenty of drama. Once again, crosswinds were the joker in the deck. Almost 50 riders got off the front early and most of them stayed away for the duration. The best of them put over five minutes into the Roglic group. Nairo Quintana, the little *grimpeur*, snuck into the lead group and hung in there all day, with the result that he was suddenly back at the top of the standings...well, second place anyway, 2:24 behind Roglic.

His Lazarus-like resurrection was short-lived however.

On the uphill finish of Stage 18 he was dropped and lost time again. He had plenty of company. Roglic rode strong and only Valverde was able to hang with him. Everyone else lost anywhere from a few seconds to a few minutes. The short but steep final climb on Stage 20 was the last chance for anyone to shake up the standings and Tadej Pogacar rose to the challenge, going clear and winning, over a minute and a half ahead of his nearest rivals. His third dramatic and impressive win of the Vuelta. That was enough to boost him onto the podium: 3rd place in his first ever Grand Tour at only 20 years of age. Add his name to the list of new kids on the block we'll be watching in the years ahead.

The final standings were Roglic 1st, old warrior Valverde 2nd at 2:23, and Pogacar at 2:55. Quintana and Lopez rounded out the top five.

So...new winners at all three Grand Tours. I hesitate to call them new kids: Bernal may be only 22, but Carapaz is 26 and Roglic is 28. Ages aside, they do represent a turning of the page in the big book of bike racing. No telling what Chris Froome and Tom Dumoulin will do when they heal up from their injuries and get back in the saddle, but for now, it's new folks ruling the roost. However, rumors of the demise of Vincenzo Nibali and Alejandro Valverde appear a bit premature. No, they didn't win, but they battled hard and finished very strong seconds. In addition to his oh-so-close 2nd at the Giro, Nibali won a mountaintop stage at the Tour. Valverde going back-to-back with a 9th at the Tour and a 2nd at the Vuelta at age 39 is really quite amazing.

Finally, a tip of the hat to some young US riders who did quite well in these races. Joe Dombrowski (EducationFirst) was a respectable 12th at the Giro and was often among the leading riders on the biggest mountaintop finishes. Chad Haga (Sunweb) won the final time trial at the Giro. At the Vuelta, Sepp Kuss (JumboVisma) won Stage 15, a tough mountaintop finish.

And a tip of the hat to you if you slogged all the way through this review...back-to-back-to-back Grand Tours!

That horrible crash at the Dauphiné pretty much marked the end of Chris Froome's career. He did come back from his injuries but was never a winner again. I have a future column about the dangers of time trial bikes, which speaks to this.

Top Ten Riders of 2019

The pro road racing season is over. The Union Cycliste Internationale held its season-ending gala on October 22. (Included among the awards presented for recent cycling exploits was the UCI President's Trophy to celebrate the 30th anniversary of Greg Lemond's 1989 season, where he won both the Tour de France and the World Championship. Nice to see that epic accomplishment recognized.)

With the season all wrapped up, it's time for my own awards ceremony: my personal take on the top ten riders of this past campaign. As I have noted frequently—at the end of last season, in my spring preview this year, and in last month's *Racing Wrap-Up*—we are seeing quite a musical chairs situation at the top of the sport: lots of new people grabbing the laurels while some of the recent “heads of state” have been getting shut out.

Losing both Chris Froome and Tom Dumoulin to injuries for most of the season changed the *dramatis personae* considerably. They have occupied a good many podium steps over the past few years. Whatever top placings they might have garnered this year were now available to others.

Before drilling into the list, I am going to state that I really can't make room this year for any of the sprinters. I have waffled back and forth on this in the past but now I'm settled on the matter. My list is first and foremost for all-rounders. Splashy results in one-day races are all well and good but are not enough to make this list on their own, at least not unless a given rider is so dominant that they can't be ignored. I don't think that was the case this year.

So without further ado, let's get to the countdown from 10 to 1...

10. Emanuel Buchmann, 25, Germany, Bora-Hansgrohe



Buchmann has been a pro for five years now and is slowly, quietly improving each year. This season he was 1st and 2nd at two minor races, 3rd at both the Tour of the Basque Country and the Criterium du Dauphiné. But most significantly he was 4th at the Tour de France,

1:56 behind the winner and just :25 off the podium.

9. Geraint Thomas, 33, Wales, Ineos



This is a long fall down the rankings for the winner of last year's Tour de France and #2 on my list in 2018. But honestly, he didn't do much this year and it was only his 2nd overall at the Tour de France that got him on the list at all. He also finished 3rd at the

Tour of Romandie but that pretty well sums up his good results for the year.

8. Miguel Angel Lopez, 25, Colombia, Astana



Lopez won the Tour of Catalunya, including winning Stage 4, and he won the Tour of Colombia. He was 7th overall at the Giro d'Italia and 5th overall at the Vuelta a España. He was a feisty scrapper in the mountains, especially at the

Vuelta, where he wore the leader's jersey for several days. I see better days ahead for him but at this point he is still a work in progress.

7. Tadej Pogacar, 20, Slovenia, UAE Team Emirates



This young gun opened his account for the year by winning the Volta ao Algarve stage race, taking the hilltop finish on Stage 2. He then won the Tour of California, again winning the decisive mountain finish on Baldy. Showing that he's not just a climber, he won his national time trial.

But what really caught the world's attention was his performance at the Vuelta, where he won the mountain finishes on Stages 9, 13, and 20 on his way to his first-ever Grand Tour podium in his first ever Grand Tour. Barring injuries or other bad luck, big things lie ahead for this young man.

6. Richard Carapaz, 26, Ecuador, Movistar

Carapaz became the first rider from Ecuador to win a Grand Tour when he won the Giro d'Italia, highlighted with two dramatic wins on Stages 4 and 14. He also won the Vuelta a Asturias, taking a win on Stage 2. But



that pretty much covers his accomplishments this year, which is why the winner of a Grand Tour is down in 6th place on my list. I expect to see him ranked higher in the years ahead.

5. Alejandro Valverde, 39, Spain, Movistar



My nickname for Valverde—Mr Almost—is accurate again this year. He was 2nd at the Vuelta a España (winning Stage 7), 2nd at the UAE Tour, 2nd at the Giro di Lombardia, and 2nd at Milano-Torino. He was 9th at

the Tour de France. Collecting a 2nd and 9th at back-to-back Grand Tours would be awesome for any rider but for one who is 39 years old? Most impressive. He also won the 4-stage Route d'Occitanie, winning Stage 4. He had more than his share of bad luck with injuries this year or might have done even more. As it is, his collective efforts netted him 5th place in the UCI rankings for the year.

4. Jakob Fuglsang, 34, Switzerland, Astana



Fuglsang has been a pro for quite a few years now but this may have been his best year yet. He won the 5-stage Vuelta a Andalucía in February, taking out Stage 4. He won the prestigious Criterium du Dauphiné in June. He won the monument Liege-Bastogne-Liege, was 2nd at Strade Bianche and Flèche-Wallone, and 3rd at Amstel Gold.

He won two stages at the Vuelta. All of that added up to 3rd place in the 2019 UCI rankings.

3. Julian Alaphilippe, 27, France, QuickStep



Alaphilippe had a season almost any cyclist would envy. He won Strade Bianche and the grand monument Milano-Sanremo in March, then Flèche Wallonne in April. He won Stage 2 of the Tour of the Basque Country and Stage 6—and the Mountains

Jersey—at the Dauphiné. But his most noteworthy days came on the biggest stage: the Tour de France. He was in the lead for much of the race, attacking or defending as needed. He won two stages, including the only full time trial. No one imagined a classics *puncheur* could win a Grand Tour but he came close, only fading to 5th over the last couple of stages. It was a glorious effort and won him a lot of fans. All of his great performances were rewarded with 2nd place in the season-long UCI rankings.

2. Egan Bernal, 22, Colombia, Ineos



Bernal finished 4th in the UCI rankings but he leapfrogs #3 Fuglsang and #2 Alaphilippe in my pantheon by virtue of winning the biggest stage race of all, the Tour de France, his first Grand Tour and an overall victory. He also won the 8-stage Paris-Nice in March and, after recovering from a broken collarbone in May, the 9-stage

Tour de Suisse. Also 3rd-place finishes at the Volta a Catalunya stage race and the monument Giro di Lombardia. Had the weather gods dealt a different hand on that crucial stage of the Tour, he might have ended up second and his team leader Geraint Thomas might be up here near the top of the rankings instead. But that's not how the fates would have it. Expect more from this young phenom in the years to come.

1. Primož Roglič, 29, Slovenia, Jumbo-Visma



I have been predicting good things for this rider for a couple of years but I didn't expect to be placing him at the top of my rankings for 2019. But to my way of thinking, there is no doubt about it. And the UCI agrees: he is ranked #1 for the season. His biggest win

was of course the Vuelta a España, his first Grand Tour victory. He won the Stage 10 time trial and also took home the Points Jersey. But he did much more than that this year. He won the 8-stage UAE Tour in Febru-

ary and the 9-stage Tirreno-Adriatico in March. He won the 5-stage Tour de Romandie, winning Stages 1 and 4, and won the 1-day Giro dell'Emilia. He won two time trials at the Giro d'Italia and was in contention for the *maglia rosa* throughout before slipping to 3rd at the end. He too will be a major player in the seasons ahead.

This year the top five places seem to sort themselves out fairly easily. I didn't have to agonize over them the way I sometimes do. The bottom five were more a case of throwing the names up in the air and seeing how they landed. And there are a few other riders who might have made the list: Steven Kruijswijk (3rd overall at le Tour and 3rd at the Vuelta a Andalucia), Nairo Quintana (2nd at Paris-Nice, 8th overall and a stage win at the TdF and 4th overall and a stage win at the Vuelta), and Vincenzo Nibali (a close 2nd overall at the Giro).

Six out of ten members of my top ten from last year didn't make the list this year. Froome and Dumoulin because of injuries. Simon Yates—#1 last year—doesn't even get within sniffing distance of the list this year. Peter Sagan, Michal Kwiatkowski, and Thibaut Pinot all had occasional good results this year but overall rather lackluster seasons. So there we go with the musical chairs theme: lots of shuffling around. There were also a lot of relatively unknown riders who pulled off grand victories... Alberto Bettiol at the Tour of Flanders; Remco Evenpoel at San Sebastián; Michael Woods at Milano-Torino; Jelle Wallays at Paris-Tours; and Mads Pedersen at the World Championship...just to name a few eyebrow-raising surprises. Were they one-day wonders or will they do more big things next year? Nothing is preordained. Nothing is promised. The stars stumble and little guys clamber over them and grab the glory. If it were always predictable it wouldn't be much fun, right?

Now we throw on our long-fingered gloves and knickers and vests and churn out our winter miles, waiting for the pros to come back out of hibernation in a few months, ready to astonish us all over again in 2020.

Giving Thanks

I'm writing this on Thanksgiving afternoon. In the traditional scheme of things, the house would be suffused with aromas of baking bread and pies and, above all, with the heady scent of roasting turkey, well on its way to a star turn in the dining room in a few hours. A gaggle of family and friends would be lolling about, laughing and joshing, made merry by brandy-laced egg nog or an endless supply of IPA. Someone might be watching football. Someone else would suggest a brisk walk to work up an appetite.

But that's not what's going on today. The wife and I are home alone. The house is empty and silent. She's out in the garden, turning the compost, and I'm making use of the quiet day to tackle this column. Our son and his wife had planned to drive down from Seattle for the occasion but at the last minute decided to stay home, which now looks like a smart move, with snow closing I-5 over Siskyou Pass yesterday. (Our family members are scattered all over the West and winter travel is always a challenge.)

But don't feel sorry for us. First of all, most of the members of our extended family are getting together for Christmas and it seemed like too much of a good thing to do the big turkey and all the rest twice in quick succession. But more to the point, we've just had a delightful long weekend with friends that included festive dinners three nights in a row and a smokin' barbecue on the last afternoon. Also, other friends are having a big Black Friday party tomorrow, and I'll be very surprised if we don't end up as stuffed—and basted—as a turkey by the time we stagger home.

Anyway, with or without the classic Thanksgiving festivities, the fact remains that I have a lot in my life for which I am giving thanks. And seeing as how this is ostensibly a cycling column, I aim to bring that grateful feeling around to the world of skinny tires and chain rings before too long.

But first the obligatory disclaimer: I know all too well that there are many people who would have to work pretty hard to come up with things in their own lives for which they might be thankful. I could rattle off a long litany of the world's woes, from the global level right down to the very personal. Even the most delusional Candide has to concede that this is not the best of all possible worlds. None of us is going to sort out all the miseries and problems that muddle up our

days. We do what we can. It might be precious little, but we try.

However, on this day of giving thanks, we can, at least for the moment, do as the corny old song says and “accentuate the positive.” In my case, a heaping helping of positive comes from cycling and all the side dishes that go with it. It’s more than just the riding itself, although that alone might be enough...the exercise and the movement and the eye-opening, mind-expanding dharma of simply being out there, rolling down the road, soaking it all in.

But being on the bike is just the can opener. And what it opens up, beyond the act of riding itself, is so much more. It’s how being out there opens up the world for me. Every ride is a pilgrimage to the church of zen buzzardism: floating on wide wings, up over the ridges and down the valleys, skimming the tree canopy... a 90-proof cocktail of endorphins and serotonin making it all come alive and snap into sharper focus.

But that again is still being on the bike. After the bike, before the bike, there are other gifts this activity brings me. Thanks to a few fortuitous bends in my own life, I now write about cycling a good deal. (I owe thanks to my parents and my teachers for laying down the fundamentals of decent word-smithing, and I even tip the hat to that typing class I had in high school that makes banging away at the keyboard as easy as coasting downhill.) For better or worse, I love talking and writing about riding, and as long as I can manage not to come off as a bloviating bore, I think the writing is a good thing. Anyway, it’s at least good therapy for me. (I hope you get something out of it as well.)

The writing is all tangled up with dreaming up new routes to ride and, by way of guidebooks, to sharing those routes with others. I have no illusions that my writing makes me the next Herman Melville any more than my cycling chops qualify me for the Tour de France. But when it comes to laying out bike routes

and tours, I can say I’m as good as they get in that little skill set. I do it well and I derive an immense amount of joy and satisfaction from doing it. And not just the doing of it...not just the creative process. No, the real pay-off is knowing other cyclists will follow the routes and have a ball out there, tracing my directions down new roads through new regions. That’s the frosting on the cake.

Then there is the big, big positive of friendships that began on bike rides and grew to be life-long relationships of great value. If your cycling life includes group rides, sooner or later you’ll make friends with your fellow travelers. Some of those will only be the cordial small talk sorts of friendships that don’t extend much beyond the rides. But others will take on a life of their own, with the cycling only part of a larger, more complex acquaintance.



Take this past weekend with our house guests and all those festive dinners and get-togethers. Every one of those happy occasions has its roots in cycling. All of the people involved are people I met through riding: club rides, centuries, doubles, brevets, weekday afternoon hook-ups, 25 miles and a cup of coffee...pretty much every kind of recreational riding you can imagine has been grist for our mills at one time or another. At this point, although we still ride,

including two rides this past weekend, we spend more time together off the bike. And although cycling still comes up in our conversation we are just as likely to be discussing anything from politics to poetry, from gardening to cooking to woodworking.

I look around at the folks at that excellent barbecue on a warm Indian Summer afternoon and I see people I’ve known almost half my life. An attractive 30-something woman approached me and said, “You don’t recognize me, do you?” But after she supplied her name I realized I have known her since she was three or four, wearing a little bike helmet shaped like a turtle. Now here she is in the prime of her adult life. There

2020 Hindsight

were riders there who are at the apex of cycling skills and strengths right now, as good as any riders in this region, at least at the amateur level. There were others who have been that strong and accomplished in past years but are now dialing it back a bit. And others who never were that strong but bring their best to their biking, whatever that may be. On the bike, that might make a difference; off the bike, not so much. We're all friends. We're all on approximately the same page when it comes to the verities we've learned on two wheels.

As for giving thanks, I sometimes think there is a fine line between humility and hubris. When some folks express their gratitude for whatever good fortune they have, you can almost hear a subtext: look at us; we are so prosperous and healthy, so handsome and clever! Aren't we the lucky ones? I dearly hope you don't read that between the lines of this column. In broadest outline, I see good fortune as made up of two parts. First off, there are the cards we're dealt: the nature and nurture of our birth and family and other circumstances pretty much beyond our control. Then there is how we play those cards we've been dealt: the values and virtues we apply to make the most of what we have been given. For the former we can take no credit. For the latter, if we have behaved with something approaching honor and courage and compassion, we might be able to feel good about how we got to where we are today... but not too good. We do the best we can with what we're given and then say "thank you" for even being allowed to make the effort.

Cycling and all its collateral benefits have made my life better and perhaps even made me a better person. For that I can and do give thanks, today and every day.



How many journalists are going to write retrospective articles in the next month using that headline? It's too good to pass up and it will never come up again...use it or lose it! So excuse me for being predictable but I just couldn't resist. And I do have a column in mind that looks backward. Whether it exhibits 20-20 vision remains to be seen.

My look backward is about this column on this website: I call it *On The Road*. That is of course the title of Jack Kerouac's seminal novel about cutting loose on the ragged fringe of bohemia...hitting the road to find what's over the horizon or just to find oneself. They say Kerouac wrote the "book" as one long, continuous stream-of-consciousness scrawl on one long, continuous roll of butcher paper.

I take that long, continuous butcher paper image as my *leitmotif* for this column. Okay, maybe not continuous, but at least regular. I wrote my first *On The Road* column in July, 1999 and I have cranked one out every month since. That's 247 columns...247 months. How long a role of butcher paper would that be? Given the nature of HTML docs on the internet, it's hard to quantify. There are no page breaks and no word counts. The columns just roll along like that butcher paper. At a guess, at an average of maybe four-plus pages per column, that would be around 1000 pages of copy. (*Note: It's actually only 752 pages, including images.*)

Calling the column *On The Road* is not just a tribute to those old boho boyz from back in the day. It's also, at least in broad strokes, the theme of all these columns: road bikes on roads. The good folks at BikeCal.com have generously and tolerantly allowed me a great deal of leeway over the years to wander far afield from that fundamental topic, but then isn't that what happens when we set out on a ride? If we have our eyes and our minds open to the world around us, as we toot along on our bikes, an almost endless array of thoughts and themes and topics will unspool in front of us. At least that's the way it is for me.

If you are a regular reader of these columns—I know there are some of you out there!—you may recall my dipping into this particular topic before. Not writing about riding but writing about writing about riding. Without checking my archives, I can think of at least a few times I've gone down this road, including—briefly—just last month. If you want to take a hard line

with me on the matter, you could accuse me of being narcissistic and self-absorbed. I would have to do some heavy lifting to prove I'm not. What it boils down to is this: after almost 250 columns stretching back almost 21 years, I simply feel justified in using that *2020 Hindsight* header as an excuse to reminisce about that long road...that long roll of paper.

It actually goes back a bit further into the misty past than 1999. So, as briefly as I can...

I had the nuts and bolts of journalism pounded into me as my high school newspaper Editor and then as a Journalism major at University of Oregon. But I never did much with it, aside from working as a sports reporter for a while. Other roads and other careers captured my time and interest for most of my middle-adult life. Then around 1990 I came back to it by way of cycling. First I took on the job of coordinating the Santa Rosa Cycling Club's monthly ride calendar. No journalism there. I just like planning and organizing rides. But the ride calendar in those days lived in the center-spread of the monthly club newsletter and the Editor at that time was proving to be a problem.

She did okay with her content but she was chronically tardy in getting the newsletter printed and distributed. By the time it arrived in members' mailboxes, often the first weekend of the month had gone by already and whatever rides were on that weekend were lost. (No internet then: no alternative way to find out the start times and locales for the rides.) After working hard to fill the dates with good rides, they'd go up in smoke because she couldn't hold up her end of the deal. It drove me nuts. Finally I blew my stack...tore a major strip off her one month. She took offense and said, essentially: you don't like the way I'm doing this, fine, you can do it! Really? Okaaaay...

So, early in 1992, I became the Editor of the 8-page newsletter. Pretty small time you say, and I wouldn't disagree. However, a newsletter is the town hall of a club...the water cooler...the place where all the members meet to share their yarns and theories and woes. And beginning about the time I took over, the club began to grow, both in membership and in its influence around the Bay Area cycling scene. Much of that was due to the rising popularity of cycling in general but at least some of it was due to the club banging out a good, readable, informative newsletter each month.

Of the eight pages in the newsletter, four were taken up with standard forms each month: the aforementioned ride calendar—which I was still preparing—on

pages 4 and 5, a membership application form on page 7, and assorted boilerplate on page 8. That left about four pages for original copy each month. I kept cranking out the copy for those newsletters from 1992 to 2014...22 and a half years (at four pages a month = about 1100 pages). I finally stopped when I guess I kind of burned out. It was a lot of work, taking up a number of days each month. And after so many years I felt like I was on a bit of a hamster wheel, recycling the same topics and copy, month after month, year after year. Anyway, by then the club had a well-established web presence and the old-school newsletter was not so important. (Someone still has to write the content that appears on the website...or not. But that's a story for another day.)

Meanwhile...a fellow club member got me interested in organizing week-long cycle-tours for the club. It had never occurred to me that such things were possible. We staged our first prototype tour in 1994 and have been having one or two a year ever since. At first we just printed maps and route slips for the tour participants but in the later '90s I started preparing preview booklets for each tour: not only the routes and maps but also descriptive copy of each stage, including photos. There are currently 23 such previews available at my own website, Adventure-Velo, but I've done over 30. I just haven't gotten around to loading the latest ones at the site. The booklets run from 25 to 50 pages. Minus the maps, route slips, elevation profiles, and photos, the copy runs anywhere from 15 to 30 pages per book (times 30 books = about 750 pages).

Somewhere along in there, what with all the copy about assorted stages and routes, Mountaineers Books of Seattle offered me the assignment of creating a good old-fashioned hard-copy guidebook: *75 Classic Rides Northern California*. That's another 325 pages. Add it all up and it's around 3000 pages of copy, all more or less about bikes and biking.

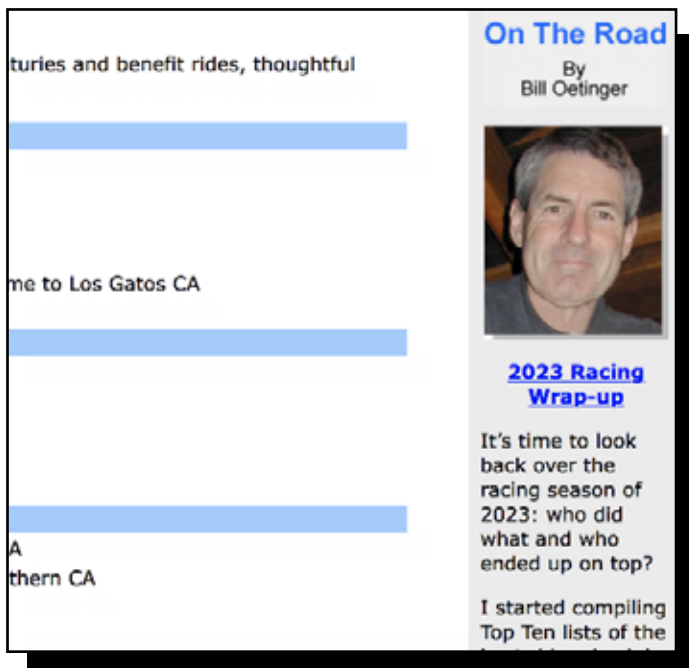
So anyway...back to 1999, when Tom at BikeCal asked me if I would like to write a column each month about cycling for the website. My first reaction, understandable I think, was to be flattered and enthusiastic. My next reaction was to wonder what the hell I would write about, once each month. Could I really keep producing interesting and—I would hope—at least occasionally original content that would appeal to cyclists...get them pumped up about riding and bikes and all the aspects of the pastime that come with that...racing, wrenching, advocacy, health, history,

the environment, frothing rants about the anti-bike element, etc.

I wasn't at all sure I could find enough ideas and words to last out a year. I certainly had no notion that I would still be writing the columns 20 years on; still finding new ways to look at the activity and to find it fresh and revelatory, all over again. That at least is my hope: that I'm keeping it fresh. I am well aware that many may not find it so wonderful. But I do get fan mail from happy readers when I write something that resonates for them. Every so often I get it right.

All of those 3000-plus pages of bike chat haven't made me famous, nor rich. Even though my mug shot is up at the top of the column, no one recognizes me on the street, especially not in bike kit. If I introduce myself to another rider, I usually try to just say, "Bill." But if they manage to latch onto my full name, then it's not uncommon for something like this to unfold: "You're Bill Oetinger? THAT Bill Oetinger? OMG!" This I find embarrassing and uncomfortable but secretly sort of gratifying. It's not that my ego needs the boost. (Well yeah, it does.) But more because it tells me I've written something that has reached this person, that has piqued their curiosity or stoked their enthusiasm... or perhaps launched them on a ride down some new roads they'd never been on before. That makes it all worthwhile.

So thanks to the folks at BikeCal for allowing me this little space on their home page for all these years. And above all, thanks to you for clicking through to the columns, every month or every so often.



Ode to Not-Quite-Spring

It's the dark time of the year. I'm not talking about the many dark matters that assail us, from climate change to homelessness; from politics to pollution. No...I'm talking about the old-school, natural spin on dark times: the big planetary pirouette and our progression through the seasons.

But just to be a little picky and pedantic about it, let me note I'm not all that fond of the idea of nominal "seasons"—Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter—as if the weather and light and all the rest of it change suddenly on the 21st of every third month, like walking into a different room.

I get the fact of the equinox and the solstice...pretty basic stuff there. And you can say the days are getting longer after we pass Winter Solstice. But can you really notice that change from the third week of December to the fourth? No, not without paying really close attention and measuring it accurately. For a "real feel" take on it—what you can see with the naked eye or feel with the naked fingers—you have to wait a few weeks or even a few months, depending on where you live.

(The 45th parallel—halfway between the North Pole and the Equator—passes through the northern fringe of Salem, Oregon. That's about 30 miles south of where I grew up and where my body and mind came to understand the seasons. That makes it, arguably, the most anodyne, mainstream, moderate, temperate environment on the planet. You just can't get more middle-of-the-road than that. I now live and ride close to 500 miles south of where my roots are, up there around Portland. That gives me a bit of a head-start on the transition from Winter to Spring: it's a teeny bit warmer here and less inclined to rain all the time. It still rains but not so incessantly. So when I talk about the weather now, my views are filtered through the happy lens of being just south of the prevailing, moist jet stream and a couple of crucial ridges inland from the Pacific and all its marine implications.)

Anyway, seasons do not open up and slam shut like a door or window. The transitions are protracted and usually subtle. The contrasts may be dramatic if you take samples from the middle of each season: a 105° day in July vs a 25° day in January. But getting from one extreme to the other takes time and we pass through a great many changes along the way, most of them incrementally modest when we're living (and rid-

ing) through them, one day to the next.

Which brings me to my “Ode to Not-Quite-Spring.” Here we are at the beginning of February and the Vernal Equinox is still seven weeks away. How can this be Spring? It can’t. But we’re also six or seven weeks past the Winter Solstice, so about half way between the two...the 45th parallel of planetary tilt. However, I’m not thinking so much about the days on the calendar as I am about how it feels to be out on my bike, riding through the real-feel world. And by that rather subjective metric, I can definitely see and feel the changes.

I rode down into Chileno Valley (below) and the hen house belt north of Petaluma this week. The lovely rolling meadows were as green as anything in Western Oregon’s Willamette Valley, but the temperature was comfortably in the mid-60s, the sun was peeking out between scattered clouds, and it was not raining. That’s the big one: it...was...not...raining.

Show of hands: how many of you like riding in the rain? Anybody? Nobody? Okay, I see a couple of crazy Belgians over there with their hands up. A big, water-repellant “Chapeau!” to you, gentlemen. Most of us will ride in the rain if we get caught out in it...what other choice do we have? And once we’re home and dry and warm again, we will rehash the grisly anecdotes about those miserable rides with anyone who will listen. They are a part of our carefully curated personal mythologies. But the number of cyclists who will willingly, happily set out on a long ride on a day that is already raining hard? Those hardy souls represent a tiny slice of the great cycling pie chart.

Of course the pros will ride in the rain, in the spring classics and in those appalling alpine stages when the weather gods didn’t get the memo that a race was going to be happening today. They train in the rain too because, for them, cycling is an everyday occupation, not a matter of choice. They have to do it. They don’t get paid for staying home. But ask them if they like it. Not a lot of yes answers. (Ask Bob Roll how he liked being Andy Hampsten’s *domestique* over the Gavia, back on that infamous Giro stage.) One not-insignificant thing in their favor: they don’t have to clean their own bikes after those wet, gritty rides.

For the rest of us, if and when we get to choose, we prefer it nice when we ride. None of that wet stuff coming down and soaking us and none of it making the roads slippery and messy. Temps in some comfy window between 65 and 85 would be just fine, thank you very much.

So here we are, in this neck of the woods anyway, in what the calendar would have us believe is the Dead of Winter—that dark time of the year—and yet it’s okay, even pleasant, to be out on a bike. I am happy—delighted!—to find these little windows of sunny and dry and not-too-cold already being offered up for my cycling consideration, late in January and early in February. No, it’s not Spring yet. Not Quite. But for the moment anyway, it’s doing a passable imitation of the real thing...close enough to get this fair-weather rider out the door and turning the cranks.



A North Bay 200-K Triple Crown

It's that time of year: are you ramping up for a new season? Have you got big plans? New worlds to conquer? If you're an ambitious rider who likes to set season-long goals and then work toward them, I have a suggestion for what might add up to a new and exciting challenge for you in 2020.

In short, it's a package of three very hilly and hard 200-K rides coming up in May and June. All three are Santa Rosa Cycling Club rides. All of them have been on the club ride calendar for a few years but what's new now is that a few SRCC members—veterans of all three rides—are kicking around the idea of promoting the three of them as a little North Bay Triple Crown. Complete them all and get that feather in your cap. More importantly, if you're competitive, add your times together for the three of them, as in a stage race, and see how you rank with the other hardcore hammers who've jumped into the fray.

At this point, although all three rides exist and are on the calendar this year, no one has actually done the work of tying them together into this trilogy of rides, with some reliable timekeeping and support. It's just a gleam in the eye of a few riders. It's possible that by the time May rolls around, this will have taken on more substantive shape. For now, I'm just trying to prime the pump by putting the idea out there where people can read about it and think about it.

What are these three tough rides we're talking about? Here they are, in the order in which they are scheduled...



The Fearsome Five 129 miles • 15,000' • Early May

This website (URL at the end) will tell you pretty much everything you need to know about this brutal ride. It was created by our Belgian friend Marc Moons, who needs no introduction among hardcore riders in this region. One of the toughest competitors on two

wheels but a charming gentleman off the bike.

At the site you can find a RideWithGPS map of the course and digests of the adventures encountered on past FFs. It was first run in 2007 so this year will be the 14th edition of the ride. It consists of a series of out-&-backs on some very butch climbs, in the style of the Death Ride (but a lot harder). It stages out of the elementary school in Alexander Valley, first going north over the multiple summits on the Geysers, down the north face and up Pine Mountain Road, a remote, obscure dead end. Back over the Geysers, north to south, then south along Hwy 128 through Alexander and Knights Valley and up Ida Clayton Road to its summit. Back down that hill, north on 128 and, saving the best for last, up Pine Flat Road to the top, one of the most infamous climbs in the North Bay, with some of its last pitches up around 20%.

The Bad Little Brother 131 miles • 14,000+ • Late May (usually Memorial Day weekend)



© Bill Oetinger

This is the oldest of the three events. It was created by my old buddy Rich Fuglewicz in 1996. That makes this its 25th Anniversary. There's a link to a RideWithGPS map of the course at the back. That's for the standard route, which is what most people do. There is also a "highland option" that plumps it up to 134 miles and 15,000'...as if this nasty piece of work needs to be any harder. (I suppose, if this does become part of a timed stage race, they will have to decide which course will be the official timed one.) Its original title was The Terrible Two's Bad Little Brother and Rich commis-

sioned Art Read to create a graphic for the event that paid tribute to Art's original graphic for the early years of the Terrible Two.

I am proud to say I was on that first BLB back in '96 and finished in the lead group. I guess I've done it about ten times. In those days it was run in April but it has been on or near the Memorial Day weekend for many years now. It's a demanding counter-clockwise loop from the Warm Springs Dam Visitor Center up into Mendocino County. North through Cloverdale and up Hwy 128 to Boonville, then west over several steep ridges on Mountainview Road to Point Arena. Down the coast and back inland on Annapolis Road and Skaggs Springs Road. Easy to describe it but much harder to ride it. It's a beast.

The Terrible Two 200-K|121 miles • 11,000+' • Mid-to Late June



Run in conjunction with the club's legendary Terrible Two Double Century, this 200-K is sometimes referred to as The Tolerable Two. But it's only tolerable compared to the full double. There is a short description of the course there (written by me). Essentially it's the second half of the Terrible Two—"where the Terrible Two gets truly terrible"—with a section of the Wine Country Century route up Dry Creek Valley to bring the riders from TT headquarters at Analy High School in Sebastopol up to the midpoint of the TT course at the Warm Springs Dam site.

TT 200-K riders start their day a couple of hours after the riders head out on the full double. The 200-K riders arrive at the midpoint before the doubles riders

get there and the fastest among them will stay ahead all the way to the finish. Slower 200-K riders may be overtaken by the fastest of the doubles riders later in the day.

We added the 200-K to the Terrible Two in 2013, making this the newest of the events in the set. It wasn't timed in its first years but the riders asked for a mass start and timing and we have adjusted accordingly. The course record now stands at 6:52, set last year by the aforementioned Marc Moons.

(By the way: I am no longer involved in management of the Terrible Two. I retired this year.)

The Fearsome Five and Bad Little Brother at this point are still just glorified weekend club rides, although with colorful, storied histories already. They offer minimal support. The last I heard, the BLB was asking for a \$10 donation to cover gas costs for sags and for a little food laid out along the way. The TT200-K is an official event with an entry fee and everything that goes with it: the usual superb support the SRCC provides at all of its pay-to-ride events. While the challenge is what will probably act as the biggest draw for participants, it's worth noting that all of them are off-the-chart gorgeous.

Fields for all of these events are still relatively small—even for the TT-related one—but if this Triple Crown idea catches on that may change. They're all so brutally hard that I doubt they'll ever grow much beyond the scale of what we might call cult classics. There just aren't that many people who are strong enough to tackle them...or who want that sort of challenge. But if you are one of those people, you can try them all on for size this year, whether they have been officially bundled together into a series or are still just three, stand-alone rides.

Fearsome Five webpage...

https://www.dharma-travels.com/Marc/FearsomeFive/ff_index.html

Bad Little Brother map...

<https://ridewithgps.com/routes/59845>

Terrible Two website...

<https://www.srcc.com/Terrible-Two-and-200K-General-Information>

Of course these rides, along with most of the rest of our lives, were cancelled because of COVID.

Cycling Through a Pandemic

I had another column already written a few weeks ago for this April slot. I got the idea for the piece on a ride I did early in March and banged out the copy right away, while the inspiration was still fresh.

Well...as they say: that was then; this is now. Now is the new reality of the Covid-19 pandemic. That other column will have to wait. It's not time-sensitive, so maybe I can use it in May or June. I certainly won't be writing my traditional observations about the spring racing season.

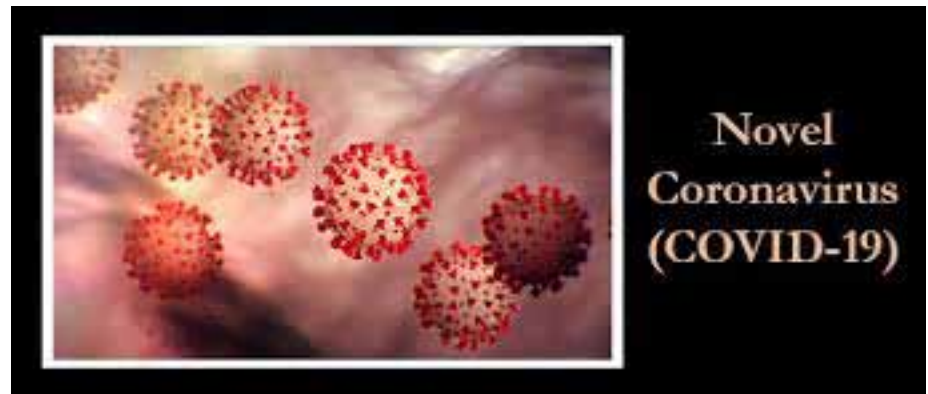
This is not going to be any sort of exhaustive look at the pandemic. That has been as well covered as any news story in memory and will continue to be the topic du jour for months and years to come. Personally, I've already reached information-saturation level and only check the news as needed to keep abreast of anything I feel is critical to know, going forward. So why am I even discussing it? All I can say in my defense is that to publish a column right now about anything else would imply an absurd level of starry-eyed cluelessness...of being in denial. And that I am definitely not.

All I really want to say today is this: keep riding. Or at least keep riding until they tell us we have to stop. So far, they're not doing that. So far, we are still being allowed to ride and in many cases encouraged to do so...to get out there and get some exercise, for our physical and mental well-being.

Of course all our group rides and big events are cancelled. Our local club has had to cancel the Wine Country Century, scheduled for the first week of May. That will be a tough blow for the club. That ride is our cash cow, the one money-maker that pays for everything else we do, including sending some of the proceeds onward to the Sonoma County Bicycle Coalition, the big, effective advocacy group in this area. Small change in the larger picture, to be sure, but painful for those it touches.

The one-week tour I helped plan for late May is almost certainly a goner. I haven't quite given up hope for the tour I worked so hard to organize for mid-August. Losing the tours will be a pain but not a catastrophe. If we get past this and life returns to something approximating normal, we can reschedule them for the summer of 2021.

I had my 27th Annual Apple Cider Century on the club ride calendar for March 21. That too was cancelled. However, several of us rode it anyway. I did it solo and I believe most of the others did as well. (I asked around afterward and a few people said they'd done it.) It was a lovely day...as beautiful as one would expect the world to be on the first day of Spring. (In spite of the hot mess we little humans have gotten ourselves into, the rest of the natural world seems to be ticking along just fine. The flora are blooming, or, past their blooms, are



leafing out. The fauna are here, there, and everywhere, deer and fox, squirrels and hawks. All that spectacular and robust fecundity makes a poignant and maybe bittersweet backdrop for our current travail.)

I wrote one of these columns a while back called *Good For What Ails Ya*. It's about how cycling promotes good health. Part of it was just the usual feel-good generalities that are my stock-in-trade, but there was some solid science in there as well. Now I've come across another article with plenty of medical and scientific substance to support the premise that cycling is a good thing to be doing anytime but especially now, in the midst of this crisis. Among other factoids, it cites the same study I made reference to in my column, but it adds a lot more, in particular about how cycling can strengthen your immune system. I'm not a doctor and I won't pretend to be one here by getting into the details in this space. The article does a good job with that. The main piece is quite short but there are links in there for more in-depth investigation, if you're interested. (Link at the end of this piece.)

The point is simple though: as we are knocked sideways and turned inside out by this pandemic and all of its impacts, never lose track of the fact that cycling is one positive thing you can still be doing. Not only is it a balm to a troubled mind in a time of trouble and a nice relief from cabin fever, but it just might boost your resistance to the virus by keeping your fitness

and immune system in tip top shape. And if you ride solo—which I do most of the time anyway—you will still be practicing social distancing.

My plan for the moment is to keep my rides short enough that I can do them on the two bottles of water I fill up at home. The idea is to avoid having to refill your bottles at public fountains or faucets midway through the ride...spots where community contamination is a possibility. Conventional wisdom—under ideal conditions—would say that should be about 15 miles per bottle. But with a bit of a thirsty regimen, I can stretch it to about twice that, or around 60 miles. The old adage of “hydrate or die” might apply for longer, harder rides, but for a 60-mile ride at a moderate tempo on a not-too-hot day, I am willing to bend the old standard. If you want more water for more miles, throw on you CamelBak.

We’re living day to day now, riding the wave. So much changes so quickly, by the time you read this, who knows where we will be on the bell curve of disaster? I’m aiming at a moving target with this piece. I hope it’s still relevant tomorrow or next week or next month. I hope my encouraging words to keep cycling are still viable just up the road a ways. Stay safe. Stay calm. Don’t test positive...stay positive.

Cycling/Immune System article...

<https://www.cycleplan.co.uk/cycle-savvy/cycling-immune-system/>

Everything I wrote about COVID in the months ahead has to be filtered now through the lens of ever-changing, always evolving data and information about the pandemic. The scientists and medical whiz kids were scrambling to get ahead of things...the news was aglut with conjecture and rumor and way too much bullshit. We were making it up as we went along.

May, 2020 • 251

Cycling in Place

This is another column on the virus and how it affects our cycling lives. I have waited until the last possible days to write it because circumstances are changing on an almost daily basis. In particular, we who live and ride in Sonoma County have been waiting to see what the County Supervisors and Chief Medical Officer would come up with in revising our Shelter in Place ordinance, which they have been hinting about for a few days. Those revisions went into effect this morning (April 29). But before bringing things up to date with those amendments, I want to go back to the early days of the crisis to recall how we got here.

Last month I mentioned that my annual Apple Cider Century, scheduled for March 21, had to be cancelled, first as a simple bit of prudence but also because the county had announced—around March 15—its first foray into the world of staying at home and social distancing. As we all know, the Bay Area was way out in front on implementing such restrictions. The fact that medical and political leaders were so proactive with their measures—even though they seemed extreme at the time—is now credited with keeping the virus from running rampant through our communities.

When officials announced their restrictions, they allowed county and state and regional parks to remain open. In fact they encouraged their use to the extent of waiving parking fees at many parks, in effect promoting the idea of driving to the parks. I can’t read the minds of those who made that call but my guess would be their good intentions were to soften the impact of the restrictions by offering people the opportunity to get out of the house and get some fresh air and exercise in the parks. I suppose they envisioned people driving three miles to their nearest neighborhood park.

In spite of the Apple Cider Century being officially cancelled, some of us rode the route on our own on Saturday, March 21, each of us solo, starting at different times. It was a beautiful spring day and the ride was as good as it ever is. But one weird thing was noticed by many riders: traffic on the main roads heading toward the Sonoma Coast was extremely heavy, as heavy as one would expect on a holiday weekend. Roads like River (Hwy 116) and Bodega Hwy were choked with a non-stop stream of cars, mostly making a bee-line for the Sonoma Coast State Beaches.

Cyclists weren’t the only ones to notice. Sunday’s paper

had a front page article about the huge crowds at the beach. Thousands of people decided the open parks, with free parking thrown in, plus great weather, plus a chance to dodge around the Shelter-in-Place mandate, were just too good to pass up. The result was that every beach was packed with crowds. The parking lots were overflowing, with people parking anywhere they could. Chaos...anarchy. Social distancing was impossible. I don't suppose any one person or any single carload of people thought they would be the straw that broke the camel's back but really, driving 20 or 30 miles to the beach? Or more? (Many of the visitors were from out of the county.) That was not what the planners had in mind.

Those who had crafted the ordinance, including the open-parks proviso—had their good intentions blow up into an ugly health crisis as well as a political hot potato and their reaction was prompt. The next day, March 23, they announced that, because of the abuse of the parks policy by so many people, they were forced to close all parks until further notice. The one exception was the many “linear parks”...multi-use paved trails, otherwise known as bike trails. Those were to be left accessible for walkers...but not cyclists.

The rationale provided for banning bikes on the trails was a little flimsy but just barely plausible. (I'm not going to parse it out here.) Some of us considered protesting and good arguments could have been made to support our views...but with the Grim Reaper sitting over there under that shade tree, patiently sharpening his scythe, it didn't seem like the right time to be quibbling over the rights and comforts of cyclists. We mostly let that one go.

It did seem bitterly ironic though that the selfish behavior of motorists—in flocking to the beaches—ended up creating a situation that punished cyclists by getting them banned from the network of trails that had been built at least in part for their use and convenience and safety.

Make no mistake: self-absorbed, me-first attitudes are at the heart of this problem. The open-parks exemption was like offering free candy to children. Many kids, brought up with good values, would politely choose one piece of candy. But plenty of others would grab two handfuls and come back for more. A lot of people choose what pleases them first and never think about the ramifications for the larger community. But it isn't just motorists or some other groups who are guilty of putting their own pleasures ahead of those of

society. There are many cyclists unwilling to sacrifice any of their rights or customary habits in this time of trouble.

How the Shelter in Place strictures affect cyclists—at least in Sonoma County—come down to two issues. One was the ban from the very nice network of trails we use every week...in my case almost every time I go for a ride. I am happy to note that the revisions to the March 23 ordinance put into effect today allow cyclists to return to the Class I bike trails. So that is one of the two issues addressed, and—so far—with a happy ending. But while the ban was in place, many cyclists continued to ride the paths, even though the bike ban was widely publicized and signs were posted at the trailheads. Many other trail users were upset about it and some of them complained about it to the local paper and to their County Supervisors, etc. It was selfish behavior by a few riders creating bad PR for all riders.

The other issue is the details in the general exemption in the ordinance for cycling. It has been accorded the status of an essential activity and is allowed, but with certain constraints. The State and all of the assorted Counties around the Bay Area have granted some exemption for cycling but the details in each ordinance vary and the result is a confusing patchwork of rules and penalties. However, one statute appears constant throughout all of them: that your cycling should start from your own home...that you are not allowed to rack your bike on your car and drive to some distant spot to start a ride.

We had several almost endless and occasionally acrimonious discussions on our club chat list about this rule. Two riders sent notes to the list that expressed a sense of grievance that they had found themselves warned by park rangers or county sheriffs about having driven to distant sites to start rides. One group with two cars had actually parked in the lot of the State Park regional headquarters in Duncans Mills—a site crawling with rangers—so they were guilty not only of using a park when the parks were closed but of driving to a ride start. In that case, a ranger gave them a friendly warning: don't do this again. In the other case, four carloads of cyclists parked on a country road...cars with bike racks on display. In that case, a sheriff left a written warning citation on each car, (Enforcement has begun with friendly reminders but if infractions continue or are too egregious to ignore, actual tickets can be written and the fines range up to \$1000.)

In both cases, the cyclists tried to wriggle out of any responsibility for what they'd done by fiddling around with fine points of language in the ordinance...lawyer shit. Some of us got fed up with it and chastised them: you did a wrong thing and you need to own it. Get over it! Ride from home! And stop riding in groups! Most people agree but I know some cyclists are still driving their cars to far off places to ride. But like people using cell phones while driving, they're just getting better at hiding it.

A less cut-and-dried detail in each County ordinance concerns where rides are allowed to go. Start from home...okay...but how far from home are we allowed to wander? The State edict says you must ride in your "local neighborhood" but what does that mean? My desktop dictionary defines "neighborhood" as "a district, especially one forming a community within a town or city." If that were taken literally, we wouldn't be able to ride much beyond our city or town limits, so no long rides. (However, one of our club members proved it could be done last week by completing no less than 80 laps of a 2.5-mile circuit near his home in Petaluma...200 rather insane miles in one day.)

Sonoma County's ordinance contains such a thicket of legalese it's hard to discern exactly what their intentions are. The one I like best is the Mendocino County statute: "The recreation must be initiated from one's residence and may not involve the use of a motor vehicle or public transit to the location of exercise..." That's all it says but it says enough. No limits on the length of the ride. My own spin on that is the common-sense suggestion I made last month: limit your rides to what you can do on the two water bottles you fill at home...40 to 60 miles. Because the Sonoma County ordinance is so vague on the point, I'm using the Mendo mandate as my guide. I hope that's both appropriate and defensible.

I'm not nearly as concerned about cyclists contaminating one another or anyone else as I am about the perception of bad boy behavior by some cyclists turning the tide of public opinion against us to the point where the politicians and administrators feel it's expedient to ban all cycling, everywhere, just as they decided to close the parks after first leaving them open and then people behaved badly. (Now they're opening some of them up again, but on a limited basis.)

Everyone's lives have been so disrupted by this pandemic...first of all, anyone who becomes sick and possibly even dies. Then all the people whose jobs are

hanging by a thread or who can't pay their bills. And everyone on the front line in the health care sector and the first responders. That is serious stuff. Dire...drastic.

Then there are all the people whose chosen form of recreation has been banned or severely curtailed, from softball to basketball, rugby to lacrosse, from aerobics to the weight room at the gym, from bowling to darts...on and on. Not to mention all who miss the spectator sports, either in person at the old ball park or on TV. All those folks are frustrated and some are seriously cranky about not being allowed to do what they normally take for granted. And then they see those cyclists—those weirdos!—still out there, still getting to do their biker thing while everyone else is cooped up at home. It's got to chafe on a few people who either are grumps about bikes to begin with or else aren't familiar with the exemptions in the ordinance.

So cyclists are kind of living on sufferance during this crisis. Don't assume it's a lock that we will continue to be granted that cherished exemption. Never forget that for many in our world, cyclists are still considered oddballs and at times a nuisance. They don't understand what we do or why we do it. If we irritate enough of the wrong people, we may end up getting thrown under the proverbial bus.

If the tide turns against us it will be because of cyclists who don't follow the letter of the ordinance. First of all, it specifically states that rides should be close to home. That automatically rules out any ride that requires putting the bike in the car and driving to some distant point to start riding. That means, for most of us, that distant venues like King Ridge and Pope Valley are off-limits for the time being. But our region is rich in nice back roads, wherever you live. It might be different if you lived in central LA, but anyone living anywhere in the north bay can be on nice roads within a few miles of their front door. They may not be the most scenic, iconic, spectacular roads we know and love but dang it...suck it up a little! Make a friggin' sacrifice!

Finally, there are those general traffic offenses down to cyclists, most notably running stop signs...things most of us do at least some of the time. Those always piss off non-cyclists who see them happening and now is not the time to be pissing off our neighbors. If you usually think of stop signs as elective, maybe for a while here you can at least get it down to a California roll...?

We keep hearing that we're all in this together and it's that notion of shared sacrifice and shared extra-efforts that makes this tolerable. But when everyone else is

making those sacrifices, there is one thing that is sure to stoke up their outrage and that is someone they think is gaming the system. Could be price gougers. Could be people still out partying together. Could be hucksters selling phony vaccines. And it could be cyclists who appear to be breaking the rules.

The next time you think the rules don't apply to you, and if you can't imagine following the rules simply because it's the right thing to do, try picturing what it would be like to be standing next to a county sheriff's car on the side of the road with a \$1000 ticket in your jersey pocket, or finding such a ticket on the windshield of your car. It probably won't come to that, but this is a fluid, evolving crisis unlike anything seen in our lifetimes. Who knows which way things will unfold? Let's try to be good boys and girls so the tide of public opinion still flows in our favor.

Reading these pandemic columns in 2023...only three years later...seems a bit weird. So much of what happened then seems so far-off and almost science-fiction at this point. I was just remembering the baseball games on TV, with the stands behind the plate—anywhere within the camera's field of view—filled with cardboard cut-outs of fans. Did we really do that?



Virtual Touring

Have you been feeling a little cooped up lately? Feeling a little hemmed in and hedged about by the shelter-in-place mandates? Are you missing all the big spring classics and stage races on TV or streaming video? Perhaps your frustration extends to having had to cancel some big cycling plans you had in the pipeline for this summer. (I've had to cancel two cycle-touring vacations I had on tap and in my case it's not just a matter of letting some tour caterer know I won't be coming: I am the caterer. I did all the planning and grunt work to get the tours organized. Now I've had to let the 40 or so people who signed up for each tour know they're not going to get to enjoy those weeks of exploring new roads through new country, and all they have to look forward to is a refund of their tour fee.)

Well, so be it. This is our world right now and it will probably be our world until we have a viable vaccine up to scale, all over the country, if not all over the world. In spite of the clueless fools thronging the beaches and brewpubs—those mosh pits we see on the evening news—an overwhelming majority of Americans are still committed to at least some version of social distancing and staying close to home. That being the case, how do we stay occupied and happy?

Cyclists at least can still practice their favorite activity (while many other sporting folks have had to forego whatever pastime they normally enjoy). We can still hit the road and log a few miles. I'm certainly doing that and I expect you are too. But it's along the same old roads I've ridden hundreds of times before. Even in a cycling paradise the same stuff starts to seem stale eventually, and that's when we think about booking a week or three in Provence or Tuscany or even just a couple of states over from where we normally hang out and ride. But not now. Not for a while yet.

I certainly don't have a cure for the pandemic nor even any suggestions for how to end up climbing Mount Ventoux this summer...not really, truly, in person. But I do have one itty bitty tip that might help you pass the time while you're sequestered at home, and pass it in a cycling state of mind.

Now that I've dangled that teaser in front of you, I have to back up and say this: most of what follows here is a mystery to me. I don't know what the hell I'm talking about. But out of that swamp of ignorance I can pull one little suggestion that might be useful for you.

The mysterious realm into which I'm venturing is the world of indoor trainers. I think I may have climbed on a stationary bike once or twice and cranked a few strokes, just to see what the pedaling action was like. But that exhausts my understanding of the equipment and the experience. I see the ads on TV for Peloton. These are obviously expensive and sophisticated contraptions. And they no doubt do what they're supposed to do, which is good, assuming you want to be doing that. Okay.

I understand the better trainers have a monitor upon which you can watch videos and pretend you're riding the road on the screen...and with the best of them, some Strava-syle data can flow from the video to the bike to replicate the conditions on the video: more effort on the climbs, etc. I know so little about this that when I thought to write this column, I asked some friends who do use such trainers how the whole thing works. I gathered a good deal of information but the answers became quite technical and, frankly, I quickly grew bored with the whole topic. Not my thing.

However...what got me even remotely interested in this subculture of trainers and GoPro handlebar videos had nothing to do with actually riding a trainer and getting a workout. What caught my interest was a website called FulGaz. What you find at the site is a library of hundreds of those handlebar videos of back road rides on road bikes. All of them can be viewed easily and for free. If I understand their business model correctly, if you sign up and pay a fee, you can download higher-rez versions of the videos that also include all that Strava data (or similar) that can be programmed into your indoor trainer to provide the real feel of the ride on view. How all this works is what my friends tried to explain to me...until my eyes glazed over.

If you're already into this, you know way more about it than I do. But the one little tidbit I want to note here is the fact that the many videos can be watched simply as eye candy, the same way we might sit back and watch one of those pretty Great Railway Journeys shows on TV: let the landscape unfold in front of us and just enjoy the scene...the new scene in a new place, far from home. No need to get all sweaty and trashed on the trainer; just kick back in your comfy, ergonomically correct desk chair, in front of your big computer monitor, and watch the show. (This wouldn't be any fun viewed on a small screen...a phone or pad or possibly even a small laptop. You want a nice big screen for the full effect. If you have your TV hooked

up to your computer, as many people do these days, you can probably watch the FulGaz clips on a really big screen while laid out in couch-potato heaven.)

We all know about GoPro videos at this point. They've been around a few years now and are only getting better. What an amazing little bit of technology. Drop into YouTube just about anywhere and start poking around and you can watch a mind-bending marathon of crazy stuff, from extreme skiing to auto racing to sailing to...to cycling. While my wife is hogging the TV remote and watching one more remodeling show on HGTV or yet another rerun of Downton Abbey, I retire to my desk (in another room) and surf through a zillion possible GoPro options that are almost always entertaining. Mindless? Yeah, mostly. But who cares? (When I've overdosed on videos, I pick up a book and read a few chapters.)

What I like about FulGaz, as opposed to the big supermarket of YouTube, is that all the videos are about cycling...all filmed on bikes at bike speed and all on roads that make sense for cycling. The videos can be searched by country. Quite a few countries are represented although the bulk of the videos come from the countries we think of as cycling institutions: France, Italy, Spain, England, the US. Their inventory does not include every really famous climb but more videos are being added all the time. As it stands now, even being quite selective, there is enough content here to keep you glued to your screen until your eyes cross.

When I stumbled on the site, the first thing I did was find and click on some of the big climbs I have done while touring in Europe. Do the videos match up pretty well with my memories of those roads and hills? Absent the pain and suffering, they do. I see all sorts of little details I remember. So that's dandy. But I have to say, the big climbs can eventually become kind of boring, just sitting and watching them. Things happen slowly on climbs. No doubt if you're on your Peloton trainer and busting your butt to keep pace with the guy who had the GoPro on his handlebar, you will stay focused and in the moment. Just watching it as a visual entertainment, not so much. There is an urge to keep clicking forward along the progress bar to get to something more exciting, like the summit.

However, there are many other videos—often along roads I've never heard of—that include substantial sections of downhill and fast rollers. Places where the rider was really kickin' it. Those can be exciting. I'll give you a link to one I found in that category: Blea

Just Do It!

Tarn & Red Bank to Grasmere. This hilly little run (44 minutes) is in the English Lake District. (I have toured there but in a car, not on a bike.) I don't want to overhype the video but... Just watch it and see if you don't end up with at least a slightly elevated heart rate. It had me squirming in my chair, leaning into the corners and reaching for brake levers I didn't have.

So that can be fun. But it can also be informative and expand our horizons. I have a wish list of places I'd like to ride before I get too old to manage them, off in different countries. But I confess the Lake District and the Cumbrian Dales would not have been one of them. Not because it's not a lovely area with cool bike roads but simply...so many roads, so little time. Even if the pandemic was not keeping me at home, there is no way I will ever be able to cycle along anything more than a tiny fraction of all the available roads out there. Watching these videos is an easy way to explore new areas we might otherwise overlook or never have the time (or money) (or fitness) to tackle in the real world. Perhaps watching the video will be an end in itself: the only time we do that road. Or it might be a form of research and planning for a future trip, when the real world opens up to us again.

As I said at the top, this is an itty bitty tip. Not going to change the world or solve all our problems. But I have found it to be a pleasant—and occasionally heart-pounding—little adventure, browsing through these videos in far-flung corners of the biking world. Our stay-at-home, semi-sequestered way of life is not going to end soon. We have a lot of time at our disposal and only limited opportunities to get out and about. The best thing we can do is get out there on the nice roads near home...the real roads, on a real bike. But if you rode hard yesterday and are recovering today, or if it's rainy or cold or dark out, here's one little way to still have some bike fun.

FulGaz video...

https://fulgaz.com/fulgaz-rides/?fg_ride=5da7859e6097eb0630c2a034

In the three years since I wrote this, I have discovered many more GoPro POV videos on YouTube, including many journeys along roads I would love to ride someday, or perhaps only in my dreams: cliff-hanging roads in the Andes of Peru and Colombia; amazing little mountain roads in China; and edge-of-your-seat videos of downhill mountain bike races, filmed with helmet cams. The inventory is almost inexhaustible.

With a nod to Bo Jackson—"Now, where is that Tour de France?"—I am borrowing his signature line for the header on this column. What is it that I am urging you to just do? Please, just wear a mask.

I'm not the first to use the Nike-ad line in promoting mask use. A bipartisan group of California governors—Gavin Newsom, Jerry Brown, Gray Davis, Pete Wilson, and Arnold Schwarzenegger—invoked it in a public service message. Their appeal was to the general population. Mine will have a little bike spin.

I had not thought to write a column about masks or even about the pandemic this month. But a ride I did a few days ago got me thinking about masks and how we are adapting to them...or not. My ride happened to include quite a few miles of our local bike paths as well as some pleasant, bike-friendly back roads. Over the course of the ride I probably had close encounters with over 100 people, split fairly evenly between walkers and cyclists, with a few runners thrown in. By "close" I mean any encounter near our social distancing limits, such as passing on a bike path.

Among those 100-plus people, I counted a total of five masks. Four of them were on cyclists. The only pedestrian I saw with a mask was a guy standing in his own driveway. Perhaps some of the others had masks in their pockets, available for whenever they deemed them appropriate. But if so, a close encounter with me, on my bike, didn't appear to rise to such a standard.

Since then I've been paying attention to mask use in outdoor, public places. On a seven-mile hike on trails above the Sonoma Coast beaches, mask compliance was better than 50% but still a long way from universal. On a more recent ride with many bike path miles, I watched the cyclists and I would estimate mask use was in the 40% range...somewhat less than half. Better than the five masks on that previous ride but still woefully low. So what's going on?

Ignorance is no excuse. You cannot be awake and aware in the current world without knowing that mask use in outdoor, public spaces is mandated by Sonoma County ordinance and has been for months. Now it has become a state-wide ordinance as well, with plenty of publicity (cue the five governors). This does not mean you have to wear a mask every minute you're out of your house. You need to have a mask with you and use it whenever you're close enough to other people that the social-

distancing limits are compromised.

Also, let me reiterate that I am only talking about wearing masks in this column, plus a good-faith effort at following the social-distancing guidelines. The much larger matter of the lockdown of society—the closures of restaurants and sporting events, schools and workplaces—is another matter. But the point here is that while the costs—the pain—of the lockdown can be immense, the cost of wearing a mask is virtually zero.

If you are already using a mask when appropriate and are committed to sticking with it for the duration of this crisis, then you can take this as an affirmation that you're doing the right thing. Good for you! If, on the other hand, you are adamantly opposed to masks because you think the whole pandemic hoohaw is just some deep state conspiracy—fake news—then I doubt I can change your mind. (Or, as my Irish friend Brenda says: “Bill...you can't fix stupid!”)

(I don't want this column to be a political wrangle. Unfortunately, some people, for reasons almost too complex to fathom, have chosen to make the virus a political football and masks are seen by some as a symbol of oppression...whatever. We have to factor that point of view into any discussion of the matter. But for the purposes of this column, I am accepting that the pandemic is a real and present and future danger; that it is going to be a part of our lives until a vaccine is up to scale. If you agree with that premise, then you have to also agree that the virus doesn't care who you vote for. All it cares about is propagating itself via close contact among its potential hosts...us.)

Between the two poles—already compliant mask users and obstinately obtuse virus-deniers—there is a broad middle ground inhabited by people, including many cyclists, who aren't wearing masks for many little reasons. It's the folks in this middle ground I'm really trying to reach.

Political posturing aside, much of the push-back against masks seems to boil down to two things: comfort and convenience. Added onto that are rationalizations about the level of risk. Let's look at this in the context of cycling. For the run of this pandemic, think of a mask as just another item in your bike kit, along with your gloves and shorts and shoes, your sunglasses and helmet and jersey. Or perhaps an auxiliary item for special conditions, like your winter rain jacket and arm warmers and long-finger gloves. If you're any kind of regular rider, you are going to look for clothes that are comfortable and work right for the task of moving you on up

the road. If you make the mistake of buying a pair of shorts with what turns out to be a funky chamois, you won't wear them too long before shopping for a better pair. Your rear end will file a grievance that will be hard to ignore. Ditto for shoes, for glasses, for gloves.

Now here's a new item in our kit. It should be judged and used according to the same standards we would apply for any other piece of bike gear: find one that works...that's comfortable and convenient.

Helmets are the obvious parallel here. If you've cycled long enough you can remember when none of us wore helmets. We modeled our kit on that of the pros. We liked the wind in our hair. Helmets were uncomfortable and looked dorky. (Ever own a Bell V1-Pro? 'Nuff said!) But over time the designs of helmets improved and meanwhile, bowing to public pressure and just plain common sense, the UCI was moving toward mandatory helmet use in racing. Fast forward to the present: with all pros using them, almost all amateur and recreational riders use them too. The designs are so good now you hardly know you have one on. Hardly any serious cyclist these days would question the good sense and efficacy of a helmet. Now we're on a similar learning curve with masks. And while a helmet may cost well over a hundred bucks, a mask costs pennies.

When I hear a biking friend say, “I hate those f__king masks!”...I will wager the biggest issue is comfort and that he simply has not yet found a mask that's comfortable and easy to use. He may have tried one model, hated it and quit trying. I started out with an N-95 mask and couldn't stand it. I felt as if I were suffocating. Since then I have had the opportunity to sample other models until I found one I can live with. My wife—a skilled hobby-seamstress—has been making them. About 900 so far, which have gone to medical personnel and clerks in stores and so on...and to me. (Her fabric has been donated by a local yard goods store and the semi-elastic ties are strips cut out of surplus Terrible Two t-shirts.)

I favor the standard pleated model with ties that go around my neck—not just looped behind the ears. This allows me to leave the mask hanging around my neck most of the time. When I approach a person, I can quickly pull it up over my nose and mouth. As soon as we're out of each other's vapor plumes, I let the mask drop below my chin again. In just three months, the little process of pulling up or dropping the mask has become so second-nature to me that my left hand does it before my brain even tells it to: see the upcoming encounter...the mask is up. Same as shifting or brak-



ing: just one of those things we do pretty much without conscious volition. Most of the time, when I'm riding, I'm alone, so my mask is not in use. I would guess on a four-hour ride I might actually have the mask over my face for a total of only about ten minutes...fifteen, max. Not much of a hardship or hassle.

But even for short spells it has to be comfortable and easy or it will remain an aggravating bother. If it is a bother, you won't want to do it and you will begin to rationalize not doing it with assorted logic-chopping. The most common argument I hear pivots around the relative risk factor: that everything we do in cycling involves some risk and that this is just one more very minor risk, one we are willing to accept and assimilate into our cycling lives. Okay, I get that. I've said in this space many a time that the assumption of some risk is understood for any serious cycling. That said, any half-way intelligent and responsible cyclist takes all sorts of steps to minimize those presumptive risks.

Start with the helmets...almost a given at this point. Then bike care: we keep our bikes in the best shape we can manage, either doing the work ourselves or taking the bikes into the pros in the shops. That's not just so they'll run fast and efficiently; it's also so they won't fail in some disastrous way while we're bombing down a mountain road. We wear sunglasses to cut down on glare but also to ward off little flying or bouncing projectiles. We slather on the sunscreen so we don't end up having chunks carved out of us by the dermatologist. We pop a couple of Advil to get on top of joint pain and inflammation. When we ride we pay attention to hazards and do what we can to avoid them, from potholes to gravel to clueless drivers. And so on. We acknowledge the risks but we do what we can to neutralize them. Why is the risk of inhaling the virus any less compelling than any of the other dangers we work to guard ourselves against? Especially when the mask that wards off the potential risk is so easy to use and so inexpensive.

If your jury is still out on this one, try a few other masks. I don't like masks any more than you do. In fact, if I had to use a bad mask I'd go flat out bat shit. But I

can tell you there are comfortable masks out there... easy to pull up with one hand and comfortable to wear. And if this virus is still with us this coming winter, you might like having your face covered to cut down on the wind chill on a brisk descent.

A quick thought about social distancing. On some of my recent rides I've been passed by faster riders. In almost every case, they have not given me a wide berth, even though the quiet country roads leave loads of room for taking a wide line around me...for distancing. They just blow by, a foot off my shoulder, like we're in a rotating pace line. That's just rude...thoughtless. It's disrespectful to me that they think no more of my welfare than to envelope me in their vapor trail. C'mon...

And that brings up riding in groups. I see it all the time. The couples I can understand. We'll give them the benefit of the doubt and assume they live in the same house and breathe the same air. Fine. But four or six guys cruising together? No masks? How do you figure that makes sense? It's like having unprotected group sex during the AIDS pandemic. When you inhale the exhaled breath of the guy in front of you, you're also inhaling the breath of all the other people he's been close to, etc, etc. And now you'll take his breath—and whatever is in it—and pass it along to anyone else you come into contact with. We know how the virus spreads. Why are people so carefree, so cavalier, about the potential risk? I've always figured cyclists were fairly intelligent people. Now I'm beginning to wonder.

Those are all the functional, practical reasons for wearing a mask (and distancing). There are also the reasons that we might file under the heading of community relations...the greater good for the greater group. There have been a few cranky letters to the Editor in our local paper about those darn cyclists riding without masks. That creates ill will for all cyclists. Bad PR. I submit the walkers and runners are at least as bad as the cyclists. But just because others do it doesn't make it okay for you to do it. As your mother admonished you: two wrongs don't make a right and 95 wrongs out of a hundred just adds up to a lot of wrong.

I get seriously pissed off at the twenty-somethings who are thronging the clubs and brew pubs and beaches, elbow to elbow, no masks, no distancing. When asked, they say they're not worried about getting sick (or dying...they're immortal, right?). They see the virus as only attacking some vulnerable groups...old people, primarily. Or poor people. The self-absorbed, me-first myopia is staggering. They hang out in a crowd...

somewhere in there the virus makes a few jumps to new hosts...next thing you know it's worked its way from the blithely clueless party-hearties to someone who works in a nursing home...and then 14 grandmas and grandpas in the nursing home get sick and eight of them die....and while they're dying they infect a doctor and a couple of nurses in ICU. All because some ignorantly arrogant brats were bored with being cooped up and just had to get out and party.

We sometimes refer to our parents or grandparents as "the greatest generation." They lived through the Depression and then World War II. In this country, for the four years of the war, they endured austerity and rationing of all sorts of vital commodities, from gas to sugar to beef. Cars and home appliances and other essentials wore out and couldn't be easily replaced. Life was hard. Four years of it, right on the heels of over a dozen years of the Depression. But most folks did what they could to share the load, to help one another get through it. They were fighting another kind of evil virus and they understood it was in everyone's interest to make the effort...everyone together. Now? After just two or three months of not being able to go to a bar or restaurant or ball game, people are whining and puling about tyranny and their precious, god-given freedom like a bunch of spoiled three year olds. The concept of the greater good for the greater group seems to have gone up in a haze of barbecue smoke.

Forgive me for ranting. I get a little het up about it. Admittedly, those are the extreme cases, what they show us on the evening news. But the same implacable math applies to cyclists not observing the simplest safety constraints because they find them inconvenient...because they're tired of being sequestered and oppressed and want their world to be normal again. But the world isn't normal right now and won't be for a while. Get used to it.

We can't do much about the overall lockdown—or the reopenings—except perhaps exercise a little caution regarding when to venture out into a group environment again. But we can do those simple, easy, inexpensive things on our rides that will help: masks and distancing. We can do it because it's the practical, functional thing to do, to protect you from me and to protect me from you. But we can also do it because it says something important to those who see us with our masks on: that we respect them and don't want to infect them; that we appreciate the gravity of the current crisis; that we don't blow it off as some crazy hoax...and that we're all in this together until we have a cure.

Addendum—May, 2021

Over the course of the past year—the Year of COVID—I wrote at least four columns that touched on how the pandemic was affecting our cycling lives. One in particular—*Just Do it!* in July—was about wearing masks while riding. That same topic was mentioned briefly in some of the other columns as well.

Now that most of us have received our vaccinations and now that it looks like we're getting the upper hand against the virus (mostly, probably), and now that more scientific research is becoming available, it appears the likelihood of transmitting the virus in outdoor settings is very low. Which is to say: we probably didn't need to be wearing masks when we were riding. We almost certainly don't need them now and we probably did not need them back when I wrote that column.

I would like the record to show that I now understand and accept this. However, I am not apologizing for having taken that stance when I did so. Nor am I cutting much slack for the many riders who were out there at the time, cycling without masks.

We did not know then what we know now. The virus was on the rampage. The medical and scientific experts were scrambling to figure out how and where it might be transmitted. Many theories and scenarios were proposed, based on a rapidly evolving body of evidence. Some were debunked and some were substantiated or at least provisionally accepted. As the months have turned, we—that is, the scientists—have learned more.

But those columns were written when we knew less and when most responsible people figured erring on the side of caution was a better path through the maze than being reckless. And by "reckless" I mean saying, "I can't stand those masks!" or, "They're an affront to my liberty!" Or worse yet, not wearing masks as a form of political grandstanding...virus-denial and red-state, blue-state polarity.

Regardless of their efficacy or necessity, wearing masks was also a counterpoint to the posturing of the deniers. It made the statement that this mask-wearer took the virus seriously and was behaving responsibly. None of that was wrong then and none of it requires a retraction now. We have a better batch of scientific data points now and thank goodness we do. I'm happy to leave my mask at home when I go out for a ride now. But I'm also comfortable with having worn one and with having urged others to do so back in those uncertain times last year.

The Death of a Road

The pandemic is still with us, still going strong. And thanks to the bungling of assorted governmental leaders, it looks like it will be a part of our lives for at least another few months. Frankly, I can't see any light at the end of the tunnel yet. Can you? But we carry on anyway, buoyed by the hope that we will eventually get back to something resembling normal life.

In the meantime, I can't devote every one of these monthly columns to some aspect of the virus. I have to make a stab at other topics, at least occasionally. So this month I'm going off-virus and talking about something else. This is the column I had prepared for March but then set aside when the pandemic became the only game in town. It's not about the virus and not about the bungled response to it. But it does touch on the failings of government in a general way.

These are observations about a road over in Napa County called Howell Mountain Road. If you're familiar with our North Bay roads, you probably know it. The entire road is a bit over ten miles but is divided into two quite different sections. The "main" part of the road—six miles—connects to Deer Park Road and between them they form the primary route between central Napa Valley and its quiet neighbor to the east, Pope Valley, surmounting a hefty ridge and passing through the town of Angwin along the way. But that's not the part of the road I'm concerned about today. At the point where Deer Park and Howell Mountain meet, another section of Howell Mountain spurs off and heads downhill toward the town of St Helena. That section is 4.3 miles long and loses 1200' of elevation as it wiggles down the canyon of Conn Creek. Or gains 1200' if you're climbing it from Napa Valley.

This section ought to be called Old Howell Mountain Road to distinguish it from its busier, more polished portion. This is a rustic, quiet, under-engineered road...a classic biking back road, just the way we like them. It never had excellent pavement but it used to be good enough that one could drill the 4-mile descent with confidence and comfort...really let it rip. I would rate it one of my all-time favorite descents. Four miles of kinky, slinky corners at just the right sort of grade: steep enough to be fast but not so steep as to be all about damage control. 1200'

over four-plus miles equals about 5%. There is one steep pitch that exceeds 15% but balancing that out are assorted near-flats here and there. The bulk of the descending—or climbing—would be around 6%. In other words, just about perfect. A challenging but not gut-busting climb and a rollicking downhill, if you like that sort of thing.

One other essential factoid: there are a few homes over the first mile, coming up from St Helena, but beyond that, all the way to the top—over three miles—there are no houses and no addresses of any sort along the road.

Unfortunately, most of what I can say about that nice section has to be put in the past tense. Over the years, various chunks of the road have been worked on by the winter rains and have, now and then, here and there, suffered serious damage. Landslides down onto the road from above or subsidences of the roadbed into the canyon below. On at least one occasion a few years ago—maybe twice—the road had to be closed because of such depredations. In each case Napa County eventually found the money and the will to set things right. Repairs were made, no doubt quite expensive, and the road was reopened.

But then, in the winter of 2017-18, it happened again: the ravages of winter storms caused substantial damage that was not easily fixable. The road was closed again. This time, after looking at the damage and estimating the cost of repairs, then looking at their budget, the county decided enough was enough. Just uphill from the last residence and just downhill from the junction at the top, they blocked off the road. They officially abandoned it.



There was some protest from the community. Some people thought the closed section should be preserved as a bike and pedestrian route. Others pointed out that the road provided good access for fire fighters when the all-too-common wildfires roar up the canyon. But no dice. The county didn't want to spend one more dime on Old Howell Mountain. They surrendered. Punted. Gave up.

They gave the road back to Mother Nature and she didn't waste any time in reclaiming it. For the first year or so, it was still possible to hit the descent pretty hard. You did need to look sharp for the various hazards that were starting to crop up on the abandoned road—tree branches, boulders, cracks, weeds growing out of the cracks—but it was still doable. However, the last time I did it, going uphill, in February of this year, I could see it would no longer be feasible as a descent on anything short of a serious mountain bike. In fact it was a challenge as a climb. The pavement had crumbled and buckled so badly, or just fallen off into the canyon, and so many weeds and shrubs had grown up through the cracks, that it was hard in some spots to find a way through. Some helpful local had been up there with a can of white paint and had marked out the best lines through some of the worst spots. Without those markers, I probably would have had to put a foot down and walk it through some really bad patches. It has effectively ceased to be a road, all in just a couple of years of neglect. It was at that point I started thinking about this column.

When it comes to roads, I'm not a big fan of Progress writ large: bigger and wider and faster. I like old roads...quaint and meandering and sleepy. And if their pavement is less than perfect, I can live with it. But even the sleepest, off-the-beaten-path back roads deserve and require at least a minimal amount of maintenance...yes? No? I totally understand Napa County's budgetary logic. An unimportant little road, with better alternatives nearby, with no houses or other addresses along it...and a wickedly expensive fix needed. Hard to argue against their decision. But a sad day, nonetheless, losing such a sweet biking road.

For what it's worth, over in my home county of Sonoma, the same implacable bean-counter priorities are at work. Classic cases in point: Old Monte Rio Road and Old Cazadero Road. Both were open and maintained when I was first cycling this area in the '80s and '90s. Both have since been blocked off and abandoned because of landslides or other expensive problems and

both are getting close to being impassable. The county cut their losses and moved on. One old road at a time, one more budget crunch at a time, our county administrators are staging a slow retreat. For reasons much too complex to be considered in this space, the tax dollars just aren't going as far as they used to. Or else those dollars are being diverted to other, more pressing needs that may not have existed when those roads were built.

With all the travail and difficulty confronting us today, it may seem petty to mourn the loss of a few minor back roads, but if you want to be a bit of a Cassandra—or a Chicken Little, if you prefer—you might see those lost roads—those surrenders—as a canary in the coal mine: little warning signs of a civilization starting to go downhill.

I read an historical novel a few years ago. I don't remember its name nor even most of the plot. But I do remember the general setting. The main character was a Roman consul or general who was the chief administrator of a colonial outpost in what we now call Spain. This was during the period where the might of the Roman Empire was starting to fray around the edges. For this administrator that would show up in things like the funds for the local schools not arriving from Rome when needed. Little things. A death by a thousand cuts. One little shortfall at a time; one little pinch in the budget that causes something to not be done, to be abandoned or diminished... It doesn't happen all in a day. More like erosion. But off in the distance, getting closer, is the Dark Ages: several hundred years of regression and loss and ruin.

Am I making too much of a few abandoned roads? Is my worry about the future too dystopian? I don't know. But I'm pretty sure of this: any time you start giving up on your world and letting it slide into decrepitude, you're heading in the wrong direction.



Pro Racing: Better Late Than Never!

You don't need me to tell you 2020 has been a crazy year...an appalling, dreadful, crazy year. The world has gone haywire in just about every way possible, thanks to an itty bitty virus none of us can see or feel or smell. You also don't need me to document all the ways the world has been turned upside down since the early months of the year.

Amidst all the death and suffering, the economic melt-down...all of it...there has been a yearning to get back to some semblance of normal life. Witness the ill-advised reopenings across our states, back in June, which only made things worse, prolonging the suffering.

But clumsy reopenings aside, one way people have been wishing and hoping for a taste of normalcy has been in sports, from football to futbol, from basketball to baseball. Bit by bit, in hesitant fits and starts, those in charge have been trying to plot a path forward for all of our beloved spectator sports. No one would suggest these truncated, contrived seasons are the real thing...normal. But to sports fans dying of thirst, a glass half full is still better than nothing. We'll watch whatever weirdness they throw together, glad to have something—anything!—to keep us amused. And we'll let history sort out the questions as to whether these oddball seasons are legit.

Muddling and bumbling its way through all the chaos has been the grand old sport of bike racing. Unlike most seasonal sports, bike racing has a calendar that stretches almost all the way through the entire cycle of any given year, beginning with races in the Southern Hemisphere in late January. Thanks to that early start on the race program, we actually had quite a few good events run before everything screeched to a halt in mid-March.

After having a number of races cancelled between mid-March and the end of July, we are now back in business...kind of, sort of. If you are reading this column anywhere near its published date of September 1, you know the Tour de France has just begun, approximately in the time slot normally allocated to the Vuelta a España. The Giro d'Italia will follow in fairly short order and the Vuelta will happen after that, deep, deep into autumn. So...we're back!

That being the case, I'm going to craft a column more-or-less like the ones I usually write in May, just before the Giro, wherein I review the spring season and see if we can find any interesting trends heading into cy-

cling's prime time, normally late spring and mid-summer but in this whacky season shoehorned into the last few months of the year. I could make the case we need a review of the season more than ever this year because it has been so strange and because what happened before things went nuts in March now seems so long ago as to be almost from another time, another world.

So let's climb into our time-capsule and hit rewind, all the way back to the early months of 2020.

The Tour Down Under, January 19-28...won by Richie Porte, thanks to dropping and distancing Daryll Impey on the last climb of the last stage, Willunga Hill.

Vuelta a San Juan (Argentina), January 26-February 2...won by Belgian Remco Evenepoel by virtue of winning the time trial.

Volta Comunitat Valenciana, February 5-9...won by Tadej Pogacar, winning two stages in the process.

Tour of Oman, February 16-21...won by Alexy Lutsenko, who won the two stages with uphill finishes.

Volta ao Algarve, February 19-22...another triumph for Remco Evenepoel, winning two stages, including the ITT.

Ruta del Sol, February 19-22...won by Jakob Fuglsang, who won two stages and tied for first in a third, the time trial.

UAE Tour, February 23-27...won by Adam Yates after taking out the hilltop finish on Stage 3.

Paris-Nice, March 8-14...won by Max Schachmann. He won Stage 1 and then hung on for the rest of the week while all his rivals failed to mount a challenge.

And there, between Paris-Nice and Tirreno-Adriatico, the season ground to a halt. Confusion and consternation on all sides. A vast swamp of uncertainty. A slough of despond. Now what? I doubt it's possible to appreciate or calculate the number of brain cells and nerve bundles burned up over the ensuing weeks as those in charge scrambled to salvage something from the wreckage. May, June, and July went by with nothing to show for those usually busy months except speculation and frustration, aside from all that behind-the-scenes rejiggering of the calendar to finally get things moving again.

Which brings us to August. There was a light, tentative reboot to the season: three "classics"—Strade Bianche and Milano-Sanremo—both won by rising star Wout Van Aert, and Il Lombardia, won by Jakob Fuglsang. And then the traditional prep race ahead of the Tour de France, the Critérium du Dauphiné, August 12-16. This was won by relatively unheralded Dani Martinez. But there's a fair

bit of backstory behind that finish. Primož Roglič had a comfortable lead until he crashed badly on Stage 4 and had to abandon. Also abandoning or crashing out on Stage 4 were Egan Bernal—the defending TdF champ—and Steven Kruijswijk and Emmanuel Buchmann. Meanwhile, Bernal's famous teammates, Chris Froome and Geraint Thomas, were looking very much off-form, getting dropped early and often and generally stinking up the joint.

That's where things stand heading into *le Tour*. The lineup for the Tour, as always, provides us with fodder for wild surmise. But probably the most notable thing about the entrants is who's missing: four-time past champion Chris Froome and 2018 champ Geraint Thomas. Instead, their powerful Ineos team is going with last year's champ Egan Bernal, backed up by last year's Giro winner Richard Carapaz, with Thomas slated to lead the team at the Giro and Froome to take the reins at the Vuelta. What a roster that team has, able to throw past champions into all three of the Grand Tours.

The Bernal-Carapaz tag team will have stiff competition from the Jumbo-Visma teammates Primož Roglič—the defending Vuelta champ—and Tom Dumoulin, the 2017 Giro winner. They're two of the very best time trialists, which is always important, although there is only one ITT this year. Who else? Mikel Landa finally is his own team leader at Bahrain-McLaren, with former Enefos lieutenant Wout Poels in support. Youngster Enric Mas and oldster Alejandro Valverde are flying the colors for Movistar. And Tadej Pogacar will be entering his first TdF for UAE Team Emirates after his break-out performance at last year's Vuelta. Veteran Fabio Aru is the official team leader for UAE but everyone agrees that Pogacar is the hot ticket right now. Of course, in this strangest of all seasons, who knows what wild card rider might get in amongst the heads of state and shake things up? I'm glad I don't wager money on the outcome because I have no idea who might prevail.

The results of the season so far—such as it is—don't offer any really solid hints as to favorites for the big events ahead. Roglič looked good at the Dauphiné until his crash. Pogacar looked sharp in winning Vallenciana and was second at the UAE Tour. Fuglsang shows good form, as do several other riders we expect to see rising to the top. But no one looks like a prohibitive favorite. We'll find out soon enough.

But the main thing is...racing is back. It has been a rocky road to get here. Let's hope the virus leaves our hard-working heroes alone and that we are allowed to enjoy a Tour as good as any we've seen in recent years.

Youth Will Be Served

Tadej Pogacar: learn how to spell that name; learn how to pronounce it (ta-DAY po-GOT-cha). We'll be talking about this young man for years to come. The reason we're talking about him in this column should be obvious to any fan of bike racing. He just won the better-late-than-never 2020 Tour de France. Not only did he win it but he did so in just about the most dramatic and emphatic way anyone could have imagined, blowing everyone else away in the uphill time trial on the last day of real racing.

I'm not going to analyze every pivotal moment of the Tour but this stage demands a replay and some context. He arrived at that time trial in second place, 57 seconds behind his Slovenian countryman Primož Roglič, one of the very best time trial riders out there. This 36-km time trial had a stinger in its tail: after a fairly moderate first 30 km, the final six km were uphill at an average of 8.5%, with the last pitch to the finish line at 20%. Ouch! But then Roglič is not just a good time trialler. He was in first because he's also a superb climber. He and his Jumbo-Visma team had controlled the race, day after day, by dominating in the hills...by keeping the tempo so high almost no one could challenge them.

The word "almost" is in that sentence to allow for that pesky kid Pogacar. He could and did challenge for the lead in the hills, often to good effect. More about that in a minute. But the fact remains that he was still down :57 when he rolled out of the start house on that time trial.

His pro résumé in time trials was a little thin. (What can you expect? He was only 21...turned 22 the day after the tour ended.) I think I read somewhere he had only completed five of them in his career. He first came to our attention when he won the 2019 Tour of California, but that race contained no time trial. Then he really caught our attention by winning three stages of the 2019 Vuelta a España, climbing onto the podium after his last hilltop stage win. Roglič beat him pretty soundly in the one ITT in that race on his way to winning the overall. But Pogacar beat Roglič by a few seconds in the Slovenian national time trial earlier this summer. He didn't kill him but he did win, and on a hilly course that might serve as a preview for the TdF course.

But still...:57 over 36 km against one of the best in the world? Most folks who pondered the auguries figured it might be close but almost no one thought he could pull back that much time. His own *Directeur Sportif* said that if he rode out of his skin and if Roglič had a bad

day, he just might pull it off...and that's pretty much what happened. Roglic did have a subpar ride, by his standards. He finished fifth overall behind Pogacar and three other riders, two of them his own teammates—Tom Dumoulin and Wout Van Aert, two more of the best time trialers in the world. But even if he'd ridden as fast as Dumoulin—a former ITT World Champion—he would still have ended up 1:21 behind the young kid, his :57 lead gone. Look at it this way: the time spread from Dumoulin in second down to eighth place—the other seven fastest finishers—was 1:20. All of them within that window. The distance from Pogacar to Dumoulin was 1:21. The gap to Roglic was 1:56. He pulled back the :57 and added another :59 to it. Astonishing, really.

Along the way to the yellow jersey, Pogacar also took home the white jersey for best young rider and the polkadot jersey for best climber. No one has ever won all three jerseys at one tour before, although Eddy Merckx would have done so had they awarded a white jersey the first year he rode—and won—the Tour. Oh, and Pogacar's the youngest winner since 1904.

Pogacar's Tour didn't start out all that well. During the first week it seemed like he found some trouble almost every day. He'd get a flat or get stuck behind a crash and would have to ride hard to catch back on. Then Stage 7 gave us one of those classic crosswind days where, out in the flats, the more aggressive teams put the hammer down...echelons quickly formed and if you missed the bus you lost time. Pogacar and Richie Porte—who eventually finished the tour third overall—both ended up about a minute and a half behind the top guns like Roglic. In the case of Pogacar at least it wasn't a matter of not paying attention. He had just had a flat and had drifted back to the team car to swap out the wheel when all hell broke loose up at the front of the peloton.

He never whined about his bad luck. Just said he'd have to put in a little work to claw back the lost time. Which he did, pulling back :40 on the very next stage, then winning Stages 9 and 15 but only gaining a few bonus seconds because Roglic finished right behind him each time. Then on Stage 17 Roglic turned the tables and beat Pogacar in the best uphill finish we've seen in years. When the dust had settled from that slugfest, Roglic had padded his lead out to :57 and there it stayed until the Stage 20 time trial. After that epic battle on Stage 17, most people figured Roglic had it wrapped up. The strongest rider supported by the strongest team. A worthy winner. Uh...not quite...

Roglic is a classy guy. At the finish of his disastrous time trial, stunned and shattered, he still managed

to find Pogacar and congratulate him on his winning ride. Of course he was disappointed (to put it mildly). But remember that in his last three grand tours he has finished third (2019 Giro), first (2019 Vuelta), and now second at the Tour de France. No one else has matched that level of consistent excellence over the same span. He's 30 now but has a few more years to do good things.

And then there's Richie Porte in third place...his first ever Grand Tour podium at age 35. I had written him off a couple of years ago. Said his best days were behind him. I had said he has a knack for snatching defeat from the jaws of victory and when he lost that time in the crosswinds on Stage 7, I was thinking: there he goes again! But he didn't give up. In the highest, hardest hills, he was one of only a couple of riders to stick with the two Slovenians when things got serious. He couldn't quite match their pace but he was the best of the rest. And then he too banged out an amazing time trial: third place, just a fraction of a second behind Dumoulin. He says this was his last year as a team leader. He's moving over to Ineos next year but the official line is that he will now be a *super-domestique* riding in support of their nominal team leaders, Geraint Thomas and Egan Bernal. That's the official line at this point but he beat the crap out of all the Ineos leaders at the TdF so don't bet the farm on that official line.

Speaking of Ineos... There are dozens of interesting stories one could distill from the Tour but the biggest one, aside from the tussle between Pogacar and Roglic, was the meltdown of the formerly unstoppable Ineos team (up until last year known as Sky). Winners of seven out of eight of the previous TdFs: one each for Bradley Wiggin, Geraint Thomas, and Egan Bernal, and four for Chris Froome. A great deal of second guessing has trailed along behind the team's decision to not enter Chris Froome and Geraint Thomas in this year's TdF, relying instead on Egan Bernal—last year's winner—and Richard Carapaz—last year's Giro winner—to lead the team. Thomas and Froome had not shown much in the way of form over this truncated, bifurcated season. But then, neither had Bernal or Carapaz. In fact, Bernal was quietly nursing a bad back during the Dauphiné tune-up. Once the Tour got moving, Carapaz dropped out of contention almost immediately. Bernal hung around near the front—third place through Stage 14—but on Stage 15, with its huge finishing climb to Grand Colombier, he cracked big time...terminally...as big a bonk as we ever see from a supposedly top-notch GC rider. He lost almost eight minutes and that was all she wrote for Team Ineos at this year's Tour. Lo, how the mighty are fallen!

The team's grand plan—what's left of it—is for Thomas to lead at the Giro—starting October 3—and for Froome to lead at the Vuelta, running off into November. Now there are rumors that either Carapaz or Bernal might ride the Vuelta, presumably in support of Froome. But this is something of a swan song for Froome and Ineos: he is leaving the team and moving next year to the relatively unknown Israel Start-Up Nation team. Ineos declined to renew his contract for 2021 so he's moving on. How will they support this lame-duck leader at the Vuelta? How will he perform after recovering from his horrific accident in 2019? If he falters, will they throw their team support behind another rider?

The rosters for the Giro are out now and it looks like a wide open rumble with about half a dozen riders capable of winning the GC: Thomas, Vincenzo Nibali, Jakob Fuglsang, Steven Kruijswijk, Diego Ullisi, Simon Yates...and, just for the hell of it, Lawson Craddock. We'll find out soon enough. No rosters yet for the Vuelta. That soap opera will have to wait until next month.

Finally, a round of applause for Jumbo-Visma's last, best mountain lieutenant, Sepp Kuss of Durango, Colorado. That guy can climb with the best of them, although he'll need to beef up his time trial to be a serious GC rider. Still...a really interesting new rider, perhaps the best out of the USA in years.

Finally, finally...a tip of the French beret to the irrepressible Julian Alaphilippe, who won the World Championship yesterday, the first for a French rider since 1997. He did it the way he usually does these things, with an audacious attack over the last summit and then a gritty, grinding time trial to the finish ahead of an all-star cast of chasers...Van Aert and Roglic among them. He'll look good in the rainbow jersey next year. *Salut!*



A Season-Ending Double-Header

A year ago, no one could have predicted that the Giro d'Italia and Vuelta a España would between them be the last blast of the 2020 racing season. But 2020 has been about as unpredictable as a year could be, thanks mostly to COVID-19. Actually, many scientists and at least a few governmental smart people have been saying that a pandemic of this sort was predictable; that it was out there in our future, just waiting for the right moment to launch itself. But like "The Big One"—the monster earthquake they tell us will someday flatten California—it was just out there, over the horizon, a hypothetical we didn't think about too much until it crashed our party.

So here we are, in a season that just keeps getting weirder. The world of bike racing is a tiny bump on the big pickle this year has turned out to be. But because enough of us care about it, those in charge have worked hard to provide us with the challenges and spectacle we had been missing, with most of the marquee attractions shoe-horned into the last few months of the year. The Tour de France, normally in mid-July, was moved to early September, displacing the Vuelta from its traditional spot on the calendar. The Giro, normally in May, was punted all the way to October. And with not much time left ahead of winter, a slightly shortened (18-stage) Vuelta began in late October, before the Giro was even over.

How strange it was to be trying to watch the Giro and the Vuelta at the same time! After no racing for most of the spring and summer, suddenly we had an all-you-can-eat buffet.

Last month, after the Tour, I listed a few riders lined up for the Giro who seemed to be likely favorites. I don't know why I even attempt these quasi-predictions. I get them wrong just about every time. But at least in this case I had a lot of company: no one could have predicted the final winner and podium. No way, no how. Those pre-race favorites? It was a little like the old Agatha Christie mystery, *Ten Little Indians*: one by one, stage by stage, they were bumped off.

Stage 1 was a 15-km time trial and was won by Filippo Ganna (Ineos-Grenadiers), the ITT World Champion. Second was an unheralded and more-or-less unknown Portuguese neo-pro, Joao Almeida (Deceuninck-Quickstep). Astana's Miguel Angel Lopez crashed out near the second time check when his twitchy time trial bike

got away from him. He was the first of the favorites to be bumped off.

Ganna said he would be keeping the *maglia rosa* warm for his team leader Geraint Thomas. But on Stage 3 Thomas crashed out. He was taken down by a loose water bottle under his wheel in the middle of the pack. He struggled to the stage finish but was later found to have a fractured pelvis and his Giro was over. That's the second of the pre-race favorites gone and perhaps the rider most likely to have won it all. His departure was significant not only because he was gone but because of how it changed the race tactics for the powerful Ineos team. More about that later.

While most of the press was focused on Thomas' demise, Joao Almeida finished that stage with the other presumptive GC favorites and, thanks to his good time in the ITT, took over the leader's jersey. I don't think anyone expected Almeida to win the Giro—he didn't—but he did a yeoman job of protecting the jersey, through hilltop finishes, sprint finishes, a time trial, and even at least one crash, all the way through Stage 18. 16 days in pink for a kid in his first big tour.

The next of the ten little indians to be bumped off was Michelton-Scott's Simon Yates. He was not taken out in a crash but was yet one more of the millions around the world to test positive for the virus. The test result came back between Stages 7 and 8. So say goodbye to another favorite and hello to a new player at the Giro: the virus. Many riders and staff were tested on the first rest day between Stages 9 and 10 and the results were not good. Seven positive tests, including ones for Steven Kruijswijk (Jumbo-Visma)—yet another pre-race favorite—and Michael Matthews (Sunweb). That precipitated the withdrawals of the entire Jumbo-Visma and Michelton-Scott teams.

At that point the entire Giro was hanging by a thread, with many arguing to call it off immediately. But the organizers dug in their heels and vowed to continue. In the end, their confidence—or their stubbornness—was rewarded and there weren't any more crucial COVID problems for the duration.

Meanwhile, the race slogged along...

Almeida remained in first place and the supposed GC big shots were not doing much to distinguish themselves. Wilco Kelderman (Sunweb) was in second, within a minute. Vincenzo Nibali (Trek-Segafredo) was still in the hunt at about two minutes. Jakob Fuglsang (Astana) was more than four minutes back and pretty

much toast. That accounts for all that was left of the pre-race faves. Based on past *palmarés*, one of these guys was going to eventually take control and get things sorted out. But this wasn't about past performances; it was about what you can do right now, today, in this Giro. It was time for another episode of New Kids on the Block.

Stage 15—a mountaintop finish—was won by Tao Geoghegan Hart (Ineos) with Wilco Kelderman two seconds behind and Wilco's faithful mountain lieutenant, Jai Hindley, another two seconds back. Almeida dug deep to limit his losses and came in 37 seconds back. He kept his *maglia rosa* but his lead was down to :15. Hindley moved up to third and Geoghegan Hart to fourth. So who are these guys...the Australian Hindley and the Brit Geoghegan Hart? The latter has made a few splashes in the past couple of years—most notably in last year's Tour. But I have to admit I had never heard of Hindley until this stage finish.

Geoghegan Hart's steady climb up the standings dates back to the departure of his team leader Geraint Thomas after Stage 3. His assignment had been to work for Thomas but with his leader gone he was free to move about the peloton. Ineos has been a strong team for a long time. They didn't just fold up when Thomas tanked. They recalibrated their assets and options and carried on. He picked up a little time with an attack on Stage 9. Did a respectable time trial on Stage 14. And then popped this big surprise on Stage 15. Hindley's presence near the top was due to his good work in aid of team leader Kelderman...escorting him up all the hills and simply hanging around at the front each day, mostly unnoticed.

Nothing much changed with another mountain finish on Stage 16. All the top guns finished together. The big changes came with the next mountain finish, Stage 18. This included the ascent of the massive Stelvio before a descent to the valley and one last climb to Lago di Cancano. On the ginormous climb over the Stelvio, Geoghegan Hart and Hindley showed their youthful heels to all the other hopefuls. Sunweb's game plan for the day was for Hindley not to support his team leader Kelderman but instead to shadow Geoghegan Hart. So the two new kids dropped Kelderman and set off on their own *mano a mano* race to the finish with Kelderman chugging along behind, solo, for many, many miles. (Important footnote: Geoghegan Hart's Ineos teammate Rohan Dennis was with them and helped to power them away from any chasers. He faded right at

the end but until then he was the engine driving their little train.) Hindley won the two-up sprint and—even-
tually—Kelderman soldiered in close enough behind
them to finally take the leader's jersey away from
the plucky Almeida. Hindley was now in second and
Geoghegan Hart in third.

Stage 20 was the last summit finish and Stage 21—the
last day—was a third time trial. The pandemic played a
role once again on Stage 20: the route was supposed to
venture over the border into France but with new cases
spiking, France said, “Sorry, go away!” So the route
was hastily reconfigured to stay in Italy. It was probably
not quite as hard as the original stage would have been
but was still pretty tough. In a repeat of the scenario
on Stage 18, Rohan Dennis powered his teammate
Geoghegan Hart and Hindley up and away from every-
one else—including Kelderman—and delivered them
to within 1500 meters of the finish line in Sestriere.
Kelderman couldn't keep up and eventually finished
1:35 down. This time Geoghegan Hart won the two-up
sprint and with the bonus seconds factored in, he and
Hindley ended up in an exact tie...first time in the long
history of Grand Tours that two riders have entered the
final stage exactly tied. Wow!



Filippo Ganna
won the final time
trial to complete a
TT trifecta—win-
ning all three
of them—and
Geoghegan Hart
finished :39 ahead
of Hindley to win
the overall. Kel-
derman ended
up third at 1:29
and the never-
give-up Almeida

was fourth. Vinnie Nibali ended up seventh and admit-
ted there has been a “generational change” in recent
races...graciously saluting the new kids and implicitly
suggesting his era may be over. So, yet another Grand
Tour victory for the Ineos team and yet another Grand
Tour victory for a British rider. How many teams could
lose their team leader on Stage 3 and still go home
with the big prize? And with a rider who's never come
within a sniff of a Grand Tour podium before? This goes
a long way to salvaging the season for Ineos after their
big meltdown at the Tour.

But wait...there's more...

On October 20, while Jan Tratnik was winning Stage 16
of the Giro d'Italia, Primož Roglič was winning Stage
1 of the Vuelta a España. That right there is a first: two
Grand Tours going on simultaneously. What was also
at least a little unusual was having a Grand Tour begin
with a fairly substantial uphill finish on the first stage.
(Actually, there was a brief, mildly downhill run to the
line but that was preceded by a husky Cat 1 climb: 2.5
miles at 9%.) But in this goofy season, nothing is nor-
mal. The Vuelta has become known for its hilly profiles
and in that respect this one ran true to form: seven
significant uphill finishes. plus a time trial with a nasty
uphill finish, plus at least two more “sprint” stages that
had short but punchy uphill finishes...all crammed
into just 18 stages.

With two Grand Tours going on at the same time and
with both of them following close on the heels of the
Tour de France, there were opportunities for other
riders—new riders perhaps—to grab some of the glory.
But there were Tour riders doubling up here as well,
most notably Primož Roglič for Jumbo-Visma and
Richard Carapaz for Ineos-Grenadiers. Each was sup-
ported by a strong team. Roglič had most of his Tour
team back, including Tom Dumoulin and Sepp Kuss.
Carapaz had Chris Froome as his wing man. Initially
it was assumed that Froome would be the team leader
but in the event, he was still recovering from his ter-
rible crash of 2019 and was not really a factor except
as a rather high-priced *domestique* for Carapaz. Other
likely faves? Enric Mas and Alejandro Valverde (Movi-
star), Dan Martin (Israel-Start-Up Nation). With hind-
sight, we can say we should have included Hugh Carthy
(EF) as a major player. We didn't expect that one.

So Roglič took Stage 1 and the leader's jersey. He
kinda, sorta had the notion of keeping it throughout
the tour but it didn't quite work out that way. He did
end up wearing it on the last day in Madrid but he lost
it a couple of times and had to win it back. Along the
way he won four stages and, most of the time, looked
like the strongest rider on the strongest team. But as
we learned about this very good rider at the Tour, he
is human and his team is not invincible. To my mind,
the fact that he is not in fact bestriding the world like a
colossus makes his triumphs all the more impressive.

Roglič was followed over the line on that first stage by
all the premier GC riders. Thanks to bonus seconds,
he led Carapaz by :05 and the rest by a little more. On
Stage 2 he finished second, winning a bunch sprint

among those same GC favorites, grabbing a few more bonus seconds to pad his lead to :09 over Martin and :11 over Carapaz. (The old adage that every second counts is worth remembering here.) Martin, Roglic, and Carapaz finished 1-2-3 on the next stage—an uphill finish—and with the various bonus seconds it was now Roglic first with Martin at :05 and Carapaz at :13. Mas and Carthy were just a few more seconds back.

It was status quo through a couple of sprint and breakaway stages but things got shaken up a bit on Stage 6, another big summit finish, this one in the rain. Roglic and his whole team managed to make a hash out of the simple task of getting rain jackets from their team car and putting them on, and while they were thus occupied, dropping off the lead, Carapaz and his always lethal Ineos team attacked, bombing down a rain-slick descent at scary speeds. By the time Roglic and teammates finally managed to get back on—near the base of the final climb—they were half-exhausted and didn't have a lot of juice for that last big ascent. Behind the remnants of a breakaway, Martin, Carthy, and Carapaz all took time out of Roglic and when they were all back in their buses, drying off, it was Carapaz first, Carthy at :18, Martin at :20, and Roglic clear down to fourth at :30. Mas and Valverde lost even more time.

Roglic got some of that back on Stage 8, the next of the big summit finishes, winning the stage with Carapaz, Martin, Carthy, and Mas struggling and straggling in a little way behind. With bonus seconds added in, it was now Carapaz first, Roglic at :13, Martin at :28, Carthy at :44, and Mas at an increasingly distant 1:54.

The Stage 10 finish was one of my favorite moments of the Vuelta. It was officially listed as a sprint finish but this was one of those “sprints” that had a wicked stinger in its tail: the final mile was uphill at almost 7%! Roglic won another stage here and he did it with both good legs and smarts. Midway up that last ramp, Carapaz launched an attack...put himself out in the wind on his own and pretty much blew himself up well before the line. Meanwhile, Roglic stayed cozy in the pack—near the front but not on the front—until that last possible moment and then showed an impressive sprint out of the group to take it. Carapaz ended up three seconds back, so with Roglic's 10-second bonus for winning, the two ended up equal on time. Martin and Carthy ended up at :25 and :51 respectively. Frankly, it didn't look like a full three-second gap to me but that's how the *commissaires* called it. Whatever the timing, it was a bold and brassy move and it paid off.

Now we arrive at the queen stage of this or any other Vuelta: the super steep finish atop Alto de l'Angrilu, frequently called the most feared climb in the world of pro cycling...many pitches on the high side of 20%. We've seen it in past Vueltas about every other year but this one felt a little different because of a very sparse crowd on those nasty walls (thanks to Covid restrictions). Usually it's an insane mosh pit like Alpe d'Huez. Crowds or no, the road was still there and still brutal to the nth degree. Here again, Roglic looked vaguely like a mere mortal. First Mas attacked and when the other top guns saw that Roglic was laboring a bit they all smelled blood and went after him. Carapaz attacked and then Carthy came around them all and made the defining move, stomping along in his big ring on a freakin' 20% wall. He won the stage, with Mas and Carapaz at :16 and Roglic, Kuss, and Martin at :26. So Carapaz went back into the lead over Roglic by :10, with Carthy now at :32 and Martin at :35. What saved Roglic's Vuelta was Sepp Kuss pacing him up those last, nastiest pitches. Kuss could have probably won the stage...his climbing up to that point looked so effortless. But he stuck with his team leader and shepherded him home.

After a rest day they had their only time trial: 21 miles with the final mile uphill at 9%. On paper at least, Roglic was the best time trialer in the field. But that course had a spooky resemblance to the final time trial at the Tour de France, the one that was his undoing. However, this time he did not have to contend with Tadej Pogacar and he won it, one slim second ahead of young American Will Barta. Carthy was the next GC hopeful at :25 and Carapaz was at :49. So now the standings were Roglic first, Carapaz at :39 and Carthy at :47.

In theory, the only remaining decisive stage would be 17, the last big summit finish before the final promenade into Madrid. But Roglic pulled a little rabbit out of his hat on Stage 16, a hilly stage but with a flat, fast finish that would likely end in a bunch sprint. And so it did, although some of the most hardcore sprinters were culled from the herd by the hills. Nevertheless, it was a fast field sprint and Roglic snuck in amongst the sprinters and took second place, gaining a few more bonus seconds. You have to love that kind of racing: finding opportunities to pip your competitors and gain a little advantage. It's the kind of thing I imagine Eddy Merckx or Bernard Hinault would have done.

And in the end, on that last summit finish to la Covatil-

2020 Racing Wrap-up

la, he needed just about all the seconds he had in hand (:45). Although this final climb was not as monstrous as Angliru, it was still a big, hard-ass climb and the way things played out among the chief protagonists was similar. A breakaway would scoop up any bonus seconds while down the hill the same top riders were measuring each other until, with about two miles to go, Carthy and Carapaz started attacking Roglic. Kuss was still there, as well as Mas. But for once Kuss didn't have the legs to pull Roglic to the finish. Carapaz made the strongest move and went clear, just hammering his brains out to try and erase Roglic's :45 advantage. He almost did it but Roglic buried himself to hang on and came across the line :21 behind Carapaz, leaving his lead at a meager :24. He bent but he did not break.

Final podium: Roglic first, Carapaz at :24 and Carthy — the real revelation of this Vuelta—at :47. Roglic was the reigning champion at the Vuelta and he defended the *maillot rojo* well. He didn't crush the competition but he was just a little bit better when it mattered.

Think back to all the places where a few seconds changed hands among the eventual podium. Roglic's biggest single haul was his :49 over Carapaz in the time trial. Aside from that it was just nibbles here and there, plus or minus bonus seconds. Sooo close! Then again, his winning margin of :24 was only :15 less than Tao Geoghegan Hart's winning margin at the Giro. Lots of close racing this year. That's the way we like it.

After all the trouble and turmoil of this grim year, it was amazing that the riders and teams and promoters managed to pull off all three of the year's great stage races. We've been through a grinder lately, so it was nice to finally have these moments of high drama in our favorite sport to divert us from our personal and collective difficulties. Who knows what next year will bring? For now, we can be happy with what we've been given.



December is the month when I do my traditional end-of-the-season racing wrap-up. At least it is when I don't do it in November or January. This year it's December. In recent years I have packaged this retrospective as a Top Ten list, ranking the best riders. Those are always fun, for me anyway.

However, with 2020 being such a strange year, all topsy-turvy and ass-backward, I'm not sure I can organize it into anything as simple and linear as a countdown. Numerous stage races and one-day races were cancelled because of the pandemic, so we don't have our usual big batch of results to study. Not so easy to assign rankings based on such an abbreviated body of work.

So this time around I'm just going to toss a few names out there, look at who did what, and let you—and history—decide. The order in which I toss out the names may suggest a sort of ranking, even without numbers assigned. I can't help that. I'm just trying to make the point that we don't have enough data to draw definitive conclusions.

Honorable Mention

Into the Honorable Mention basket go a few riders who almost did good things this year...almost grabbed the brass ring.

Richie Porte, 35, Australia, Trek-Segafredo



Porte's pro career spans 13 years now with more to come: a new contract with Ineos-Grenadiers for next year. He has flirted with greatness year after year but has almost always come up a little short. This year he won the Tour Down Under in Australia—back before the virus—and then gritted

his way onto the podium at the Tour de France—3rd place—by doggedly clinging to the heels of the leaders on all the big mountain stages and then throwing down the time trial of his life on Stage 20...his first Grand Tour podium after so many years of being so close.

Jai Hindley, 24, Australia, Team Sunweb

Unlike his countryman Porte, Jai Hindley is a new face



in the pros. He has had a pro contract since 2016 but hadn't done much until this year when he won the Herald Sun Tour in Australia—another pre-virus event—and then really opened our eyes by taking the leader's jersey at the Giro d'Italia with just one stage to go, only to lose it in the time trial on the final stage, finishing second

at :39. In theory, he was riding shotgun for his team leader, Wilco Kelderman, but in the end, he was a little bit better than his boss. Was this a one-and-done or can we expect to see more from him in the years ahead?

Wilco Kelderman, 28, Netherlands, Team Sunweb

Here's another rider who's been around for quite a few years, often nearly doing big things. Five times in the top ten at Grand Tours, including a 4th at the 2018 Vuelta and now 3rd at this year's Giro di'Italia...which is what gets him on this list. He wore the *maglia rosa* for two

days before his teammate Hindley took it away from him. He was the fastest among the GC favorites in that final-stage time trial, so if things had played out a little differently on a couple of the big mountain stages... who knows?



Hugh Carthy, 26, UK, EF Pro Cycling

Carthy is on this list because he finished 3rd overall at the Vuelta a España and won the monster mountain stage to Alto de l'Angrilu. He's another rider who has been flirting with fame for a few years but never quite putting it all together, until now. Not only is he killer in the hills, he's a better-than-average time trial

rider. That's a good combination. With some good team support, he will probably be stepping onto other im-

portant podiums in years to come.

The Big Boys

These are riders who really jump out at us as having done important things in 2020...at least a step up from Honorable Mention.

Wout van Aert, 26, Belgium, Jumbo-Visma and Mathieu van der Poel, 25, Netherlands, Alpecin-Fenix

It's probably overly simplistic to lump these two young riders together. But they are so similar: their riding styles, their strengths, their trajectories through the sport. Both started out in the punishing winter discipline of Cyclo-Cross and both became masters at that craft. Wout van Aert was World Champion in 2016, '17, and '18; Mathieu van der Poel was World Champion in 2015, '19, and '20.



Both have now come over to road racing and are doing good things. This year, Van der Poel won the BinckBank Tour stage race, including winning Stage 5. He won Stage 7 at Tirreno-Adriatico. Won the Belgian National Road Championship. Best of all, he

won the monument Tour of Flanders, just nipping Van Aert in a two-up sprint. All of that landed him 4th in the season-long UCI standings.



Van Aert did perhaps a little better. He won the Belgian Time Trial National Championship. Won Stages 5 and 7 at the Tour de France while working tirelessly for Jumbo-Visma and Primož Roglič. He won the Points classification and Stage 1 at the Dauphiné. He was 2nd in the World Championship Road Race and Time Trial and at the Tour of Flanders. He won the classic Strade

Bianche and won the monument Milano-Sanremo, outsprinting Julian Alaphilippe to the line. He ended up 3rd in the UCI World Rankings.

Julian Alaphilippe, 28, France, Deceuninck-Quick Step



The Great French Hope didn't have quite the season he did last year, when he ended up 2nd in the UCI World Rankings and 3rd on my Top Ten list. With so many lost dates on the calendar, he didn't have many opportunities to do his thing. He won Brabantse Pijl and Stage 2 at the Tour de France, which got him into

the *maillot jaune* for three stages. And he was 2nd at Milano-Sanremo. All of that collectively would probably not have earned him a place on this list, but he did one big thing right at the end of the year that made his season: he won the World Championship Road Race. My sense is that Alaphilippe, van Aert, and van der Poel are going to be the favorites in almost any classics or monuments they enter for the next few years.

Richard Carapaz, 27, Ecuador, Ineos Grenadiers



Carapaz switched over from Movistar to Ineos this year and was expected to be one of their major players in the Grand Tours. It didn't work out quite as well as he and the team had hoped for but was still not too bad. He was supposedly co-leader with Egan Bernal at the Tour de France but he fell

down the standings early and was never a factor, finishing a quiet 13th. But he redeemed himself somewhat with a battling 2nd at the Vuelta. He gave eventual winner Primož Roglič a very stiff challenge...some of the best racing of the year.



Tao Geoghegan Hart, 25, UK, Ineos Grenadiers

This is not someone we would have expected to be on this list. But he won the Giro d'Italia and how can you argue with that? That's pretty much all he did this year but it's enough. He was supposed to be riding in support of Geraint Thomas but Thomas crashed out on Stage 3 and that allowed the

younger Brit to strike out on his own. He climbed with the best and time trialed with the best and it added up to a GC win. With Carapaz and Bernal and Thomas on the same very strong team for 2021, we have to wonder who will be the team leaders.

And Finally...

Top of the heap: two Slovenians...but who's number one? I'm going to punt and say: who knows? If you count the Tour de France as the ultimate prize and if you count head-to-head competition as the best metric, then Pogacar comes out on top. But a case can be made for Roglič as well. I'm glad I don't have to decide.

Tadej Pogacar, 22, Slovenia, UAE Team Emirates



This *wunderkind* burst onto the pro scene last year with an overall win at the Tour of California and then 3rd place at the Vuelta. This year his signal accomplishment was winning the Tour de France with that storming time trial on the last real day of racing...all well documented elsewhere and all of it leaving

the cycling world agog. Youngest winner in 111 years. Best Young Rider jersey. Mountains jersey. He also won the Volta a la Comunitat Valenciana, winning Stages 2 and 4 and the Best Young Rider jersey. Second overall at the UAE Tour, winning Stage 5 and the Best Young Rider jersey. Third at Liege-Bastogne-Liege. Fourth overall at the Dauphiné. First in his National Time Trial, beating Roglič. Second in his National Road Race, behind Roglič. That's quite a year, and it placed him 2nd in the UCI World Tour Rankings.



Primož Roglič, 30, Slovenia, Jumbo-Visma

It may be unfortunate that the enduring image of Primož Roglič in 2020 will be the final moments of his time trial at the Tour de France: utterly

shattered, aero helmet askew, drooling, exhausted, etc. But that prime time collapse doesn't accurately represent his very good season. So let's get the TdF out of the way first. With the exception of that final meltdown, it was impressive. He won Stage 4 and held the yellow jersey from Stage 9 through 19 (the fateful, fatal time trial). All good except for having one uncharacteristically bad day in the ITT. To his everlasting credit, he picked himself up off the pavement after that time trial and congratulated his friend on his amazing victory. Classy.

So okay, only 2nd at the Tour. But then consider the rest of his season. He won his National Road Race, ahead of Pogacar. Finished second in his National Time Trial, behind Pogacar. Won the Vuelta a España, winning Stages 1, 8, 10, and 13 (the only time trial). Also won the Points jersey. Won the Tour de l'Ain, winning Stages 2 and 3 and the Points jersey. First at the monument Liege-Bastogne-Liege. Won Stage 2 at the Dauphiné. So...1st at the Vuelta and 2nd at the Tour: the only rider to stand on two Grand Tour podiums this year. That's quite a year as well, and it placed him 1st in the UCI World Tour Rankings.

As noted above, in this truncated, misshapen season, it's hard to crunch the numbers and get a good read on what just happened, at least in itty bitty detail. But in broad outline, it's easy to see that these two riders are the pick of the litter. Which of them is best? Maybe let's wait until the end of 2021 and revisit that question.

There are many recent "heads of state" who didn't make this list, including six out of ten on my Top Ten list from 2019. Alejandro Valverde, Chris Froome, Geraint Thomas, Egan Bernal, Tom Dumoulin, Jakob Fuglsang, Miguel Angel Lopez, Vincenzo Nibali, Enric Mas, Nairo Quintana, Mikel Landa, Thibaut Pinot, Simon and Adam Yates... Injuries took out some of them, either injuries incurred in races this year or injuries from prior years not yet fully rehabbed. In other cases there aren't any excuses except, for some, the implacable march of time.

With the exception of Richie Porte, the average age of the riders on my list of top performers is 26. They're all in their prime or haven't even reached their best yet—their hypothetical best anyway. Some of the riders noted in the prior paragraph are still young and may have better seasons ahead than they had this year. Others are near retirement or at least are looking at a future of diminishing returns. Some will be changing teams, with all the new dynamics that may entail.

Some will work their way back from nagging injuries and others may not. And so on.

We have two or maybe three months before we begin to see how things shake out in 2021, not least with respect to where we are with the virus and possible vaccines and some return to normalcy. Figure the whole Spring campaign will still be tangled up in health restrictions. But we at least have reason to hope we'll get past this and back to a world more-or-less the way we like it...including all the races we so enjoy. Hang in there. It's going to get better.

Seeing as how I have all this blank space in this column, it might be a good spot to add a few observations about racing reports. Looking back over these 25 years of columns, I can see I didn't used to do quite so many as I have come to be doing in the later years. My second column ever was about Lance Armstrong and his first Tour de France victory, but overall, there weren't as many, back in the day.

I think I mentioned, in the first volume's intro, that I had worked—briefly—as a sports reporter for a local newspaper in Portland. I remember how difficult this cub reporter found it to say the same things over and over about basketball and football games without all the reports sounding exactly alike. In transcribing and tidying up these race reports, I've noticed certain phrases cropping up repeatedly...

Some variation on, "with the benefit of 20-20 hindsight" is a classic. So too is a team domestique being "let off the leash" to race more aggressively when his team leader abandons. What the repetition tells me, aside from my being not all that original in my narratives, is that the races tend to be more-or-less the same; that in spite of the racers changing over the years, the same general trajectories occur, year after year, one race to the next.

When I wrote these race reviews, immediately after the exciting races had reached their conclusions, I was so jacked up on the thrills and tension and suspense...it was so special...and yet, reading them now, years later, I can see they're not all that interesting. Or at least they don't make for interesting, entertaining, thought-provoking copy.

I will keep writing them, though. I love the sport and love "talking" with my readers about it. Maybe I can work a little harder at finding new ways to say the same old things.

A Happier New Year

Happy New Year...? Is that really the right salutation this time around? If you're reading this anytime close to its publication date of January 1, 2021, it will be the obvious and obligatory greeting. Taking it at face value, we can at least hope that 2021 will be a happier year than 2020. Which isn't asking for much, 2020 having been about as dismal as a year could be.

This is ostensibly a column about cycling and I will work cycling into the conversation eventually. But everything that happened this past year, including our bike lives, has to be filtered through the lens of current events. It is not the remit of this column to descend into partisan political rants or even the general news of the day. I get that. I appreciate that cycling is supposed to be non-partisan. I have made that point in other forums, including my club's chat list, whenever someone starts venting about this or that political hot button. In theory at least, being out on the bike, rolling through this wonderful world of wonders, with the oxygen and blood and prana coursing through our bodies, all of that stress about the latest news and stews...that's all supposed to be rinsed right out of our systems. And yet...

And yet, it's difficult to take our biking out of the context of what has been the overarching reality of this past year: the plague that has beset us, far and wide. (The pandemic itself is not political. The virus doesn't choose sides. But how the virus is being dealt with has political import. More about that later.) Things are not normal. We've had to cancel all our pay-to-ride events—our crits and centuries, doubles and brevets. We've had to postpone—for at least a year—any plans we had for touring in far off, exotic places. Most of us, if we have half a lick of sense and pay attention to the doctors and scientists, have pretty well given up group rides of any sort. Weekend club rides are a distant memory. After-ride burritos and beers are ancient history. The whole social component of our rides is on hold for the duration.

We are all buoyed up at present by the roll-out of two vaccines, with two more a month or so away. The timeline for getting these vaccines up to speed has really been amazing—call it a Christmas miracle if you want. It has given us all a huge psychological boost, to think that the end may be in sight. But as others have reminded us, while we may now be able to see the light

at the end of the tunnel, we are still in the tunnel and will be for at least a few more months. That tired old bromide about it always being darkest just before the dawn really rings true right now. Even as we're seeing endless news loops of needles spiking into shoulders, the numbers of infected and hospitalized and dying just keep on keeping on. The experts predicted a dark winter and we are in it, right up to our facemasks.

So while we may be able to see a day in the not-too-distant future when we're past this and life is back to something approximating normal, we are not there yet. It's going to take patience and perseverance and strength of character to ride this out for the next few months. Instant gratification isn't on the menu. Tough it out; settle in for a long slog. I was part of the lead team in organizing two week-long tours in 2020, one in May and one in August. Both were of course called off. At this point, I am tentatively, cautiously, beginning to make reservations for the tour in August...to reboot it around those same dates. But the tour slated for last May is being moved to September because we don't think we'll be out of the woods by May. For the larger world of recreational cycling, I doubt we will see too many events back on the calendar before mid-summer. The whole spring schedule, perhaps the most fertile and festive time of the year for weekend warriors, will still be null and void. What the pro racing scene looks like this year remains to be seen. I'm glad I'm not one of the people tasked with figuring that out. Just rescheduling two group tours is headache enough for me.

Meanwhile we carry on, hoping for brighter days ahead but weathering the unfolding catastrophe day by day, week by week. I've used this space in recent months to discuss various ways we can tilt the odds slightly in our favor in the battle with the wily virus. Social distancing...that is, no group rides with those outside our households. Giving other riders and pedestrians a wide berth when we meet up out on the roads and trails. Thinking twice about refilling water bottles at public restrooms or fountains (in other words, sticking to shorter rides that can be done on two bottles). And above all, wearing masks. My observations still reckon mask compliance among cyclists as pretty poor. No better than 50%. That still drives me a little batty. I don't understand it. I doubt it's political posturing for most of the riders I see: some hare-brained notion that the virus is a hoax or that a mask is an infringement of our liberty, etc. I am more inclined to think most non-users simply find masks inconvenient or un-

comfortable or perhaps even a violation of some style aesthetic. I don't know, really. It's a puzzle. But I want to add just one more thought on that topic...

During this year's Tour de France, the crowds along the roads were not what they normally are. Organizers imposed restrictions on how people could access the routes. So no, not the crazy mob scenes we are used to. But still fairly large crowds. On all the most important mountain finishes, the most decisive sections of road were packed solid with spectators. I watched all those stages first thing in the morning in real time, then, in a few cases, again in replay in the evening.

The second time around, knowing what had happened already, I allowed my attention to stray away from the racers and take in other details. And one thing that struck me was that mask compliance among the spectators was virtually 100%. I really started watching the crowds. There might have been one person without a mask for every thousand fans. Presumably, with all the travel restrictions in place, most of the fans out there were French. The French are fiercely protective of their liberty. After all, *Liberté* is part of their national motto. And yet these staunchly libertarian citizens had no problem donning their masks when in a crowd. So why is it that so many Americans still see masks as a problem rather than a solution? If the French can manage it, why can't we? As I say, I don't get it.

Finally, back to the matter of politics. I am going to adhere, as best I can, to the stricture of not turning this into a political rant. But to ignore the topic entirely would be to ignore the elephant in the room. All I will say is this: what a thoroughly nutty fruitcake this year has offered up with respect to politics...to the wildly divergent points of view that divide us. I have my own theories about how we got to this polarized place but am less certain how we can get back from this hot mess to anything like comity or civility or common ground. Anyway...the only reason that politics earns any ink in this column is this: just as we are still in the midst of this dark winter with respect to the pandemic, so too are we still deep in the mire of political wrangling and probably will be for at least the next month. It's hard to predict how it will play out. Perhaps it will all fizzle out into a few whimpers and feeble squabbles. Then again, it may blow up into something so cataclysmic our lives will never be the

same again. As of January 1, I have no idea how it will unfold. As is the case with the pandemic, it feels like we're heading in the right direction but it's going to take some patience and pluck to chug on through to that better place.

So keep your head down and keep your chain lubed. Put on your winter kit and get out there on the back roads, rolling out the miles and cooking the worries out of your troubled soul. Let the spinning cranks and wheels be your therapy—your yoga—for getting past this craziest and cruelest season. Hang in there: happier days are just around the bend.



Talk about 20-20 hindsight! That last observation about polarizing politics was written one week before the attempted coup at the capitol. Three years later, we're still reeling from that insurrection. What's the old Chinese curse? "May you live in interesting times!"

We did run one small tour in August but the second, more ambitious and complex tour had to be postponed until August of 2022. There will be a report on that one when we get there.

Dream Globally; Meander Locally

Last month I said this about the coming weeks, mostly with respect to politics and current events: “It’s hard to predict how it will play out. Perhaps it will all fizzle out into a few whimpers and feeble squabbles. Then again, it may blow up into something so cataclysmic our lives will never be the same again.”

So...whaddya think? Feeble squabbles or cataclysm? It was an interesting month, for sure. I’ll let the historians—and the FBI—decide the full scope of what just went down. But at the moment, in spite of some deeply disturbing events along the way, it feels as if we’re trending toward better things, brighter days. We live in hope.

And in spite of the struggles and quarrels of little men, the planets keep to their appointed rounds and the seasons move along. We’re well past the darkest days of Winter—literally as well as figuratively—and we can see the sun shining somewhere ahead. (For the record, it’s raining in Northern California as I write this and the forecast is for more of the same for at least the next week. And thank goodness for that...our drought-parched world so needs the rain.)

But after our thirsty world has soaked up as much water as the weather gods will grant us, we’ll be ready for sunshine, dry roads, and the promise of a new season that will eventually wobble back to some facsimile of how our lives used to be...something we can recognize and embrace as “normal.” In anticipation of that happy tomorrow, I am ready to roll out some miles and to try and shed those extra few pounds that snuck in around my middle during these long months of lockdown.

For the time being, I’m still going to adhere to my cautious approach: keep the rides close to home and relatively short. Bigger rides in more distant venues await. Be patient. We’ll get there soon. Meanwhile, juice up your local rides with some little embellishments to keep them fresh and to keep you motivated and energized. One way I find to enhance and mildly expand my local rides is exploring dead-ends...out-&-backs.

Back in May of 2002, I banged out a column in this space titled *In Praise of Out-&-Backs*. It appeared a long time ago and maybe you missed it. I just reread it and I think it still says most of the things I want to say about riding up and down little roads to nowhere. I won’t drag out all those talking points again.

But the general idea of the value of out-&-backs came to me—again—during this season of rides close to home. Close to home and often solo or in very small groups. For example, a basic ride for me from Sebastopol to Healdsburg is about 40 miles via the typical Westside-Eastside loop. I can make it a 50-mile loop by heading up Dry Creek Road to Lambert Bridge and back south on Dry Creek, etc. But I’ve done both those loops sooooo many times. It’s hard to get excited about the same old same old, even if it’s the same old cycling in paradise.

So, how to add a little spice...a new wrinkle? One way is out-&-backs. They’re out there in their dozens and most have at least some interest and perhaps some challenge. Add a 20-mile round trip on Mill Creek to a basic Westside-Eastside loop and we’re talking serious challenge. But they don’t have to be that butch. In addition to all the public dead-ends, there are numerous paved roads that are glorified driveways: private but open to the public.

If you never think to explore these, you might be surprised at how many miles of good riding are hiding in plain sight in your backyard. In the so-called Wine Country of the North Bay, winery driveways are a classic case in point. The wealthy winery owner builds his picturesque chateau—with tasting room—way back up the hill, nestled in among his many acres of vines, and paves a handsome approach road to get there. If the tasting room is open to the public, so will the road be. Usually the pavement will be better than the nearby roads and the scenery will be above average as well...all the best scenery money can buy. If you live in or near Napa or Sonoma Counties, you will find an almost inexhaustible supply of such spurs off your main drags.

I’m not going to entangle myself in the question of whether winery tasting rooms welcome cyclists (who can’t buy a case of wine and take it with them on their bikes). I’ve lost track of the current state of that market and I can’t recall the last time I actually visited a tasting room. Back in the ’70s, my wife contributed design work and graphics to a book called *Grape Expeditions* which was about biking along the roads of the wine country on what amounted to drinking sprees...stopping at every winery for as many free tots as they would pour. The cover of the book featured a ten-speed with a wine bottle in the *bidon* cage. I’m pretty sure those days are long gone. I’m not suggesting your rides include any boozing at all. Just meanders up and back along the pretty driveways.

Two recent explorations of such driveways are what got me thinking about this column. Both are out around Jimtown in Alexander Valley, just north of Healdsburg. They are far from the only such candidates for little voyages of discovery but they're good examples of what's out there. One is the access road to Jordan Winery. It's about a mile long and gains around 200' of elevation on the way up to the handsome winery complex...a moderate climb that then turns into a zippy descent on the way back to Alexander Valley Road. The other is the drive to Stonestreet Winery in the heart of Alexander Valley. This one is also around a mile, one way, but is almost dead level with just the slightest false flat feeling. The entire drive is lined with a colonnade of handsome sycamore trees, looking like a country lane in Provence.

The day I did the Stonestreet driveway, I was lucky enough to happen upon a swarm of starlings. Have you ever seen these birds swarming? It's quite a sight: several thousand birds all flying in a massive ball, like a school of fish, all turning and wheeling in response to some group-mind we barely comprehend. Such a swarm is called a Murmuration. What a wonderful word and what a wonderful—really, almost a holy—phenomenon to encounter. I've seen such swarms before but what made this one even more interesting was that a red-tail was gliding across the sky nearby and a mini-murmuration of about 50 starlings split off from the main mass and took out after the hawk, flying along in a little ball, directly above and behind the big bird as a self-appointed posse of air marshals.

You never know what you're going to happen upon when you take your bike out for a spin. We may head out for the exercise or to blow off the fug of cabin fever, but little treats like a mumuration of starlings are the frosting on the cake...the wonderful moments that make our souls sing hosannas.

Those two driveways only add four miles total to whatever your base ride for the day was. Perhaps that's all you need—and the quantity of the miles might not be as important as the quality of the miles—but these are only two of the myriad little lanes out there, waiting for our wheels to roll along them. Before we start thinking about the big tours we can do in Tuscany or Provence or the centuries we can ride somewhere around the greater Bay Area; before we are back to doing the things we used to take for granted, consider the humble out-&-back as a stepping stone on the path to ramping up...a few little detours and a few more miles with each ride.

A Journey to the Gold Mine

So many years. So many roads. So many rides.

Gather 'round, children, while old Granddad spins you a yarn about one of those epic rides from back in some imagined golden age of cycling. I rummage around in my musty old sea chest of memories and pull out this tall tale of great things done well...or maybe not always all that well. But done, for sure.

This is not the longest nor hilliest nor hardest ride I've ever done. But a healthy ration of high hills and high heat made it a serious challenge. This is a loop out of Middletown, up in Lake County, with some big climbs in the early miles. Its main attraction is probably the run south along Morgan Valley Road and Knoxville-Berryessa Road, up and over the ridge that is home to the Homestake Gold Mine, then down the wooded canyon of Elicuera Creek to the north shore of Lake Berryessa. 85 miles and 6500' of gain.

The ride happened back in the early '90s and all of the six or eight riders on board were then in their mid-40s...too old to be serious racers but still young enough to feel like hardcore hammers, up for a big adventure. It was a Santa Rosa Cycling Club Saturday ride. Middletown is an hour's drive from Santa Rosa so not too many people showed up. I guess I must have put it on the club ride calendar. Few other members at the time would have been daft enough to list a ride that far from home and in such a remote, unknown corner of our backcountry. I think I was inspired to list this loop because of reading about it in one of Bodfish's books on back-road rambling.

It was scheduled for the same day as the Davis Double—mid-May—and it fed its little tributary of club riders into the bigger river of Davis riders as they flowed through Middletown around midmorning. I'm not sure where our start time placed us among the Davis riders. Certainly not among the earliest, fastest riders. As fast as we imagined ourselves to be, we would have been no match for them. We were somewhere in mid-pack, back among the sturdy plodders who make up much of the Davis demographic.

Just a couple of miles past Middletown, on Big Canyon Road, there used to be a white stripe painted across the old pavement indicating the halfway point of the double: 100 miles down and 100 to go. In that mix of riders, with our fresh legs versus their 100-mile legs, we were livin' large. We took some entirely unjustified

satisfaction in whizzing past rider after rider on the ascent out of Big Canyon. Then we all bombed down Siegler Canyon and on into the little town of Lower Lake, where the Davis troops turned east and we continued south out of town onto remote Morgan Valley Road, headed for the gold mine and parts unknown.

Have you ever ridden out this way? I doubt too many of you have. It's way out there, way off the beaten path. The scenery is standard Northern California fare: oak woods and meadows, fairly rocky, with pines and redbuds here and there. What marks this out as a bit unusual is its remoteness. Aside from a few sprawling ranches, there isn't much out here, and that includes just about zero traffic. There's the gold mine too... more about that in a minute.

The road starts out easy enough but the first climb—a mile and a half—comes up almost immediately. After a steep plummet into a gorge, the big climbing challenge of the day arrives: 1200' up in three and a half miles with the steepest bits up over 15%. We already had some hefty climbing in our legs—seven steady miles out of Big Canyon and that first little hump on this road. And now, around midday, 20-plus miles into the ride, it was heating up. The day would eventually turn out to be a scorcher, flirting with triple digits. The Davis Double Saturday will do that sometimes. Not always, but often enough.

Again, not the hardest climb any of us had ever done, but it did start to tell on us. We were all working hard and a couple of guys were already struggling...already wondering if maybe they were in over their heads. The entire climb is out in full sun. We were starting to feel a bit baked, and it would only get hotter.

After lumping along over a series of little summits, around mile 29 the road finally starts to tilt downhill and it will mostly—mostly!—stay downhill for the next 23 miles. A few miles into the downhill we arrived at the Homestake Gold Mine. This is not an historic artifact from the Gold Rush. Its heyday was just a few years ago. Between 1985 and 2002, a billion dollars' worth of gold dust was extracted from big open pit mines here. Now, with the mining over, the site has become a 7000-acre natural preserve. The 300 miners who toiled here have been replaced by a small staff of ecologists working on the remediation of the

site. (Mining is often a messy and sometimes nasty business, but in this case, the mine's owners were above-average conscientious about their environmental responsibilities, and the site is in pretty good shape.) Back in the early '90s the mine was still going strong and it had the look of open-pit mines the world over...raw and scarred.

Up to this point, the road itself had been fairly standard: two wide lanes, guardrails, and good engineering, but beyond the busy activity of the mine, it lost its stripes, narrowed to one fat lane, and the paving deteriorated. As it drops down the canyon, the little road crosses Elicuera Creek many times, and several of those crossings are fords: in the wet season the stream flows over the road, rather than under it (see photo). It can be quite deep in the wetter months, almost impassible. But even if it's only damp, the surface may be slimy, a slip-n-slide for bikes. I don't think anyone slid out on the slime on this ride but it has happened to several riders on other days out there.

It really is a wonderful run down the canyon, funky pavement and slippery fords notwithstanding. After the hard climb, this is payback time, a rollicking, galloping dance. We recovered a little from the hot uphill and were mostly enjoying life. But things were about to become more interesting...

Somewhere down the canyon, where it was more grassy, wooded valley than gorge, we came upon a cattle drive clogging up the road from one side to the other, perhaps 200 head and many of those heads still with their horns in place. They were moving downhill, same as us, but at only about a mile per hour. What to



do? We decided, without really thinking it through, to just slowly ride into and through the herd and out the other side. It worked for a while. The steers gave us some room and we rolled in amongst them....but at some point a few of them became spooked by the presence of these weird critters in their pack. They started to jump and skitter and caper about, then to pick up speed. The jitters were contagious and soon enough the entire herd was in motion. Not a full stampede, but a lively, heaving mosh pit of beef on the move. If they were horses, I'd call it a canter. Holy shit!

This gives a whole new meaning to pack riding. We were jostled and knocked about and I worried about a horn in the spokes. But we all eventually elbowed our way through to the front and emerged, shaken but unharmed. And there at the front of the herd was the cowpoke in charge, looking exactly right for the part: the chaps, the boots, the spurs, the sweat-stained stetson, even the scrappy little cow dog. We all said something like, "Sorry about that!" He never said a word. Just sat his horse and gave us this flinty-eyed stare, as if to say, "What a bunch of dipshits!"

A little way along after that excitement, we decided to take a break along the creek. We were hot and tired and still only halfway round our loop. We found a pretty little spot where we could sit in the shade on the bank of the creek and soak our feet in a little pool. One fellow took off his helmet and set it down on the sand next to him. When we were ready to roll again, he put his helmet back on, only to discover it was swarming with angry ants, and then the ants were in his hair and down his neck into his jersey. It took a lot of frantic slapping and hopping about and disrobing to finally clear up that little hot mess...and a lot of laughter from the rest of us.

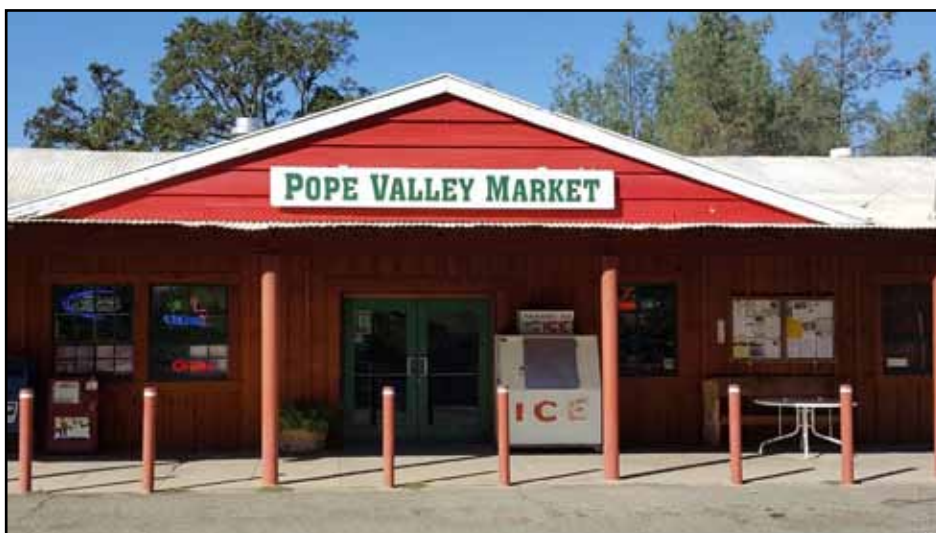
Right about then, one of the guys who was—now, for sure, in over his head—developed the mother of all quad cramps. He quite literally toppled over and landed hard on the side of the road, rolling around and screaming like his leg was being taken off with a rusty saw. Purest agony. If you've ever cramped badly on a bike ride, you can appreciate how bad it can be. (I have, just one time: it was a show-stopper.) We were half sympathetic and half worried about how the hell we could get this guy out of here, still in the middle of nowhere.

By now the day was really hot and we all began to understand we'd miscalculated the severity of this loop. None of us had enough water, not to mention any energy-mineral magic to go in the water we did have. None of us had brought enough food. We weren't bonking yet but we could see it lying in wait for us, just a few miles up the hot, hilly road. We were in trouble.

Luckily, we did find water along the north shore of Lake Berryessa around mile 50: a faucet at a little trailer park. First civilization we'd seen in miles. We were down to our last sips at that point. That saved us—or at least revived us—and allowed us to soldier on, up and over the climb from the lake on Pope Canyon Road and down into beautiful Pope Valley. Our hopes were now pinned to the food and water that would be available at the Pope Valley store at around mile 65. We got there, dragging our tail feathers but still moving...but wait...what? This was the first time we discovered something now known to most local cyclists: that store was run by Seventh Day Adventists and was closed on Saturdays. (At least it was then; that may no longer be the case.)

I remember sitting there on the front porch of the closed store, exhausted and starving, looking at the last two inches of my last Power Bar, somewhat fuzzed with pocket lint, and contemplating the 20 remaining miles still to be ridden up along Butts Canyon through the hot afternoon. The guy with the cramp—who had recovered enough to ride this far—and one other guy said they were done. Couldn't ride another mile. We'd have to slog on and drive back and pick them up. It was a pretty grim little group there, considering our prospects.

And just then, a VW bus pulled up to the store porch.



Time Trial Bikes

A man and a woman got out, took one look at us, and slid open the side door on the van. These were two volunteers from the Davis Double rest stop in Middletown, now driving home, and the entire interior of the van was packed with leftover rest stop chow...bunches of bananas, flats of strawberries, crates of melons, sandwich fixings, cookies, jugs of ice water and lemonade. It was a cornucopia of plenty...manna from heaven. We were dumbstruck, gob-smacked. Christmas in May. It didn't take us long to fall on that feast and stuff ourselves silly, then stuff our pockets as well. I don't recall that we ever got the names of these two angels but I will never forget them.

I also don't recall a thing about those final 20 miles, over the two substantial climbs and north along the flats back to Middletown. It was hot. That we know. Did we have a headwind or a tailwind? That detail has swirled down the drain of lost factoids. We were tired but not nearly as whacked as we would have been without that providential visit from the Davis volunteers.

Some of us did drive back and retrieve our two wounded warriors. One of them I've never seen since, although I know he lives only a mile from me. The other is still active in the club and now one of my oldest friends. I ran into him just last week on a ride out around Tomales.

I'm not sure why I felt the urge to trot out this old story. I had another topic in mind for this month but it will keep until April. I guess I was just reflecting on all the rides we do and have done, stretching back down the decades. And every road, every ride, brings back memories of past adventures, past sensations...mostly pleasant and some incandescent with joy and fulfillment. Also some bad days and ugly, painful, awkward moments. But as was the case with this particular ride, the bad moments are often redeemed by some wonderful miracle, like the Davis angels. Not always but often enough to keep us coming back for more.

I hope my story-telling was deft enough to keep you entertained. Perhaps it may have primed the pump of your own memories; caused you to recall some epic ride that had all sorts of ups and downs and quirks and fun embroidered into it. If you roll that bike down the road often enough and keep your heart and mind open to what's around the next bend, you're going to lay in a vast supply of such memories. Here's hoping most of your cycling memories will be more positive than otherwise.

We're now well launched into the 2021 racing season. Paris-Nice and Tirenno-Adriatico have been run, along with a few other stage races and spring classics. The season is still somewhat abbreviated by COVID constraints but a fair bit of good racing is going on. What a pleasure it is to watch serious racing again.

Off the bikes, the folks who make the rules are making news as well. The UCI has banned the so-called "super tuck" as unsafe, as well as the practice of riding with the forearms resting on the tops, as riders often do when off the front on a solo breakaway. A super tuck is when a rider—typically on a fast but not too technical descent—plops his crotch down on the top tube, ahead of the saddle, and lays his chest down right on his bars. It looks dorky but it works, providing some aerodynamic advantage. I can't off-hand recall seeing anyone crash while in a super tuck but it certainly looks like the riders would have less control, with their weight so far forward over the front wheel.

As for riding with the forearms on the tops and the hands dangling out in space, I suspect many of us have at least tried it, in emulation of what we see the pros doing. I know I have, although at this point in my creaky old cycling career, I have no interest in whatever advantage it might provide. It should be obvious it's less safe.

So, in the interest of safety, those rather sketchy practices have been taken out back and shot. You might have seen the occasional super tuck in the spring campaign but that was its swan song. As of April 15—can we call it "tucks day"?—it will be prohibited.

But here's the point of this column: if the UCI really has the safety of the riders at heart, there is one step they could take that would go a long way toward that priority: ban time trial bikes in stage races. Don't ban time trials; just the radical bikes used in TT these days.

Okay then...having thrown down that proposal, allow me to insert this disclaimer...

This idea is not original to me. I have been thinking about it for years but am not enough of an expert—in fact no sort of expert at all—to have articulated my concerns. However, an article by Nikolai Razouvaev at the PezCycling website last October helped me understand just what it was that had been niggling away at my back brain for years. Razouvaev has the credentials

to be considered an expert on this topic and pretty much everything I say about it here I am borrowing from him. If you want a better read on this, check out his piece. Think of my column as a “like” of his column or a retweeting of his premise. (*Note: Unfortunately, Pez has taken down the article.*)

I’m not a racer and never have been. I think I’ve only ever done three time trials in my life, two individual and one team. The only part of my bike life that might serve to inform my opinion here is having run aero-bars on a standard bike for several years when I was doing double centuries. I had the kind with the spring-loaded, flip-up arm rests so I could still put my hands on the tops if I wasn’t on the aero-bars. From a classic bike-aesthetics point of view, they were ugly as hell... but they certainly did work. I was fairly strong at the time—strong at least by the standards of middle-aged, mid-pack weekend warriors—and when I got on the bars and put the hammer down, I could see an immense improvement in my speed for very little extra effort. For a lot of the long and often lonely miles of doubles, they were just the ticket. But they were of course unsafe for any riding aside from more-or-less straight ahead and approximately level. Any serious climbing, descending, or cornering, and any pack riding or pacelines...forget it.

That pretty well exhausts my own expertise in the matter. But I watch the racing on TV and every so often in person and have done so since the early ’80s...and in this context since Greg Lemond strapped on his aero-bars in 1989 to snatch the Tour de France away from Laurent Fignon in the final-stage time trial. Since then the bikes used in time trials have evolved considerably and a great deal of time and skill and testing—fueled by a great deal of money—has been plowed into making them more effective at what they do best: go fast in a straight line. No one would attempt a conventional time trial these days without the best TT bike money could buy.

But when Lemond introduced the world to the advantages of his TT set-up, Fignon did not make use of the same aero-toys. So he was immediately at a disadvantage. (I remember a story I heard the next day from Dave Walters, a former Masters World Champion and a friend of Lemond. He told me he’d been on the phone with Lemond’s mechanic the day of the time trial and the mechanic related that Lemond had come to him in the morning and said, “I’m feeling really strong today. Put on a 59.” The TT course that day, from Versailles

to Paris, has a slightly downhill profile. I can well imagine Lemond turning over that big pie-tin of a gear while hunched over his clip-on bars.)

Now however, as Razouvaev points out, with everyone using the hottest aero-bikes available, everyone has Lemond’s advantage and then some. Whatever edge one guy might have had while he had the technological gadgets and the other guys didn’t, that’s all gone. Now everyone has an equal technological “advantage.” The stronger rider will still win but not because of his bike.

Meanwhile, all the disadvantages of aero-bikes remain, and they are still playing an outsize role in racing, and not in a positive way. The far-forward weight shift of the bikes makes them inherently unstable. Disk wheels are nasty in crosswinds. The brakes they put on those bikes are semi-useless. All in all, they simply don’t handle very well. Plus they suck on climbs, so we see those keystone cops routines—like at last year’s Tour de France—of swapping over to a standard bike for a climb. But because of their obvious advantages during the more conventional sort of time trial miles, everyone has to use them. It’s like being addicted to a drug: you have to keep doing it even though it doesn’t get you high anymore (that is, even though it gives you no edge over the other guy)...and even though it’s risky and may ruin your career.

The PezCycling article includes links to several videos of grisly time trial accidents. I thought about copying some of the links here but just go and check them out there. I want you to read his take on this. But I’ll mention a couple out of many.

First off, Alejandro Valverde in 2017. This is what I had to say about his season in my springtime overview: “He has had by far the best spring campaign of his long and illustrious career...a spring that rivals the best of any rider in any era. He was first overall at the five-stage Vuelta a Andalucia (2/15-19), including winning Stage 1. He won overall at the Volta a Catalunya (3/20-26), winning Stages 3, 5, and 7. He was first overall at the Tour of the Basque Country. Three stage race overalls. What about the classics? He won the Vuelta a Murcia (2/11)—for the fifth time—by going on a 70-K solo break to win by over two minutes. He won Flèche Wallone (4/19)—for the fifth time—by launching his patented sprint over the last 200 meters on the brutal Mur de Huy. He won Liege-Bastogne-Liege (4/23)—for the fourth time—with a similar attack from about 200 meters on the long, uphill grind to the finish. This guy is so hot right now, you’d need barbecue mitts to shake his hand.”

That's a long read on Valverde but I want to make the point: he was absolutely at the top of his game at that point. Almost anything seemed possible. And then what happened? In the first ten minutes of the first stage of the Tour de France—a time trial—he slid out on a wet corner, slammed into the barriers, and fractured his kneecap. No more season. No Tour, no Vuelta, no World Championship. All lost because of a little glitch on a twitchy time trial bike. He has returned to very good form in the years since but that begs the question: what might he have done with the latter half of 2017 had it not been wiped out by that TT wreck?

Second case in point, Chris Froome in 2019. Froome is well known to all fans of cycling. He has won four Tours de France, two Vueltas a España and one Giro d'Italia. (*Note: actually three Vueltas.*) In 2017 he did the almost impossible Tour-Vuelta double, the first rider to win both, back-to-back, in 40 years. He backed that up with the most dramatic, improbable victory in the 2018 Giro, becoming only the third rider, along with Eddy Merckx and Bernard Hinault, to hold the crowns of all three of the Grand Tours at the same time. He did not win the 2018 Tour. He was third. He had some bad luck, including a crash that cost some time. And he wasn't quite at his best. But he was still pretty nearly at the top of the cycling totem pole; still operating at a very high level with more big things expected in the years ahead.

But then, in his last tune-up race before the 2019 Tour—the Dauphiné—he crashed while doing a recon ride around the time trial course. Traveling at high speed, he took one hand off the bars of the time trial bike—to blow out a snot rocket—and in those couple of seconds, the bike went out of control and slammed head-on into the wall of a brick house. Observers said it was the nastiest crash they'd ever seen. His injuries were extensive. Razouvaev goes into this incident in detail. But the bottom line is that Froome has not been the same since. The balance of the 2019 season was gone. He had a rather limited slate of races in 2020—everyone did—but he didn't accomplish anything of note. His Ineos team did not select him for the Tour de France and instead entered him in the season-ending Vuelta. Most fans assumed he would be the team leader

but he ended up working as a *domestique* for Richard Carapaz. He was never in contention and finished 98th. He has since left the top-tier Ineos team and signed with the smaller Israel Start-Up Nation team. His only significant race so far in 2021 was Volta Ciclista Catalunya where he was dropped early and often, stage after stage, and ended up 81st overall, 54 minutes behind winner Adam Yates, who replaced him on the Ineos team this year.

So...pretty much at the peak of his career, then that time trial crash and nothing since. I'm a big Froome fan and would love to see him rise from the ashes, but right now...well, we'll see.

Froome and Valverde are two of the most experienced and skillful bike handlers on the planet. And yet, at those crucial moments and thanks to those twitchy TT bikes, they looked like kids just learning to ride.



These are just two of the many, many cases of riders who crashed out on time trial bikes; who sustained injuries that took chunks out of their racing lives. Riders only get a finite number of years when they're at or near their peaks. To have any of that time taken away from them—to have that gaping hole in their careers—or even possibly to have a wreck that ends a career. That's a high price to pay for the time gained in a race against the clock, especially if the bike really isn't offering any advantages but only potential risk.

Razouvaev makes other telling points against the trick bikes, not least the expense in terms of time and money allocated for supporting a stable of such bikes as part of the equipment a pro team needs. They're all good points but I'll let him lay them out. The only

Bike Stuff

Spring Cleaning...or not...

Bill Bryson is one of my favorite authors. I've never picked up one of his books that I didn't enjoy. Wikipedia describes him as "an American-British author of books on travel, the English language, science, and other non-fiction topics." If you're familiar with his books, he needs no introduction; if not—and if you like reading—I recommend him.

I was recently reading one of his travel books about England wherein he was strolling through a quaint seaside resort, marveling at all the gift shops selling precious, mostly useless souvenirs to the visiting tourists. This prompted some reflection on his part about buying more and more stuff. "One of the great pleasures of dotage is the realization that you have pretty much everything you will ever need." He goes on at some length about having enough stuff or possibly too much stuff and includes a long list of examples, ending with this: "... paper clips, rubber bands, spare cans of paint, dried out paintbrushes, miscellaneous lengths of electrical wire, or any kind of metal objects that might one day theoretically come in handy for some as yet unimagined purpose."

The key to any successful humor is being able to see ourselves in the witticism, and when I read that I said to myself, "Brother Bill, we are kindred spirits! We have walked the same mile in the same shoes!" And we have collected the same stuff. As this is a bike column, I will eventually steer this topic around to bikes. But first, allow me to prattle on about the acquiring and having of stuff, of material possessions.

I like to think I'm a simple sort, not prone to ostentation or conspicuous consumption. For one thing, I've never had enough money to indulge in wretchedly excessive purchases and vulgar displays of wealth. When I feel the need for something, I don't go shopping...tossing around money in exchange for fancy new stuff. I go to a different kind of shop: my workshop, where I make or fix things myself. I derive much more satisfaction from repairing than I do from replacing. However...



place I disagree with him—although deferring to his greater expertise—is his final statement that the UCI will never ban TT bikes because the manufacturers like selling all those extra bikes. I have even less expertise when it comes to the subjects of manufacturing and marketing bikes but I still wonder if this is really true.

Some form of TT bike is going to be around forever. They are used in many track disciplines. The bike companies are going to keep making them, but does it matter all that much to them whether the pros or top-level amateurs are buying them as part of the road-racing discipline? The manufacturers have to invest heavily in the research and development of these special bikes. Do they really make much profit on them (compared, for instance, to the money they're minting these days on e-bikes)? The UCI already regulates just how weird and unstable a time trial bike can be for events like the hour record. They say they do this partly because the bikes are so manifestly unsafe but also because they want the record to be about the strength of the rider and not about some new technology. The same logic could apply to the bikes used in time trials in stage races, and with even more compelling justification.

It's one thing to ride a radical TT bike around a smooth velodrome track to set an hour record or compete in pursuit or other track events. It's quite another to use the same bike on the open road, with turns and ups and downs, maybe sketchy pavement, roundabouts, wet spots, and road furniture. If you watch enough racing you've seen the crashes or at least the places where the TT bikes are out of their element: making a pig's breakfast out of an otherwise normal, twisting downhill, for one painful example.

You may think this a rather arcane topic for one of these columns, especially as I bring only a modest amount of knowledge to the subject. Take it for what it's worth. It may seem like the technology is so embedded in the sport at this point that there's no way to shake loose of it, but given the will, there can be a way. A five-year or three-year window until they're phased out, perhaps. Give both the teams and the manufacturers fair notice so they can plan accordingly. I think the sport would be better off in the long run and I like the idea of fewer riders crashing on their tricky TT bikes and jeopardizing their immediate health and their long-term careers, all for no particular purpose. That may sound a bit luddite, like Henri Desgranges railing against derailleurs, but it makes sense to me.

There's an old maxim that the stuff expands to fill the available space. When the wife and I and our two kids moved from San Francisco to Sebastopol in 1983, we moved from a little Victorian cottage of less than a thousand square feet (on a plot about the size of a postage stamp) to a home—on an acre-plus—that would eventually grow to three thousand feet, plus another thousand feet of decks and courtyards and the aforementioned detached workshop. All of a sudden we needed, at the very least, more furniture. We haunted the local flea market and antique stores and braked for garage sales. I recall that time as our nest-building years.

The nest building did not just include the furnishings. We also mostly built the nest itself: added on a big two-story wing and so thoroughly remodeled the original house that its former owners would barely recognize it today. We did 90% of that construction and remodeling ourselves and that means tools and materials...more stuff.

Eventually though, once most of the construction is done and most of the rooms are comfortably furnished, you get to that point where you don't really need anything more. Sure, as your wallet allows, you might upgrade a few things...which sooner or later leads to having your own garage sale or perhaps to putting some chair or side table out at the street with a FREE sign on it.

I most emphatically deny that I'm a hoarder. Real, dysfunctional hoarding is creepy and borderline disgusting. I've visited in the homes of real hoarders and it's not pleasant. I think of myself more as a collector. I'm an artist and I have a magpie's eye for bright trinkets and goofy odds and ends. But I keep the tchotchkes in check: when they start overwhelming me, I herd them together into "collections."

Out in my shop, I have what I call my "you-just-never-know" bins. As in, you just never know when you might need this (see Bryson's metal objects above). These can be carefully organized bigger bins of scrap wood or they can be little bins of nuts and bolts and screws and washers...cup hooks, nails, S-hooks, door knobs, hinges. I've had two such sets of bins myself



for years and then I inherited more from my dad and my father-in-law. And this is where we bring it back around to bikes: to bike stuff.

When it comes to bike stuff, I am also not a hoarder, at least not a hardcore hoarder. I only have three bikes and two of them hang on hooks most of the time. I could probably dump them but...you just never know! I wrote one of these columns some years ago about my alpha bike having to go back to the factory for repairs and taking one of those other bikes off the hook and putting it back in service. It could happen. It does happen.

Some of my friends have many bikes. Their workshops



are crammed with them. They could make a good start on a bike museum, with Schwinn Black Phantoms and Murray Pacemakers...Columbia and Hercules and amazing old French rando-bikes. This can be a noble, worthy hobby (or obsession). We all agree that bikes are wonderful and magical and beautiful and that the best ones are works of art, well worth preserving and restoring and cherishing. And it's a lot cheaper and less complicated to restore or maintain an old bike than it is to attempt the same thing with an old Jaguar or Alfa Romeo. So that's all good.

I'm not a top-notch bike mechanic. I know I said I like to repair things myself and I do that, but I also know the limits of my competence and I am willing to pay the pro wrenches now and then for the most finicky fine-tuning. That said, I still do a lot of tinkering and, one way or another, I end up with a lot of spare bike parts and tools.

So, amidst my you-just-never-know bins are some dedicated to bike stuff. From bar-end caps to bike locks, from cogs to stems. Frame pumps, floor pumps, mini-pumps, handlebars, aero bars, forks, racks, saddles, rims, spokes, hubs, lights, patch kits, crank sets, head sets, pedals, skewers, brakes, brake pads, tires, tubes, etc, etc...I probably have enough parts out there to build an entire bike, minus the essential frame.

Why keep all those parts? What am I saving them for? Will any of those old parts ever find their way back onto a working bike? A few might but most won't. I should do a spring cleaning and toss a lot of them...or not! One option, short of sending them to the land-fill, is to repurpose them in new ways. For instance, I gathered together—okay, hoarded—a big stack of old

chainrings and turned them into a wind chime in the garden, all hanging off an old Mavic rim. You probably can't tell from the photo but some of those chainrings aren't round. Remember the brief fad for "Bio-pace" elliptical chainrings? A mechanic in a bike shop handed me a bunch of them once, all brand new. They were a failed experiment cast aside on the march to a better bike...but they look good and make a nice, tinkly tune when blowing in the wind.

We all love our bikes and I suspect most of us have a sort of fondness for the little fiddly bits that hold a bike together and help it to do what it does so well. All of those components have assisted us on our way to so many grand adventures and triumphs and outright epiphanies.

Most of the parts in the bins and boxes in the shop are well past their useful life, but after all they've done for me, it seems almost callous and disloyal to simply toss them on the scrap heap. They're like old bike-event t-shirts or number bibs. They speak to us. They remind us of what we've done, where we've been.

And every so often, when you need a certain part right now and the bike shop is closed, you might rummage around in the bin and find just what you're looking for. It could happen...you just never know!



The Show So Far

Often in recent years I have used my May column to review the pro cycling season leading up to the Giro d'Italia, which occupies most of the month of May. Then I do my Monday-morning water-cooler rehash of the Giro in June.

I skipped that May jump-start of the season this year. Instead, I'm adding it onto the front of this Giro report. The spring season was a bit abbreviated because of lingering COVID constraints, but thanks to the vaccine roll-out and other proactive measures, we actually have had a few good races...just not quite the jam-packed calendar we usually have. I'm only going to touch on a few high points out of the already slim list of results: just the ones that seem relevant for predicting the future.

So let's hit the road...

Tadej Pogacar took up where he left off last year by winning the 7-stage UAE Tour (February 21-27). He did it by turning in a good time trial on Stage 2, then winning the uphill finish on Stage 3 and finally finishing a close second on the other hilltop finish on Stage 5. Final margin of victory: 35 seconds over Adam Yates.

He followed that up by winning the 7-stage Tirreno-Adriatico (March 10-16). Same path to victory: he won the only real hilltop finish on Stage 4 and then finished very near the top in the time trial on the final stage. Final margin of victory: 1:03 over Wout Van Aert and considerably more over all the other top guns: Landa, Bernal, Nibali, Simon Yates, et al.

Meanwhile, his compatriot, Primož Roglič, looked like he had won the 8-stage Paris-Nice (March 7-14) right until the final stage. He finished 3rd in the Stage 3 time trial, just six seconds off the lead, then won Stages 4, 6, and 7, building up a lead of almost a minute over Max Schachmann and the rest of the hopefuls. He was clearly the best rider in the event. But a funny thing happened on the way to the podium. He crashed twice on the final stage, each time on a fast downhill. He got back to the group after the first crash but not after the second one. The rest of the riders did not wait for him the second time. He was isolated and badly beat up and eventually lost tons of time, dropping all the way to 15th. A great disappointment, no doubt, but at least he could take some solace from the rest of his week's performance.

He got back on track a few weeks later at the 6-stage Tour of the Basque Country (April 5-10) where he won ahead of a stacked roster of good riders, including Pogacar (who finished 3rd at 1:07). He won the Stage 1 time trial. Then he and Pogacar finished together in the lead on Stage 3. And he sealed the deal by again finishing at the front on equal time on the final stage...but not with Pogacar this time. It was some of the best racing of the season, both for *mano a mano* physical effort and also for tactical strategy. The case has been made that Pogacar's team kind of messed up their tactics along the way, but that's all part of racing, same as crashing on a downhill.

Adam Yates transferred to the almighty Ineos-Grenadiers team over the winter (replacing Chris Froome). He followed up his 2nd overall at the UAE Tour by winning the 7-stage Volta a Catalunya (March 22-28). He had a decent time trial on Stage 2 and then won the hilltop finish on Stage 3. It wasn't all that exciting—how he did it—but it was effective. After that, his team kept the race in a stranglehold, eventually putting Yates, Richie Porte, and Geraint Thomas on the podium. Total dominance but not much drama.

Adam's twin brother Simon won the 5-stage Tour of the Alps (April 19-23). He won Stage 2, going off the front on the penultimate climb and hanging on up the final hill to win comfortably. It looked a lot like his brother's stage win at Catalunya. He also finished third with the same time as the winner on Stage 4. Final time gap was :58 to Pello Bilbao.

More Ineos dominance at the 6-stage Tour de Romandie (April 27-May 2). Geraint Thomas won with Richie Porte 2nd. They were 2nd and 5th after the hilltop finish on the next-to-last stage but their efforts in the final-stage time trial moved them to the top of the heap.

So that's pretty much it for the spring stage races. I don't see much to discuss regarding the one-day races. The best of them all—in terms of drama—was Flèche-Wallone, with its usual fireworks on the final wall, the Mur de Huy. Primož Roglič launched what looked like the winning move halfway up the climb but Julian Alaphilippe patiently watched and waited, and when Roglič started to wilt right at the end, he had just enough to come around him for the win...his third win at this event in the last four years. And then Tadej Pogacar beat Alaphilippe by half a wheel at Liege-Bastogne-Liege.

That brings us to the Giro d'Italia (May 8-30). You can see from the summaries above who the most active riders have been so far this year. The two Slovenians, Tadej

Pogacar and Primož Roglič, look like they're in Grand Tour shape. The Ineos-Grenadiers team looks ready to rock, with a deep roster of heavy hitters. The Yates twins are looking lively. But of all the early-season hotshots, only Simon Yates was entered in the Giro. Many teams appeared to be waiting for the Tour de France and sent riders to the Giro who were not quite top tier. Ineos' team leader was Egan Bernal. He is a proven race winner but struggled in 2020 with a bad back. They claim he's fully recovered. We shall see...

Filippo Ganna, the hottest time-trialer lately, won the Stage 1 ITT and then held onto the *maglia rosa* through two more sprinters' stages. Stage 4 had a substantial but not too brutal uphill finish and that shook things up. Out of a break, USA's Joe Dombrowski won the stage—a big break-out moment for him—and ended up 2nd overall behind his breakaway companion Allesandro De Marchi. Unfortunately for Joe, he crashed the next day and lost time, dropping back down the GC standings. The same crash also took out Mikel Landa, team leader of Bahrain-Victorious and one of the favorites. He was hauled off in an ambulance, his Giro over. Damiano Caruso thus inherited the leader's role for that team.

De Marchi held the jersey for one more day, then Attila Valter wore it for three more stages of sprints and rollers, with the GC favorites biding their time. That all changed on Stage 9, which finished with a steep uphill on hard-packed dirt in a drizzling rain. Egan Bernal let the peloton know that, at least at this point in the race, he was back to his best or close to it. For a while it looked like he was content to sit in near the front of the lead group and not make a move. But with about half a K to go on the dirt road, a couple of other riders launched attacks and he responded. His acceleration was prompt and emphatic and he passed and dropped all the other wannabes and left them gasping.

He took over the leader's jersey and kept it through several more stages of sprints and breakaways. Those nearest him in the standings shuffled around a bit but he stayed on top. Stage 14 was the next big uphill finish: Monte Zoncolan. They tell us this was the easier side of Zoncolan although the profile shows a pitch near the top listed at 27%! There was a break of lesser riders up the hill that took the top spots but just behind them, Simon Yates went on the charge and only Bernal could hang onto his wheel. Up and up they went until, near the top, Bernal came around Yates and left him behind, further padding his lead.

Two stages later they tackled what should have been the queen stage of the Giro, with three major passes in the Dolomites: the dreaded Fedaia, Pordoi, and Giau, all near or over 2000 meters on a day when rain, sleet, and snow were forecast. (The weather had been dismal for many of the Giro stages, with rain early and often...miserable conditions.) At the last minute, after consulting with the teams, the organizers rerouted the stage, bypassing both Fedaia and Pordoi but retaining Giau: almost 10% for almost 10 K, with a long uphill grind before the official climb begins. The weather was almost as bad as predicted, with cold rain most of the day. But Bernal rose to the challenge once again and attacked on the Giau ascent, going clear and staying away on the rain-slick 17-K descent to the finish. It was epic, heroic stuff.

One little thing struck me right at the end of the stage...out in front, all by himself, Bernal rode no-hands along a twisting, slippery, cobbled road, slightly uphill, so he could strip off his black rain jacket, stuff it up the back of his jersey, and cross the finish line showing the pink leader's jersey. He said he did it to honor the jersey and the Giro. Watch it in replay and ask yourself if you could pull off that stunt. As I say, a little thing, but just a minor reminder that these guys can do things we average riders cannot.

After the second rest day, with five stages left, Bernal led Damiano Caruso by 2:24 and Hugh Carthy by 3:40. Yates lost contact with the leaders on the Giau ascent and never got back, losing 2:37 and dropping to 5th overall at 4:20.

Of those final five stages, the last one was a fairly short time trial (just under 19 miles and an almost flat profile). Three of the other four stages featured significant uphill finishes and the one nearly flat stage was the longest of the tour at 143 miles. So no rest for the weary warriors...nowhere to hide.

Better weather returned for Stage 17 and the rain jackets stayed in the team cars. The stage ended with an 11-K ascent of Segna di Ala in the beautiful hills above Lago di Garda. Graphics on the TV screen showed the gradients hovering between 10 and 12% most of the time but there were a few pitches near the finish that topped out at a brutal 18%. Dan Martin won the stage out of a break. Behind the remnants of Martin's break—at one point six riders—Ineos set a steady tempo that kept most of the handful of elite riders under control. In fact, all but a dozen or so had been shelled out the back of that group by the relent-

less pace. It was looking like a typical Ineos show of force, with three teammates pacing Bernal up the hill...everything under control.

But with around 4 K to go, João Almeida and then Simon Yates attacked. Bernal had to jump on his wheel. That worked okay for about a kilometer, with Bernal's lieutenant Dani Martinez still there as well. But all of a sudden Bernal was off the back of the little group. It took Martinez a minute to even notice he was gone. Then he slowed and paced Bernal up the hill at whatever speed he could manage—damage control—while Yates danced off up the road. Second place Caruso, who had been dropped earlier, got back onto Bernal and Martinez and rode with them to the line. In the end, it was not a disaster for Bernal. He lost less than a minute to Yates. and other riders who had been potential threats lost even more time, in particular Hugh Carthy, who dropped from 3rd to 5th, while Yates went from 5th to 3rd. The real damage was perhaps psychological. Bernal and Ineos had seemed totally dominant up to this point. Now they looked a little vulnerable.

The long, almost flat stage did turn out to be something of a rest day for most of the peloton, if you can call 143 miles at an average of 25 mph an easy day. After a busy and contentious selection process, a break of 23 riders was allowed to go up the road. Alberto Bettiol eventually won. (His average speed was 27 mph.) As he crossed the finish line, the Ineos-led peloton was just passing under the 15 K to go banner. It was frisky and feisty for the fastest handful of boys in the break, hammering hard right to the end, but for everyone else, it was cruise control...status quo. No changes among the favorites.

Stage 19 looked a lot like Stage 17, both ending with big but not quite ridiculous uphill. This stage finished with a 10-K climb to a remote nowhere called Alpe di Mera, south-east of Lago Maggiore. The lower slopes are in the 6 to 8% range but all of the top half is near 10% and a few pitches reach 14%. All the leaders hit the final climb in a bunch, most still with teammates to lend a hand. Once again, Almeida was the first to go off the front at around 7 K to go. Half a K later Yates jumped across and that started a bit of a jailbreak, with three or four riders from the top ten scrambling in pursuit.

This looked like it might be big trouble for Bernal but

he didn't panic. He still had two teammates and they set a steady tempo, eventually catching and dropping all of the escapees except Almeida and Yates. (Almeida was riding well but was too far down the standings to be a threat. Yates however was another matter.) Yates won. Bernal conceded :29 to him, but he put time into all his other nearest rivals. When the dust had settled, his lead was 2:29 over Caruso and 2:49 over Yates. No one else was within six minutes so we pretty much had our podium right there...but who would be on which step?

Before dealing with the final mountain finish on Stage 20, I want to reflect a bit on the routes the organizers put together this year, or most years, really. I'm not 100% sure of this, but I believe the Stage 17 hilltop finish—Sega di Ala—and the Stage 19 finish—Alpe di Mera—were making their first appearances in a Giro. The final “mountain” on Stage 20—Passo dello Spluga—has been used before but I'm fairly sure they haven't put it together the way they have this year. (More about that in a minute.) Anyway, the point is, I continue to be amazed at how many of these wonderful new roads they can keep pulling out of their hat, year after year. I love laying out routes (for tours) so I have a special appreciation for the creative thinking the Giro planners are doing with these new roads.



So...Passo dello Spluga! What a road! We did it on a tour in 2001 and I think I can safely say it is the most outlandishly insane mountain road I've ever done. It was the last of three major passes for us on a day that ended up being 112 miles, with over 12,500' of gain, half in Italy and half in Switzerland. We did the road straight through, north to south: six miles up at 7% and then 20 miles down to the city of Chiavenna, losing almost 6000' along the way. The Giro stage doesn't do exactly that. They got really creative and figured out how to turn a downhill into an uphill. They descend

from the snowy 6837' summit for 12.5 miles, losing 3300'. Some of that is fairly tame, but much of it is extremely extreme: super tight hairpins carved into the cliff face, with steep chutes between the switchbacks... really tight; really steep. Halfway down the hill, they dodge off onto another little road—more downhill hairpins—race way down the valley, and get back onto the bottom half of the Spluga road, but now going in the opposite direction, back uphill...up and up, through many more hairpins and dinky tunnels. Finally, they veer off onto a teeny twister running up to a small ski station, Alpe Motta. That final ascent is 5.5 miles at 7.6% with the steepest sections touching 13%. Depending on how you define hairpins—or *tornanti*, as the Italians call them—from the Swiss border to the finish—27 miles—I count 30 downhill hairpins, 16 uphill hairpins, and 12 tunnels, often unlighted. With the big stage in the Dolomites shortened because of weather, this stage really became the queen stage of this year's Giro.

Now that I've set the table for the final road stage, how did it play out? Very nicely! It was one of the most exciting and entertaining races in a long time, with all sorts of drama, and fortunately none of it due to crashes or other bad voodoo...just good, hard racing. Well before arriving at Passo dello Spluga, the riders had to work their way over the massive Passo San Bernardino and descend into Switzerland before climbing to the Spluga pass. Various riders had been off the front in breaks but by the time the Spluga summit was reached and the route tipped back over the ridge into Italy, only four riders were left off the front: 2nd place Damiano Caruso and 5th place Romain Bardet, each with a teammate to help them. They went over the summit with a 43-second lead over Bernal, his Ineos workhorses, and the remaining small cohort of top guns.

That strikes me as a little strange, that the 2nd-place rider could have been allowed to escape. But it was more of the same keep-calm-and-carry-on strategy Ineos had employed the day before, knowing they had a little cushion of time to play with. Also, they were probably just as concerned about the lurking Simon Yates, who was comfortably sitting in, right behind the Ineos train, presumably waiting to attack. ("Train" might not be quite the right term: there were only two *domestiques* left with Bernal over the summit, but they pulled like a train for the rest of the stage.) So...first the fast and super technical descent into the Valle Spluga, made quite bit more hairball by being wet. Then the final climb to Alpe Motta. Thanks to the superb han-

dling skills of the riders and perhaps to their prudent respect for the slick, high-risk descent, everyone made it to the bottom in one piece.

Shortly after they turned back onto the Spluga road and began the last climb, all the bit players fell away. Caruso's and Bardet's helpers dropped off, as did one of Bernal's. None of the other leaders had any helpers left to lose. It was fitting that as they settled into that final climb of the 2021 Giro, only the top eight riders in the GC standings were still at the front...they and no one else: Caruso (2nd) and Bardet (5th) half a minute ahead and then Dani Martinez (6th) and Egan Bernal for Ineos, plus Simon Yates (3rd), Aleksandr Vlasov (4th), Hugh Carthy (7th), and João Almeida (8th).

Once Martinez got on the front of the chase group, he put in a monster pull for Bernal, for the team, and for himself. Eventually, his hard tempo shelled all the others out the back, except for his team leader Bernal. The much anticipated attack by Yates never happened. With about 2 K to go, he quietly drifted off the back of the group, all his matches burnt and his hopes of a Giro victory or even a 2nd place gone up in smoke. Meanwhile, up front, Caruso dropped Bardet and hammered on alone, putting in the ride of his life, cheered on by thousands of manic fans thronging the narrow, switch-back climb. Bernal finally took over from Martinez within the final kilometer and nibbled a few seconds off Caruso's lead. But the gritty Caruso hung tough and won the stage, :24 ahead of Bernal. That left him 1:59 behind with just the 19-mile ITT as the final stage.



Think about this for a minute. Caruso's job going into the Giro was to ride in support of team leader Mikel Landa. He's 33 and a good, solid rider but not often thought of as one of the best. For all of his dozen years on the pro circuit he has been a *domestique*, a *gregario*, with no thought of either being a team leader or

indeed of winning a race. In fact, he had never won a race at this level before, ever. But when Landa crashed out on Stage 4, Caruso's role changed. As the stages ticked off and he stayed well up in the standings, he began to wrap his head around the idea of actually duking it out for the overall win. In 13 prior Grand Tours, his best results have been 8th at the 2014 Vuelta, 9th at the 2015 Giro, and 10th at the 2020 Tour de France. Three top tens is nothing to sneeze at but still, not the *palmarés* that would suggest a podium step at this year's Giro, let alone a heroic, determined bid to win it all.

He did not quite win it all. He took 30 seconds out of Bernal in the final time trial—pretty much what was expected—reducing the final gap to 1:29. Yates did a lackluster, tired-looking ITT but managed to hold onto third place, now down a distant 4:21. Almeida was the best of the GC hot shots, finishing 5th to leapfrog a couple of people to move from 8th overall to 6th. Dani Martinez also did well and moved up to 5th overall, another good result for Ineos-Greandiers. Speaking of Ineos, the ITT was won by another member of that team, Filippo Ganna, as expected. It was not without a little excitement though, as he had a puncture late in his ride and had to do a quick bike swap. Rémi Cavagna almost caught him but crashed in a late corner and had to do his own bike swap. He finished :12 behind Ganna, which is just about the time he lost with his crash. Remember my article from two months ago about the problems with sketchy, twitchy time trial bikes? This is a classic example of their liabilities.

Bernal is not a great time-trial rider. We knew that. He knew that. All he wanted to do was set a good, solid tempo, hammering the straights and pussy-footing around the many urban corners in downtown Milano. Which he did. All he wanted to do was avoid a disastrous crash. Which he did. It may not have been spectacular but it got the job done. He made his spectacular moves back in the Dolomites to carve out a healthy lead and everything after that was careful race management and damage control by him and his very well run team, with a special tip of the old chapeau to his *domestique* Dani Martinez. Even though this column has already gone on far too long for any but the most devoted race fans, it's still too short to itemize all the little ways the team managed the race...for instance the fact that Martinez pretty well sucks as a descender and got dropped on every major downhill, so

the team had to work to pull him back to Bernal so he could then pull Bernal up the next ascent. Little things...the little stories behind the big story.

A time gap of 1:29 between 1st and 2nd seems tiny. When you consider that the riders traveled almost 2100 miles over the past three weeks—essentially the distance from my home in Sebastopol to Chicago—and all the trial and travail they encountered along the way—headwinds, alpine summits, sprints, urban stews, rain, bronchial infections, saddle sores, crashes, mechanicals, pacelines, pack riding, hairball descents, team tactics, calories consumed and calories burned, brain-deadening fatigue, etc, etc—and then, at the end of it all, for the guy in 2nd place to be able to see the guy in 1st place, just a few hundred yards ahead of him...just that measly one minute and 29 seconds ahead. And to think of the many places and moments where a few seconds might have been lost or gained. It almost fries the circuits of our understanding. So close! And yet this was the widest margin of victory in a Giro since 2015.

I guess that's at least part of why we love it and keep coming back, year after year, to glory in the struggles of these road warriors. And—an added layer of magical miracle this year—to have the Giro back in its proper May time slot and to have the roads thronged with wildly enthusiastic fans, yelling their brains out and acting like half-wits—after all the trauma and tragedy of the past year-plus... Recall that Italy was one of the countries hardest hit by the virus, back in the beginning, and how our hearts ached for their suffering. We're not quite out of the woods yet with this nasty plague, but we're getting there. And this wonderful first Grand Tour of the year sees us some way along the road back to normal. Bravo for that!



Along the Trails

“They’re the people that you meet in the neighborhood.” —Mr Rogers

Wise old Fred Rogers had it right: we live in a neighborhood and a neighborhood is a community of many people, some more alike, some quite different, but all adding something to the whole.

In the context of my cycling life, my neighborhood includes a few local bike paths: the Joe Rodota Trail, the Santa Rosa Creek Trail, and the West County Regional Trail. Of course my bike world also includes many miles of public roads in four or five North Bay counties. But when I think about “neighborhood”—local and, in a way, almost familial—the paved trails stand somewhat apart and feel somewhat special. When we take the cars and trucks and buses out of the picture, things become more intimate. On a trail, I am not encountering an oncoming cyclist with two lanes of traffic and asphalt between us. Instead, we meet head-on, pretty much. And because of the close quarters, we see each other up close. If we’re awake and paying attention, we notice one another.

I ride my local trails frequently. They’re super convenient for getting me to places I want to ride. The “Joe” connects downtown Santa Rosa and downtown Sebastopol. It’s a rails-to-trails conversion along the grade of an old trolley and freight line. The SR Creek trail also begins in downtown Santa Rosa (where it intersects the Joe) and heads due west along the levee next to the creek. The West County Trail almost connects to the Joe in Sebastopol and follows another railroad bed north to the town of Forestville.

I’m not the only cyclist (or walker or runner) who likes them. They’re all popular, rarely to the point of being overcrowded but definitely active recreational corridors. Linear parks.

On a recent ride heading east along the Joe, into Santa Rosa, and then, later, returning west along the Creek Trail, I started noticing the other people I was seeing along the way. Once I started noticing, I kind of got hooked on it and began an informal census of who was passing by...who else had chosen that sunny morning for some sort of jaunt along our nice paths.

There are plenty of pedestrians, either walkers or runners. They come in many shapes and sizes, ages and groupings. I don’t mean to give these worthy bipeds

short shrift today but they are secondary to my topic. I am mostly interested in the folks who chose to use bikes for their trail excursions.

Among the bike people, there are, first of all, the most obvious (to me) trail users: the people who look essentially the way I look. We’re somewhere on a spectrum that can be termed middle-aged but still entertaining the happy fiction that we’re serious cyclists. We ride more-or-less state-of-the-art bikes and we wear cycling kit that takes its fashion cues from the pro peloton. Some of these riders are still slim and sleek and obviously quite fast. But most would not be mistaken for young racers. The years have had their way with them (with us). I won’t presume to know the personal histories or ambitions or current agendas of each of these riders. I only note they look approximately like I do and therefore maybe are on about the same page in the big book of cycling.

Then there are guys who look like they just grabbed a sturdy bike out of the garage, dusted it off, and set out to get some exercise—and have some fun—on this pleasant spring morning. No fancy bikes. No special bike attire. No helmets. Just 40ish guys in shorts and tees and baseball caps on cruiser bikes. On the day in question I saw a few fellows that fill this bill, sometimes in small groups and sometimes solo.

Among my favorite sightings were the families. One or two parents with one or two kids. The best was a mom with a younger girl and what I assume was an older brother. The girl came first...maybe eight years old, concentrating so hard on the challenge of keeping that bike moving along. The look of mingled determination and triumph—“I can DO this!”—was priceless. Her brother, with a little more of a comfort zone on his bike, had enough spare bandwidth to flash me a huge, goofy grin as he followed along behind his sister, as if to say to me, “This is so cool!” Finally, the serene and attractive mom, bringing up the rear, with panniers on her bike, no doubt carrying bottles of water or juice and snacks to keep her little team fueled up for the duration. All of them collectively looked like they rolled right out of a Norman Rockwell painting...so wholesome, so happy.

There were also parents pulling Burley-style trailers with one or two tots on board. (I’ve done that. Not with my own kids but with their kids, my grandchildren.)

Another group I’m guessing was a sort of extended family included six middle-school kids on scooters with four women at the back on basic bikes...presumably

the moms riding herd on the kids. A slightly strange assembly but there you go...these are the people that you meet along the trails.

Maybe the most colorful fellow I encountered out there had a bike fully decked out in baubles and reflectors and bright, shiny objects...a pearly queen of a bike. Ahead of the handlebars was a big box, almost the size of a milk crate, and across the front of the box in big block letters—in all colors of the rainbow—was a single word: LOVE. Hard to argue with that.

I saw what I surmise were a couple of small tour groups. Matching bikes with identical handlebar bags. Four in one group and seven in another. No idea whether they were simply renting bikes and off on their own or whether they were part of a catered tour group with a guide nearby. I can't offhand recall seeing tour groups on these trails before. We usually see them up in the "wine country" of Dry Creek and Alexander Valleys. But there they were. What their routes were for the day, I can only guess.

Often on the local trails I run into a trio of older gentlemen on recumbents. I did not see these three on this day but I did see a couple on 'bents...the three-wheeled kind. Going at a snail's pace but looking very comfortable while doing so.

E-bikes! This is a relatively new phenomenon in the bike world. There have been e-bikes around for at least 20 years but they have been breeding like rabbits lately. On the trails I see them coming toward me or—in my mirror—coming up behind me, and I can tell almost instantly that they have power assist. They're going too fast relative to their pedal cadence. Some of the e-bikes are almost stealth: they look like classic road bikes with just a slightly fatter down tube stuffed with batteries or they sport some oversized rear hub or bottom bracket concealing a power unit. Then there are the big, beefy rigs with those ginormous, hunky tires. They look like they weigh at least 90 pounds. Even with a powerful motor they must still be a load to push along. I still like supplying my own power when I ride so I haven't really studied up on e-bikes yet. I may get there someday but not this year. But boy, there sure are a lot of them on the trails these days.

And then there are the homeless folks. Bike trails passing through the ragged fringe of industrial dreck near cities seem to be the native habitat of homeless people and their cousins, the so-called street people. The miles of the Joe closest to Santa Rosa are in this category. Many of the homeless use bikes to haul around

their possessions, often in overloaded trailers. I met up with a few on this day. If you read my columns with any regularity, you know I have opinions about most things and am not shy about airing them out. But when it comes to the homeless "problem," I am going to keep my thoughts to myself. It is an incredibly difficult issue in our world right now and while I wish I had some brilliant plan that would lead to a happy solution, I don't. I'm stumped. In my informal census of who's out there on the trails, it would be dishonest to not acknowledge them. They may not be the stuff of happy-talk bike columns but they too are some of the people that we meet in our neighborhood. I will only say this much more: they make a miserable mess along the trails and I could wish they had some other place to live their lives. However...I also appreciate that, but for some fickle twist of fate, I could be one of them. So my discomfort is leavened with charity and forbearance.

I wasn't keeping notes out there except in my head. My census was mostly a series of quick snapshots collected from the passing parade. Subjective and selective. I forgot more than I remember. Anyway, what's the point of this chronicle of bike trail travelers? I guess the point I'm trying to make is that when we leave home and venture out into the wider world, we become part of something larger than just our only, lonely selves; that we become part of a large and complex community. We see the signs and hear the mantra: "Share the road!" This tells all of us, out on the roads, to be patient and friendly; to bend toward comity and civility and kindness. It's true on the trails as well...treating one another with respect and courtesy. But sharing is not just about giving way and fending off the bad interactions. It's also about sharing in the celebration and good cheer of being out there, each of us alone and yet all of us together...neighbors.

The Joe Rodota Trail, within the Santa Rosa city limits, has been closed repeatedly in recent years because of homeless encampments. Some of the closures have been for months at a time. It is to be closed again next week to clear out the latest clutter cluster. It's a never-ending, frequently repeating cycle.

For whatever reasons, the Santa Rosa Creek Trail does not attract these aggregations of tents and makeshift shelters...perhaps because the trail is on a levee and the land beside the trail slopes away too steeply for comfortable camping?

No Doubt About It

I could save myself a good deal of writing and save you a good bit of reading if I just said this much: Tadej Pogacar won the 2021 Tour de France. End of story. Game over...drive home safely.

But how much fun would that be?

Seeing as how the Tour was a little earlier than usual this year and finished on July 18, the fact of his win is old, cold news at this point. So this won't be a standard, stage-by-stage report on what happened. If you were interested, you watched it every day on TV, read the daily accounts in the cycling press, and maybe even pored over the commentary and analysis churned out by the experts. How can I presume to add anything to the saga that hasn't already been aired out thrice over?

I can't, really. But as I know from conversations with my biking buddies, we all love to kick things around in the time-honored tradition of Monday-morning quarterbacking. That will be my approach: just tossing around a few observations with the benefit of 20-20 hindsight.

Po-Gotcha!

First and foremost is that kid, Tadej Pogacar. Already two Tour de France championships at 22 years old. Not only the *maillot jaune* but also the Best Young Rider jersey and the Mountains jersey, same as last year. Unlike last year's last-minute, rabbit-out-of-a-hat shocker, this one was almost over before it began.

Where are those points where we can look back and say, the Tour was locked up at this point? The first might have been when Primož Roglič crashed on Stage 3. He did get back on the bike and finished, although he lost enough time his Tour hopes were as battered as he was. And then he lost more time each day, clearly struggling with his injuries, until finally he left the tour. He was Pogacar's biggest rival. With him out of the frame, much of the suspense evaporated.

For the record, Pogacar was caught up in a massive pile-up the same day and lost about half a minute to some of the other top GC riders. But his wounds were minor. More about crashes later!

The next nail in the coffin was the first time trial two days later, which Pogacar won, beating not only his GC rivals but all the ITT specialists. A dominating performance. He didn't take the overall lead that day but he was over a minute ahead of anyone who might have been considered a contender.

The really definitive moment came three days later on Stage 8, the first Alpine stage...miserably cold and rainy, with three monster mountains to cross and a long, freezing descent to the finish. Behind a fragmented breakaway, on the twin towers of Col de Romme and Col de la Columbière, he jumped off the front of the favorites' group and simply blew everyone else away. Pogacar will insist he was working his butt off but it looked so effortless, so casual, the way he dropped his rivals and then picked off the breakaway riders up the hill ahead of him. By the time he rolled into the finish, the gaps to all his supposed adversaries were at least 4:30 and over five or six minutes for most. Barring an accident or some cruel mischance, it really was over at that point.

Lest there be any doubt, he repeated the same stunt the next day on a stage with a Cat 1 uphill finish, also in the rain, also behind a breakaway. This time it was near the finish and was only in response to little digs from other riders. After a few of those irritating mosquito bites he just shot off and put another 30 seconds into his nearest pursuers. Now everyone who might have mattered was over five minutes down...less than halfway through the Tour.

After that, with leads of anywhere from five minutes to three times that over all the riders who were supposed to be in contention, Pogacar and his UAE team could exercise a sort of soft control over proceedings as the days went by. Many breaks were allowed up the road but they didn't bother the leader. Many riders had their little daily triumphs but the GC situation remained status quo.

That changed on Stages 17 and 18, the two final mountain stages in the Haute-Pyrénées, both with ginormous uphill finishes. Pogacar might have been content to simply sit on his rivals' wheels and follow their attacks. And he did so, up to a point. But in the end, nearing both summits, he covered every move and then launched blistering attacks of his own that no one could match. He won both stages emphatically...a total smack-down the likes of which we haven't seen in years.

He did the final time trial on cruise control, finishing 8th with most of his massive lead intact. Bike racing is a dangerous and quirky sport. Bad things can pop up around any bend. Just ask the many riders who crashed badly. So it's never wise to say it's over until you cross the finish line in Paris. But really, they could have popped the champagne corks at the end of Stage 8.

Cycling's checkered past being what it is, inevitably some folks cast a cynical, jaundiced eye at the astonishing accomplishments of this young Slovenian. Too good to be true? Sadly, this is the legacy we live with. All Pogacar can do is point to the many, many doping controls he undergoes along the way, sometimes three a day. All we can do is hope he's as good as he appears to be. What he appears to be is a once-in-a-generation athlete with physical and emotional attributes far beyond even the higher standards of pro sports.

Crashes

Were there more crashes this year than usual? I read somewhere that more riders had abandoned by the second rest day than in any prior Tour. That doesn't mean there were more crashes but only that whatever crashes there were had caused more damage than usual.

In all, 44 dropped out, but not all of them left because of crashes. Some abandoned because of sickness or exhaustion or plain old abject misery. Some were DQ'd for missing the time limit on a given stage. And a few simply cut their losses and moved on, to prepare for the Olympics, for instance.

But many did crash out. Roglic was certainly the most significant, at least in terms of how it affected the race at the front of the field. Based on recent performance, he would have given Pogacar a stiffer challenge than any of the rest of the presumptive favorites. Geraint Thomas crashed early—a dislocated shoulder—but managed to stay in the race, although his performance was tepid afterward. Caleb Ewan, Peter Sagan, Marc Soler, Simon Yates, Robert Gesink, Tony Martin...it's a long list, although it seems about typical for a Tour.

It's a high-risk sport. Pack riding at 30 mph, inches from other riders in all directions...or perhaps inches from the edge of the road and the spectators thronging there. Which brings me to...

Crowds

The first and most spectacular crash of the Tour was the one caused by the woman with the stupid "*Allez Opi • Omi!*" cardboard sign that took out Martin and about a zillion other blameless riders. The only surprising thing in this case was that it was a woman at fault. Men are the problem 99% of the time. To be fair, most people who flock to the Tour or Giro to watch the race are good, sensible people who never cause any trouble. But there is a significant subset of boneheads who make life difficult and dangerous for everyone around

them. I want to believe most of my readers are intelligent, responsible fans who would always want to do the right thing, which is to cheer for but not interfere with the riders.

But just on the off-chance that when you go to see a bike race, you dress up as the Pope or Batman or the homecoming queen and then dance around in the road, or worse yet, if you run out into the road and chase along next to the struggling riders on a climb, getting in their way while screaming nonsense in their ears...then you are a jerk, an idiot, a fool, a turd, a card-carrying, USDA-certified moron. This is not a matter of debate or nuance. It's a cold, hard fact: you are a dipshit.

If you show up with a dopey sign that no one can read or understand, or wave a flag on a pole in the riders' faces, or light a colored flare...you should be locked up in a tiny cell for the next ten years. Shame on you! What the bleep are you thinking? The race is not about you. It's not about the message on your sign or the fealty to your flag. Just...stop. Don't go there. The bike race would be vastly improved if you stayed home.



Weather

As the riders were making their final loops up and down the Champs-Élysées, with the thermometer topping out around 85 sunny degrees, we heard one of the color guys saying he felt the weather for this year's Tour had been about as nice as he could ever remember. And I'm like, Excuse me? Which planet have you been living on lately? Can you not remember all those days of icy rain in the Alps and elsewhere?

I tell ya, as a fair-weather recreational tourist, I never cease to be amazed at the amount of pain and suffering the pro riders have to put up with to do what they do...neither rain nor sleet nor snow can keep these

faithful couriers from their appointed rounds. Calling myself “fair-weather” is only wishful thinking because I have logged many and many a mile of misery in the rain and sleet and snow down the years, some of it even on roads in France they use in the big races. I wrote in this space once about sumitting Col d’Allos in the rain, at 40 degrees. Ten miles of climbing and—worse—ten miles of descending. Seemed like an eternity of purgatory. Purest awfulness. And yet these guys don’t do a mere 20 miles in it. They do stages of over 100 miles in the grimmest conditions and they wake up the next day and do it all over again, like repeating a bad dream.

And spare a thought for the mechanics who have to clean all those bikes every night. Not just the ones that were ridden but all the others that were up on the roof racks being pelted by the rain and road grime.

Okay, so no stages were closed or rerouted because of blizzards or landslides—as happened in this year’s Giro—but still...if this is anyone’s idea of great weather, they are welcome to it. Of course, if it was Bob Roll who said it—the *domestique* for Andy Hamsten on his famous Gavia-in-the-Snow escapade—then maybe we can respect his point of view.

Sprints

Any halfway astute fan of cycling knows that Mark Cavendish is not Eddy Merckx and that Mark’s 34 Tour wins are not the same as Eddy’s 34. So I won’t belabor that point. But to hear the talking heads going on about it on TV—perhaps to boost ratings?—you would think Cav is the second coming of the Cannibal.

Make no mistake: Cavendish is one of the all-time great sprinters. And he’s had some tough luck in recent years, dang near career-ending luck. So it was nice to see him have this moment of resurrection. All hail the Manx Missile!

That said, not only is Cav not Merckx, he was probably not the best sprinter in this year’s Tour. Don’t forget that many of the other top sprinters were taken out in crashes or were eliminated early for other reasons. Most notably, Caleb Ewan. All else being equal, he would have eaten Cavendish’s lunch in most sprints. But he crashed out early, along with Peter Sagan, another likely sprinter. Merlier. Cocquard, Bouhanni. Demare. Van der Poel. A lot of good, hardass sprinters. Of course bagging the green jersey often has more to do with surviving to Paris than with being fastest.

Cavendish also benefited from having absolutely the

best lead-out train in the Tour. Watch the overhead views of the last 500 meters of any of his wins and you see an almost textbook-perfect example of how a sprint lead-out should be done. The only time they messed it up was on the final finish in Paris. But seeing how easily even a good team can screw things up during those super hectic, crazy-fast last meters should only remind us how hard it is to get it right and how well they did it most of the other chances they had.

Revelations

In the context of the Tour, “revelations” means riders who exploded onto the scene from out of left field; riders we had never or barely heard of and now, all of a sudden, they were big-time prime-time.

Clearly, the pick of the litter in this department is Jonas Vingegaard, the Danish rider for Jumbo-Visma, who finished 2nd in his first Tour. He’s 24 and his only previous showing in a Grand Tour was 46th at last year’s Vuelta. Most people assumed he was entered in this Tour as a *domestique* for Primož Roglič. But his team says otherwise. They say they knew he could do well and they saw his role as only incidentally working for Roglič as needed but more as a sort of junior, sub-assistant co-captain...a second prong in a two-pronged, tag-team tactic to challenge Pogacar. And to just generally be the team’s Plan B in case Roglič stumbled. Which he did.

He finished 3rd in each of the two time trials, right up there among the ITT specialists. And he finished 2nd to Pogacar on both of the big mountain finishes in the Pyrénées...Stages 17 and 18. In both cases Richard Carapaz attacked him and dropped him, briefly, but in both cases he dug deep and got back around the Ineos rider before the line. And on the double-Ventoux stage, he put in a dig that actually had Pogacar on the ropes for a while, the only time in the entire tour where the leader showed any sign of weakness.

So...a star is born! This jump starts a whole boatload of speculation as to what Jumbo-Visma will do in future Grand Tours, including the upcoming Vuelta. Presumably Roglič—the defending champion—will be entered and Pogacar has already said he’ll be there. And so has Vingegaard. Can’t wait to see how that plays out.

Another rider who made a nice splash was the Australian Ben O’Connor of the AG2R team, finishing 4th in his first Tour. He’s not quite the newbie that Vingegaard is. This is his fifth Grand Tour and all his

results have been respectable. He won Stage 9 out of a breakaway and that catapulted him into 2nd place. After that he hung tough for the duration of the Tour, giving up little scraps of time to the three riders ahead of him but not totally caving in. A very good showing and cause for rethinking team strategy at AG2R.

I might also mention Wout van Aert but we already knew he was a formidable rider capable of great things, as he proved in winning a mountain stage, a time trial, and a sprint. But I already had him on my list of top riders last year so this is not that much of a surprise. At 6'1" and 172 pounds he's probably just a little too beefy to be a genuine all-rounder. When the biggest mountains loom, he loses time. I doubt he can reconfigure himself in the ways needed to be a Grand Tour winner but he will continue to be a major force in the world of racing for years to come.

The Wheel Turns

In contrast to these new kids coming along, we have an older generation fading away. This is a constant theme and one I've noted in past seasons...out with the old and in with the new. Out of a group of what we would have called the Heads of State just a couple of years ago, only Rigoberto Uran made the top ten and he was over 18 minutes back in a tired 10th place. Here's a list of other luminaries with their placings and times, not counting the ones who departed because of crashes...

24. Alejandro Valverde...1:07:50

28. Nairo Quintana...1:33:11

38. Richie Porte...2:05:13

41. Geraint Thomas...2:11:37

132. Chris Froome...4:12:01

Vincenzo Nibali and Jakob Fuglsang: abandoned

How many Grand Tour victories and podium steps do you have there? A lot. No bookie would give you decent odds of any of these veterans ever stepping on a Grand Tour podium again. It could happen but don't hold your breath. No, the times they are a changing. Pogacar and Vingegaard look like a couple of high school kids. That's the future. That's who we'll be watching and discussing in the years ahead.

It was another grand Grand Tour, in spite of there not being much suspense after about Stage 8. We had the privilege and the high entertainment value of watching some emerging stars doing amazing things. People are already comparing Pogacar to Merckx, which I think is way beyond silly. It's too soon, for one thing.

Any piece of bad luck could derail his career at any moment. It happens. Just ask Chris Froome.

But beyond all that Fickle Finger of Fate stuff, they appear to be two very different people. Merckx was a hard-assed bastard. A tough guy. Pogacar seems—superficially at least—to be doing what he's doing with an ebullient, cheerful joy...always with a smile on his face. It's too soon to know if the fame and the incessant badgering of the news media will eventually cause him to withdraw behind a wall of reserve. So far he's weathering the storm.

And although at the moment he appears invincible, there will come a day up the road where he is tested and possibly overmatched. Vingegaard might do it. Roglic might. Or maybe it will be some young buck we don't even see on the horizon yet...next year's new revelation. But for the moment, all the other riders are thinking, "Jeez, he's only 22. He could do this for another ten years!" He probably won't but who knows?

With less than a week's rest, the same cast of characters showed up for the Olympic road race in Japan on July 24. At the end of a long, hard, hilly race, Richard Carapaz and rising US star Brandon McNulty formed the final and decisive break. Carapaz eventually dropped McNulty and soloed to a gold medal for Ecuador. McNulty was caught by a very elite chase group and in the final sprint, the silver and bronze medals went to—who else?—Wout van Aert and Tadej Pogacar. And for whatever it's worth, although van Aert beat Pogacar, the latter was actually faster in the sprint. He just started his kick from further back. What can we take away from those results? Richard Carapaz is still a force to be reckoned with. Wout van Aert can sprint with the best and can also get over the big climbs with the leaders. And Tadej Pogacar can climb like an angel but can hold his own in the sprints too.



Three in a Row

Primož Roglič (Jumbo-Visma) got to wear a funny Spanish hat on the final podium of this year's Vuelta a España and that seems appropriate as this was his Vuelta hat trick: three in a row. This was by far his most dominant victory. He beat Alejandro Valverde by a couple of minutes in 2019 and Richard Carapaz by a slim :24 last year...this year he cruised to a comfortable margin of almost five minutes over Enric Mas (Movistar).

He won the opening time trial on the first day and the final time trial on the last day. He won four stages and was second on four more, in almost all cases putting time into all his serious rivals. It was a master class in superb riding and tactical control, with his team performing well throughout. They weren't crushingly dominant but they did enough to keep things where they wanted them every day. Sepp Kuss was usually there as his last, best mountain lieutenant (finishing a commendable 8th overall himself). One measure of their competence—or perhaps their good fortune—is that they still had all nine riders on the road at the finish, whereas Movistar lost four riders—including Valverde and Lopez—and Ineos lost three—including Carapaz.

Those were the two teams—Movistar and Ineos—that, at least in theory, were going to pose the biggest challenge to Roglič and his Jumbo-Visma team this year. Each had a three-pronged tag-team of favorites to throw against him. Movistar had Mas, Valverde, and Miguel Angel Lopez. Ineos had Egan Bernal, Adam Yates, and Carapaz. Those are some heavy hitters and, again, in theory, any of them might have been able to win it all. Against that swarming hoard, Jumbo-Visma put all its eggs in one basket: Primož Roglič. Their confidence in him was justified.



When all the dust had settled, only one Movistar star was still standing: Enric Mas at that rather distant 4:42 2nd place. Valverde crashed out on Stage 7. It was the saddest thing. He was lying 4th after Stage 6 and looking good. Have you seen his crash? I've watched the replays a few times...descending through a fast right-hand corner and his front wheel catches a tiny flaw in an otherwise beautifully paved road. You see the wheel give the tiniest dink as it hits that blip and then he's gone. Such a little thing! I have to wonder if that marks the end of his long, illustrious career at the Vuelta. I hope not. But at age 42...

It also begs the question: how would Movistar's tactics have changed had he remained in the race? I doubt he would have won but he would have served as a stabilizing influence on his younger teammates. That's especially relevant because of how Lopez flamed out in the most spectacular and awkward way on Stage 20, while in 3rd place. What happened has been widely viewed and discussed. In simplest terms, on a stage with a ruggedly up-and-down profile, he missed the crucial selection when the other top riders took off. He seemed to hesitate and by the time he decided to chase, it was essentially too late. The gap was too big and he had no one to help him. So he was isolated and frustrated and had himself a very public and unfortunate little meltdown, one stage from the end of the stage race. After being yelled at by his *Directeur Sportif*, he more-or-less said, "You don't like how I'm riding? Fine...I quit!" And quit he did, pulling over and climbing in the team car. It was a disastrous moment for the team and a stain on the career of this brilliant young rider. It will take some getting over.

I wonder how it might have been different if wise old vet Valverde had been there to support his struggling young teammate. I have to think he would have calmed him down and helped him carry on and make the best of things. But because of one tiny flaw in the pavement, he wasn't there to help.

Ineos had rather mixed results as well. Adam Yates finished 4th at 9:06 and Bernal 6th at 13:27. Respectable results but not remotely close to contending for the GC. Both were active throughout, with one or the other launching attacks almost any time the roads tilted uphill. But in every case, Roglič covered their attacks and then rode away from them. His counterattacks were seldom flamboyant. He seemed to say, "That's what you got? Okay, I'll see your bet and raise you..." and would just motor off up the road, some-



times sitting, sometimes out of the saddle, but always looking composed and almost casual in his control of things. Carapaz, who gave him such a tussle last year, withdrew midway through the race, claiming to be utterly exhausted. He worked his butt off for his 3rd place at the Tour de France so it's not surprising that he might fizzle out at the Vuelta. We could second-guess the Ineos game plan of entering him at all.

Under the heading of Revelations, we have to tip the old chapeau to the Bahrain-Victorious team, with Australian Jack Haig finishing 3rd—his first Grand Tour podium—and his teammate Gino Mader in 5th. Haig is 27 so not exactly a neo-pro. This was his eighth Grand Tour with his best results 21st and 19th at the '17 and '18 Vueltas. He broke his collarbone early in this year's Tour and has been recuperating since. He has had a few decent results elsewhere. A 4th and 7th overall at Paris-Nice and a 5th at this year's Dauphiné. But this podium step represents a great leap forward for him.

One little puzzle—for me anyway—was the non-appearance of Tadej Pogacar. I said last month he was planning to enter the Vuelta. I thought that was a done deal. Maybe I got that wrong or perhaps his team changed their plans. Now that Roglic has dominated the Vuelta almost as comfortably and casually as Pogacar dominated the Tour, we are still left hanging as to which of them is the top dawg. The only joker in the deck is that Pogacar is only 22 and Roglic will turn 32 next month. Most of a decade between them. All else being equal, Roglic has to be near the zenith of his career...a few more good years, maybe...while Pogacar is just hitting his stride.

I like them both. Not only are they extraordinary bike racers, they both appear to be genuinely nice guys. Cheerful and humorous and without any bully-boy

attitudes. Doubtless they both know how good they are but so far that hasn't seemed to translate into any sort of arrogance or aloofness. I'm already looking forward to how they will race and conduct themselves next year.

As seems to be the case lately, the Vuelta organizers did an outstanding job with their parcourse. They had at least eight uphill finishes with two or three more that had little uphill challenges late. Some of those final ascents were absurdly steep and long...brutal. (Pity the poor sprinters!). The organizers and the riders were fortunate with the weather...mostly. Offhand, I can only recall one seriously rainy day. But there were several days that were wicked hot...well over 100.

There weren't all that many significant crashes. Valverde's was the most telling. Roglic hit the deck twice but neither of them seemed to beat him up too bad, nor cost him much time. All in a day's work for the pros. Perhaps the most amazing crash was that of Jay Vine on Stage 14. Up in the day's break, he goes back to his team car, gets a little too close to the car and tangles with it. Suddenly he's sliding along the ground at maybe 30 mph. It looked terrible. He lay on the ground for what seemed like forever as the medical team worked on him. That's the last we see of him until almost the top of the final climb and—WTF?—here comes Jay, jersey, shorts, and number bibs in shreds, chasing back through the break and finally duking it out for 2nd place on the stage. (He finished a close 3rd.) That's the best recovery I've seen in a bike race in years!

Well! There you go. The third Grand Tour of the season and what a grand race it was, with a very deserving winner. We still have the rag-tag assortment of season-ending races to go before we have to back away from our TVs or monitors and find some other way to be entertained over the winter. But it has been a good year...much closer to normal than 2020. Thank goodness for that.



Back to Touring (!)

I've just returned from an extended journey looping up through Oregon and Washington...a nice adventure. The trip was split between visiting family and scouting out routes for future bike tours. This column is about the scouting, or more generally about getting back into cycle-touring. Along with so much other trouble and turmoil, the pandemic put a serious crimp in our touring agenda over the past couple of years. Now we're getting back into it.



Back in February, 2019, I wrote one of these columns about the process of scouting out and planning a week-long bike tour. Specifically, that was about a tour in Northern Oregon featuring the Historic Columbia River Highway and its assorted bike paths. That tour—one of the best I've ever dreamed up—was scheduled for August, 2020. You know what happened to our world in 2020...in particular, what happened to our bike activities. That tour was scrubbed, as was another one I helped organize for May of that year.

Compared to all the bigger issues with the virus—closing in on 700,000 dead in this country alone, not to mention endless disruptions to our daily lives—the canceling of a couple of little bike tours is a tiny blip on the radar. But to those who were signed up for them and for those of us who had put the work into planning and organizing them, it was a serious disappointment.

I thought about trying to

reboot that tour for this past summer but at the time I would have had to begin making reservations—Summer and Fall of 2020—we didn't even have a vaccine yet, nor any sense of how effective it would be once it was rolled out. So I put that tour off for yet another year: I'm now making reservations for August of 2022. I'm about halfway there with more booking windows opening up this month.

We did manage to stage our other postponed tour this past August. It was a much less ambitious tour closer to home in Lake and Mendocino Counties. But even that one was affected by COVID, indirectly. It was supposed to have been in May, when the weather in that region is at its best. But we weren't confident enough about the state of the virus and the vaccines at that point, so we pushed it back to August. That meant the potential for hot weather in Lake County. We gambled on that and lost. The forecast was for 107 degrees during our three days in that region. We might have plowed ahead with it anyway, but the smoke plume from the massive Dixie Fire was blanketing the region and the air quality was terrible...not anything you'd want to breathe while huffing up a hill.

So we made a last-minute decision to lop off the first days in Lake County and pick up the tour as it moved into Mendocino County...a decision our participants wholeheartedly endorsed. We ended up with a very modest tour of just four days. But after a year-plus of no tours at all, folks were so starved for that experience, everyone thought it was just the bee's knees. Smiles all around. You never saw so many happy people, so many good rides and good times in the camps. Just so you know, we invoked a vaccine mandate for the tour and no one complained about an infringement of their liberty.

This most recent scouting trip was not to revisit the



Top Ten of 2021

routes of the tour that includes the Columbia River Gorge. That one is already pretty well laid out. I did spend part of one day looking at one road that I might have used to change part of Stage 5, but in the end did not make the change. Even though it didn't work out, it was worth it to spend the time and check it out. It might have been an improvement. It wasn't. But sometimes you can't make those calls based on what you see in Google maps. Sometimes you just have to be there and see it up close.

Mostly this trip was to sort out a long list of questions regarding a new tour I have in the pipeline for 2023: the High Desert Tour, set around Bend. I've had this one simmering away on a back burner for a year or two. I'd done as much as I could with my own past touring and driving in the area and with whatever Google could tell me. But as I say, sometimes you just have to put your wheels and your eyeballs on the roads, the camps, and the scenic attractions to finally decide what works and what doesn't. In fact, some of my tentative routes did not pan out. But once I knew that, I was able to move on and begin exploring other options. It all worked out well: a seven-stage tour with long and short options each day—an average of 64 miles for the long rides and 54 for the short—and loads of great scenery and cycling fun every day.

If you read these columns often enough, you know by now I'm a tireless promoter of multi-day bike tours, especially the kind I call cooperative tours, where the participants share in the chores that keep the tour moving each day. Now that our lives are slowly edging back toward something we can call normal, it's sweet to once again be planning and staging multi-day tours. For me, they're just about the best biking fun out there. I've planned and participated in 36 of them over the past 25 years or so, adding up to over 260 stages and over 16,000 miles, and I can't say we've ever had a bad tour. We've had bad days, when it rained hard or when someone crashed out, but overall, great days on the bikes and pleasant times in the camps or hotels along the way. It feels great to be getting back to that again. Here's hoping your cycling life includes at least one good tour in the coming year.

We did that High Desert Tour in early July of 2023 and it went off pretty much without a hitch. Over 50 participants. Nice weather every day. One tour vet called it perhaps the best tour he's ever done. A new tour is in the pipeline for 2024...

Okay then...the 2021 UCI road racing season is finished. Things wrapped up over the first week or so of October with no less than five excellent one-day races almost back-to-back: the Giro dell'Emilia on October 2, the rescheduled Paris-Roubaix on October 3, Milano-Torino on October 6, Il Lombardia on October 9, and Paris Tour on October 10. The season may have stumbled a bit back in the early spring, thanks to lingering COVID concerns—several smaller stage races were cancelled—but it ended with a bang.

Even with those few cancellations early in the year, it still felt mostly like a full and familiar racing season. The three Grand Tours were back in their proper slots on the calendar and all of them were run at full distance. There were enough of the one-day races and lesser stage races to satisfy most fans. We even had the Olympics to add a little extra spice this year.

Now that it's all over, it's time for my annual retrospective finale for the year, which I typically present as some form of Top Ten list. This year's look back will be no exception to that and, in fact, it's going to be one of the simplest, most straightforward Top Tens I've cobbled together in years. Not too many surprises or flukes...some, but not many. Nine out of ten of my selections were also in the top ten of the UCI World Ranking. I'm not thinking outside the box too much.

(Putting this in probably overly simplistic terms, the UCI World Ranking combines the points for One-Day Races and Stage Races. Each of those categories has its own ranking as well and it's interesting to see how the three lists differ. You could say the World Ranking attempts to identify the best all-round riders. Without doing an obsessive analysis of this, I would say both the UCI system and my own subjective assessment are weighted slightly in favor of stage racing results. Points are awarded for outright wins or high placings in one-day races. In stage races, big points are awarded for the overall win or high finish and fewer points are allocated for stage wins. This sets up an interesting situation where riders from a breakaway grab all the points on a given stage while, back a ways, a leader in the GC battle might put time into his rivals. He'll improve his overall position but not gain any points on the day. Of course, the big pot of points awaits at the end for winning the entire stage race.)

But enough fluff about points. Let's get after the list...

10. Jonas Vingegaard, 24, Denmark, Jumbo-Visma



Vingegaard is the one rider on this list who did not finish in the top ten in the UCI World Ranking. (He was 18th but 5th in the Stage Race Ranking.) He didn't do a lot but what he did do really caught our attention. He was Jumbo-Visma's second captain at the Tour de France, there to either help team leader Primož Roglič or to take up the reins if Roglič

flamed out. After Roglič crashed on Stage 3 and eventually abandoned, Vingegaard stepped into those big shoes and filled them pretty well, finishing 2nd overall in only his second Grand Tour. He was 2nd behind eventual winner Pogacar on the two decisive mountain finishes (Stages 17 and 18) and 3rd overall in both of the full time trials...definitely an all-round performer.

He also won the Coppi e Bartali stage race, winning Stages 2 and 4 and the Sprint jersey. He won Stage 5 at the UAE Tour and was 2nd overall at the Tour of the Basque Country, taking home the Young Rider jersey. It's going to be interesting to see how Jumbo-Visma parcels out the team leader assignments between Roglič and Vingegaard next year.

9. Joao Almeida, 23, Portugal, Deuceninck-Quick-Step



Almeida first caught our eye at the 2020 Giro d'Italia where he took over the lead on Stage 3 and held onto the *maglia rosa* all the way through Stage 17, eventually finishing 4th overall. I confess I did not think too much about him then or since but he has proven to be a consistent and persis-

tent competitor, up near the front in many races. Perhaps it's time to think about him a bit more seriously. He finished 9th in the UCI World Ranking and that's where I have him on my list. How did he get there? He won the Tour of Poland, winning Stages 2 and 4 and the Sprint jersey. He won the Tour of Luxembourg,

winning Stage 1, the Sprint jersey and the Young Rider jersey. He won his national time trial championship, and had loads of top five and top ten finishes, including another good showing at the Giro: 6th overall this year. Lately it seems as if whenever I'm watching the top riders duking it out in the final, decisive miles of a race, Joao Almeida is there, mixing it up with the big boys. He can climb. He can time trial. He's on a strong team. He's only 23...

8. Sonny Colbrelli, 31, Italy, Bahrain-Victorious



If Jonas Vingegaard is one of the flukey surprises on this list, Sonny Colbrelli is definitely the other. Who saw this coming? He's been around a while...at least a dozen years as

a pro. He is ostensibly a pure sprinter. At least that was his reputation until this year. At 5'9" and 163 lbs, he has the classic build of a sprinter. But he embellished his resumé in some unexpected ways this season. He won the Italian road race championship. He won the European Road Championship. Won the Memorial Marco Pantani. Won the Benelux Tour stage race, securing the overall with a bold, 50-km solo breakaway on Stage 6. Won Stage 2 and the Sprint jersey at the Tour de Romandie and Stage 3 and the Sprint jersey at the Dauphiné. Add in a pocket full of top tens and you already have a good season. But wait...

The real surprise for me came at the Tour de France. On Stages 9 and 16—both seriously hilly mountain stages—he finished 3rd and 2nd. Admittedly, he put himself in those positions by getting into the day's breaks. But in each stage he stayed at or near the front all day, while other supposedly better climbers were falling away. It was like, "Yo, Sonny? You're a sprinter! What do you think you're doing?" All that was fun but he saved the best for last: he won the grand Monument of Paris-Roubaix on October 3. (A word about this year's Roubaix. It had been postponed from its traditional April date but it had April showers written all over it. All of the cobbled sections were slippery-sloppy soups of danger and drama. It seemed like someone was sliding out and going splat in the mud every mile. The riders looked like they'd been sprayed, top to bot-

tom, with chocolate mousse. It was great fun to watch from the warm-and-dry comfort of home but it was the classic Sunday in Hell for the riders.) Mile after brutal mile, Colbrelli clung doggedly to the wheel of one-day powerhouse Mathieu van der Poel and then had just enough juice left to outsprint him in the velodrome. All of his season's hard work landed him in 7th place in the UCI ranking.

7. Mathieu van der Poel, 26, Netherlands, Alpecin-Fenix



I have van der Poel well up on this list but with some grudging reservations. He won quite a few races this year but many were in either cyclo-cross or mountain biking. I honor those disciplines but they normally fall a bit outside my reckoning

when thinking about my Top Ten riders. However, he also won a fair number of road races so I'm willing to accept his whole, year-round body of work. He did win quite a few races in cyclo-cross, including the World Championship (for the fourth time). (Cyclo-cross is a winter sport, its season running from the end of the road racing season until early spring. This would have been for the '20-'21 season.) And he won on the road. He won Stage 1 of the UAE Tour, won Strade Bianche (much of it unpaved), Stages 3 and 5 of Tirreno-Adriatico, Stages 2 and 3 of the Tour de Suisse, Stage 2 at the Tour de France, and had at least eight other top-five finishes, usually in big events, such as 5th at Milano-San Remo, 2nd at the Tour of Flanders, 3rd at Paris-Roubaix, and 4th and 5th on two more Tour de France stages. All of that toil added up to 5th in the UCI World Ranking.

6. Richard Carapaz, 28, Ecuador, INEOS Grenadiers



Carapaz didn't do much but he did just enough to make this list in 6th place and to end up in 8th place in the World Ranking. He won the overall at the Tour de Suisse, including winning Stage 5. He was 3rd overall at the Tour de

France. He was a busy beaver throughout *le Tour*, at-

tacking whenever he thought it might work, although it never did. It was clear almost every day that for Pogacar, he was just a minor irritant. He couldn't even stay ahead of the little upstart Vingegaard. Still, a podium step at the Tour de France is nothing to sneeze at. But the best thing he did this season, and what gets him on this list, was win the Elite Road Race at the Olympics, bringing home the gold medal for Ecuador.

5. Julian Alaphilippe, 29, France, Deceuninck-Quick Step



There aren't a lot of victories in Alaphilippe's 2021 *palmarés* but the ones that are there are good ones. Most important among them was the World Championship Road Race, defending his rainbow stripes from last year. The course in Belgium was very

much like one of the spring classics, with short-but-steep ups and downs all day long. He loves that sort of topography and he attacked with his usual bravado. Some analysts felt he might not have won had the powerful Belgian team not messed up their tactics so badly. But hey, that's their problem, not his. He also won La Flèche-Wallonne, just nipping Primož Roglič at the top of the Mur de Huy. We won Stage 1 of the Tour de France and Stage 2 of Tirreno-Adriatico. Those were his only wins but he also had no fewer than 24 top ten finishes, including 2nd at Strade Bianche and Liege-Bastogne-Liege. He ended up 4th in the World Tour Ranking.

4. Egan Bernal, 24, Colombia, INEOS Grenadiers



Bernal earns his place on this list because of winning the Giro d'Italia back in May. He won two hilly stages—9 and 16—to carve out his lead, and then he and his team managed things the rest of the way. It wasn't an overwhelming smack-down of his rivals but it was enough. It seems

like he's been a fixture at or near the top of the racing world for quite some time now, so it's a mild surprise to see that he also took home the Young Rider jersey

at the Giro...to remember he's still only 24. But the two stages and the overall are the sum total of all his wins this year. He had 17 other top ten finishes, including a 6th overall at the Vuelta a España. He's 6th in the World Ranking. The fact that I leapfrog him over Alaphilippe (4th) and van der Poel (5th) highlights my slight bias toward stage racers over one-day specialists. In the UCI Stage Race Rankings, he's 3rd.

3. Wout Van Aert, 27, Belgium, Jumbo-Visma



What can we say about this guy? He finished 2nd in the World Tour ranking and 1st in the One-Day Race ranking. He dazzled at the Tour de France, pulling off the rare trifecta of winning a mountain stage, a time trial, and a sprint finish (on the final stage in Paris). That prompted some folks to wonder if he could reinvent himself as an all-rounder and win a Grand Tour. The an-

swer to that, at least for now, is no. They conveniently forget that he won that Ventoux mountain stage out of a break. Were he a true GC threat, he would not have been allowed to get up the road, building a big time cushion. On any other hilly stage, where he hit the slopes with the main group, he always was gapped, sooner rather than later. He can climb better than 95% of the racers out there. But the other 5% will leave him well behind.

Nevertheless, he is an extraordinary talent. He reminds me of Peter Sagan in his prime, with the added value of being one of the best time-trialers on the planet. He won three major cyclo-cross races and was 2nd in four more. And while van der Poel won the cyclo-cross World Championship race, Van Aert won the season-long points championship. (So the two of them ended up just about even in that series, as they have done now for the past seven years.) He won Stages 1 and 7 and the Sprint jersey at Tirreno-Adriatico and finished 2nd overall. He won Gent-Wevelgem, Amstel Gold, and the Belgian Road Race championship. He won those three prime-time stages at the Tour de France. He won the Tour of Britain, winning Stages 1, 4, 6, and 8. He was 2nd in the World Championship

Time Trial and 2nd in the Olympic Road Race. He had at least another 16 top tens that I can track down. He will be a force to be reckoned with for years to come.

2. Primož Roglič, 31, Slovenia, Jumbo-Visma



Roglič had another monster season, although it had its blemishes along with its many triumphs. Most notably, among the triumphs, he won his third Vuelta a España in a row, winning Stages 1 (ITT), 11, 17, and 21 (ITT). He was 1st overall at the Tour of the Basque Country, winning the ITT, the Sprint jersey and the Mountains jersey. He

won the gold medal in the time trial at the Olympics. He won Stages 4, 6, and 7 at Paris-Nice and shoulda, coulda, woulda won the overall had he not crashed twice on downhills on the final stage. That was one of his big disappointments, although a worse one was crashing on Stage 3 of the Tour de France and eventually abandoning on Stage 9.

An aside about crashing. I don't know if anyone keeps close track of how many times racers crash. I know it's a lot and that all of them do so sooner or later. But Roglič seems to do it frequently. In addition to the crashes noted above, he also crashed at the Vuelta. The talking heads were wondering why he even needed to be hammering that downhill as hard as he was. He had the race well in hand and there was not much to be gained, but there he was, taking needless risks on a wet road. In the end, it only cost him a few seconds but it might have been worse and cost him the stage, the overall...perhaps his season or even his career. Before taking up bike racing, Roglič was a ski jumper. He won events in that discipline. His personal best was a jump of 607 feet. He also crashed very badly in one event. If you're interested, you can find the video on YouTube. It's cringe-inducing. The point of this digression is that the guy is certainly fearless or close to it. But maybe a little moderation would not hurt. That said, I don't think his crash at the TdF was due to him pushing the envelope. He just got caught up in a mid-pack tangle. Anyway...

He finished the season with a splashy flourish, winning the Giro dell'Emilia on October 2 and Milano-Torino on October 6. He also finished 4th on Lombardia on October 9. (At the end of Milano-Torino, Tadej Pogacar is with Roglic but finally can't stay with him.) Altogether, he had 14 top tens, not counting his wins. He was 3rd in the World Ranking and 2nd in the Stage Race Ranking.

1. Tadej Pogacar, 23, Slovenia, UAE Team Emirates



Once again this year, I had a tough time deciding between Primož Roglič and his Slovenian rival, Tadej Pogacar, as to who is best and who is second-best. Last year, during the virus-mauled season, I punted and left them equal, saying, “Maybe let’s wait until the end of 2021 and revisit that ques-

tion.” Well, now it’s the end of the 2021 season and the jury is in. Tadej by a nose.

He thoroughly dominated on the biggest stage, winning the Tour de France for the second year in a row, along the way winning Stages 5 (ITT), and 17 and 18 (two big mountaintop finishes). He also distanced all his GC rivals on two other mountain stages behind breakaways. As was the case last year, he took home the Young Rider and Mountains jerseys. (It’s worth noting that the UCI deems the Tour de France to be a bigger prize than the other two Grand Tours. It awards 1000 points for the overall at the TdF but only 850 for either the Giro or the Vuelta. Also more points for a stage win: 120 vs 100. I’ve often said in recent years that the Vuelta is at least as hard as the Tour but the suits who make the rules apparently disagree.)

He won the UAE Tour, winning Stage 3 and the Young Rider jersey. He won Tirreno-Adriatico, winning Stage 4 and Young Rider and Mountains jerseys. He won the Tour of Slovenia, taking out Stage 2 and winning the Mountains jersey. He won two of the most prestigious Monuments, Liege-Bastogne-Liege and Il Lombardia. In each of those races, he was in the front group through all the hilly stuff—both races have loads of hilly stuff—but he won both of them in sprints to the

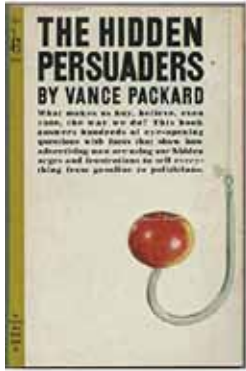
line. He took the bronze medal in the Olympic road race, losing 2nd to Van Aert by a whisker. However, his actual sprint was faster than Van Aert’s...he just started farther back. The point is, the guy is arguably the best climber in the world and one of the best time-trialers, and he can sprint with the best of them. Maybe he couldn’t beat the pure sprinters in a wide open field sprint, but among the all-rounders who might contest a sprint at the end of a hilly stage? He’s right there.

As I noted a month or two ago, the most telling difference between Pogacar and Roglič is probably age. Roglič is listed as 31 for this past season but he will have turned 32 by the time this column hits the street. Almost nine years older than Pogacar. All else being equal, that has to favor Pogacar in the long run. And in the short run—right now—he’s already just a hair ahead.

I find it interesting to note that there are nine different nationalities represented on this list with Slovenia the only one to repeat, and the two of them are the top two on the list. The one other rider in the UCI World Ranking top ten who did not make my list—Matej Mohorič, 10th—is also Slovenian. How is it that Slovenia, a country with a population less than that of Houston, can have three riders in the top ten while the USA’s top rider is Nielson Powless in 53rd, with no other Yank in the top 100?

I didn’t have to do much agonizing to come up with this year’s ten best. There aren’t any other riders close enough in either accomplishments or points to be seriously considered. No Honorable Mentions. Of course, many other riders won races, especially if you count every stage of every stage race. But no one did enough to really stand out. So it goes. About half of the riders on each of my Top Ten lists will be new each year. That usually means youngsters coming on and veterans fading away. But every so often we get a weird one, like gristled vet Sonny Colbrelli catching fire and making us all smile. Who will make the list next year? We can make some informed guesses but we can’t really know until the races are run. For now, we back away from the race videos and head outside to ride through whatever is left of Indian Summer and on into the dark side of the year. And if we get some rides rained out this winter, we promise not to complain. We need the water!

Bikes and Cars: a Different Spin



In 1957, Vance Packard wrote a book called *The Hidden Persuaders*. It was about the world of advertising and how it plays such a huge role in influencing and orchestrating our lives. It was a best-seller at the time and pretty much required reading for any thinking person who wanted to be *au courant* in the modern world.

Today it's safe to say most thinking people would take it for granted that advertising not only works overtime to persuade us to buy stuff or vote for the right candidate but is also an arbiter of cutting-edge style and even cultural mores. Just consider what we see over any given day on television. While conservative politicians are still wringing their hands over same-sex marriage and dog whistling about creeping tides of racial infiltration, the TV ads are showing us happy gay couples with kids, interracial couples, mixed-race families. Men kissing...Egad! Just a few years ago, such images would have been shocking on network TV. Now they're only remarkable for having become so commonplace. The advertising execs didn't wait around for the approval of some red-state curmudgeons to get on board. They simply gave us the world as it is. One ad campaign at a time, they not only reflected the world as it is, they validated it and made it mainstream.

In that same vein, think how many times you see ads that feature some sort of cycling. Not ads for bikes but ads for something else but featuring bikes. Could be some racers out training behind the car the agency is marketing. Could be folks unloading mountain bikes from the roof of some SUV. Could be a middle-aged couple riding cruiser bikes along a path while the voice-over promotes some unpronounceable pharmaceutical we've never heard of. It may be that we still get buzzed by retrograde knuckle-draggers now and then while out riding, but overall, bikes are considered cool. I would say cycling is trending except it's been trending—staying trendy—for about a hundred years. It has never really gone out of style. When the marketing mavens want to add a little style or sporting cachet to the product they're promoting, some cycling iconography is an easy way to do it.

I was reminded of this while browsing through old car

ads recently. (I have a collection of over 15,000 vintage auto ads...I've told you before: I'm a bike nut *and* a car nut.) The images are always trying to tell us a little story; to concoct a narrative we, the prospective buyers, will believe in and buy into. The ad people want to place their cars in some larger context they think will appeal to us. That sometimes leads them to include bikes in their illustrations because bikes are popular and accessible and speak of play and freedom and robust good health...virtues and values they hope will adhere to their cars. The bikes are invariably portrayed in a subsidiary role in the illustrations. That makes sense. They aren't selling the bikes, after all. They just want to gussy up their cars by association with the carefree sportiness of bikes.

To be sure, bikes are not the only sporting icons to lend their luster to the marketing of cars. Down the years, most other recreational activities have had their moments in that role, especially the sports that were deemed to be the most fashionable in any given era: skiing, tennis, golf, any sort of boating, anything to do with horses. But bikes have always been in the mix, as they are in the real world. The account executives on Madison Avenue get it, even if some of the drivers we encounter on the back roads may not. Cycling sells.

So, in this last month of the year, with holiday color and glitter on all fronts, I decided to depart from my more conventional biking topics to entertain you with some "shiny-brite" images showing bikes in car ads down the years. My collection here—just a small sampling—ends in the mid-'60s because that's about the time most of the ad agencies were switching from hand-painted illustrations to photography. As an illustrator myself, I have a special fondness for the old paintings. It's true that photography and television (or video, generally) can do things the old illustrations couldn't. But they cannot match the charm of the old paintings created by some of the best artists of the day. Big, full-page illustrations in magazines like *Time* and *Life* and *Look*, printed in lush colors on glossy paper, were where you were going to get the biggest bang for your advertising buck.

And you have to remember that, up until maybe the end of the '50s, TV ads and even photography in general were still fairly unsophisticated and crude. No amount of Photoshopping could make a grainy photo as attractive and evocative as a well-done painting. And anyway, they didn't have Photoshop back then. Any touch-up was done with airbrush or paint brushes.

(This is a clumsy segue on my part to take this slightly off-topic for one paragraph.) When I was an aspiring graphic artist in high school, I was given a personal tour of the art department at one of the largest ad agencies in Portland, where I watched guys a few years older than I beaver away with their airbrushes to tidy up ad photos. My guide—a friend of my father—was the head of the agency, Homer Groening. Homer is the father of Matt Groening, creator of *The Simpsons*. And yes, Homer's wife is named Marge. Homer was not the clueless doofus that is Homer Simpson, but rather a very savvy and successful advertising executive.



Anyway...back to bikes in car ads. The oldest illustration in this batch is for a Packard ad from 1920. It's worth recalling that in 1920, bike racing—in particular velodrome racing—was pretty much the most popular sport in America. The events outdrew baseball games and the stars were paid better (until Babe Ruth came along). Football was confined to college games and not many of those. Basketball hardly existed. Hockey? Please! That was for Canadians. It was cycling that ruled the roost. And for every pro racer there were dozens of young lads like the one in the illustration, pedaling their mustache-barred bikes down country lanes.

The black-and-white Dodge ad from 1923 is one of several dozen they ran through the mid-'20s, typically using the same illustrator, Willard Prince. They were almost always humorous set-ups, often with kids pitted against the adult establishment, with the kids usually getting the better of the situations. Here we have a young bike messenger running a stop sign while engrossed in reading *The Redskin's Revenge*. I don't



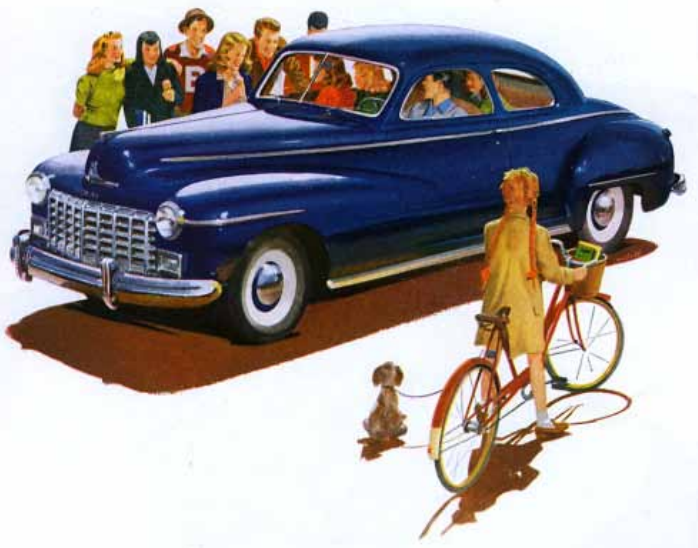
understand how this campaign added any glamor to the Dodge brand but humor is always a good ploy for winning over your audience. This was not the only ad they ran that featured a bike...



Chevrolet picked up on the cycling lifestyle in this ad from 1930. Check out those bikes: drop bars and skinny tires, out for a weekend spin along the river.



The Depression years were lean times for automobile sales. And then World War II shut down the auto industry entirely from 1942 to 1945, as all the assembly



lines were repurposed for building tanks and planes. So we fast-forward to the immediate post-war years for another Dodge ad. This is again one of a set of dozens that ran for a couple of years, all in the same style. This one shows a gaggle of high school kids gathered around a snazzy club coupe, while someone's little sister looks on from atop her "girl's" bike—the original sloping top tube—complete with chain guard and wicker handlebar basket. I learned to ride on a bike like that.

Now we dive deep into the baby boom years of the mid-'50s for this Chevy ad...a red Bel Air convertible at the beach, with a gal keeping pace on her golden bike. Check out that bike: white wall tires, a "gas tank," a chain guard, a wire basket, and a luggage rack. All the bells and whistles. Can you remember the fashion for girl's pants called pedal-pushers? Here they are in their element, pushing pedals. There are a total of three bikes in this picture. Can you find the others? This is just about the time Chevrolet's ad men really got cranked up with lavish scenes of the good life in the boom years of the '50s. This would have been a two-page spread, laying it on thick.



Talk about laying in on thick! Pontiac put together perhaps the greatest run of automobile illustrations ever between 1959 and 1971, sticking with it long after most of the other car companies and ad agencies had gone to photos. These were all the products of a wonderful partnership between two legendary illustrators, Art Fitzpatrick and Van Kaufman. Art painted the cars and Van painted the settings. They cranked out a new illustration every two weeks for 13 years for a total of over 300 images. They somehow collaborated,

passing each painting back and forth until the car and the background were one lush image. I don't quite see how they did it, especially not on a tight schedule. Beginning in '59, Pontiac's marketing hook was the "wide-track Pontiac." So Fitzpatrick stretched the width of the cars way beyond reality. This sumptuous illustration shows that to great effect. This isn't the only time they used a pretty lady on a bike to add sauce to their illustrations. They did another in 1963 that is set on the French Riviera. Oddly enough, I struck almost the same pose—minus the big Pontiac—when cycling along that same waterfront in 2009. Taken



altogether, their archive of extravagant images is one of the great chronicles of life during those years. It's something of a fantasy life, for sure, but that's what ads do for us: create that aspirational fantasy of how wonderful things could be...including flirting with a cutie on a bike.

Even more outlandish than the '59 wide-track Pontiacs were the Buicks of the same year. 1959 represents the pinnacle of over-the-top fins-and-chrome insanity that swept through Detroit in those crazy daze. I mean, what were those stylists smoking? Geez! But what do we have here? Is that a club ride? Well, no, not exactly, at least not as we would know it today. But it is some sort of group ride...an assembly of friends all out for a happy ramble. Riders in street clothes—Bermuda shorts!—on sturdy Schwinn-style bikes. And look up in the left-hand corner: is that a tandem back there? I believe it is. One other curious thing about this image: all of the cyclists are women...sorority sisters, perhaps?

The '60s were the last gasp for most painted illustrations in the car world. And at the same time that the ad agencies were moving to photography, the car stylists were moving to blandness. That late-'50s fever dream of tailfins and glitz had peaked by 1960 and, year by year after that, the designs became increasingly anodyne...that is to say, boring. But the art directors at the ad agencies still had to ply their craft, doing the best they could with what they had. Chrysler's ad men still liked bikes and these two examples (next page)—ads for a '64 Dodge Polara and a '65 Plymouth

Fury—make use of bikes to give their rather mediocre cars a little pizzazz. By now the bikes and the bike scene look almost contemporary. We see racing bikes with drop bars and skinny saddles, “hairnet” helmets, wool jerseys and number bibs. I can almost see myself in these pictures. I had my first adult road bikes at that time...a Raleigh, two Gitanes, a Bianchi, a Peugeot. I wasn't racing but I was rolling it up the road and figuring out how cool this bike thing could be. I was a new convert to the Church of the Spinning Crank.

That's where I have to leave this fantasy world and ride on into the present moment, a time where we see bikes in TV ads and print ads all the time. We may not even notice them all that often...that is, not consciously take note of them. But they're out there in ad-land, the same as interracial couples and gay families, subliminally reminding the world that bikes are a part of our lives; that they're fun and green and good for us. The road bikes and mountain bikes and cruiser bikes in ads for cars and drugs and munchies may not be what's being sold, not directly. But they're selling themselves as they roll past us on the TV screens or on our monitors or in our magazines.

I suppose a politically-correct scold might point out that all these images are somehow bad because they represent the horrid old auto industry and all it has done to pollute our little planet and, further, that the illustrations promote or celebrate an upper-crust snobbery. The ads almost always invoke some image of the good life...the hoity-toity, high-end swank of

wealth and privilege. (Who would market their product with images of down-market scruff and squalor?) But I think of the lives of those many talented and hard-working illustrators and hark back to the painters and other artists of past times who got paid by some corrupt pope or decadent duke or fat cat burgher to create everything from a Sistine chapel to a Pieta. In this sense, the car companies and their marketing budgets are just another take on the art patron paradigm. They paid the bills for a lot of good artists so they could do their lovely images...so they could live and survive creating fun and interesting art. Thank goodness such artists exist in every generation and thank goodness someone has the money to pay them so they can keep doing what they do.

And thank goodness there were art directors and illustrators whose world views embraced cycling and incorporated it into their hidden persuasion. Art imitating life.



The Comfort Zone

In the world of cycling, the term “comfort zone” has a few applications. What’s your comfort zone for fast descending? What’s your comfort zone for pack riding or a snappy paceline? Most of the time, the words reflect a state of mind, perhaps the opposite of being nervous or twitchy. Confident in your own competence: knowing you’ve got this.

But there is another kind of comfort zone: not a state of mind but simply being literally physically comfortable on your bike.

I thought about this recently when I recalled a funny incident from a few years back. I was checking in at the start of the Tour of the Unknown Coast up in Ferndale. My wife was with me although not riding the century. She was hanging out for the start and would then spend the day doing other things. She was a sort of a cyclist but not up for a challenging century. Her riding at the time was mostly cycle-commuting on heavy Schwinn beaters, first the Varsity she’d had ever since college and then a CrossCut.

Anyway, while I was checking in, she hopped on my bike and toolled around for a few minutes in the big parking lot at the Fairgrounds. She rolled back up to me after her spin and exclaimed, “That’s just not fair! This bike is so smooth and light...riding it is almost effortless!” Compared to her usual clunkers, my Merlin was a revelation.

And as nice as that Merlin was—back in its heyday—it was not nearly as smooth and light as my current bike, a Trek Madone. The basic bikes we ride—their essential configuration—may be the same as the bikes our grandfathers or great-grandmothers rode a hundred years ago but the technology hasn’t stagnated. The frames and all the little components hanging off the frames are being improved every year.

To cut to the punchline here: a modern bike, any half-way decent one, will land you in a comfort zone that most older bikes cannot hope to match. Riding a good bike is almost effortless, at least for most miles. Throw in some steep hills or too much heat or too much speed and your effort will have to ratchet up a bit. But the baseline task of making the bike roll up the road is as close to effortless as it can be. And along with the lack of effort is the comfortable ride. The New York Bike Snob guy used to mock bike reviewers who would

describe a bike as “stiff yet compliant.” I take his point: it’s an oxymoron, in his estimation with the emphasis on the “moron.” And yet, and yet...I don’t know a better way to describe how a good carbon frame feels. It can be stiff when it needs to be but not too harsh; it can be compliant as needed but not too willowy. Add in a good saddle and good bike fit and riding is an almost effortless dream...easy peasy.

In contrast to that, I’ll propose a little scenario. You’re on vacation, visiting some far-off relatives. You’ve left your bike at home and you’re getting cabin fever after sitting around the house for a few days with these folks. You wish you could just get out for a few miles and explore the town or the nearby country lanes. One of your relatives says, “You can borrow my bike.” Okay! And off you go, wearing your camp shorts and stuffing your tennies or tevas into rat-trap pedals. And the bike? It’s a beater. Not a good bike to begin with and a long way away from its last maintenance.

In all likelihood the ride ends up being a sufferfest and you come home exhausted and sore after 15 miles of neighborhood streets. Country lanes never get into the picture...a ridge too far. Have you had this experience? Or something similar? I have. It’s a brutally simple way to come to a better appreciation of how nice a nice bike can be and how pleasant it makes the task of pushing the pedals around and rolling along the roads. And how miserable it can be to try to do the simplest ride on a bad bike.

Now think about the other riders we see out there, perhaps especially along the bike paths not far from home. A lot of them are not “serious” cyclists. They don’t have the right clothing and they most assuredly do not have good bikes. Chances are they’re in the midst of that 15-mile ride on the beater bike, working harder to do their 15 miles than you’re working to knock off 30 or 60 miles... and not just working harder but suffering more discomfort. They have next-to-no comfort zone on their tired old bikes.

Granted, some of this is going to be down to personal fitness. Do enough cycling and you’ll become better at it, able to sustain the effort more comfortably and also stave off—or put up with—the little aches and pains that might assail you as the miles pile up. But having the right equipment—bike and gear—is a large chunk of what makes good riding so good.

I do not subscribe to the old adage, “He who

dies with the most toys wins.” I am not a conspicuous consumer of bike bling. You can get a decent bike without having to refinance your house to pay for it. The bike shops are full of excellent mid-priced bikes that are better in pretty much every way than the highest-priced bikes of 20 years ago. You can even resuscitate an older bike with some new parts and some TLC. I’m not talking about a state-of-the-art bike for racing or doubles or other hardcore pursuits. Just a bike that is not a clunky, chunky grinder.

When your neighbor says to you, “I just don’t know how you can pound out those long rides; I’d be dying after 15 miles!”...you can figure his own cycling experience involves one of those heavy, plodding lunkers, plus the wrong shorts and so on...the wrong tools for the job. If he’s just halfway fit—middle-aged fit—he would find a ride on any decent bike to be as much of a revelation as my wife did on my old Merlin. Like, whoa! This is amazing!

I am also not much of a believer in New Year’s resolutions. But this is January and the new year does offer us at least a benchmark moment to consider new beginnings, new opportunities. So as you face the new season and if you happen to still be riding a bike that makes even a few miles a painful chore, why not consider treating yourself to something just a little bit better? Maybe it’s time to invest a few bucks in getting the tired old bike renovated. Or even retired... time to spend a few more bucks on a new bike. If your only sense of what cycling can be comes from the seat of a clunker, you too will be amazed at how sweet and effortless a better bike can be; how it can turn a ride from a painful purgatory into a heavenly cruise. Maybe 2022 will be the year for you to make that discovery.



Here We Go Again

How many times, around this month of the year, have I written one of these columns in celebration of spring-time? I'm not going back to count them up but I know there have been a few. So excuse me for being a broken record when it comes to this seasonal turning...the deja voodoo that comes around once a year as the days grow longer and warmer. There is something so primal about it. After months of rain and gloom and even the occasional snow and freeze, all of a sudden it's nudging up into the 70s and we're having to put sun screen on parts of our anatomy that have been covered in winter clothing for the past few months. It never gets old.

I did a classic ride up into the wine country yesterday: the Russian River and Dry Creek Valleys. Ever since we got that drench of rain a month ago, our world has been as green as can be. But now the emerald grasses have been joined by their pretty dance partners, the wildflowers. Mustard down the rows of vines or splashed across whole meadows; shoals of white and orange mini-daisies along the roadsides; yellow clover blossoms under the trees, keeping company with fairy rings of mushrooms. And the domestic flora too: daffodils and daphne, rosemary, plums, acacias. Everyone is ready to rumble.

Dry Creek is a long way from dry. (I doubt it ever is anymore, with the flow controlled at Warm Springs Dam.) I stopped on Yoakim Bridge and studied the ripples for steelhead. They should be down there now. The several fly fishermen arrayed along the bank below Wohler Bridge certainly believe the fish are there. I saw a lot of fishing but not much catching. (I surfed around the 'net a little to see if I could find up-to-date info on the steelhead run but couldn't find current numbers. However, those fishermen out there in their waders, patiently floating their flies out into the current: they probably know a lot more about this than I do.)

This spring season is perhaps freighted with even more urgency and promise than in another year because—knock wood—we are maybe finally seeing some hopeful signs with the pandemic. Even as the Omicron Express is chugging its way through our world and even as (mostly) unvaccinated people fall into its clutches, the experts are telling us the trends are heading in the right direction. If things are getting back to normal, what that will mean for cyclists is more group rides, both our informal club rides and bigger, organized events, from centuries to doubles to crits to road races to triathlons to brevets....the whole circus, back in business. The pro peloton will be back in business as well, even more than last year. All the spectating you could wish for.



Dumb and Dumber

And then touring! Big plans for big tours in far-off places. A bike-n-barge in Holland; exploring the balcony roads of Provence or the hill villages of Tuscany; bike paths along the Rhine. Or just a club tour not far from home but still buckets of fun. It's all out there for the taking...again.

But most of those pleasures are still months ahead. We're not there yet unless you want to tour New Zealand or enjoy autumn in Argentina. For now, for most of us, it's just the simple pleasure of rolling down our driveways and out into this freshly green and suddenly balmy world of springtime magic. If you haven't done it yet, give your bike a tune-up or hand it over to your local bike store wrench to do it for you. Don't launch off into this happy new season with a gritty drive train.

All this happy talk about spring: bear in mind I'm only talking about Northern California now, and not even all of this great half-state. Venture into the mountains or up into the far north and Winter is still in charge. And then there's the rest of the country. We come home from a sunny, pleasant ride and turn on the evening news, where the talking heads are frothing about yet another arctic front crippling the eastern half of the country, from Austin to Boston, with wind chills below zero and the obligatory footage of icy freeways and jack-knifed big rigs.

But right here, right around the big bay, with our temperate climate, we're getting a sneak preview of what the rest of the country won't be seeing for another few months. However, while we're enjoying what we're being given right now, let's not forget that the weather gods can still open the taps and dump more rain and chill upon us in the months to come. In fact, we kinda, sorta hope they do. We had that marvelous monsoon in December that vastly improved our situation with respect to our prolonged drought. We're in way better shape than at this point a year ago. But we're not all the way back to where we need to be and if we don't get any more rain we'll still be in danger of another nasty wildfire season, not to mention the need for draconian water rationing. Indeed, we were reminded of the danger with a little wildfire up on the Geysers on January 22—soon snuffed out—and a larger fire down in Big Sur on the same day. So while we rejoice in these mild, sunny days, let's hope for at least a few more days—better yet, overnights—of rain before the true Golden State weather settles in for the duration.

In the meantime, enjoy these lovely days while they last.

“Seemed like a good idea at the time...”

I woke up this morning—swam up out of a dream-fog—recalling a really absurd predicament I got myself into on a bike ride several years ago. I'll share that story with you in a bit. But let me begin by saying this is about doing dumb things on the bike.

There's an old joke that says 50% of all emergency room visits begin with this line: “Hey, hold my beer... watch this!” Visit YouTube and type in “Jackass” and you can pull up dozens of videos of guys—it's almost always guys—doing really dumb stuff which inevitably, predictably leads to them injuring themselves. Or watch *America's Funniest Home Videos* for the same lamebrain stunts. Personally, I would rather watch cats or puppies doing silly stuff than watch young dudes mauling themselves by way of some ill-advised pranks. Partly it's painful to see the injuries but mostly it's uncomfortable to see these dopes being so irredeemably stupid. Can people really be that dumb? Apparently they can.

Then again, in this column I once described my own riding as jackass (sprinting for a county line sign around a 90° corner). That one cost me a collarbone broken into five pieces. So yeah, I've been there a time or two. And so probably have you. But jackass county line sprints are a spur-of-the-moment deal. Not much thinking involved, smart, dumb or whatever. They may be evidence of an overarching mindset that precludes much thinking...a testosterone-suffused hammerhead-edness...but one can almost forgive such spontaneous eruptions of stupid.

What I'm thinking about today are the more considered moments of dumbness: when you have time to think about what lies ahead, and the better angel on one shoulder is pleading with you, “Don't do it! Don't go there! Nothing good can come of this.” And the badder angel on your other shoulder is saying...well, what is he saying exactly? It's usually some inchoate, poorly articulated mush of stubborn willfulness and maybe bravado. A determination to not back down or give up or turn back...to push on through to victory! Doh!

Cycling smart people can trot out statistics to support the premise that riding a bike is actually safer than almost any other sport (fewer hospital admissions per hours of activity). Also safer than riding in a car or

climbing a ladder to clean out your gutters, etc. Most of the time, we agree with that. But c'mon...hardcore riding, where a lot of envelope-pushing is going on, can be risky, regardless of what the statistics say. No need to itemize all the ways things can suddenly go bad on a bike. Who has not been there and done that?

Some of those bad things are no one's fault. File them under the heading Shit Happens. Some of them do involve poor decisions or sketchy moves made by the riders...Operator Error. Like the time I was hit by a car. I saw the car. I thought I had plenty of time to cross the road. I did not in fact have as much time as I thought I did. And so...whammo! Or, as an engineering friend told me: "You did not perform an adequate vector analysis." Too true. My bad.

But again, these are not really dumb stunts. They may involve a lapse of judgment or a split-second wrong choice. But they're not willful stupidity. They're not the gaffes you can look back on later and say, "What was I thinking?"

Dumb decisions don't always lead to injuries or badly busted bikes. I'm going to pass along three anecdotes here to illustrate dumb things done on a bike, but none of them involved me in any sort of real danger and no injuries at all. Nor did any of them involve beer. But they were still dumb, each of which I can still recall with a touch of rueful chagrin.

This first little incident happened during a Wine Country Century some years ago. My friend Emilio and I were banging out the later miles up Alexander Valley when I cut a rear tire badly. It was beyond booting. Shoot...now what? A sag came along and although he had no spare tires, he did have a floor pump. So Emilio offered me his spare tubular. (Anyone who rides tubulars carries a spare tire because if you flat you cannot patch them. You have to swap out the whole tire.) But a sew-up on a clincher rim? I'd never heard of such a thing. Could it be done? It was a simple rim—a Mavic MA-40, I think—and it seemed just barely plausible. The sag driver, an experienced bike wrench, looked askance at the whole idea but Emilio insisted it would work. So we got it on the rim and with that floor pump we jacked it up to about a zillion PSI. Hard as a billiard ball and absolutely locked tight on the rim. What the heck...it

looked fine... Let's go!

A few miles later, nearing the hill on Chalk Hill—about mile 90 of the century—I started feeling a weird lump...lump...lump from the rear wheel. I mentioned it to Emilio, who was drafting behind me, and he said, "Just keep riding!" So I did, but not for long. Halfway up the hill, kablooy! The tire exploded. It had been slowly creeping around the rim and finally the valve stem was pulled too far away from its little hole in the rim and was sheered off, shredding the tire as it gave up the ghost.

So there I was, less than ten miles from the finish, stranded on the side of the road. Emilio—he of the "Just keep riding!"—did just that. He kept riding. See ya later! I think that's the only Wine Country Century in over 30 years where I took a DNF. This is what I call collaborative or codependent dumbness...the two of us egging each other on to do something we ought to have known was a stupid non-starter. Emilio knew nothing about clinchers and I knew nothing about sew-ups. We pooled our collective ignorance and made a dumb decision. But I wonder...what if we'd switched my front tire to the rear rim and put the tubular on the front, where it would have been less stressed? Would that have been smart or just another kind of dumb?

My second sorry saga also involves exploding tires. My old bike buddy Donn used to be a sales rep for a national distributor of bike stuff. One of the lines he carried was a well-known brand of tires. Donn gave me three brand new tires for my road bike. Such a deal! At least it seemed that way. I don't know whether the tires were defective—maybe why he gave them away—or whether it was one of those occasional poor match-ups between my rims and those tires. But almost immediately they started blowing off the rims in the most explosive, spec-



tacular ways. One of them blew up as I was descending from Antelope Lake, up above Indian Valley. Fortunately I was with friends and someone had a fold-up I could put on. So no harm done, aside from a rather dramatic, skittering stop from high speed on my rim.

I forget where the next one blew up but it did so, somewhere. At that point I should have wised up to the problem, whatever the problem was...the tires or the tire-rim interface. That's where this gets dumb. I should have never mounted the third tire. But dammit, they were free! How could I throw away a free tire?

And sure enough, that one blew up too. It did so near the end of one of the most epic tour stages ever: up and over a high Sierra ridge and down, down, down into Kings Canyon. 78 miles, 9800' of climbing and a ton of descending through some of the most awesome scenery in the world. I suppose I should count myself lucky it didn't blow on the wild, 17-mile descent into the canyon. It lasted through that and finally blew to pieces about five miles from camp in Cedar Grove.

My buddies said they'd ride on to camp and send the sag wagon back to pick me up. (This is before cell phones.) But the sag never came back to find me. So I walked and walked, with my bike rolling on its rim, for five miles to get to camp. The final kicker was that swarms of tiny flies found me and ate me alive. Their favorite thing was landing on my eyeballs. Are we having fun yet?

So that's cheap-dumb. Too damn cheap to toss some tires that aren't working. Explode on me once, shame on you. Explode on me twice, shame on me. And finally, three strikes, you're out! As George Santayana said, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." Case in point.

My last anecdote is the one I woke up thinking about this morning. It's the one that really exemplifies dumb and dumber on a bike. This was a solo ride near home, out to the Russian River. It must have been late winter.

There had been a whacking great storm a few days before and it had been reported in the local paper that a debris flow of mud had spilled across Old Monte Rio Road. That sounded like something worth seeing so I headed out that way. Sure enough, there it was. (Used to be we called

these landslides but ever since that big hot mess down in Montecito we have been instructed that the proper term is debris flow.) It had oozed down from the high ground on the right side of the road, flowed across and slopped over the cliff on the downhill side. It was just as it had been when it was on the move, only nicely settled in now. No county crews had been out to deal with it yet.

It was maybe 50 feet across and...just how deep was it? That was hard to tell. At least it was hard to tell if you were suffering from early-onset dumbness. Because what I wanted to do was to go forward, through it, over it, to the dry road on the other side. This is where common sense says you admire the mud, then turn around and ride back the way you came. But noooo! Not this bubba! Somehow stupidity draped its murky cloak over my head and all sensible thoughts evaporated. Never mind what that better angel is saying. the bad angel is saying, I can do this! Or as Robert Frost said, "...the best way out is always through." And who would call Frost dumb, eh?

Someone had placed a couple of 8-foot 2 x 10s across the mud...the beginnings of a "bridge"? That suggested maybe the mud had dried out and firmed up enough to be like hard-pack. I convinced myself this must be the case. With my bike on my shoulder, I got to the end of the last board and tentatively tapped the mud in front of me. Seemed firm enough. So I walked the plank: I boldly stepped out onto the supposedly hard surface and promptly sank up to my knees in the most glutinous, gooey quagmire...a quicksand nightmare except it was only two feet deep with the paved road at the bottom.

Now I was really stuck fast. Couldn't move. Like being in concrete that's setting up, except it's chocolate mousse. I was afraid if I pulled a foot out, my shoe would stay down in the grip of the mud. And if I got a foot out, where would I put it down? No way I could twist around and go back. If I could go anywhere, it



had to be forward. Meanwhile, my pretty road bike had become my crutch and was buried in the mud up past the chain rings.

What ultimately bailed me out was firewood. A nearby home had an open-sided shed full of split firewood and the debris flow had run through the shed and floated many lengths of cord wood out onto the top of the flow. I grabbed all the ones I could reach and placed them ahead of me as stepping stones...the mud equivalent of snowshoes. Slowly, carefully, I pulled one foot out of the sucking mud and placed it on the flat side of a piece of firewood, always leaning for balance on the now totally filthy bike. One by one, I moved on across the flow, bringing the blocks of wood along, picking up the ones behind me and placing them in front. It must have taken an hour to go 30 feet.

I made it eventually. But then I had a mud-covered me and a disgustingly muddy bike to deal with before I could ride the 20 miles home. I found a nearby ditch with about a foot of water in it and set the bike in there, and with the help of a stick and some handfuls of grass and a lot of splashing, I got enough crud off so the chain would work. I didn't even try to clean myself, except to clear the cleats a little. I was solid mud from the knees down with large splotches everywhere else. I passed some other riders on the way home and they gave me funny looks but no one said anything. Maybe they thought I was some hard-ass animal who rides a road bike in the mud, cyclo-cross style. Yeah...I meant to do that!

The dumb moments we survive end up making good anecdotes...old war stories. (Despite Santayana's famous quote, we do remember the old stories...and yet still fall into the same stupid booby traps again and again.) If the anecdotes sometimes reflect rather badly on our capacity for rational, reasonable thought, so be it. A little humility is good for us. I'm using the plural pronouns—"our" and "us"—because I imagine most of you will confess to at least the occasional lapse of common sense when some quixotic challenge has presented itself and blotted out your better angel's better advice. It happens. We keep tilting at windmills, even when we should know better.

So here we are, launched into the fullness of spring-time, with all the possible cycling options arrayed ahead of us. What to do? Where to go? I wish you all the best in this best of all possible seasons. I hope you have many grand adventures and only a very few and very small dumb moments.

April, 2022 • 274

Friends

Yesterday, our neighbor Tony invited a few friends over to sample his latest batch of home-made beer. (Tony makes very good beer and even grows his own hops.) That may not seem like earth-shaking news and I suppose it's not. But if there were more news stories like this, the world would be a better place.

What makes this newsworthy for me—or at least fodder for a bike column—is that everyone who attended the party was connected to one another through cycling. We all ride. We don't all ride the same way or have the same cycling plans or practices. Tony's wife likes to load up a sturdy touring bike and head off on her own for a month of solo exploring in some far-off wonderland. Others are—or have been—closer to the "typical" template of racers or century riders. There are those who hew to the randonneur way of doing things. Almost everyone there has been on at least one of my summer tours and often several. All of us met through some interactions within the Santa Rosa Cycling Club. Some of the friendships go back 30 years.

We met because we all joined the club. We joined the club because we wanted to take part in club rides; wanted to expand and improve our bike lives. And out of those incidental meetings on club rides—those shared adventures—we found a few people with whom we bonded in other ways than just as folks you meet on Saturday for a ride. We found other common themes in our lives. Shared values and pleasures and priorities. Each of us might have met some of the other people through some other matrix of social connection. Tony and his wife live just around the corner from me and my wife, in a small town. We might have crossed paths with them via other community connections. Or not. There are dozens of people who live nearer to me than they do—almost across the street—and who have lived that near to me for over 30 years... and I don't even know their names, nor would I recognize some of them on the street. But I know where all the cyclists in the neighborhood live.

It's the cycling that brought us together initially. To some degree it's still the tie that binds us. Now, however, our common ground spreads well beyond cycling. We're just as happy talking about our kids or grand-kids, about our jobs or hobbies or gardens or current events. But eventually, we always circle back to biking. At the party, with a replay of Tirenno-Adriatico play-

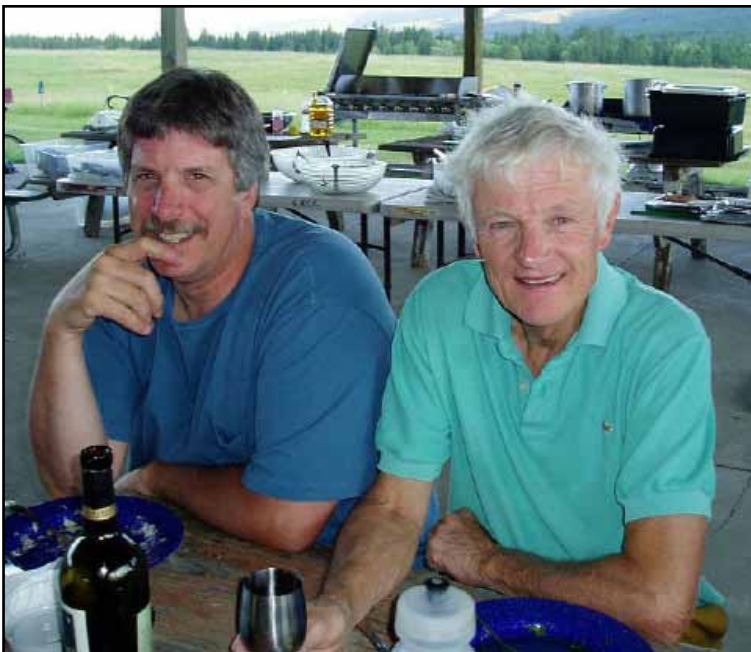
Racing into Springtime: Prime Time

ing quietly on the TV in the corner, we sooner or later rolled out the old anecdotes, the tall tales about past rides. We got going on flats...on double flats. We recalled a broken seat bolt in Italy, riding in a downpour in France, the kindness of a stranger in Napa. So many rides, so many stories, big and little, scary or funny or just plain weird. It's all grist for the mills of memory.

We may not ride as fast or as far as we used to. The average age at Tony's party was...well, let's just say middle-aged and leave it at that. But all those accumulated years add up to a wealth of experiences and adventures...a whole lot of been-there-done-that. We like unpacking the old yarns, both as tellers and listeners. We understand and respect one another. We are... friends.

This is always of great value for us, the social animals that we are. But it seems especially poignant and pertinent right now, as we are emerging from two-plus years of enforced isolation and "social distancing" in the dread shadow of the pandemic. It's as if we're cautiously climbing out of the storm cellar after the tornado has passed. Being able to once again meet with our friends for something as simple and as sublime as an afternoon of beer and chips and cheerful conversation...that seems just about as precious a gift as our world has to offer us.

So thank you to cycling for finding me these genial companions, these fellow travelers upon life's back roads. There are many reasons why we ride but these endearing and enduring friendships are right near the top of the list for me.



The beginning of May marks a tipping point in the world of professional bike racing. The slate of spring classics has run its course and several stage races of up to a week have been completed. Next up on the calendar is the first of the three Grand Tours: the Giro d'Italia, running from May 6 to May 29.

With that tipping point in mind, it makes this a good time to review the season and see what, if anything, the action so far portends for the big races ahead. So let's strap into our time machine and travel back to the early months of the year. What we're going to find is the usual mix of the big guns doing big things—predictably—and of some surprises that few would have predicted.

The first two races of the UCI season, down in Australia, were cancelled because of lingering COVID restrictions. There were assorted smaller races where we could watch the pros sharpening their claws if we cared enough to dig up all those videos. But the first big race was the UAE Tour, seven stages in the last week of February.

Tadej Pogacar (UAE Team Emirates) took up where he left off last year—and the year before—by winning the tour. He did it almost exactly the way he did it last year by turning in a respectable time trial on Stage 3, then winning the uphill finishes on Stages 4 and 7. His uphill wins got rid of the time trial specialists and sprinters and his good time trial topped all the other climbers. Final margin of victory: 22 seconds over Adam Yates (INEOS-Grenadiers), compared with beating Yates last year by :35.

Pogacar added a new wrinkle to his spring campaign this year by winning Strade Bianche, the one-day classic on March 5. This is the race that spends many of its miles on gravel roads in the rolling hills of Tuscany. He rather quietly went off the front with 49 K to go and simply left everyone else behind. There was nothing dramatic about it. He just opened a little gap and then kept widening it, uphill and down, gravel or paved, and finally up the steep streets of Siena's *centro storico*. Alejandro Valverde (Movistar) led home the chasers, 37 seconds back.

The cheerful young Slovenian kept the pedal to the medal by once again winning Tirreno-Adriatico (seven



stages from March 7 to 13). Same path to victory: a close 3rd in the opening time trial, then wins in mountain finishes on Stages 4 and 6. Final margin of victory: 1:52 over Jonas Vingegaard (Jumbo-Visma).

Pogacar broadened his horizons this year by contesting many of the one-day classics. At the Tour of Flanders on April 3 he was clearly the most animated and dangerous rider on each of the steep climbs. The only rider to stick with him was Mathieu van der Poel (Alpecin-Fenix). The two of them approached the final uphill sprint together and who knew who would win? But here his luck ran out, or his skill set in classics came up short. He got a little cute with van der Poel, trying to stall a bit and stay behind him...but as they were doing their little *pas de deux*, Dylan van Baarle (INEOS-Grenadiers) and Valentin Madouas (Groupama-FDJ) came storming back and rejoined the leaders. Then, when van der Poel launched his sprint—from the front—Pogacar got boxed in by the other two and got skunked: 4th place. It's the first time I've ever seen Pogacar anything other than cheerful. He had some tart words for van Baarle at the finish.

One last early-season note on Pogacar. On the steep finish of Flèche-Wallonne on April 20, he was right up there among the elite front group on the brutal Mur de Huy...until he wasn't. He was there, out of the saddle and looking good, and then he just sat down and slowed down and threw in the towel. Don't know why. But arguably the best climber in the world all of a sudden didn't have the legs. Does it mean anything? We'll find out in July.

Meanwhile, his compatriot, Primož Roglič, rectified his mistakes at last year's Paris-Nice (eight stages, March 6-14). Last year he was clearly the strongest rider and was positioned to win but crashed twice on the final stage and dropped well down the list. No mistakes this time. He was 2nd behind teammate Wout van Aert in the time trial on Stage 4, then won the only real

uphill finish on Stage 7. He had a 47-second lead over Simon Yates (BikeExchange) going into the final stage and Yates made a valiant effort to chew away at that lead, getting off the front and gapping Roglič. But with the help of van Aert, Roglič clawed his way back and only conceded nine seconds of his lead.

He began the Tour of the Basque Country (six stages, April 4-9) as if he would capably defend his title from last year. He won the time trial on Stage 1 and protected that lead through Stage 4. But on Stage 5 he was unable to hang with the fastest riders on a steep uphill finish and dropped to 8th overall, 1:05 behind. He lost more time on another uphill finish on the final stage and ended up over three minutes in arrears. It was a bit strange to see him lose that much ground; he's been so consistently strong in recent years. He didn't offer much in the way of excuses afterward. He just didn't seem to have it.

The race was eventually won by Dani Martinez (INEOS-Grenadiers), including winning Stage 4. He has had a lively spring campaign. In addition to winning this tour, he was 3rd overall at Paris-Nice, 3rd overall at Volta ao Algarve, 4th at Liege-Bastogne-Liege, and 5th at Flèche-Wallonne.

The hot young Belgian Remco Evenepoel (QuickStep) won the Volta ao Algarve (five stages, February 16-20) by winning the time trial on Stage 4. He took the GC by 1:17 over Brandon McNulty (UAE Team Emirates). He took the early lead at the Volta a la Comunitat Valenciana (five stages, February 2-6) but couldn't quite hang with the best climbers on Stage 3 and eventually finished 2nd overall to Aleksandr Vlasov (Bora-Hansgrohe), 41 seconds back. He was 4th overall at the Tour of the Basque Country. Still just 22 years old, he won the Best Young Rider jersey in all three of those stage races. Best of all, he won the monument Liege-Bastogne-Liege on April 24. He attacked on the Cote de la Redoute, showing a savage burst of speed no one



could match. He soloed home over the final 14 K for a comfortable 48-second victory.

Sergio Higuita (Bora-Hansgrohe) won the Volta a Catalunya (seven stages, March 21-27). Through five stages it was looking like a three-cornered tussle between Higuita, Nairo Quintana, and Joao Almeida. But on a hilly and rainy Stage 6, Richard Carapaz and Higuita got away off the front and opened up a gap of over three minutes. The sharp end of the peloton chased hard and eventually whittled the lead down to 48 seconds at the finish but that was enough for the two *escapados*. Carapaz won the two-up sprint but Higuita won the overall. Higuita also won a stage at the Volta ao Algarve, a stage at the Tour of Romandie, and the national road race championship in Colombia. At age 24, he may be a rising star, providing a potent one-two punch with Vlasov at Bora.

Romain Bardet (DSM) won the five-stage Tour of the Alps (April 18-22, knocking Pello Bilbao off the podium with a strong finish on the final stage. (Yes, all the way off the podium for Bilbao: from 1st to 4th on that last hilltop finish.)

The last stage race we can squeeze in here is the Tour of Romandie (five stages plus an ITT prologue, April 26-May 1). Rohan Dennis (Jumbo-Visma) finished a close second in the prologue and then took over the GC after a short, steep uphill finish on Stage 1. He protected his lead through the biggest uphill finish on Stage 4. It looked like the tour was his with only the short, uphill time trial on the last day. He has been one of the best against the clock for some years. But so much for that! He had a lackluster time trial, finishing in 22nd place, 2:12 behind winner Aleksandr Vlasov. That was more than enough to put Vlasov comfortably in the final GC lead. Vlasov has always been strong in the hills but if he can time trial like this, watch out!

That takes care of the stage races and a few of the classics, usually with stronger riders living up to their reputations and bringing home the bacon. We'd probably have to call Dani Martinez winning the Basque Country a bit of a surprise but, as noted above, he did have a strong spring season overall.

As for the one-day races, we've noted Pogacar at Strade Bianche, van der Poel at Flanders, and Evenepoel at LBL. One-day races can always be unpredictable and this season has been no exception. Van der Poel also won Dwars door Vlaanderen (March 30) in a two-up sprint with Tiesj Benoot (Jumbo-Visma), reaffirming what we already knew: that he is one of the strongest

classics riders right now. Wout van Aert won Omloop het Nieuwsblad on February 26 and E3 Saxo Bank on March 25...another of the stronger one-day racers. After that, the results start raising some eyebrows...

Matej Mohoric (Bahrain-Victorious)—another dang Slovenian!—won la Primavera: Milano-Sanremo. How he did was the big news. He attacked on the descent from the Poggio into San Remo and simply rode all the other big boys off his wheel. That's not easy to do. You might gap one or two timid descenders but the whole bunch? Great descenders and highly motivated? But he did it... got a big-enough gap on the downhill and scampered home clear of the pursuing pack.

Now for a real shocker: Binian Girmay (Intermarché-Wanty) won Gent-Wevelgem on March 27. He's the first Black African rider to win a major pro race. He won a four-rider sprint several seconds clear of the main pack. Those were good riders he was going against...nothing flukey about it.

Michal Kwiatkowski (INEOS-Grenadiers) just nipped Benoit Cosnefroy (AG2R) at Amstel Gold on April 10. Kwiatkowski attacked on the penultimate climb—the Cauberg—and only Cosnefroy had the legs to hang on. By the time they reached the last climb, their lead was :30 and no one was able to bridge across. The finish was as close as close can be. In fact, Cosnefroy went into a big victory celebration right away, but close analysis of the photos proved Kwiatkowski was ahead by a fraction of an inch.

Dylan van Baarle (INEOS-Grenadiers) won the great monument Paris-Roubaix on April 17. It was a classic Hell of the North, this year a dry day with dust rather than a wet day with mud. All the usual mayhem was on tap through the many *secteurs* of cobblestones but nothing I can recall that had a decisive impact on the results. It was just the usual war of attrition and who had it at the end. After all the struggles and tumbles and suffering, van Baarle got away 20 K from the velodrome...first a little gap and then a little more... It seemed likely, at first, that others would pull him back, but it never happened and he finished on his own, 1:47 ahead of a pack of four, with Wout van Aert winning the sprint for 2nd.

One week later, another Dylan—Dylan Teuns (Bahrain-Victorious)—won the gut-busting final grind up Mur de Huy at La Flèche Wallone. (Year after year, this finish has to be one of the great spectacles in all of sport...I love it!) He was chased home by that ageless wonder, Alejandro Valverde, who has won the event five times.

And that's going to do it for all the bigger bike races of the spring. Can we read anything into these tea leaves?

We can say that Tadej Pogacar looks to be in pretty good form, with the UAE Tour, Strade Bianche, and Tirreno-Adriatico all in his column. Just a couple of little hitches in his giddyup at Flanders and Flèche but not really much to worry about, at least not in the context of Grand Tours.

Primož Roglič did just enough to win Paris-Nice but did not exactly look like a colossus. And then he had his little meltdown at the Basque Country. So while we have to figure he'll be a contender in mid-summer, I wouldn't rate him a mortal lock to win anything.

Aleksandr Vlasov might be coming into his own this year. He was 1st overall at Romandie, 1st overall at Valenciana, 3rd overall at Basque Country, 3rd at Flèche Wallone, and 4th overall at the UAE Tour. He's fortunate Russian cyclists are still allowed to participate in pro races, although not under a Russian flag.

Remco Evenepoel is looking strong...just bursting with youthful energy...but like Wout van Aert, he doesn't quite have the climbing chops to win a Grand Tour. He'll be a holy terror in the classics and maybe some shorter stage races but will be only hoping for stage wins in the bigger events.

Who else was looking good this spring? Jonas Vingegaard, Joao Almeida, Pello Bilbao, Romain Bardet, the Yates twins, Mikel Landa, Nairo Quintana, Brandon McNulty, Sergio Higuita.

The start list for the Giro is interesting. Past Giro champs Tom Dumoulin, Vincenzo Nibali, Tao Geoghegan-Hart, and Richard Carapaz are all signed up, but not last year's winner Egan Bernal. (He was badly injured when he ran into a parked bus while on a training ride in January.) Valverde is on the start list. How cool would it be to see the old war horse win one more big race? Of course that goes for Nibali and Dumoulin too. Sentimental favorites but probably not all that likely to get 'er done. There are six or eight mountain finishes, depending on how you define the term. It will be a good test in that department. However, there are only two short time trials totaling a measly 16 miles. That, frankly, is pathetic. It must give the pure climbers a little ray of sunshine though.

But no predictions from me. I've learned not to try that game. I'm almost always wrong. But if all the races were predictable, what fun would that be?

June, 2022 • 276

In the Pink

The Giro d'Italia ended on May 29...just a couple of days ago if you're reading this when it hits the street. That makes this almost breaking news. Even so, most dedicated bike race fans will already know the Giro was won by 26-year old Australian Jai Hindley (Bora-hansgrohe), with Richard Carapaz (Ineos Grenadiers) 2nd at 1:18 and Mikel Landa (Bahrain Victorious) 3rd at 3:24.

I haven't heard any of the race commentators saying this, nor read any of the print journalists writing it, so maybe it's just me...but I felt this year's race was a little dull compared to some recent Giros or other Grand Tours. First of all, most teams were saving their A-list team leaders and in fact their A-list teams for the Tour de France. That's nothing new for the Giro. In fact, it can make for some exciting racing, with potentially unpredictable results. But still, when you look at the pool of talent, it came up a little short of breathtaking. Also, for whatever it's worth, neither of the winners of the past two Giros was entered: Tao Geoghegan Hart (2020) or Egan Bernal (2021). Nor was last year's 2nd place finisher, Damiano Caruso. And then, among that less-than-star-studded cast, there were quite a few significant abandons among riders who might have been considered important: Miguel Angel Lopez (Astana) on Stage 4; Romain Bardet (DSM) on Stage 13 (after coming down with the flu the day before); former Giro champ Tom Dumoulin (Jumbo Visma) on Stage 14; Simon Yates on Stage 17; Joao Almeida (UAE) after Stage 17 (a positive COVID test); and Richie Porte (Ineos) on Stage 18.

Then the course was not all that challenging. There were five or six mountain stages but only one of them really made a difference (Stage 20). All but one of the others were won out of breakaways, while, in every case, the presumptive favorites finished in a bunch. And the only time trials were 9.2-km on Stage 2 and 17.4-km on the final stage. That adds up to a measly 16.5 miles. Hardly enough to separate the sheep from the goats.

But you can't hold it against the riders for the rosters their teams put together, nor for the stages the organizers gave them. So let's see what they did with what they were given...

The first three stages were in Hungary. Mathieu van der Poel won a lively uphill sprint finish on the first

stage and wore the *maglia rosa* for those first three stages. Then they flew to Sicily for the traditional climb of Etna. Lennard Kamna (Bora-hansgrohe) won out of a two-main break but it was his companion, Juan Pedro Lopez (Trek-Segafredo), equal on time, who took over the pink jersey. Once he got it, he kept it for ten stages. No one figured he'd wear it all the way to the end but he made a valiant effort and at the end of the race he went home with the Best Young Rider jersey (he's 24).

Behind Lopez and behind assorted breakaways and sprint finishes, the key players were mostly biding their time. After the fact, we can say that only what happened on Stage 20 really mattered. But there were little jostlings in the standings prior to that which seemed important at the time. Knowing what we know now, we can say the only riders who really mattered (for the GC) were Richard Carapaz and Jai Hindley. Carapaz was certainly the presumptive favorite before the Giro began. The Giro champion in 2019 and backed by the powerful Ineos team. Hindley? Not so much. He finished 2nd at :38 in the 2020 Giro but since then, pretty much nada. A 5th overall at Tirreno-Adriatico was his only notable result this year, until now.

Hindley was :10 behind Carapaz after the Etna climb on Stage 4. Then he won the next climb to Blockhaus on Stage 9. Five top riders finished together with Hindley out-sprinting the others. Carapaz was 3rd. So Hindley was awarded :10 for 1st and Carapaz :05 for 3rd, thereby reducing the gap between them to just :05. A few seconds shifted back and forth between the two of them through Stage 16, at which point, Hindley had whittled the gap down to just 3 seconds. Carapaz had taken over the lead after Stage 14 and held it through Stage 19.

But everything changed on Stage 20, the second-to-last stage, with only that short time trial on the final day. This was a brutally tough stage in the Dolomites, with three major ascents. The final one was the infamous Marmolada (Passo Fedaia): 13 km long with the final 6 km at 10.4%.

As I see it, three significant factors had a bearing on what happened on that big stage. First was the abandon on Stage 19 of Richie Porte, Carapaz's #1 mountain *domestique*. Had he still been there on Stage 20 and at his normal best, he would have pulled like a train for Carapaz. But he wasn't there, so he couldn't pull... Carapaz was isolated. Second factor was Carapaz simply having a bad day...a *jour sans*. Maybe Porte couldn't have dragged him up the mountain. Or maybe he could

have. But on his own, Carapaz just didn't have it. The third factor was Lennard Kamna, a strong rider and Hindley's teammate. He had been up the road ahead of Hindley and Carapaz but he dropped out of the break and waited for Hindley to reel him in, which happened just about where the ascent got serious, with 6 km to go. Kamna buried himself for Hindley and they almost immediately dropped Carapaz. Game over. At the finish, Hindley was 1:28 ahead of Carapaz. Minus the :03 he'd been behind, he now took over the lead by 1:25.

Hindley is not noted for being a killer time trialer. He's not terrible but is not among the best. Recall that he lost the Giro in 2020 by losing the final time trial. Same scenario this year only he had a bigger time cushion this year. It was more than enough: he conceded :07 to Carapaz, leaving his final lead at 1:18. (They were 10th and 15th in the ITT...quite respectable.)

Hindley is the first Aussie to win the Giro. He looked pretty much smooth and unruffled throughout. But he didn't dominate; he didn't crush the competition. Except on Stage 20, and that was the only place it mattered.

Vincenzo Nibali finished a very good 4th overall in his last Giro. A distant 4th but still...ahead of all but three riders. He can ride off into the sunset with his head held high.

It was a bitter loss for Ineos, not only with respect to this race but also considering their whole season. Who will be their team leader at *le Tour*? It's funny: they used to be the most dominant team in stage racing and a bit weak in one-day races. This year they had a stellar campaign in the spring classics but now a less-than-ideal result in a Grand Tour. (Second place would be a red-letter day for most teams but Ineos is not most teams.)

We'll find out about that in July...



Life in the Slow Lane

In between my spring and summer columns devoted to professional racers going really fast, I am this month squeezing in something different: pretty much the opposite of going really fast. This is, I suppose, yet another installment in the saga of my descent from kick-ass hammerhead to slow-poke tourist.

But that makes it sound sort of depressing. It's not, really, at least not once you get past whatever might be discouraging about simply getting older. It comes to all of us eventually, that slippery slope. Dylan Thomas implores us:

*Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*

Can't argue with that! And yet at some point it almost becomes unseemly and embarrassing and, functionally, futile to make a stink about aging. Rather than raging against it, my approach is to be one of those elders who is said to be aging gracefully instead of raging furiously. At least I hope it comes across that way.

As for how the years affect my cycling, I am simply slower and not as strong and a little less coordinated. (I used to be able to ride no-hands for long stretches, eating a snack or taking off a vest or just to stretch my back. Now? It's getting to be about as dodgy and challenging as it was when I was learning to let go of the handlebars as a kid.) So I'm slower moving the bike up the road and especially up the hill. And slower downhill too: the coordination, plus the memories of too many past crashes and how much they hurt and how much longer they take to heal now.

Because of all that, I can't hang with the gang I used to ride with. But the other people I know who ride more at my present tempo don't want to log the miles I like to do. So for more and more rides every year I ride alone. I can review columns in this space from over 15 years ago where I said I was riding alone more and more. It may be a slippery slope but it's a long, gradual one (I guess until it slopes off more steeply...not quite there yet). Riding alone eliminates the challenges of the group: the need to keep up

or get ahead. Now, without other riders to egg me on and keep me on the boil, the prime directive becomes not inflicting pain on myself. So I lose that cutting edge. That's not really new.

Here's what has changed lately. For most of those years, I was chastising myself for losing that edge. Guilt-tripping myself. I was still raging, still working hard to stay as fit as I could manage. But I have to work twice as hard to stay fit at my age and—at the same time, lately anyway—I'm only half as motivated to make the effort. One way or another, I've mostly ceased to care. Waved the white flag. Stopped raging.

Instead, I am riding with other goals and priorities. It's probably even wrong to call them goals now. It's just living my life, being comfortable in my own skin. Going out for a ride and enjoying the scenery along the way has always been a part of why I ride. The fitness and speed kind of just happened while the beautiful world was rolling by, keeping me entertained. What's different now is that I don't just glance at the pretty world as I hammer by; now I slow down or even stop to take it in. If bikes had bumpers, I'd have a bumper sticker that says, "I brake for beauty."

What inspired this column was noticing that now I not only slow down to look at interesting sights along a ride, I will actually brake and make a U-turn to go back and check something out more closely. Put a foot down for five minutes to take it in. Maybe even whip out my iPhone and take a photo or two. (Both photos here were taken on recent rides.) Compare that with something I wrote in this space way back in the '90s, where I described being obsessed with going fast, faster, and fastest to the point of begrudging even the



tinest slow-down to look at the scenery. I have drifted, gradually, slowly, so far from that obsession about speed that I hardly recognize the current me as the same person who used to hammer so intensely. Who the hell was that guy?

That said, let me just add one more thought. Last Saturday I rode up into the Sonoma County wine country for what I expected would be yet another of my many solo rides through this lovely countryside. What I hadn't expected was that my route and that of the Giro Bello Century were the same for almost 30 miles, with me in the midst of the many riders doing the event. So instead of cruising along lazily, looking at vineyards and woods and old barns, I was doing something approximately like pack riding. Not quite that. The crowds were not quite that thick. But there were always riders ahead and behind and alongside. And in that mass of bodies, I was amused to discover that my old habits and impulses die hard. Some long-neglected fast-faster-fastest gene kicked in for me and I suddenly was having fun getting on a fast wheel, passing slower folks, and just generally doing my sorry-assed impression of a hammerhead. And for whatever it's worth, I can report that I was passing far more riders than were passing me. Which segment of the Giro Bello pool I was riding with, I have no idea. They looked like a sampling of average riders. And in that crowd I was holding my own.

So most of the time these days I enjoy life in the slow lane. I still get in the miles and I still have fun. But contrary to my main premise here, my little visit to the Giro Bello reminds me that my inner hammer is still in there, still happy to get out in the fast lane now and then, if only for 25 miles.



A Jumbo Helping of Tour de France

It's August again and that means it's time for my review of the recently concluded Tour de France. And what a tour it was! One of the best in recent memory in terms of drama and heroics and even good sportsmanship (aka classy behavior).

Last August's column in this space was titled *No Doubt About It*. Tadej Pogacar (UAE) dominated the Tour and pretty well turned the whole three-week affair into a snooze fest. A lovely travelogue around France but not much in the way of edge-of-the-seat, nail-biting suspense. But as Shakespeare has it, "The past is prologue," and some of what happened last year foreshadows what happened this year.

Pogacar's supposed chief rival last year was Jumbo-Visma's Primož Roglic. But he crashed on Stage 3 and eventually abandoned, partly because of his nagging injuries and partly to rest up and prepare for the Vuelta, which he won. That left JV's Plan B—Jonas Vingegaard—to do battle with Pogacar. And a fine battle he made of it, finishing second in his first Grand Tour. He even put Pogacar in a little difficulty on le Mont Ventoux...the only moment we ever saw the all-conquering Slovenian looking even remotely vulnerable.

Fast-forward to this year. I reviewed the spring season and the Giro d'Italia in prior columns, but there were a few significant races between the Giro and the Tour. Two little pictures seemed prescient coming out of those races. Roglic won the Critérium du Dauphiné (June 5-12). On the final mountaintop finish, Roglic and Vingegaard finished at the head of the race, with enough time in hand to cruise over the line arm in arm. Vingegaard got the stage win and finished second behind Roglic in the GC. The message was clear: "We are strong and we are a team with a two-pronged leadership. We can attack you on two fronts."

A couple of weeks later, Pogacar won the Tour of Slovenia. On the final mountaintop finish, he rolled across the line arm in arm with his best mountain lieutenant, Rafal Majka. They seemed to be replying to Jumbo's challenge: "We too are a strong team and we have many ways to beat you." At about the same time—June 12-19—Geraint Thomas (Ineos-Grenadiers) was comfortably winning the Tour de Suisse, thereby anointing himself as team leader for the other strongest team lining up for the Tour.

Now for the Tour. Primož Roglič was once again billed as Pogacar's biggest rival, with Vingegaard again in the role of Jumbo's second option, should Roglič falter. Sure enough, Roglič crashed on Stage 5, tangling with a hay bale that had been dislodged onto the road in a roundabout. He dislocated his shoulder and had to put it back in himself. (Don't try this at home.) He continued but was unlikely to be at full strength, not to mention losing almost three minutes. So, unofficially at least, the mantle of team leader once again passed to Plan B Vingegaard.

Post-race scuttlebutt seems to indicate Roglič may have been hurt a bit worse than the team let on at the time. They played their cards close to the vest on that one. And Roglič is nothing if not tough and fairly impervious to pain. So he kept on riding but now more in the role of Vingegaard's top *domestique*.

Allow me to digress for a moment. I watched the final week of the Tour during a family reunion at our beach house up in Oregon. I was in company with assorted relatives, some of whom sat with me to watch the Tour unfold. All of those who were interested enough to sit through the stages were none-too-well-versed in the lore and strategy and nuance of bike racing, especially stage racing. They asked me all sorts of questions that any savvy cyclist would not have to ask. For instance: "What's the point of all those teammates who aren't likely to win the Tour? What are they doing?"

I was reminded of something we all should know but perhaps forget: that stage races can be opaque and inexplicable to the sometime fan, to all those who only dip into bike racing for a couple of weeks in July each year. Having at least a modest understanding of the tactics that animate the racing has never been more important than it was this year, where we were given a superb demonstration of what all those teammates are there for.

Pogacar won Stage 6 with a sparky little uphill sprint out of a small group. That got him into the yellow jersey, with Vingegaard at :31, Thomas at :46, and Roglič way down in 28th after his crash. The next stage was the first really serious mountain finish and Pogacar won again, although equal on time with Vingegaard. Roglič was :12 back and Thomas :14 in arrears. That left the GC battle after seven stages with Pogacar first, Vingegaard at :35 and Thomas at 1:10. Roglič was now up to 13th but still 2:45 back.

At this point it looked like *deja vu* from 2021: Pogacar in control, cheerfully taking care of business. But a

flinty-eyed look at the details allowed his rivals some room for optimism. First of all, UAE lost two riders to COVID positives. Add to that the fact that his remaining teammates were not really doing all that well. Some were pretty much non-factors, out the back and pretty much useless as *domestiques*. Rafal Majka and Brandon McNulty were sometimes seen helping their team leader well up into the bigger hills but not much and not too impressively. Meanwhile, Jumbo-Visma often had as many as five or six riders around Vingegaard all race long, or at least onto the last climb on the uphill stages.

The records will list one rider as the winner of a stage race but it is a team sport. An exceptional rider can sometimes win a major stage race without a strong team but it's a rare accomplishment. Usually the best team wins. Such was the case this year.

That became abundantly evident on Stage 11, with the three back-to-back climbs of Télégraphe (7.4 miles at 7%), Galibier (11 miles at 7%), and the col du Granon to finish (7 miles at 9%). The UAE worker bees were already in trouble on Télégraphe and an attack by Jumbo-Visma over the summit and down into Valloire saw all Pogacar's helpers falling away from the leaders. On the early miles heading up the massive Galibier, Vingegaard and Roglič went to work on Pogacar. They tag-teamed him. Taking turns, they launched one stinging attack after another. Short, sharp shots up the road. In each case, Pogacar had to respond, chasing down whichever of the two had fired off up the hill.

Roglič and Vingegaard were switching off with the attacks, first one, then the other. When one attacked, the other one could sit back and more slowly reel them back, expending less energy. But Pogacar had to put in a hard dig every time one of the Jumbos launched. So he was having to make twice as many of these hard bursts as his two rivals. It adds up. You might think Pogacar could have afforded to ignore Roglič, who was still down in 13th, almost 3 minutes back. But he couldn't really take that chance. Recall that Roglič first introduced himself to the cycling world by going off the front on this very same climb in the 2017 Tour and winning by a wide margin. He probably couldn't do that today but who knows?

Some way up the climb, Pogacar's teammate Marc Soler finally clawed back up to the leaders. But no sooner had he arrived than Roglič attacked again and off the back went Soler. Then Pogacar made what I think was a mistake. Fed up with the incessant attacks

from his two rivals, he went to the front and put in a big pull of his own, as if to say, "Hey, I'm in charge here!" Only all it did was wear him out a little bit and, more importantly, distanced his own teammates. All this time, Pogacar wasn't getting much in the way of food or fluids. There may be the neutral water moto but no high-energy liquids and no food. He can't go back to the team car and his *domestiques* can't get up to him to bring him anything. Team sport, remember?

Over the top of Galibier and all the way along the Lauteret descent, he had no resupply. Finally, just before the start of the final climb, Majka got back up to him and brought him things to eat and drink. But it was too late. Whatever he took on then wouldn't be processed and out into his system in time. He would eventually run out of fuel, out of calories. We've all been there. We know the feeling...the bonk.

Halfway up the fearsome Col du Granon, there came a point where he could not respond to the tempo being set by Vingegaard. (Roglic and all the other Jumbo boyz had done their work by then and it was just Vingegaard vs Pogacar.) Vingegaard won the stage and Pogacar faded to 7th, conceding 2:51 on the day. That put him 2:22 behind on GC.

Given Pogacar's recent history of dominance in pretty much every race he's entered, I doubt too many people would have predicted such a day. A loss perhaps, but by six seconds or something equally inconsequential. Not almost three minutes in a couple of miles. With the benefit of 20-20 hindsight, we can say the Tour was essentially over the minute Pogacar lost Vingegaard's wheel on that last brutal climb. It may have looked like a *mano a mano* battle between those two riders, and it was, by some manner of reckoning. But it was also a master class in team tactics from Jumbo-Visma over the course of the whole stage: how they isolated Pogacar and left him vulnerable, without the resources even the most gifted riders need to make the wheels go around.

Pogacar didn't give up. He said he'd fight every day and he did, although none of it amounted to much and his team continued to look weak. (McNulty pulled like a train on at least one stage but in the end it didn't gain them anything.) Meanwhile, the Jumbos were protecting Vingegaard every day: Christophe Laporte, Tiesj Benoot, Sepp Kuss, Wout van Aert...they were always where they were supposed to be. It wasn't quite all bright sunshine for the team though. On Stage 15, Steven Kruijswijk, crashed out and got an ambulance

ride to the hospital. On the same day, Roglic abandoned to heal his wounds and prepare for the upcoming Vuelta...much like last year.

The other really exciting stage was 18, in the Pyrénées, offering up three monster ascents: Col d'Aubisque (10.6 miles at 7%), Col de Spandelles (6.3 miles at 8.3%) and finally Hautacam (8.4 miles at 8%). If Pogacar was going to break Vingegaard, this would be where it would happen. Here or nowhere, now or never.

Pogacar and Vingegaard went over the Spandelles summit together and alone, then did the long, sometimes technical descent together. On one left-hand corner, Vingegaard's rear wheel left the ground and hopped sideways, often a prelude to an ugly, over-the-top crash. Somehow he saved it, an amazing bit of bike handling. Just a few corners later, Pogacar overcooked it into another left-hander and plotted a tangent off the outside of the corner. He got onto the gravel and then the grass and then he was down. He hopped right back on the bike and was going again in a few seconds but by then Vingegaard was out of sight around the next bend.

There is an unwritten bit of etiquette in racing that says when a rider is delayed by a flat or mechanical or something not his fault, his rivals will sit up and wait for him. It isn't always observed but is fairly common and if you don't do it, the reporters are going to ask you why you didn't. However, if a rider crashes on a descent because of his own screw-up—operator error—no one is obliged to wait. Good descending is a skill you're supposed to have in your tool box. If you mess up, too bad. See ya later.

That didn't happen this time. Vingegaard saw Pogacar crash. It happened right in front of him. When Pogacar got going again, two or three bends down the hill, he found Vingegaard soft-pedaling, waiting for him. It was a classy thing to do and Pogacar saluted him for it. When my non-cycling relatives saw that, they were all impressed. You don't have to understand the subtleties of cycling to appreciate that sort of sportsmanship.

While all this was going on, Vingegaard's teammates Sepp Kuss and Tiesj Benoot were catching back on and were there for him at the beginning of the ginormous final climb to Hautacam. And have we mentioned Wout van Aert? He was up the road in a breakaway. He was in the breaks a lot during the Tour, consolidating his lead in the Points (sprints) competition, which he won with a record-setting points total. So that's three teammates to help Vingegaard on the long climb. First Benoot put in a major pull on the front, shelling most of their ri-

vals off the back. Then Sepp Kuss took over and pulled and pulled and pulled. When he was done, only Pogacar was left with Vingegaard. And when Kuss was done, he neatly handed the job over to Wout van Aert, who was the only one left out of the original breakaway.

What can we say about Wout van Aert? One of the best riders of his generation, for sure. So insanely talented. He can sprint. He can time trial. He can do it all...almost. But at 6'3" and 172 pounds—40 pounds heavier than Vingegaard—just a little too beefy to be a GC winner in a major stage race. Or so the conventional thinking goes. But geez, who wouldn't want to climb as well as this guy who isn't supposed to be a good climber? There he was, almost all the way to the summit of this monster ascent, still hammering away (in his green sprinter's jersey). Kuss hands Vingegaard and Pogacar over to him and he powers up the hill, putting in the final dig that pops Pogacar off the back. He gives it his all and then pulls over to allow Vingegaard to take the stage. And the Tour.

It was another textbook display of team tactics, team efficiency. To add a little frosting to the cake, they managed to put Christophe Laporte in position to win Stage 19 and then van Aert won the time trial on Stage 20. Vingegaard might have won the time trial himself. He was ahead of van Aert's time splits at all the intermediate time checks. But he eased off at the end just enough to allow van Aert to win the ITT.

In the end, Jumbo-Visma nearly won everything. Vingegaard won the *maillot jaune* as the overall champion and also the *maillot pois* as best climber. And van Aert won the *maillot vert* as best sprinter. The only jersey they didn't win was best young rider, which went to Pogacar (which seems kind of strange: best young rider after having won the Tour twice already). You can be sure of one thing: Pogacar will be back next year and won't be satisfied unless he can trade in that white jersey for a yellow one.

Every Grand Tour has its own character, its quirks of fate, its magical moments. This one had more than its share. Can we expect a repeat next year? The same heads of state duking it out to the same conclusion? Too many bumps and bends and potholes in the road between now and then to start making predictions. For now, let's sit back and savor what just happened. It was epic. It was a classic.

Anatomy of a Tour

I'm just home from an excellent summer bike tour with my mates from the Santa Rosa Cycling Club. We put on one or sometimes two of these week-long tours every summer—sometime between May and September—and I have been involved in some leadership role in most of them, almost 40 tours down the years, beginning back in 1995.

I've written in this space in the past about what we call cooperative touring: all the participants assisting with the many chores needed to keep the tour moving every day. (These are usually campground-based tours.) Cooperative touring is something I learned from one of our club members who had formerly been a member of the Sacramento Wheelmen, where such tours have been a staple of their summer season for years.

NORTHERN OREGON TOUR REDUX



The last time I had written about club tours was in September, 2007, reviewing the Northern Oregon Tour. Funny thing about that: this recently-run tour was The Northern Oregon Tour Redux, a reinvented reprise of the 2007 tour. It's no accident that both of these related tours should inspire me to write about

them. They were both epic tours in their own ways, both worthy of some ink.

This isn't really a guidebook-style overview of the tour. I see this column as more of a look at how the tour actually played out, with its good points and its challenges and struggles. We started the tour with 43 participants, two of whom were our paid staff of what we call food wranglers. They do all the food shopping, oversee the cooking, and also drive our two small rented trucks between our overnights each day. We also run one sag wagon, with the sagging shared by two riders taking turns: one day of riding, then a day in the sag.

This tour was originally scheduled for August of 2020 but of course had to be scrubbed because of COVID. We had all our camps and other details nailed down for that one but around March of 2020 the future began to look grim and we warned our participants that it was unlikely to happen. It was a terrible disappointment for all of us to have to cancel that tour. Now, finally, with vaccines and with life more or less back to normal, we were finally ready to try again.

A huge amount of work goes into a tour before it ever hits the road. Countless hours of route planning and scouting, which typically will entail at least a couple of trips to the region to drive or ride the routes. Then preparing the maps and route slips and elevation profiles. This is becoming less important as more people use Garmin or Wahoo or some other mapping app on their bikes. But we still like to do it and there are still many riders who rely on the old hard copy materials.

Then there are all the logistical chores, from booking campsites or motels to arranging car pools, renting trucks, planning the shopping, gathering all the support equipment at the club warehouse. Just rattling off these few sentences does not begin to encompass all the hours of hard slogging and discussion and problem solving that go into getting our show on the road. Then there's the crucial budget crunching: how much is the tour going to cost and how much do we charge our member participants? Two of us are co-chairs and

receive free entries for our time and trouble, which probably works out to about 25 cents an hour, if that.

The really hard, hands-on work begins on the Friday before our Saturday departure, when we pick up the two trucks and begin outfitting them for the trip. One truck is our kitchen truck, with all the food and cooking equipment. It's packed to the roof by the time we've loaded everything. The other is the luggage truck, which takes all personal gear, including any bikes people can't take on their own cars. This year we had 17 carloads of people converging on the start at Silver Falls State Park, east of Salem. Some were self-contained but many had gear or bikes that had to go in the truck. We had arranged with the rangers there to have all the cars stored for the week in a secure, gated lot in the park (for a fee).



The first minor glitch was that one of our two trucks wasn't in Santa Rosa on Friday morning. We had to send two people to Berkeley to pick it up, a two-hour round trip. That might now be seen as an omen of things to come. Anyway, we spent a long, hot day prepping and loading both trucks. While some of us were working on that front, another team was at Costco and Trader Joe's, running up hefty tabs on the food we'd be consuming for the next week. All that food, from sodas and waters to tri-tip and chicken to oatmeal and croissants, had to be organized into daily rations according to our menu plans, then iced down (if perishable) and stored in the trucks. It was a long day for many of us.

And then we were back at the warehouse at 5 AM on

Saturday morning for last-minute chores and then out on the road by 5:45. Our two food wranglers, Bob and Becky, were in the kitchen truck. Long-time tour participant Nathan, an experienced truck driver, was driving the luggage truck. I was in a car with my pal Ed, just having had lunch in Weed and on the road to Yreka, when I got a call from Nathan. The luggage truck was dead on the side of I-5, ten miles south of Dunsmuir. All the fluid had leaked out of the transmission and it had seized up...dead as a doornail.

Now, consider the situation: we have 40 participants en route to the start at the state park. They will mostly arrive around 5 or 6 PM, just in time to make dinner and pitch their tents and turn in. But our truck, with most of their camping gear, plus all three of our propane stoves, is kaput on the side of the road, hundreds of miles away. If we can't get the gear to them, they have no way to camp for the night. They will have the food in the kitchen truck—which arrived on time—but no way to cook it. (They improvised a cold dinner, then settled down to wait for us.)



Ed and I doubled back and found the truck, then spent at least two hours on the phone with the truck rental customer service folks...two mostly fruitless hours. They had no replacement trucks anywhere nearby. We were screwed. Without a replacement truck, our

tour would be dead on arrival. So I finally decided we needed to race back south to the bigger city of Redding and find another truck at some other rental outlet, if we could. Off we went, with me driving way over the speed limit and Ed working the phone, trying to find any truck at all. One dead end after another. No truck, no truck, nope, sorry, nothing... Finally, just as I hit the Redding city limits, he found one lonely U-Haul out at the Redding airport. We spent most of an hour on the paperwork but finally had the truck and headed back north toward the dead truck.

Meanwhile, another of our car pool gangs had found out about our plight and they were rushing back from Medford to assist. Assist with what? With transferring tons of cargo from the dead truck to the new truck. (Did I mention it was close to 100°?) As I was driving the new truck north, Nathan called to tell me the dead truck was being towed into Lakehead, a little no-place along the interstate. I said I knew where that was and would meet him there. We both pulled in at the same time and the carload of guys who'd doubled back pulled in five minutes later. We backed the two trucks up to each other and ran a ramp across as a bridge, and within less than an hour we had everything out of the dead truck and well stored in the new truck. Finally, we were back on the road, but by now many hours late. Our two cars pulled into the camp just before 11 PM and the big truck rolled in at midnight. We unloaded as quietly as we could and finally got people bedded down in the wee hours of the morning. By breakfast, everything was okay and we were ready and eager to begin Stage 1.

I always say these tours are about problem solving; about meeting the unexpected and figuring out a way forward. We've had other truck failures on past tours. Another one near Redding, one in Southern California, one in Southern Utah, one deep in Kings Canyon NP, and one over near Bridgeport on the far side of the Sierra. In every case we've managed to get things sorted out and keep our tours on the road. Then there are the other two banes of summer touring: forest fires and highway construction. We've had at least a half-dozen tours affected by fires and just about that many derailed by road projects. Some were easy fixes; others quite complex and daunting. But we've muddled through them all. I'm proud of that.

The other variable that can make an average tour stage into something quite different is weather. Over those



past tours I've accumulated over 270 stages. Of those, we've only been hit with rain on about five days, and rarely more than just a brief cloudburst or a minor drizzle. Heat though...that has been a more frequent visitor. And so it was on the first stage of this tour: well over 100°. It had been that hot in the region for the preceding couple of weeks and we were dreading doing the whole tour under those conditions. But I guess we caught the last gasp of that heat wave because after that first Sunday ride, it was never more than mid-90s for the duration. Hot but not ridiculous. That first day though was a beast, and it didn't help that the 64-mile stage turned out to be a lot harder than we expected. It's part of my job to give the participants a good idea of what to expect on each upcoming stage. For this day, I badly undersold it. I said the many "little" climbs would be like being nibbled to death by ducks. It was more like being torn apart by crocodiles. We all struggled and those of us who are not as fit as we used to be...we were pretty well shattered.

But even in that little corner of hell we found some grace. Slogging up a super steep wall—25%!—I saw a sign on the side of the road: "Hey SRCC riders! Come in for a cold drink!" WTF? One of our earlier riders had talked to this homeowner and he—a mountain biker—had put the sign out. Of course we stopped and were revived with fresh fruit, glasses of ice water and our bottles filled with same. Saved my day.

One rider had a nasty accident right near the finish: a shattered carbon-fiber rim in a pothole lurking in the shade on a tricky downhill. Lots of road rash, even a faceplant, and that busted rim. There was talk of

having to leave the tour but he toughed it out and finished the full tour, borrowing wheels from each of the sag drivers on the days they weren't riding. We were fortunate to have three doctors and a nurse among our crew, so any medical issues such as this one received expert attention.

That was all through the pretty, wooded foothills on the west flank of the Cascades, just up out of the fertile valley of the Willamette River. Stage 2 was more of the same but not nearly as hard, nor as hot. So a more pleasant day for everyone. This was our only non-camping night. We stayed at a nice Comfort Inn in the cute town of Troutdale. All our people fanned out through the town in search of dinner, then some of us gathered in the lobby after dinner for more revels. All good. And no problems!

If you know your Oregon geography and history, you know the Columbia River Gorge and the Historic Columbia River Highway and its companion state trails represent something approaching cycling nirvana. It was every bit of that for us on Stages 3 and 4. Words and pictures can barely convey the magical experience of riding along the quaint old highway, past one magnificent waterfall after another. I hooked up with a half a dozen other riders for this section and we just wallowed in the glorious beauty, stopping at almost every waterfall: Latourel, Waukheena, Shepherd's Dell, Bridal Veil, Multnomah, Horsetail. When we stopped at the pretty little Vista House overlooking the river, we had the added treat of seeing a lovely old paddle-wheel steamer chugging along below us, harking back to the days when the old highway was new.

Year by year, section by section, the state and local agencies have been building more of the beautiful paved trails that replace portions of the historic highway that were demolished back in the 1960s. That ambitious project is almost done, except for the Mitchell Point Tunnel section, just west of Hood River. It's supposed to be completed next summer but it doesn't look like they'll be done by then. They certainly aren't done now, so we still had to ride for several miles along the shoulder of I-84. Used to be, there was a wide shoulder along that section so riding it wasn't all that bad. But now? While they're building us our lovely new paved trail, they have gobbled up almost all of the shoulder for their construction zone, leaving cyclists with maybe two feet between the concrete barriers and the 18-wheelers roaring by at freeway speed. We did not

expect that! Nothing for it but to keep tracking down that narrow space and hope the drivers are all paying attention. No accidents for us but a lot of frayed nerves.

We camped that night at the Hood River County Fairgrounds up in the hills above the town of Hood River. A nice site with nice showers close at hand. Our wonderful day in the gorge had been slightly dampened by occasional light sprinkles and we were still getting a bit of that as we were putting up our tents around the lawn at the fairgrounds, causing us to worry about what the night and the next day would bring. In the end it petered out without really getting us wet and we were treated to a spectacular sunset (and sunrise) over the mountains.

It was here, at the fairgrounds, that COVID decided to crash our party. We had been very scrupulous about everyone being vaxxed and boosted and we felt we were in pretty good shape when we set out. We even bounced one guy off the roster in the week before the tour because he had tested positive. Now one participant informed me she had tested positive and would be leaving the tour. We determined she could get an airporter out of Hood River to the airport in Portland and fly home. Because I knew the local roads, I offered to drive her there before the start of Stage 4. Even though we both wore N95 masks and had the windows open for the 15-minute drive, I still caught the bug, although I didn't suspect it until the tour was almost over.

Blissfully unaware that I and a few others were probably now incubating the virus, we set out on Stage 4 in good spirits and under blue skies. Stage 4 finished off the second half of the Historic Highway, plus running us along really nice roads in the apple-orchard country above Hood River at the start, and hotter, more arid country south of the river at the finish. It was a gorgeous day...everything one could wish for in a tour stage.

Just about where the Historic Highway ends, approaching the town of The Dalles, we peeled off onto the delightful new Riverfront Trail that has been laid out all along the river, bypassing the busy downtown congestion. We loved it, but unfortunately, one of our riders took a tumble on this section and ended up—briefly—in the local ER. He was pretty banged up. No broken bones but lots of bruising around the ribs, to the point where riding wasn't an option. He stayed with the tour but did the rest of it in the sag wagon,

helping with the support. Crashes are another bogey that haunts tours. 40 riders times 400 miles over seven stages equals 16,000 miles, often on sketchy backroads. Two crashes over that distance is not out of the ordinary. On our last tour before COVID—2019—we had two riders felled in accidents who had to abandon the tour. It happens.

The final miles of Stage 4 were through wheat fields around the tiny town of Dufur, our overnight destination. While I was relaxing in their shady city park, after a nice shower, I saw a county sheriff coming my way. He said he'd had complaints from the truckers driving the wheat trucks along the little roads... they came upon cyclists and were concerned about safety. We had not realized it was the middle of wheat harvest. We saw many wheat trucks—like overgrown



dump trucks—unloading at the grain silos in Dufur but none of us could recall an encounter with one out on the roads. But I wasn't going to give the sheriff any pushback on any of it. My job was to hear what he had to say and agree to be very careful on the next day's ride. By the time he was done delivering his message, we were on good terms. He was satisfied that we were responsible adults and he could tell the complainers that he'd delivered the message. We didn't see a single wheat truck the next morning. Much ado about nothing perhaps, but a reminder that when you ride in far-off places where bikes are seldom seen, you can expect to surprise and possibly upset a few locals.

The last three stages of the tour looped us back around to Silver Falls State Park. Stages 5 and 6 were deep in the Mt Hood National Forest...deep, deep in the trees. Lots of climbing on Stage 5 and more descending on Stage 6. Some very quiet backroads and some busier

highways. All in all, not as wonderful as the days in the gorge—very little could match up with that—but still quality bike-touring. Overnights after both stages were primitive USFS camps without showers. Lakes were available nearby if you were willing to hike a little. We had worked hard ahead of time to get our portable shower in good working order but in the end the camps didn't have enough water pressure to run it. You do your best to plan for whatever might come up and then you get thrown a curve you're not expecting: low water pressure. So showers were not available, but I never heard one word of grouching about it. Everyone understood the problem and simply shrugged it off. Jumped in the lakes or found ways to take washcloth baths. It's part of why I like our cooperative touring ethos: everyone understands that we're all in this together, all doing the best we can to have a successful tour. No pampered princesses.

The final day was down out of the deep fir forest and back to that mix of woods and farm fields that had been our bill of fare on the first two days, back through the foothills above the Willamette Valley. That included several miles of quite steep climbing near the end of the stage. There were two short pitches that flirted with 20% and several more in the mid-teens. It wore this old plugger down considerably at the end of the week. But we all got 'er done with some reserves left and many people took time that afternoon to hike to at least a few of the waterfalls for which Silver Falls State Park is so famous. A nice finish to a delightful week.

Many of the car pool crews left on Saturday afternoon, planning to drive part way home and find motels down around Ashland or Medford. The rest of us drove

home on Sunday and were back at the club warehouse by 5 PM or so. Some cursory clean-up that evening and then a bigger, more complete clean-up of all the equipment on Monday. It's amazing how dirty the ice chests and kitchen equipment get over a week of living rough. But with a good crew on hand, everything was clean and stored away by midday Monday. This is a good spot to tip the hat to the crew that helps keep our warehouse running smoothly. None of this touring could get off the ground without what the warehouse has in store, not only for us but more importantly for supporting the Wine Country Century, the Terrible Two, Levi's Gran Fondo, Tour de Fuzz, the Giro Bello, etc, etc. And none of that would happen without the volunteers who keep the warehouse in good shape.

By Sunday night I had tested positive for the virus and so missed the clean-up day. Eventually we had eight people test positive but only two of them during the tour. The rest of us only thought to test when we got home. Only one person has felt really funky. The rest of us got small doses and have weathered the storm, with the help of Paxlovid in my case. In light of the ever-evolving virus, it's almost inevitable a few of us would catch the bug, in spite of all our precautions. It is, for now anyway, our new normal.

So...not a real description of each stage but rather a behind-the-scenes look at what a tour involves and how it evolves over the course of the week, for better or worse. Our tour could have ended before it began if we hadn't found that one available truck in Redding. We could have had baking heat all week or perhaps that little bit of drizzle in the gorge could have blown up into torrential rains. COVID might have never put in an appearance or it might have swept through the entire group. We had another crisis with a closed road on Stage 6 that I'm not even going to get into here, but it could have turned into a major catastrophe if we hadn't come up with a good work-around. More of that in-the-moment problem solving. Every tour is different. Every one has its own challenges and its own rewards. Reading this and thinking about some of the speed bumps we dealt with this time around, you might wonder if it's all worth it. All I can say is: look at our roster. Of the 43 participants, there were only five newbies. All the others were coming back for more after having done many past tours. We must be doing something right if all these folks keep coming back.



The Reign in Spain is Over

Primoz Roglic (Jumbo-Visma) did not win his fourth Vuelta a España in a row but not for want of trying. Instead, the new king of the Vuelta is 22-year old Belgian Remco Evenepoel (Quick-Step). As the Vuelta finished back on September 11, this won't be news to any race fans who've been paying attention. So this won't be a conventional sports report on the three-week grand tour; rather a more relaxed review of how the fast boys got from the start in Utrecht to the finish in Madrid.

I always say I never make public predictions because I so often end up wrong in my own private guesses about who's going to do what. But I came close in my May look at the season up to that point. Two items...

"Primoz Roglic did just enough to win Paris-Nice but did not exactly look like a colossus. And then he had his little meltdown at the Basque Country. So while we have to figure he'll be a contender in mid-summer, I wouldn't rate him a mortal lock to win anything."

"Remco Evenepoel is looking strong...just bursting with youthful energy...but like Wout van Aert, he doesn't quite have the climbing chops to win a Grand Tour. He'll be a holy terror in the classics and maybe some shorter stage races but will be only hoping for stage wins in the bigger events."

Hmmm...I was about half right. Maybe even marginally more than half, if I may be allowed to spin-doctor my observations.

I said in that piece that no excuse was offered for the Roglic meltdown at the Basque Country (where he couldn't keep up with the fastest climbers when it mattered). But subsequent reports indicate he had a knee injury, something he incurred prior to that race. Whether it was due to an accident or to chronic issues I have not been able to ascertain. In any event, he seemed to be past the problem when he won the overall at the Dauphiné, just before the Tour de France.

Then he crashed at the Tour, lost time and was beat up. He hung around long enough to help his teammate Jonas Vingegaard take a commanding lead, then dropped out to heal up and rest up for the Vuelta, where he was the three-time defending champion. He did not win his fourth Vuelta. He didn't even finish it.

Evenepoel won the Vuelta and quite impressively. However, he did appear just a teeny bit vulnerable in the biggest mountains. Not every day...just every so often.

He did much better than I expected him to do but my personal jury is still out: can he win against stronger competition, such as what he'll face at next year's Tour? Even at this Vuelta, with a couple of little things playing out differently, he might not have pulled it off.

So let's go back and see where this race was won and where it was lost. First of all, I am going to state that the race was really between Evenepoel and Roglic; that no one else was really in the hunt, not seriously. Enric Mas (Movistar) had a fine ride to finish second at 2:02 but I never thought he was going to challenge the two big guns...did you? Juan Ayuso (UAE), at the ripe old age of 19, finished an amazing third but almost five minutes back.

Chris Horner, in his preview of the Vuelta, at least agreed with me in this. He said Roglic and Evenepoel were the only riders who could win the GC, barring some major weirdness. However, he went out on a limb and stated quite confidently that Remco could "demolish" the Vuelta field. He noted the reasons why others were doubting the young Belgian (which were my reasons exactly): that he couldn't hang with Tadej Pogacar on the biggest climb at Tirreno-Adriatico; that he couldn't hang with Aleksandr Vlasov on the biggest climb at Valenciana; that he couldn't hang with Dani Martinez on the biggest climb at the Basque Country. I had plenty of company among the self-appointed smart guys as to his inability to hang in the big mountains. But hat's off to Horner: he called it and got it right. His contention is that Evenepoel, at just 22, is still rounding into form, still figuring out how good he can be and how to be that good.

So anyway...

Roglic and Jumbo-Visma got off to a good start, winning the Stage 1 team time trial, notably :14 ahead of Evenepoel and Quick-Step. Things stayed that way until Stage 4. This looked like a stage for a sprint finish, although there were more than a few hills along the way—enough to weed out the bigger, heavier sprinters—and then the final half-mile was uphill at over 8%. So it was actually more of an opportunity for a *puncheur*, someone who can combine climbing and sprinting. We've seen Roglic fill that bill in other races in recent years and he did it on this stage, to perfection. While Evenepoel was chillin' in the main pack, not staying alert for surprises, Roglic was edging up to the front at 700 meters. He bided his time until under 200 meters and then attacked and made a clean getaway ahead of the fastest riders still there

after the little 8% wall. He won, got the bonus seconds and a little more for gapping the group. It was classic, opportunistic racing. And when the dust had settled, Roglic had fattened his lead over Evenepoel from :14 to :27. And he put on the GC leader's jersey...the *mail-lot rojo*.

But that was something of a high-water mark for Roglic. He held his lead on Stage 5 but lost it on Stage 6, a day of miserable rain and pea soup fog, with a mountaintop finish to Pico Jano...a little under 7% for a little under 8 miles. That's a not-too-hard climb that might favor Evenepoel and so it proved out. Behind a break, he got off the front of the GC group with just Enric Mas for company. Juan Ayuso also got off the front of that bunch but never made it across to the other two. Meanwhile, Roglic was leading the remaining GC group of about 20. No one helped him. He pulled the whole final climb with everyone else sitting on his wheel. At the end, behind a nice win for Jay Vine, Evenepoel was 2nd, having gapped Mas in the last few meters. Ayuso was 4th and Roglic was 5th, 1:22 behind Evenepoel. Add in the :6 bonus for finishing 2nd and Evenepoel goes from :27 behind Roglic to 1:01 ahead.

All the major players finished together on Stages 7 and 8 but things got exciting on Stage 9, which offered up five categorized climbs, including the final one to Alto Les Praeres: less than three miles but an average grade of 13%, with much of the last three kilometers at over 15% and some of it between 20% and 24%. At least the weather was nice! This is the sort of terrain where the Remco-doubters figured he'd crack. In fact, he dominated...demolished his rivals, to use Horner's word. Behind another breakaway—a great win for Louis Meintjes—Evenepoel, Mas, Ayuso, and Roglic were together just below the 3-K banner. Roglic was the first to falter. You could see he was struggling...in and out of the saddle, rocking around like a dinky-bird. Then Mas and Ayuso had to let go as well. Evenepoel never let up and, really, he never looked like he was working all that hard. I mean, he had to be, right? But throughout that section, with pitches up above 20%, he never once got out of the saddle. He just sat there, grinding out a brutal, machine-like tempo. For the many wise guys who figured he couldn't do that, it was a shock. It was very impressive.

By the time the dust had settled—and this time I mean that literally: the final kilometer was hard-packed dirt—his lead was 1:12 over Mas and 1:53 over



Roglic. Another fresh young rider, 21-year old Carlos Rodriguez (INEOS), was 4th and Ayuso was 5th, all still within two and a half minutes.

It only got better for Evenepoel. After the rest day they had the only full time trial. He won it...demolished it. Roglic was 2nd but a whopping :48 behind. (Remember that Roglic is the current Olympic champion in the ITT.) The only other GC player even close was Rodriguez at 1:22. Mas and Ayuso both did anemic time trials. Now the GC standings had Evenepoel 2:41 ahead of Roglic and 3:03 ahead of Mas. That Evenepoel would do well in a time trial was no surprise. He's done that before. At this point he was showing no weakness.

There was plenty of head-scratching from the troops as to why Roglic wasn't quite up to his normal, dominant standards. Were his injuries from the Tour still bothering him? Was the knee problem from the Basque Country still an issue? He lost two teammates—Sepp Kuss was a DNS on Stage 9 and Eduardo Affini was a DNS on Stage 10—leading some to speculate there was a bug making its way through the team. Many questions were asked and perhaps they were answered somewhere, but I never saw any definitive conclusions. He was obviously in pretty good shape to be 2nd overall and 2nd in the ITT. But just...just not quite there.

Game over? Probably, but not quite...

It was mostly status quo for a few stages. Evenepoel, Mas, Roglic, and Ayuso finished together on another big mountaintop climb on Stage 12. But things got more intriguing on the next mountain finish, Stage

14 (last climb to Sierra de la Pandera: 5 miles at about 8% but with many of the later pitches much steeper). Just around 4 K to the finish on a 15% grade—again, behind a break—Roglic attacked the 10-rider GC group and initially dropped everyone. Most crucially, Evenepoel could not respond. Next, Mas jumped off the front and chased after Roglic. Eventually, most of the riders in that group dropped Evenepoel. As the TV announcer said: “He’s human after all!” Roglic took almost a minute out of Evenepoel over those 4 K, trimming his lead down to 1:49.

More of the same the next day on the massive Sierra Nevada mountain finish (14 miles at about 7%). As long as the climb was, the grade wasn’t steep enough to really make a difference. Within the last kilometer, Roglic dropped Evenepoel and eventually chipped another :15 off the lead, ending up in 2nd at 1:34. Clearly, Roglic had good legs at this point and Evenepoel was looking a bit vulnerable...which only begs the question: what was going on with Roglic back on Stages 6 and 9, where he lost a collective 2:20 to Evenepoel?

Time was running out for Roglic. There were two more mountain finishes—Stages 18 and 20—but neither looked all that difficult and therefore not likely to be all that decisive. But Roglic wasn’t giving up and that brings us to Stage 16, where something very weird happened. Or two weirdnesses, back-to-back. The stage was in many respects similar to Stage 4, where Roglic pulled off his little sneak attack. There was a nasty little uncategorized climb about 10 K out that would weed out most of the hunkier sprinters. Then there was a little wall—a third of a mile at over 8%—before a last roll-out to the finish. Just as he had done on Stage 4, Roglic attacked on that little wall, with 2.7 K to the line. He got his gap but four other riders—all good sprinters but also decent climbers—eventually chased him down, the five of them well clear of the main pack.

Roglic kept the hammer down until the last corner before the finish. Then he pulled wide and let the sprinters pull through. Some analysts say his speed took him wide but my sense of it is he knew he could not beat the best of these sprinters and only intended to finish with them and get the same time they would get. Either way, they pulled through and he tucked back in at the back of the group. His gambit had paid off, with Evenepoel lolligagging around, way back in the pack, not paying attention to any sneaky moves.

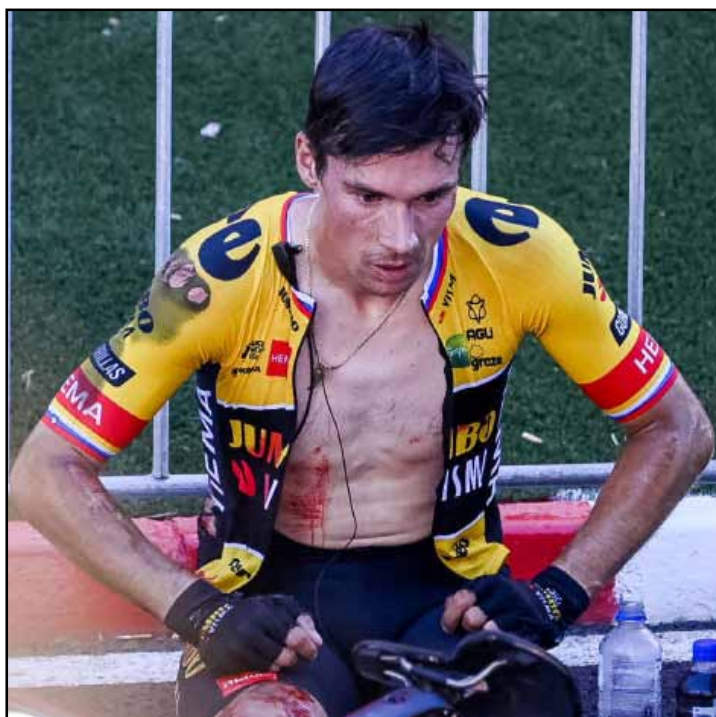
That’s where we get our two weird moments...

First off, about 40 seconds after Roglic attacked, Evenepoel, who had, as I say, been drifting toward the back of the main group since about 5 K to go, threw up his arm to signal to his team car that he’d had a flat. This is within the final 3 K. Bear in mind that if you have a mechanical or a crash within those final 3 K you get the same time as the main finishing group. However, if you are just dawdling along (a relative term in a field sprint), just trying to roll it home and stay out of trouble, and if you fall outside the main group, you won’t get the same time as the main bunch. You get your real time, whatever it is when you cross the line.

By signaling to his team car that he’d had a flat, Evenepoel ensured that he would get the same time as the main bunch, which it turns out was 8 seconds behind Roglic and his four off-the-front guys. I’ve watched the video of him calling for a new bike several times and it sure doesn’t look like he’s got a flat. But I confess it’s hard to tell. The video is brief and grainy and riders and cars are sometimes blocking the view. I’m not the only one who red-flagged this though. Many others thought it looked a bit fishy...suspiciously convenient. He eventually rolled across the line 3:08 behind the leaders. No one is suggesting he would have lost three minutes had he been hammering to catch up to Roglic and his other *escapados*. But he almost certainly would have lost much more than the 8 seconds he was eventually given. Minus the 8 seconds, his lead was trimmed to 1:26. Without the call for a new bike, who knows? Under a minute?

But then we get the other weirdness and that one renders the possibly phantom flat tire moot. Back to the front: we watch from the finish line camera as the five off-the-front guys line up their sprint. Roglic has pulled wide and has now drifted in at the back of the group...and then suddenly, we see him on the ground, spinning in circles at 40 mph. What the hell? You could not tell exactly what happened because he and the rider he collided with—Fred Wright—were hidden behind the other three sprinters and the helicopter shot missed them. But I found a series of stop-action photos taken from the side of the finish straight that show pretty conclusively that Roglic slammed into Wright. He didn’t mean to. He was just going too fast and lost it. Others have suggested Wright was at fault but that’s not how I see it.

Eventually he got up and staggered across the finish



line. Although many riders passed him while he was getting himself back on his bike, he was awarded the same time as the four others in the sprint: 0:00, or :08 ahead of the pack, including Evenepoel. That was the right call.

But the crash was bad. Although he had no broken bones, he was badly hammered. It was the end of his Vuelta. He could not start the following day. I feel so sorry for Roglic. He's such a classy guy and such a brilliant cyclist. But lately it seems he almost embodies that old blues song: "If it wasn't for bad luck, I wouldn't have no luck at all!" As a personal aside, I have more than the usual sympathy for him in this case. A couple of days before his crash, I went more-or-less head-on into a truck and got pretty well smashed up. When I saw him sitting on the ground at the finish, with blood all over and with that vacant, in-shock look on his face, I had a pretty good idea how he was feeling...except for the bit about knowing his Vuelta has just gone up in smoke.

We'll never know if Roglic could have made any more inroads into Evenepoel's lead. My guess is probably not or at least not enough. We do know the standings remained essentially the same over the final five stages. With Roglic gone, Mas moved to 2nd and Ayuso to 3rd.

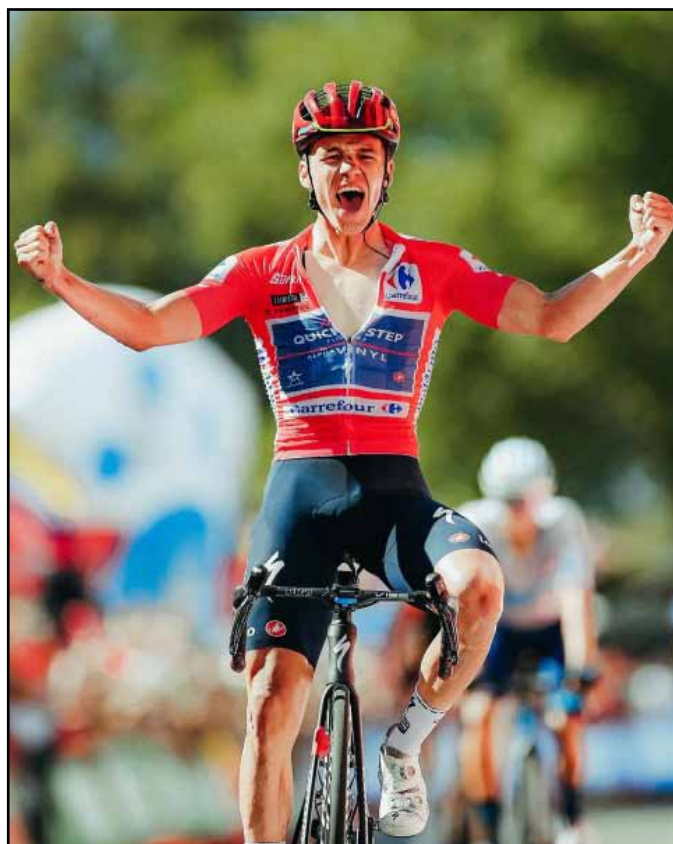
In spite of losing a little time on Stages 12 and 13, and in spite of the faintly fishy smell from that flat tire on Stage 16, it was a hugely impressive win for Remco Evenepoel. His attack on the absurdly steep finish of Stage 9 was the stuff of instant legends. His arrival on

the scene changes the calculus for next year and for many years to come.

And then, just two weeks later, he capped off his dream season by winning the UCI World Championship. Wow! And it wasn't even close. He rode off the front of the main pack with 35 K to go, dropped his last pursuers with 25 K to go, and soloed in from there, 2:21 ahead of 2nd place. About three years ago, my Belgian friend Marc told me to keep an eye on this kid; that he was going to do big things. Good advice!

So...three grand tours this year and three new winners...Jai Hindley at the Giro, Jonas Vingegaard at the Tour, and now Remco the pocket-rocket at the Vuelta. That's an exciting development but it doesn't mean the big dawgs from recent years are going away. (Well, actually some are: they had a nice tribute on the final day of the Vuelta for two old warriors who are retiring this season: Alejandro Valverde and Vincenzo Nibali.) But Tadej Pogacar and Primož Roglič are still alive and kicking. On the same day the Vuelta ended, Pogacar won the Grande Prix de Montreal, beating none other than Wout Van Aert in the final sprint...just for one little reminder of that.

We still have a few more fun races this season—II Lombardia, Paris-Tours, Giro dell'Emilia—and then we have to wait, none-too-patiently, for the 2023 season to see how things unfold.



Top Ten of 2022

Yikes...it's November already! How did that happen? Or, more to the point in the context of this column: how did we get here? As in, who did what this season to earn a place on my Top Ten list of 2022?

Last year I said my list was pretty much a no-brainer. The big guns won the big races and most things followed predictable paths throughout the season. Tadej Pogacar (UAE) won his second straight Tour de France (convincingly). Primož Roglič (Jumbo-Visma) won his third straight Vuelta a España (comfortably). Nine out of ten on my list were also nine out of the top ten in the UCI World Ranking, with only Jonas Vingegaard (Jumbo-Visma) crashing that elite party, thanks to his 2nd at the Tour de France.

This year? Not so much. Whoo...what a muddle! In spite of this being just for fun, I do take my list seriously—assuming anyone cares—and I spend quite a bit of time and some of my few precious brain cells trying to sort it out. But my goodness, what a thorny thicket this season has been.

When I weigh up all the results from a past season, I consider several things: the UCI World Ranking, the One-Day Race Ranking, the Stage Race Ranking, all melded together with a grain of salt, a little voodoo, some historical context, and a dash of sentimentality. My rankings favor all-round cyclists so I automatically toss out most of the pure sprinters, regardless of how many UCI points they accumulated.

A case in point this year was 20-year old Belgian Arnaud de Lie (Lotto-Soudal). Ever heard of him? He finished 6th in the World Ranking and 3rd in the One-Day Race Ranking. He had a very busy season to get to those exalted placings. He won 10 races and was top five in at least seven more. But there is not one single race on the list that most of us have ever heard of. They're all minor-league, small-points races. Nickel and dime stuff. Perhaps in the years to come he will start winning at the top tier, but for now I picture a mouse picking up crumbs under the table where the big folks are feasting. That's not someone who will end up on a Top Ten list.

This year I'm also taking a pass on the winners of many of the one-day classics and monuments. Not all of them but some. These winners—Matej Mohorič at Milano-Sanremo, Binian Gernay at Gent-Wevelgem,

Michał Kwiatkowski at Amstel Gold, Dylan Van Baarle at Paris-Roubaix, and Dylan Teuns at Flèche Wallonne—yeah, they won those big events but then they didn't do enough elsewhere to get within sniffing distance of anyone's Top Ten.

So after dumping all those wannabes, who's left? Let's find out...

10. Dani Martinez (INEOS), 26, Colombia



Down here at the bottom of the Top Ten, a case could be made for any of half a dozen riders getting their foot in the door. But I'm going with Dani. He finished 14th in the World Ranking but with five of those ahead of him being pure sprinters or one-day wonders, he's solidly in the Top Ten of all-rounders. In chronologi-

cal order, he won the Colombian ITT on February 10, finished 3rd at the Volta ao Algarve (Feb 16-20), 3rd at Paris-Nice (March 6-13), 1st at the Tour of the Basque Country (April 4-9), winning one stage, 5th at Flèche Wallonne (April 20), 4th at Liege-Bastogne-Liege (April 24), and finally 1st at the Coppa Sabatini (Sept 15). He also finished 8th at the Tour de Suisse and 30th at the Tour de France, in both races working for team leader Geraint Thomas. And for whatever it's worth, he was the best placed rider from INEOS in the season-long ranking, well ahead of his presumptive team leaders: Richard Carapaz, Adam Yates, and Thomas.

9. Sergio Higuita (BORA-hansgrohe), 25, Colombia



Higuita finished 12th in the World Ranking (behind those five sprinters so 7th among the all-rounders). He won the Colombian Road Race (Feb 13), won Stage 5 of the Volta ao Algarve (Feb 20), won the Volta Catalunya stage race (March 21-27), won Stage 4 of the Tour de Romandie (April 30), was 2nd overall at the Tour de Suisse (June 12-19), won Stage 3 of the Tour de Pologne (August 1) on his way to 8th overall, was a rather lackluster 23rd at the Vuelta (I

expected better), was 2nd at Tre Valli Varesine (October 4) and 4th at Il Lombardia (October 8).

8. Alejandro Valverde (Movistar), 42, Spain



At first I thought to put Valverde in the list as sort of a sentimental Lifetime Achievement Award but the more I pored over this year's results, the more I felt he belonged, in this, his final season as a

pro. He was 11th in the World Ranking or 6th among the all-rounders. He won Trofeo Andratx (Jan 29), was 5th overall at Volta Comunitat Valenciana (Feb 2-6), won the Gran Camiño stage race (Feb 24-27), winning Stage 3 and the Points jersey, was 2nd at Strade Bianche (March 5) and 2nd again at Flèche Wallone (April 20), 13th overall in his final Vuelta, 2nd at Coppa Agostini (Sept 29), 4th at Giro dell'Emilia (Oct 1), 3rd at Tre Valli Varesine, and finally a very respectable 6th at Il Lombardia, the last race of his long career.

So that's this year, and a good year it was at age 42. But about that Lifetime Achievement deal: consider...

He won the Vuelta a España in 2009, the UCI World Championship Road Race in 2018 and was 2nd twice and 3rd four times. He won the Critérium du Dauphiné twice, won the Tour of the Basque Country once, won the Clásica de San Sebastian twice, won the Volta a Catalunya three times, Liege-Bastogne-Liege four times, Flèche Wallone five times, finished first in the UCI ProTour twice, first in the UCI World Ranking twice. He holds the record for most medals won in the World Championships. He entered 31 Grand Tours, completed 27 of them, 20 of which were in the top ten. He has 133 professional wins and an almost countless

number of 2nds, 3rds, and top tens. The online database Cycling Ranking rates him the third most successful cyclist of all time, behind only Eddy Merckx and Sean Kelly. And through it all, he has been the classiest of gents. He will be missed.

7. Jai Hindley (BORA-hansgrohe), 26, Australia



Hindley only finished 24th in the World Ranking but he won the Giro d'Italia and that gets him on this list, regardless of the rest of his season, which, frankly, didn't amount to much. He was 5th overall at Tirreno-Adriatico (March 7-13), and 10th overall at the Vuelta. So he completed two of the three Grand Tours, both in the top ten, with one of them a win. That's nothing to sneeze at! I think we'd better leave it there and wait to see what he does next year.

6. Aleksandr Vlasov (BORA-hansgrohe), 26



Vlasov ended up 5th in the World Ranking. He won the overall at the Volta Comunitat Valenciana (Feb 2-6) winning Stage 3, was 4th overall at the UAE Tour (Feb 20-26), 3rd overall at the Tour of the Basque Country (April 4-9), won the overall at the Tour de Romandie (April 26-May 1), win-

ning Stage 5, and was in first place overall at the Tour de Suisse going into the final stage when he had to pull out because of a COVID positive. In his first Tour de France, he crashed on Stage 6, was beat up and lost time, but battled back gamely and eventually climbed to 5th overall at the end. Only bad luck will keep him from being well up this list next year.

5. Primož Roglič (Jumbo-Visma), 32, Slovenia



Talk about bad luck! This guy had more than his share in 2022. This is where I get into that thorny thicket: what does it mean to be considered one of the best riders of a given year? Is it only about results? Only placings and points? If those are the only metrics that matter, then Roglič might

barely scrape into this list at the bottom but wouldn't be up here in the top five. He had some good results but some gnarly adversity got in the way of even better results. That said, few people doubt that he is (still) one of the best cyclists in the world, no matter what

the results say. One of the talking heads in the blog-o-sphere found a neat way to express this. Aside from the results, who are the three most feared riders in the European peloton right now? Roglic is one of them. (We'll get to the other two presently.)

He opened his account for the year in a promising way, winning the overall at Paris-Nice (March 6-13). He appeared to be defending his winner's laurels at the Tour of the Basque Country (April 4-9), winning Stage 1 and staying in the leader's jersey through Stage 4. But over the last two stages he lost time, ending up 8th overall. They tell us he developed a knee injury. He was back in good form in June, winning the overall at the Dauphiné (June 5-12). He entered the Tour de France as one of the preemptive favorites but crashed over a hay bale on Stage 5, got busted up and lost a big chunk of time. There's an old saying that you make your own luck. Presumably that means you can also make your own bad luck. Okay...so the hay bale was in the road, in a roundabout. 175 other riders that day somehow avoided hitting it. Roglic drilled it. He crashed out of last year's Tour as well and also squandered a comfortable lead at the 2021 Paris-Nice by crashing not once but twice on the final stage. Are we seeing a pattern here?

Fast forward to the Vuelta a España, where he was the three-time defending champion. He was supposedly healed up from his Tour crash by then and held the overall lead, briefly, early in the race. The whole story of the Vuelta was covered in last month's column but at the end of it all, he crashed again, on Stage 16, while in 2nd place, battling for the lead. Evidence is hazy but I'm willing to assert that the crash was down to Roglic...to operator error...more of his self-inflicted bad luck. Up to that point, his Vuelta had been a mixed bag: some brilliant moments and some vulnerable ones. Could he have won? Possibly. But probably not. It would have been close.

So not his best season. Not even close. But I agree with the pundits who still rate him as one of the most lethal road racers on the planet. At 32, his clock is ticking, but I don't think he's quite done yet.

4. Wout Van Aert (Jumbo-Visma), 28, Belgium

Wout Van Aert is the outlier in this group: the only one who is unlikely to win any serious stage races, at least as things stand today. And yet he is so insanely talented there's no way to keep him out of any Top Ten list. He finished 2nd in the UCI World Ranking and 1st in the One-Day Race Ranking. He won at least 13 races



this year and had at least 20 more top fives. And unlike his compatriot Arnaud de Lie, his results came in all of the marquee races, plus a few minor ones. Among his wins were Omloop Het Nieuwsblad (Feb 26), one stage and the points jersey at Paris-Nice (while helping his team leader Roglic take the overall win), E3 Saxo Bank (March 25), two stage wins and the points

jersey at the Dauphiné (while again helping Roglic win the overall), three stage wins and the points jersey at the Tour de France. In this case, he was spectacular in helping team leader Jonas Vingegaard win the overall. He won the only time trial. He set a total-points record in winning the sprinter's jersey. For whatever it's worth, while winning the time trial and the sprinter's jersey, he also finished 5th in the mountain-jersey competition...all of it while working as an indispensable *super-domestique* for the team. Finally, a 1st at the Bretagne Classic (August 28). Also 2nd at Paris-Roubaix and 3rd at Liege-Bastogne-Liege.

The conventional wisdom at this point is that he is simply too big—too heavy—to compete with the true mountain goats who ultimately win the stage races. All of his very impressive mountain exploits have come out of breakaways, not going head-to-head with the best climbers. It's not beyond imagining that he could reinvent himself: lose 20 pounds and climb just that little bit better, the way Laurent Jalabert did, back in the day. But really, he's so good right now at what he does, why would he want to change?

3. Jonas Vingegaard (Jumbo-Visma), 25, Denmark

Vingegaard won the Tour de France, vanquishing the seemingly invincible Tadej Pogacar and scooping up the 1000 UCI points that go with it. How he did it is known to all cycling fans by now. He earned it with his own prodigious skills but he also had the benefit of the deepest team and the best team tactics along the way, while Pogacar's UAE team was making a hash out of their support and tactics. Which begs the question: if Vingegaard and Pogacar competed *mano a mano*, with neutral support and no teams or tactics involved, who would win? I think most would say Pogacar. But bike racing is a team sport and strong teams with clever



game plans do make a difference.

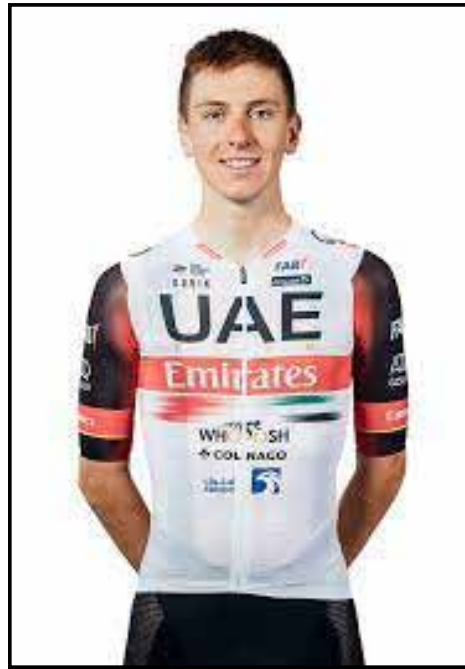
Although Jumbo-Visma management will insist that Vingegaard and Primož Roglič were equal team leaders, it seems obvious that the latter was the senior partner in the firm and that, all else being equal, the team would work for him. That was the case at both Paris-Nice and the Dauphiné, where Roglič finished 1st and

Vingegaard 2nd. At the Basque Country, where Roglič's bum knee slowed him down, Vingegaard was let off the leash over the final two stages but only managed 6th overall. The big one of course was the Tour, where Roglič crashed early and lost time, at which point Vingegaard stepped in as the Plan B option and the team threw all its support behind him. Not only is he an amazing climber but he's also a wicked time-trialer. Team tactics don't help you against the clock.

Vingegaard only contested one other stage race this year, the relatively minor CRO Race (Tour of Croatia) (Sept 27-Oct 2). He was the team leader and couldn't win it but didn't. How he managed to lose it may or may not mean much but it is a little blot on his season (IMHO). He had an 8-second lead over Matej Mohorič after five stages but on the sixth and final stage, with the two of them finishing with the same time, he somehow frittered those eight seconds away by missing out on bonus seconds awarded at the finish and at intermediate points along the way. He lost the overall to Mohorič by one second. He was either too exhausted or too inattentive to scrap for those bonus seconds. I don't know which. Minor race...no biggie. But not the look of a champion.

Okay...drum roll, please! We are down to numbers 1 and 2 and—Help!—I am absolutely stumped as to who to put on those two steps. Oh, I know who the two riders are: Tadej Pogacar and Remco Evenepoel (the other two “most feared” riders in the pro peloton). But who's number 1? I cannot decide. I'm going to do the cowardly thing and call it a tie.

Tadej Pogacar (UAE), 24, Slovenia



How can we have a rider at #1 who did not win a Grand Tour this year? Good question! But he did finish the season #1 in the UCI World Ranking. He banked 800 points for his 2nd place at the Tour, the same number of points Jai Hindley was awarded for winning the Giro or Evenepoel was

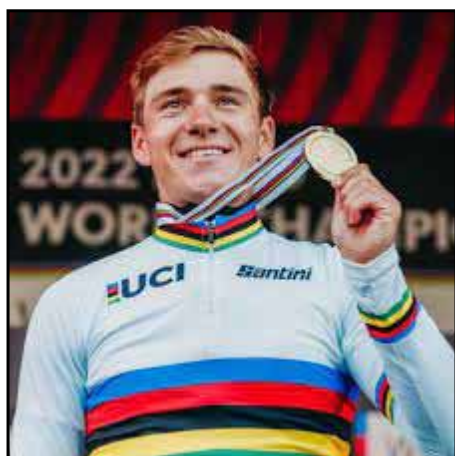
awarded for winning the Vuelta. Like it or not; fair or unfair, the UCI high hats dole out more points for the Tour de France.

But he did a lot of other good things as well. He won the UAE Tour (Feb 20-26), picking up two stage wins; he won Strade Bianche (March 5); won Tirreno-Adriatico (March 7-13), picking up two stage wins and the points jersey; was 5th at Milano-Sanremo and 4th at the Tour of Flanders; 1st at the Tour of Slovenia (June 15-19), picking up two wins and the points jersey; then his battling 2nd at the Tour de France, winning three stages; 1st at the GP Montreal (beating Wout Van Aert in the sprint); 1st at Tre Valli Varesine, and finally 1st at Il Lombardia (beating Enric Mas in a two-up sprint). Altogether at least 13 wins and at least 14 other top fives.

He's a brilliant climber, a superb time-trialer, and an above-average sprinter...pretty much the definition of an all-rounder. His team left him exposed and vulnerable at the Tour and he had a couple of other races where he looked merely mortal: fading on the Mur de Huy at Flèche Wallonne and being dropped rather decisively by Enric Mas on the final climb at the Giro dell'Emilia. But most of the time he was as good as we have come to expect him to be. Still just 24...

Remco Evenepoel (Quick-Step), 22, Belgium

This is the new kid on the block. After his spectacular win at the Vuelta a España and then his crushing victory at the World Championship, all the other teams and riders are spending at least some of the off-season



rethinking their goals and challenges for 2023. It's a new ball game.

He's been a pro since 2019 and has had some success prior to this year...enough to get people talking about his future

potential. It looks as if the future has arrived. But, as noted in my Vuelta review last month, the jury is still out as to his place in the peloton because of some past weakness in the biggest mountains. He may have laid that bogey to rest at the Vuelta with some astonishing mountain finishes. But I for one am still just the teeniest bit skeptical on that front and want to see one more season of big events under his belt before going all-in on the kid. But hey, I have him tied for 1st here so he's already at the top of the totem pole, albeit sharing the top perch with Tadej Pogacar.

Aside from winning the Vuelta and the World Championship, what else did he do this year? He won Stage 1 of Volta Comunitat Valenciana (Feb 2-6) but couldn't match the pace of the best climbers on Stage 3 and ultimately finished 2nd overall. He won the overall at the Volta ao Algarve (Feb 16-20), including winning the Stage 4 time trial by almost a minute. He was 2nd overall at Tirreno-Adriatico (March 7-13) through five stages but faded badly on the final climb on Stage 6 and ended up 11th. He was in 1st overall after five stages at the Tour of the Basque Country (April 4-9) but lost time on the final climb on Stage 6 and ended up 4th. It was these vulnerable days in the biggest mountains that had folks doubting his overall chops, up to this point.

On April 24, he won his first cycling monument, Liege-Bastogne-Liege. He went off the front on a 30-km solo breakaway and won by 48 seconds. His time of 41.397 kph (25.66 mph) is the fastest in the history of this venerable classic. He backed that up by winning the Clasica de San Sebastian with a 44-km solo breakaway to win by two minutes. Those are stunning, shocking victories...taking the whole peloton to the woodshed in two of the most important one-day races of the year.

In between those two wins, he finished first overall at

the Tour of Norway (May 24-29), winning Stages 1, 3, and 5. At the Tour de Suisse (June 12-19), he won the ITT on the final stage but lost substantial time on the two preceding mountain stages and ended up in 11th, 4:04 back. After that he won the Belgian national time trial on June 23.

That brings us to the Vuelta (August 19-Sept 11). He donned the leader's jersey after Stage 6 and never gave it up. He crushed the time trial on Stage 10 and was mostly dominant in the many big hills, although with just a couple of slightly off days. And he did it without the help of a strong team. Very impressive! And then the frosting on the cake: the World Championship Road Race on Sept 25, which he won the same way he won LBL and San Sebastian, with a solo breakaway off the front of the strongest assembly of riders in the world. A week before the road race, he took the bronze medal in the World Championship ITT, just nine seconds out of first.

What a season! And only 22 years old. I've stated my reservations about his possible weakness in the biggest hills. His performance at the Vuelta may have done away with that but we'll see how he does next year.

There were quite a few big names from past years who didn't make the Top Ten this year. Richard Carapaz, Enric Mas, Adam Yates, Mikel Landa, Nairo Quintana, Geraint Thomas, Egan Bernal, Joao Almeida, Mathieu van der Poel, Julian Alaphilippe...among them, six out of ten from my list last year. New riders are always coming up and pushing the old riders aside and also the fickle finger of fate is forever messing with people: wrecks and illness and injuries and mechanicals or just a bad day now and then.

The winning margin at the Giro was 1:18, Hindley over Carapaz. At the Tour it was 2:43, Vingegaard over Pogacar. At the Vuelta it was 2:02, Evenepoel over Mas. That adds up to 363 seconds of difference spread over 6251 miles of racing...a little over half a second per mile. It doesn't take a lot of imagination to picture where a few handfuls of seconds could have gone in another direction on any given day. Just the slimmest of margins between being a winner and an also-ran. It's unpredictable. It's capricious and sometimes cruel. This is not Zwift. This is the real world in all its complex messiness. We love it! 2023 can't get here soon enough.

Out With the Old, In With the New

On September 2, I had a more-or-less head-on collision with a US Postal Service delivery truck. We ran into each other—literally—around a blind corner on a narrow road in the hills above Kenwood. Neither of us was going all that fast but the combined closing speed was still 30-40 mph. “More-or-less” means I managed to swerve away from a direct head-on and hit the truck on its front left corner...what we might call a glancing blow but still a heavy impact. The fact that it wasn't a full-frontal splat, right between the headlights, is probably why I'm still here to write this column.



However severe the impact, it wasn't much fun. Broken left collarbone, several broken ribs, a severe bone contusion on the point of the left shoulder, a chipped bone in the left elbow, minor spinal damage. (Can any spinal damage be called “minor”?) The driver called 911. The Kenwood Fire Dept arrived first, then an ambulance, and off I went to the emergency room. Not what I had expected to be doing that day. And almost three months off the bike, recovering, was not what I expected to be doing this Fall.

In around 300,000 miles of cycling, I've only had two other crashes that ended up in the ER, one in 2005 and one in 2012. In both of those crashes, I took a pounding but my bike escaped almost completely unscathed. This time around, the bike and I both took a pounding. I'm now pretty well recovered but the bike was mortally wounded. After an extensive examination by

the mechanics at the Trek Store in Santa Rosa, it was declared DOA...too damaged to be repaired.

So...time for a new bike! Which is the main point of this column.



I don't buy new bikes all that often. I owned three steel bikes over the course of 27 years before I bought a Merlin in 1993, enchanted with the titanium. Twelve years later, in 2005, I bought a Trek Madone, moving on to carbon fiber (above). And now, almost 18 years after that, I have purchased another Trek, a Domane. (Madone...Domane: is it just coincidence those two names are anagrammatic?) This one is even the same shade of blue as the last one. But that's where the similarity ends. Okay, they're both carbon fiber road bikes. That much is the same. But over the 17-plus years since I jumped on that Madone, the technology has moved along, just a bit.

I don't think of myself as a luddite, nor even old-school. I don't object to innovation. My Merlin was cutting-edge when I got it in '93. My Madone was so advanced in 2005...as state-of-the-art as a bike could be. But I'm not a tech-weenie, gushing over every new thing. Once I find a bike I like, I settle in with it and cease to be interested in what's shakin' out in the marketplace. I don't read bike reviews, in print or on-line. I let all that go and just ride...and the world moves on without me.

So when I wandered onto the showroom floor at the Trek Store and threw myself on the mercies of my old and trusted friend, Phil, the inventory manager, I was in for a shock. The shock was actually three-fold: braking; shifting, tires.

The brakes maybe weren't that surprising. I've been



seeing disc brakes on bikes for years. They were one element that had me thinking about a new bike for a while lately. But that alone had not yet been enough to budge me off my status quo. It took a crash and a trashed bike to do that. Now that I'm using the brakes, I am a convert. They work great. No cables to wear out and no hot-rim or wet-rim issues. Taking off the wheels around the disc brakes is a minor pain, as is having to be careful not to damage the discs or the calipers. All my cycling life, one thing has been consistent: if I have to lay my bike down on the ground, I put the left side down so the derailleurs on the right side are up and unlikely to be damaged. A no-brainer, right? Now the discs and their fussy little calipers are on the left side. So which side goes down?

I went with electronic shifting. At first I was leery of it, worried about the prospect of having the battery die halfway through a ride. It could happen but you'd have to be a complete knucklehead to get to that place. It's not like riding an e-bike where you're using gobs of power almost constantly to move the bike along. The only time the power is on is when you shift, and that's just a tiny, one-second blip of juice. Phil says people riding 100-150 miles a week are going three months between charges. So I top it up on the first of every month and don't worry about it. I like the idea that I can go on a one-week, 500-mile tour and not have to worry about charging the bike all week. And, again, no cables to wear out and break in some inconvenient nowhere.

The shifting action takes some getting used to, but in a good way. It's so quick and precise and the taps on the paddles are so light I sometimes wonder if I've actually shifted. And with 11 cogs, the increments are so tiny it can be hard to tell. I'm getting a feel for it. Soon enough, cable-activated shifting will seem hopelessly klunky.

The biggest surprise was tires. I totally missed the memo on new tire technology...the bigger tires running at lower pressure. When did that happen? Back in my hammerhead days, I ran rock-hard 23s. For

years I've been on Gatorskin 25s at around 100 psi, which I figured was my old man's concession to comfort and durability. I was aware of the current thinking about running tires a little softer. But I didn't realize how far along that path new bikes had traveled.

And then there's the question of tubes vs tubeless (with sealant). I read up on the pros and cons of each system. Tubes I know about. There are a lot of good things about the tubeless tires but some not-so-good things too.

The bike I ordered came with tubeless 32s at 60 psi. 32s? Geez, it looks like a paperboy bike! Not what I thought I wanted. I could have spent some extra money and swapped those out. But hey, if the smart kids at Trek think tubeless 32s are the way to go, who am I to differ? I know zilch about these new technologies. I decided to go with what they spec'd and see how it all works. Either I'll like it or I'll switch to 28s—with or without tubes—when these tires wear out.

And then guess what: on my very first ride, I picked up a goathead thorn in my rear tire. I could hear it thumping along back there for a few yards before I stopped. When I pulled it out, the tiny hole sealed right up, just like it's supposed to do, with little or no loss of pressure. With a



tube, I would have been out there on a cold November afternoon, swapping out the tube...never one of my favorite chores. So round one to the tubeless tires! I still found a place on the swoopy new frame to mount a mini-pump...just in case.

There's an old witticism that the bicycle is the last invention the average person could understand. That may not be the case anymore. Back a few years—quite a few years—I used to do all the work on my bikes. If you owned a bike, you worked on it. You did the maintenance that kept it happy. The bike was simple, analog technology even a halfwit could understand. The work was fun and satisfying. But my expertise as a mechanic hit a brick wall about the time they put the shifters inside the brake hoods. And now? Hydraulic-driven disc brakes? Electronic, cable-less shifting? Tubeless tires filled with voodoo gumbo? I have no idea how to tinker with any of that and I would probably make things worse if I tried. All this clever innovation is neat but it comes at a cost, both financial and practical. This is of course true as well with our cars, our computers, our smart phones, our home appliances, how we listen to music or watch a movie, how we heat and power our homes. It is arguably a cleaner, greener, more efficient world, but we are now inextricably entangled with technology that most of us can't hope to understand.

The bike and I are getting acquainted. It will take a while to find our comfort zone but we're getting there. It may in fact be possible to teach an old dog new tricks. I had this happy little fantasy that the new bike would immediately improve my performance by 10 or 15%...that I could turn back the clock and be a little bit younger again. So far, that hasn't happened. Some of that may be because I'm still healing up my injuries and still getting my fitness back after a long lay-off. But most of it is being 75 friggin' years old. That clock is not getting turned back. But over this winter and into the new year, this time of promise and new beginnings, I hope the new bike and the old me will, if not turn back the clock, at least slow it down a little.

In the year since I wrote this, I've had two unfixable flats with the new tires, where the sealant couldn't close the holes. Plus—I suspect—several more where the sealant did its job and I never knew I'd had any sort of puncture. As for those two unfixable ones, I now have the proper tools to deal with them, should they come along again.

To Slam or to Slide?

There has been an interesting discussion on our club chat list lately. I didn't pay attention to it when it started but I think it was about the efficacy of padded or somehow armored cycling shorts that might do for your pelvis and butt what helmets do for your head in the event of a crash. But it soon moved on, mostly focused on this question: in a bike crash, which is better...to slide at a higher speed or to hit the ground more-or-less straight down at lower speed?

At first the observations were anecdotal and subjective—rehashes of past crashes—but then someone mentioned physics and things got a bit abstruse. Who knew we had so many physicists in the club? Or at least folks with some college-level physics in their resumé's. It started innocently enough...

“Let's say F is the amount of Force produced by an impact and applied to a Bone; P is the amount of force absorbed by (protective) Padding; and B is the threshold force required to break a Bone. If $F - P > B$, then the bone will break.”

That got things rolling and flushed the physicists and engineers out of their thickets...

“When falling, a rider's motion can be resolved into two vectors, a horizontal and vertical vector. In a crash, the vertical vector is the same regardless of how fast the rider is moving in the horizontal direction.

“High speed crashes can sometimes seem minor because a person's horizontal kinetic energy dissipates gradually as the rider slides over the tarmac. A rider skids, slides and rolls to a stop over a second or two. But the vertical component of kinetic energy remains exactly the same.

“A rider's kinetic energy is $\frac{1}{2}mv^2$. So, if a rider is moving at 20 mph, she has four times the kinetic energy in the horizontal direction than if she crashes at 10 mph. But her vertical kinetic energy remains exactly the same. Vertically, she starts at 0 mph at the beginning of the fall. Her kinetic energy vertically when she hits the tarmac is mass \times force of gravity \times height above the ground. Things become complicated very quickly because crashes are not perfectly inelastic, the slide can be converted into rolling motion, etc.”

Note: just because these folks can cobble together fancy formulas doesn't automatically mean their

conclusions are correct or even that their formulas are correct. Just sayin'...

And having said that, I will add that some of the folks who posted to the list I don't know very well. Others I know better and a few I have come to respect for their general intelligence and what I might call bike smarts. This post is from one of them...

"Whether you are going fast or slow, the gravity force vector is the same. But if you are traveling faster, the horizontal vector is longer. The total force vector is the hypotenuse of that right-angle triangle. So technically, a high-speed crash subjects your body to more force. However, when you crash going fast, your hip typically doesn't slam into a horizontal brick wall. So I think there is something about the skid angle that is protective. I think your hip decelerates more slowly with skidding, which reduces the maximum instantaneous impact force."

Then there was this from a guy I know has a PhD in Physics...

"One thing not mentioned yet in this discussion is the concept of Impulse. (Definition of 'Impulse' in physics: a force acting briefly on a body and producing a finite change of momentum; a change of momentum so produced, equivalent to the average value of the force multiplied by the time during which it acts.) I teach physics at SRJC and always enjoy discussing Impulse. The equation for Impulse comes from Newton's Second Law and can be written $dP = Fdt$.

"A change in momentum requires applying force across a change in time. From this simple equation it is clear that if the change in time drops, then the force must increase. If you are in a collision and your momentum drops suddenly to zero then your body will undergo a large force. The best thing you can do if you anticipate a collision is try to extend your stopping time as much as possible.

"I'll ask you the same question I ask my students. You're driving down the freeway at 80 mph and suddenly must stop. You have two options: you can turn left into a brick wall or right into a giant mountain of hay. Which way would you go?"

There was a good deal more in the same vein. Those

of us who are not physicists or engineers were hanging on at the back of the pace line, trying not to get dropped. But actually, even for the Liberal Arts dimbulbs, it's not that hard to understand. We may not be able to write the formulas but we've had the physics impressed upon our soft-tissue bodies and our breakable bones. Nothing like leaving the ivory towers of academia and visiting the School of Hard Knocks for making this easy to understand.

Above all, the real world is messy, and the crashes we find ourselves enduring are seldom so simple that they can be defined by a simple formula or neatly divided into two types. No doubt the assorted forces and vectors itemized above are all going to be in play, but many other variables will complicate the matter. Just for one example: in a faster crash, the difference between sliding on rain-slick pavement or black ice and sliding—grinding, bouncing—on very rough pavement or gravel or rocks. Even a smooth slide on a slick road can go wrong, whizzing you right over the edge of a cliff or under the wheels of an oncoming car or into a stone wall. The world is not a laboratory, except perhaps for experiments involving chaos theory.



My own experience of crashes—more than I care to recall—tells me the ones where I slam down hard and don't slide are going to be worse: a brutal hammer blow to the body and probably a trip to ER the next entry in my day runner. My most recent crash in September was one of these. I hit the front corner of the truck, my carbon handlebars shattered, and in some small fraction of a second, I hit the pavement HARD...all the impact concentrated on my upper left

side: elbow, ribs, shoulder, collarbone. Would I have been better off sliding? According to a simple formula, perhaps. But in this case, in the messy real world, a slide might have taken me right under the rear wheel of the truck. (My head ended up just underneath and in front of the rear wheel.)

I've had three crashes that sent me to ER. All three were the slam-down kind. All three resulted in broken bones. I know of many other crashes of that sort among my pals that ended up with the orthopedic folks involved, including even the simplest goof: toppling over at a stop light after forgetting to unclip. In contrast, the long, sometimes fast slides have resulted in nothing more than rather garish, grisly-looking road rash (and shredded shorts). If the bike was still rideable, I usually hopped back on it and continued after those skids. I might have been uncomfortable for a few days with the abraded epidermis—that gummy, scabby mess—but not nearly as uncomfortable as I would have been, for weeks or months, with a broken collarbone or fractured ribs or busted-up pelvis. No visits to ER. No surgeries. No rehab.

As is noted by our science friends above, it's the dissipation of kinetic energy that differentiates the two kinds of crashes, trucks and cliffs and other variables aside. Your butt or thigh can act as a drag brake when skidding along the pavement, slowing you down before you hit some immovable object. Making allowances for all the other jokers in the deck that the real world will throw into the equation, I think I'd choose the long slide over the hard hammer blow every time.

Of course the best option is not crashing at all. But this isn't something we choose to do or not do, except perhaps in the degree to which we choose to push the envelope. There's probably a formula for that too. Heading into this new year, I wish you all safe cycling. May you please not end up as crash-test dummies in some physics experiment.

$$\frac{-b \pm \sqrt{b^2 - 4ac}}{2a}$$

Club Tours: a History

At the end of last summer's club tour, we were lounging around in our last camp, decompressing after a week of awesome rides and sometimes stressful challenges. (We had more than our share of Murphy's Law on that tour, as reported in this space a few months ago.) One of the participants, who has done several past club tours, tossed out the thought that it would be nice if we had a history of all our past tours, all gathered together and organized in one place...a book or a web site or something.

At that moment, I was pretty much wrung out by the past week, not only by the fairly challenging riding but also by the accumulated worry and stress related to the crises that almost wrecked our tour. (They didn't wreck it, but it took a lot of work to keep it from imploding.) So I had just enough energy to agree that, yes, a history would be nice. But not enough energy to take it any further. Not then, anyway.

However, after my bike crash in September, I was mostly holed up at home, recovering from my assorted injuries, and had a lot of time on my hands. At which point that idea of a history came back to me. I had the time and, what's more, I had most of the documents and records from the past tours: the information needed to pull together the history. I spent an enjoyable and rewarding couple of weeks gathering all the documents together and collating them into a finished product.

Now then, here's my reservation about this column: will anyone except past participants on these tours be interested in a history about them? Kind of like a high school yearbook: who would find that interesting except the kids in your own class? Or like a slide show or photo gallery from someone else's summer vacation. We've all had to sit through a few of those. Okay, I get all that. But I'm forging ahead with this anyway because I've convinced myself there might be something of value for a larger audience in at least noting the creation and existence of this history, if only in putting forward the idea that such tours are possible.

We all know it's possible to throw large wads of money at professional caterers who will shepherd us through a swank biking adventure in some far-off corner of the world. But how many cyclists know we can also organize our own tours, with a little help from our local bike club? That's at least in part what this history is

about...not just documenting each specific tour but also explaining how we got into the business of cooperative tours.

I'm not going to pound out a lot of copy here discussing all that. The history does it quite well. The club has put up a history page with a link to the "book," which is a 149-page pdf (a rather hunky file of about 20 MB). 47 official club tours are covered, dating back to 1995. There is also a chapter on unofficial tours—dreamed up and organized by club members for club members—and there are at least another 40 tours mentioned there. There is an introduction, where I explain how we got started on club tours.

Each of the 47 official tours gets somewhere between one and four pages of coverage. There are over 350 photos illustrating the tours. But that's not all. Wherever possible—which means most of the time—there are links to other documents about each tour or to articles that appeared elsewhere about certain tours, sometimes in these BikeCal columns. All of those additional blocks of copy add up to around 1200 pages of lore about the various tours, including maps, profiles, route sheets, more photos, and descriptions of each stage...around 270 stages so far. (We will update the history with new tours as they happen in the years ahead.)

Most of the more recent tours also have links to Ride With GPS routes for each stage. If you feel so inclined, you can download the maps for all those stages and do your own exploring. Or use what we've created to organize a tour of your own within your own club or with your best biking pals. If you get that far, I'll be happy to answer questions that you might have about how we do this.

That's pretty much the whole message I want to push across this time around. If this piques your interest, the big pdf is there, waiting to be downloaded. Open it in Preview and use your down arrow to scroll through it. I doubt anyone is going to read or even lightly browse all 149 pages. But a quick spin down all the years, past all the tours, could be fun, stopping here and there to dig a little deeper into some of the tours that grab your attention. With spring just around the corner, perhaps this stroll down Memory Lane will inspire you to think about some nice tours you can do in the sunnier months ahead.

SRCC Tour History Page...

<https://www.srcc.com/Club-Tour-History>

March, 2023 • 285

Interactive Tourism

The very first *On The Road* column I wrote for BikeCal—back in July of 1999—was called *Interactive Transportation*. I've just read it again after a long time away from it. It still says what it was supposed to say back then...still seems relevant. The take-away from that little essay was that cycling is a great way, an interactive way, to see the world, to be fully immersed in the world around us.

I'm revisiting that theme this month, in the midst of a wet winter that is both welcome and a little bit frustrating. We need the water and thank goodness our reservoirs and our Sierra snow pack are looking good, for the first time in years. But we're missing riding days, what with all the wet stuff out there. I'm a member in good standing of Patrick O'Grady's cohort: "Old Guys Who Get Fat in Winter." Gotta get in a few miles and shed a few pounds: Spring is pretty well here.

While I'm stuck at home a bit more than I would like, I am living my cycling life a bit vicariously. Watching the first races of the year, for instance, but also watching videos on YouTube of "touring" in far off, exotic locales...virtual touring. And not just ones that are expressly for cyclists. There is a vast inventory of walking videos around charming European villages, from the Cotswolds to Provence to Umbria. Once you click on one and watch it, YouTube will start feeding you a more-or-less endless stream of them. They're kind of hard to resist, at least until you've seen enough of them and they all start to look alike.

The villages are ever so quaint. There's very little on this side of the Atlantic to match up with those several-hundred year old towns...their cobbled lanes and stair-step alleys, the warm stone buildings with the colorful window trims and flower boxes full of geraniums. Piazzas and campos. All of it. But what takes the magic off these visits just a tiny bit for me: the tourists. The throngs of ambling, window-shopping, rubber-necking tourists, from every corner of Europe and beyond...anyone who can afford to travel to these Disneylands for grown-ups.

Many a village now seems to exist almost entirely to process its tourists; to extract some Euros from them—in shops and bistros and albergos—and then send them packing..."Thanks...bye! Next, please!" Nothing new about this. The best—most scenic—of the towns have been doing this dance for hundreds of

years. But it doesn't work for me, not the way I see it in the YouTube teasers.

Now wait...who am I to stand aloof from that crowd of lookie-loos with their selfie-sticks? Who am I to demean their adventures? After all, I've been there and done that myself, in more cute villages than I can count. To answer that is to circle back to my "interactive tourism" theme. I—or we (my cycling friends and I)—did not simply step down off a tour bus or down the gangplank of a monster cruise ship, ready for a few hours of conspicuous consumption in whatever town is now up on the itinerary. No, we rode to that town. We got there via pedal-power, perhaps over some epic col in the Alps or Haut-Provence or Emilia-Romagna. Or perhaps along some mellow canal path or idyllic valley meander, gliding along an avenue of ancient plane trees or past a hillside of lavender.

So when we arrive at the next cute village, looking for a cafe where we can slake our thirst and shovel some calories into our somewhat vacant interiors, we will appreciate the world in ways the tourists climbing off the bus cannot. We will see the village in the larger context of the surrounding landscape. Our legs and lungs and hearts and minds will all be zinging with the buzz of a good work-out and at least some satisfaction in having ridden to this delightful spot employing only our own energy, fueled by the nice cuisine we enjoyed at last night's hotel.

One of the best things that happens on these bike rides is stumbling into villages without tourists: little out-of-the-way towns that are not quite precious enough to draw the attention of the tour guides. We can sit in the town square and have the place pretty much all to ourselves. It does happen, and it happens because our bikes take us to those nice no-places.

I know some folks will get a little testy when we cyclists act like we know things they don't know. I'm sorry about that but quite often those are exactly the facts of the matter, at least in this context. We may not be better human beings. We may not be entitled to any greater portion of respect or cosmic brownie points for what we do. But I'm unapologetic in asserting that we are having more fun and feeling more alive in the moment—and in the memories we take home later—than the less active tourists.

Here's hoping this unfolding new season will include some interactive tourism for you, perhaps not too far from home or maybe—if you can manage it—off in some scenic, far-away corner of the world.

April, 2023 • 286

Memories

It was 40 years ago this month that I and my wife and our two little tots packed up our kit and kaboodle in San Francisco and moved to Sebastopol, Sonoma County, a place where cycling is as good and as interesting and as challenging as it is anywhere on this planet.

I've been cycling all my adult life, ever since I toured in England on an old Raleigh in 1966 and then, after that summer, bought a Gitane when I moved off-campus at University of Oregon in Eugene. In my years in the Bay Area, beginning in '68, I rode frequently, sometimes commuting to work and sometimes exploring The City and Marin from homes in SF and Ross and Bolinas. But it wasn't until I moved to Sebastopol that cycling became something of an obsession for me. By the mid-'80s I was deeply mired in the local cycling culture and thoroughly hooked on learning my way around this vast network of North Bay back roads. 5000 to 9000 miles a year, mostly in Sonoma, Marin, and Napa Counties, but with a large sampling of Mendocino, Lake, and Solano Counties too, with SF, the East Bay, and South Bay thrown in now and then.

But this column, under the header *Memories*, is mostly about the oft-repeated local rides: the week-in, week-out, weekday and weekend rides that begin and end at my front door. What I've been thinking lately, as I doodle along the little roads in my extended backyard, is how many memories have piled up along those roads over the past 40 years, like high banks of snow. I don't remember every detail of every ride over those 160 seasons. That would be some sort of madness. However, I can't help but recall all manner of moments from years gone by, as I pass this or that landmark along the roads. Not all of the memories are of one event, one moment, fixed in place and time. Some are more of a continuum...things happening repeatedly or frequently over a span of those many years.

Case in point...

There is an old farm house along Canfield Road, about five miles south of my home. It sits on a little rise a ways back from the road, just as the road lumps up over a little hill (so I'm going slowly over the mini-summit when I pass the house). For many years, almost every time I rode by, an elderly couple would be sitting out on the porch, taking the afternoon sun. And as I'd ride by, I'd look over and they'd be waving at



me. So I'd wave back. It was the nicest, simplest form of good cheer and respect and bonding. I doubt they would be familiar with the word, "Namaste," but it pretty well fits the moment for me.

This went on for many years, whenever I was on that road, perhaps twice a month. It never failed to brighten my life a little. Then one day I noticed a wheelchair ramp had been built off the front porch. On another day, I saw a younger couple helping one of the older folks down to a waiting car. Not too long after that, I rode by and found the chairs on the porch empty. They stayed empty. The house is still there, still the same. The chairs are still there. But the couple has moved on. I still see them sitting there, lifting a hand to wave, but only in my mind, in my memories.

On another day on the same road, heading out on a ride, I realized I'd left home with my water bottles empty—Doh!—and right then I saw a woman on the front porch of a cottage just off the road. I swung into her yard and asked if I could fill my bottles. When I got up close to her I was, in the best/worst way of men, totally bowled over by her beauty. Masses of black hair, dark, flashing eyes, a perfect face, a body out of a fantasy, snugged up in a form-fitting tank top. Oy! Only in storybooks or traveling salesman jokes would this lead to anything more. For me, that was all it was. She cheerfully filled my bottles and waved me off. I continued on my way, with my poor brain momentarily bent sideways by this brief exposure to young loveliness. And, again, I still recall that moment every time I ride by that pretty little cottage.

I don't imagine I'm unique in hauling a packed suitcase of memories around with me when I roll along

my familiar homeboy roads. I bet, if you think about it, you will notice yourself flipping through a sort of Rolodex of memories when you're riding. No? Yes! Perhaps it's a function of age: the more the years go by, the more memories there are...more looks backward than looks forward.

So many memories from group rides, both the regular Saturday morning club rides and the bigger events, the centuries and doubles and brevets. Getting hooked up in a slick rotating pace line. Feeling feisty and spanking some young punk who thought he could drop me on a climb. (That one

is definitely a memory: definitely in the past. I'm not spanking too many other riders these days.) That lumatic dance on some whirling-dervish downhill: three or four sky pilots carving the corners together, dinking and diving. So...much...fun!

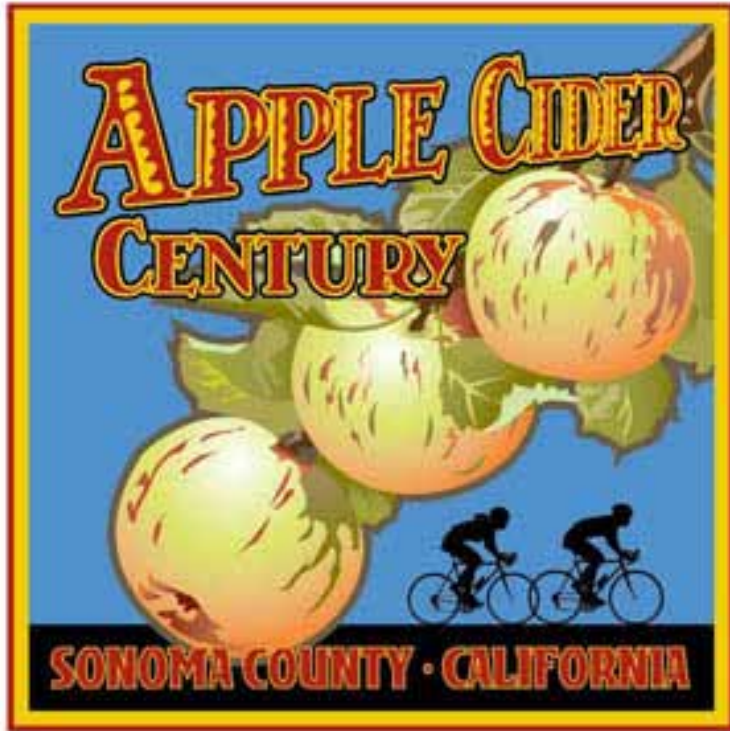
I've lived through—ridden through—complete cycles of paving on some roads. They were in terrible shape when I first moved here, then got paved to black-satin perfection. And now, 30 or so years later, they're getting close to terrible again, all patches and cracks.

Of course I remember all the places I've crashed, both the big ones that ended up in the ER and the little ones that only produced some minor road rash and shredded bar tape. Sometimes the near misses and close calls are almost more memorable than the crashes: when I flew off the road and somehow kept it upright; when several thousand pounds of speeding metal brushed by my elbow with no more harm done than a spike of adrenaline.

Then there are the bonks. The hot days when I bit off more than I could chew and had to struggle home in some miserable survival mode. Or had to climb in a sag. Not too many of those but there are a few of them in my big log book of memories. Or the cold and rainy days. The ones that were awful and the ones where we thumbed our noses at the weather gods and said, "Bring it on!" Got our hard-ass thing going.

I'm happy to say the good memories far outweigh the funky ones. Unless you have a chronically gloomy turn of mind, it's always nicer to remember the good times than the bad ones. On balance, I think most of us will agree that it doesn't take any revisionist history or spin-doctoring to conjure up more good memories

than bad. Even the most starry-eyed Candide wouldn't keep cycling if the good times didn't add up to a much longer column in our ledgers than the bad times...the bonks and crashes and nasty weather and hassles with psycho-drivers. Those things happen; they're recorded in our big book of biking. But against those not-so-great moments, we can pile up a mountain of moments ranging from merely pleasant to transcendent, blissed-out euphoria.



I did a nice ride yesterday, out in this green-as-Ireland springtime. It was the 30th annual Apple Cider Century, a ride I introduced to the club calendar all those years ago. I haven't missed a single one since. A date in late March is no safe haven. It has rained on maybe a dozen of them down the years. Even stinging hail out on the cliffs over the ocean once. We've had to cut a few of them short, running for cover with the weather dogs snapping at our heels. And we did at least one of them the next day, after the storm had rolled through. One way or another, I've managed to log at least a few miles on every one of those weekends. 30 years ago I was hammering along in the front group. 30 years later I'm somewhere near the back...but still doing it. Still getting in those glorious springtime miles and still banking a few more memories. One of these years—not yet, dammit!—I may not be able to do the ride. At that point, I'll have to rummage around in my memories to enjoy it one more time.

May, 2023 • 287

Spring Fling

Here we are at May again, with Springtime well and truly launched. And what a Spring it has been. After several years of drought, we got drenched. Boy, did we ever! Record-breaking rainfall, early and often. Reservoirs brim full and releasing into their downstream creeks and rivers. The Sierra snowpack also setting records and the only worry being whether the snow will melt too soon and too heavily and cause flooding.

It may not be cycling weather up around Truckee but it surely is down here in the temperate coastal hills. We had our little snow-capped peaks up along the Geysers a few weeks ago, looking very scenic, but now it's almost all sunshine and dry roads off into the future. We may get a few more sprinkles but mostly we're out there rolling out our miles and shedding more and more of our cold-weather clothing each week.

But this column isn't a local weather report. I only start with that theme to get the ball rolling on the real topic: the racing season in Europe through the first months of the year. And, to echo my opening: what a Spring it has been! If you're a fan of bike racing, all seasons are fascinating. But I can't recall a recent Spring season that has been as entertaining as this one and so full of omens and auguries for the even bigger races ahead.

I can't cover every single itty-bitty race on the Euro calendar, nor the early-season events in the Southern Hemisphere. I have to focus on the ones that seem most significant, both in their own right and in what they may say about the prospects of certain prime-time players going forward into those bigger races on the horizon. I'm going to divide this up into two parts: the stage races and the one-day Monuments and classics. (This will be a long review. If you're a race fan, you should enjoy it; if you're not, you won't hurt my feelings if you move on to other, less taxing reading.)

There were two 5-stage events running from February 15-19: the Volta ao Algarve and the Ruta del Sol (aka Vuelta a Andalucia). Let's take the one that seems less significant first...

At the Volta ao Algarve, nothing too significant happened through the first three stages. There was an uphill finish on Stage 2 but all the presumptive GC favorites finished in a bunch, within 2 seconds of each other. On Stage 4, a mild uphill finish, Tom Pidcock

(INEOS Grenadiers) won and took over the GC, with other hopefuls down through the top ten, all within :30. The final stage was an almost flat time trial of 24.4 km...15 miles. I would have thought Pidcock would kill it in such a short, easy ITT. (See his performance at Strade Bianche, later.) But he coughed up a hairball this time and finished in 19th place at 1:27. Sneaking in among the ITT specialists—Kung, Cavagna, Ganna, Foss—Pidcock's teammate Dani Martinez finished 4th at :16. He had been :23 behind Pidcock going into the time trial, so that was enough to put him on top. (No one else was close.) Martinez is a decent time trial rider—he's won the Colombian national title three times—but this was impressive and maybe a little unexpected, just about as unexpected as Pidcock's flop. This is Dani's only good result so far this year.

At the Ruta del Sol, Tadej Pogacar (UAE) opened his account for 2023 by pretty much running the table. He won three of the five stages (1, 2, 4) with modest but comfortable leads over either Mikel Landa (Bahrain-Vicotious) or Enric Mas (Movistar). Stage 3 laurels went to folks in a breakaway—none of them a threat—while Pogacar again finished ahead of his chief rivals in the main peloton. Stage 5 was a day for the sprinters and this time he once again finished ahead of the other GC riders. In the end he won the overall by 1:18 over Landa, with a few other big names scattered down through the top ten. It's not all that important an event but what makes it feel significant was the casually competent way Pogacar controlled the race from start to finish. He hardly looked like he was trying but he rode away from his rivals whenever he needed to.

Next up was the 7-stage UAE Tour (Feb 20-26). Pogacar had won this race the last two years. Adam Yates won it in 2020. There was a fair amount of head-scratching and speculating when UAE signed Yates this past off-season. This race at least partly explained why they did it: Yates would be the team leader, freeing up Pogacar to do other events, such as Ruta del Sol. More arrows in their team quiver. But Yates and his UAE team got caught out on the very first stage: dropped off a small front group in one of those classic crosswind fiascos. Long story short, a dozen riders managed to stay away and finish almost a minute ahead of the main group. Remco Evenepoel (Soudal-Quick Step) hung on at the back of that small sprint group and got the same time as the winner. So after what should have been an inconsequential stage, Yates was already :54 behind a very dangerous rival. Stage 2 was a short team time trial (17.4 km...under

11 miles). Evenepoel's Soudal-Quick Step team won and Yates' UAE team was down in 8th at :16. More time lost for Yates. Stage 3 was an uphill finish and Evenepoel finished 2nd with Yates right behind him. That put Remco into the GC lead. The other mountain finish was the final stage. This was the last chance for Yates to win, and win he did. He dropped Evenepoel with 3 km to go and put :10 into him. But Yates' win barely put a dent in the time he had to make up. Evenepoel won the overall comfortably. He knew how much time he had in hand and perhaps didn't even contest the finish over those final kilometers. He never looked dominant but by dint of clever riding and a good game plan—and by asleep-at-the-switch riding by his chief rivals—he carried the day.

Running almost at the same time was the 4-stage O Gran Camiño (Feb 23-26). This gives us our first look at Jonas Vingegaard (Jumbo-Visma), the reigning Tour de France champion. He didn't disappoint. Stage 1 was canceled because of blizzard conditions. After that, he won the remaining three stages, including an ITT on the final day. Stages 2 and 3 were both uphill finishes and I do mean uphill: both with ridiculously steep pitches. He won them both convincingly, as he did the time trial. This is not a really big race, although from the standpoint of spectator entertainment, it's a treat. The start list is not star-studded. That said, Vingegaard was the pick of the litter and by a comfortable margin.

However, that would change in his next race: the 8-stage Paris-Nice (March 5-12). Primož Roglič won this event last year and dominated it the previous year before crashing out on the final stage. Meanwhile, his big rival, Tadej Pogacar, was winning Tirreno-Adriatico the past two years. (It runs at the same time as Paris-Nice.) This year, they decided to swap events. Pogacar moved over to Paris-Nice while Roglič switched to Tirreno-Adriatico, which he won in 2019. Jonas Vingegaard was also entered at Paris-Nice, so a first rematch this year between Pogacar and Vingegaard. Stage 1 was for the sprinters and both Pogacar and Vingegaard finished together in the main bunch, behind the sprint. However, Pogacar, always attentive and a pretty good sprinter when he chooses to be, picked up a :06 time bonus in one of those mid-race sprints. (You can't ever take your eye off the ball when he's in the race.) Stage 2 was another sprinters' stage and everyone finished in the same time. But Pogacar did it again: he scooped up another :06 time bonus in another intermediate sprint, moving him to just :02 out of the overall lead without ever being close to

winning either stage. Stage 3 was a team time trial of 32.2 km...20 miles. Jumbo-Visma won it and UAE lost :23 to them. So now, for the moment, the tables were turned: Vingegaard was :11 ahead of Pogacar. That didn't last long. Stage 4 was a substantial uphill finish which Pogacar won, while Vingegaard lost :43. That put Pogacar into the leader's jersey and he kept it all the way to the finish. Stage 5 was a sprinters' stage and not much changed except for the irrepressible Pogacar snapping up :02 in another intermediate sprint. Stage 6 was canceled because of high wind that knocked down trees across the course. Pogacar won Stages 7 and 8, widening his lead each day. When the champagne had been sprayed around in Nice, he had a lead of :53 over David Gaudu (Groupama-FDJ), with Vingegaard 3rd at 1:39. Vingegaard hung tough but never really came to grips with Pogacar.

Meanwhile, over at the 7-stage Tirreno-Adriatico (March 6-12), we get our first look at Primož Roglič (Jumbo-Visma). Stage 1 was an individual time trial of 11.5 km...only 7 miles; really just a prologue. Filippo Ganna won (one of the best ITT guys these days) and Roglič was down in 12th at :49. Kind of disappointing for the reigning Olympic time trial gold medalist. But if you set aside the ITT specialists like Ganna, the placement among the GC wannabes was like this: Joao Almeida—:41; Roglič—:49; Aleksandr Vlasov—:50; Jai Hindley—:51; Tao Geoghegan Hart—:52; Enric Mas—1:00; Mikel Landa—1:15; Adam Yates—1:18, etc. So he was well-placed for the overall. Stages 2 and 3 were sprint finishes and nothing much changed. But the next three stages had uphill finishes and Roglič won all three. He didn't put time into any of his chief rivals on any of them. All three ended in uphill sprints amongst select groups of climbers...the last remaining riders after the long ascents. But in all three cases, he won, which gave him the lion's share of the bonus seconds. The final stage was a sprint and the overall standings remained the same. He won the overall, with Almeida (UAE) at :18 and Geoghegan Hart (INEOS Grenadiers) at :23. Not overwhelming, smack-down numbers, but he was clearly the strongest and, perhaps more importantly, the smartest rider. He worked each of those uphill finishes like a master...waiting, feinting, probing, and then delivering the final, decisive blow each time.

He was back at it a week later at the 7-stage Volta Ciclista a Catalunya (March 20-26). He won the first stage, put on the leader's jersey, and never took it off until they were done with the final stage in Barcelona.

This time his primary rival was Remco Evenepoel... their first rematch since last fall's Vuelta a España, won by Remco. In the end, it was just about the two of them. There were several very good riders entered but none of them really figured in the overall. Two stages were sprint finishes and the other five were some sort of uphill finishes or punchy stages hard enough to weed out the sprinters. Of those five stages, Roglič won Stages 1 and 5 with Evenepoel 2nd on both. Evenepoel won Stages 3 and 7 with Roglič 2nd on both. On Stage 2, Giulio Ciccone (Trek-Segafredo) won, with Roglič 2nd and Evenepoel 3rd. On four out of the five stages they finished together, so only the time bonuses for their relative placings made a difference. The only exception was Stage 5, where Roglič finished :06 ahead of Evenepoel. And that ended up being the final difference on GC: :06 in favor of Roglič. So close!

April brought us the 6-stage Itzulia Basque Country (April 3-8) and a chance for some redemption for Jonas Vingegaard. Without Tadej Pogacar to beat him up, he was again the best of the rest. Stages 1 and 2 were for the sprinters. Stage 5 was too hilly for the pure sprinters and ended up with a sprint for a group of 22 climbers, all of whom were given the same time. The decisive stages were 3, 4, and 6, and Vingegaard won them all. He eked out very small gains over Mikel Landa on Stages 3 and 4 but on Stage 7, he put things out of reach with an impressive attack off the front with 28 km to go...28 km, two big climbs, two big descents and a final 10 km or so of false-flat uphill to the line. All of his closest rivals trailed in :49 seconds behind. In the final standings, positions 2 through 8—Mikel Landa to Simon Yates—were covered by :27. Vingegaard's lead over Landa was 1:12. In other words, he dominated.

Now we hit rewind and go back to review the one-day races.

Let's begin with Strade Bianche (March 3)...184 km (114 miles) of a mix of paved and gravel roads in the rolling hills of Tuscany, with a steep finish in the *centro storico* of Siena. That finish would make for a thrilling battle if a pack of riders arrived together. But we haven't seen that lately. Last year, Tadej Pogacar spoiled the fun by winning with a 47-km breakaway. This year, Tom Pidcock did the same thing, only his attack was only from 23 km out. Still, an impressive display of solo "time trialing" to stay away. (He won by :20 over a determined chase group.) Which is why I was surprised at his rather anemic time trial over almost the same distance—24 km—at the Volta a

Algarve, just three weeks before this race.

Next up was la Primavera: Milano-Sanremo (March 18), one of the five Monuments and one of the most important races of the year. 294 km...182 miles. As is almost always the case, all those many miles were just an implacable way to weed out the pretenders before the surviving front group hit the Poggio climb with about 10 km to go. Midway up that ascent, Tadej Pogacar launched a stinging attack and opened up a little daylight between himself and the bunch. But Mathieu van der Poel (Alpecin-Deceuninck) responded with an even better counterattack. He blew by Pogacar, crested the summit alone and was never caught, all the way down the hill and through the flats to the finish. A group of three riders came in :15 later: Filippo Ganna (INEOS Grenadiers), Wout van Aert (Jumbo-Visma), and Tadej Pogacar, in that order.

On March 24, Wout van Aert got some payback by winning the E3 Saxo Bank Classic (204 km...127 miles). He won a three-up sprint with—who else?—Mathieu van der Poel and Tadej Pogacar. It's a punchy par-course, with over two dozen short but steep uphill and about a dozen cobbled sectors...perfect for all three of these riders.

Three days later—March 26—we had Gent-Wevelgem (261 km...161 miles), another tough course with loads of those nasty little bergs and cobbles. Jumbo teammates Wout van Aert and Christophe LaPorte got away late in the ride and rolled down the home stretch arm in arm, with a comfortable lead of two minutes. Wout van Aert made sure LaPorte's wheel crossed the line first, a gracious gesture to his hard-working *domestique*.

Three days after that—March 29—La Porte won again, this time at Dwars door Vlaanderen (184 km...114 miles). He attacked the main pack with 4 km to go and made it stick, with a gap of :15 back to the bunch. It might not have played out that way if van Aert hadn't crashed midway through the race.

And that brings us to the next Monument of the year on April 2: the Tour of Flanders (273 km...170 miles). Over 15 steep climbs, most of them on cobbles, and most of them packed into the second half of the race. This turned out to be Tadej Pogacar's day. He won after dropping Mathieu van der Poel on the Oude Kwaremont climb with 17 km to go...had :16 on him at the finish, with no one else even close. It seemed as if Pogacar attacked on every one of those climbs, usually getting a gap over the tops...then, over the

ensuing level and rolling miles, he'd be reeled back in. But each time, after each uphill, the number of riders getting back to him was fewer and fewer, until, finally, it was just van der Poel, and then we was gone, over that last hard climb. Pogacar did a brilliant ride for an epic victory. But he may have had a little help from the fates. Van der Poel's whole team was gapped early in the day and had to hammer hard for 30 km to regain the main bunch, using up precious reserves. And Wout van Aert was involved in a crash that slowed him down and may have sapped his energy. But hey, that's all part of racing...especially in the spring classics. Tadej Pogacar becomes only the third rider ever to win both the Tour de France and Flanders, joining the rather elite company of Louison Bobet and Eddy Merckx. Whew!

But van der Poel got his back at the next Monument: Paris-Roubaix (April 9; 256.6 km...159 miles). (Pogacar was not entered.) The Hell of the North needs no introduction: nearly pan-flat but with those infamous 30 sectors of cobbles, some of them very long and very rough. Add to that the high speed all day. (This year's edition set a new record of over 29 mph for 159 miles.) Van der Poel finished alone after a 15-km solo break. 46 seconds back, his teammate and chief *domestique*, Jasper Philipsen, won a two-up sprint over Wout van Aert. Much has been made of the fact that the Jumbo-Visma duo of van Aert and LaPorte had four flats between them (two apiece), while the Alpecin-Deceuninck duo of van der Poel and Philipsen had only one flat (Philipsen's). The brutal pounding on the cobbles takes its toll on tires and rims and on this day, the Jumbos got the worst of it. Van Aert's second flat was just before van der Poel's decisive attack. Bad luck for van Aert but nevertheless an awesome win for van der Poel.

The third week in April brings the spring classics season to a rousing crescendo, with Amstel Gold on Sunday, the 16th, Flèche-Wallone on Wednesday, the 19th, and Liege-Bastogne-Liege on the next Sunday, the 23rd. Sometimes it seems as if the collective races of the classics season, through March and April, almost add up to a fourth Grand Tour. Two or three races a week, all over long distances, usually on rough roads—cobbles, gravel—and frequently with atrocious weather. (I'm only covering the highlights here; there are several more races that most of these guys do.)

Amstel Gold is a very tough race: 254 km (157 miles) with 33 categorized climbs, almost all steep and together adding up to almost 11,000' of gain. The start list for this race looks a bit different than that at Paris-Roubaix

the week before. Gone are most of the big bruisers, replaced by more of an all-rounder crew with decent climbing credentials. Naturally, this sort of course is tailor-made for Tadej Pogacar and he once again showed why he's the number 1 rider in the world right now. His relentless attacks over those many short-but-steep bergs whittled the chasers down until only Tom Pidcock was left on his wheel, and then he dropped him on the Keutenberg with 28 km to go and soloed home from there. At the finish, Pidcock just shook his head and said, essentially: "There was just nothing I could do."

Flèche Wallone is always one of my favorite races, simply because of the last kilometer: the Mur de Huy (the Wall of Huy), with pitches up around 20%. The rest of the course is tough too: 194 km (120 miles) with over 15 stiff climbs. The final 100 km consist of three trips around a repeated loop, meaning three times up the leg-breaking Mur de Huy. But all of the first 193 km are just prologue, right up until the group hits the final climb for the final time, cranking it up in the world's slowest, most painful field sprint. By this point in this season, it should come as no surprise that Tadej Pogacar won the race. He noodled along at about third wheel until the last couple of hundred meters and then got out of the saddle, upped his cadence a little and... bye! He had time to sit back down and cheerfully wave to the crowd going over the line, while behind him was the usual weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth. I have to assume he's working hard but he just makes it look so easy...

And then, finally, Liege-Bastogne-Liege: 258 km...160 miles, with at least 15 steep climbs, some over 15%. First run in 1892, it is the oldest and one of the most prestigious of all pro bike races...one of the five Monuments. It marks the end of the spring cycling campaign. All the pre-race hype was about the match-up between Tadej Pogacar, who was on such a roll of wins, and Remco Evenepoel, the defending LBL champion. But that was not to be. Pogacar tangled with another rider about 85 km into the race and went down hard. He sustained multiple broken bones in his left wrist and hand. He was immediately taken to specialist hand surgeons that afternoon. The next day they were saying the surgery was a success and he would be looking at a four-to-six-week recovery. More about that later.

That left LBL at the mercy of Evenepoel, who won again in almost a carbon copy of his victory last year. With about 34 km to go, on one of those nasty climbs, he drove the pace and only Tom Pidcock could hang

with him...just barely hanging on. With 30 km to go, he upped the tempo again and Pidcock had to give way, same as he had to do with Pogacar at Amstel Gold the previous Sunday. Remco soloed the rest of the way and won comfortably.

So where does that leave us, with the spring calendar complete and the bigger events coming up? Prior to LBL, I would have felt comfortable putting Tadej Pogacar head and shoulders above everyone else. What a spring season! He won three stages and the overall at Ruta del Sol. Won three stages and the overall at Paris-Nice. Won Flanders, Amstel Gold, and Flèche Wallone, and was 4th at Milano-San Remo and 3rd at Saxo Bank. But his crash and injuries cast a cloud over his future, at least a little. He was already due for a rest after LBL: nothing else scheduled from April 23 on into June...at least the six weeks suggested as his recovery window. Add to that another four weeks before the Tour de France. He can be back on a trainer in a week or two and is—obviously—young and superbly fit. So maybe he'll come out the other side of this little difficulty rarin' to go. Or...he has a screw in his wrist now. He may be fit to ride within the suggested time frame, but that wrist could still be uncomfortable for months to come. Legs and lungs and heart are not all that matters at the top level of racing. It's a whole-body workout, including the arms on the bars. If he's not fully healed, who knows?



Il Giro Magnifico!

If nothing else, it serves to remind us that there are no locks, no sure things in this grueling and sometimes dangerous sport. Just ask Primož Roglič, after he crashed at the last two Tours de France and at last year's Vuelta. His spring season was not quite as splashy as his countryman's but was still not too shabby. He won three stages and the overall at Tirreno-Adriatico. He won two stages and was 2nd—on equal time—on three other stages and won the overall at the Volta a Catalunya. But that seems to be it for results. All good but not tearing down the house.

Jonas Vingegaard won three stages—including an ITT—and the overall at O Gran Camiño. He won three stages and the overall at the Tour of the Basque Country. And he was 3rd at Paris-Nice...which sounds good until we recall he was slapped around by winner Tadej Pogacar...never really seemed to be on an equal footing with him. He's very good but on current results, not quite on a par with Pogacar...but will the latter's injury even things up a little?

And then there's Remco Evenepoel. What to make of this young phenom? He exploded on the scene last year with a dominant win at the Vuelta a España, showing some serious climbing chops we had not seen from him prior to that. And his three breakaway wins at LBL, San Sebastian, and the World Championship were instant legends. This spring he won the UAE Tour without winning a stage or doing anything spectacular. He was a so-close 2nd to Roglič at Catalunya, winning two stages. And then Liege-Bastogne-Liege...another impressive breakaway off the front of a star-studded cast of rivals. What if Pogacar hadn't crashed? We'll never know.

We know this much: Pogacar and Vingegaard are both on the start list for the Tour de France, rejoining their epic battle from last year. Roglič and Evenepoel are both on the start list for the Giro d'Italia, rejoining their own epic battle from last year's Vuelta. Bearing in mind all the usual disclaimers about luck and the Fickle Finger of Fate...crashes, weather, mechanicals...at the moment, the world of bike racing in Europe appears to be dominated by these four riders. There are many other really good riders out there but so far this year, none of them has shown us enough strength, stamina, or skills to get the better of these stars. However, as we know so well, it's an unpredictable sport...so no predictions from me! It wouldn't be very exciting if we already knew who was going to win.

Allow me to trot out a couple of very shopworn sayings to begin this reflection on the recently concluded Giro d'Italia. First off, a stage race is a war of attrition; second, to finish first, first you must finish. It doesn't matter how good you are or how on top of your game, if Dame Fortune decides this is not your moment, you are toast. Hold that thought for later.

The 2023 edition of the Giro was hyped as a rematch between Remco Evenepoel (Soudal-Quick Step) and Primož Roglič (Jumbo-Visma), revisiting their epic tussle in last year's Vuelta a España, won by Remco after Primož crashed out. There were other good riders in the field, but based on recent performances, none of them seemed to be on the same level as these two.

Things started up where they left off at the Vuelta, with Evenepoel killing the Stage 1 time trial, winning it with a gap of :22 to 2nd-place Filippo Ganna, one of the world's best time trialers. Roglič was :43 back, a huge amount to concede over a distance of only 12 miles. Bear in mind Roglič has been one of the best ITT riders of recent years, including winning the gold medal in the discipline at the last Olympics. Also of concern to Roglič was seeing two of his other GC rivals ahead of him, in addition to Evenepoel: Joao Almeida (UAE) at :29 and Tao Geoghegan Hart at :40. Geraint Thomas (INEOS Grenadiers) was nipping at his heels as well at :50.

Nothing too important happened over the first week-plus, although it's worth noting the weather was fre-



quently terrible, with monsoon rains almost every day. (That remained the case for most of the three-week tour...not every minute of every day but more often than not.) Evenepoel gave up the leader's jersey on

Stage 4 to someone out of a break. A planned concession on his part. But he got it back on Stage 9, another time trial. He won again but this time the gaps were smaller: Thomas was 2nd at :01 and Geoghegan Hart 3rd at :02. Can't get much closer than that! Remember, Thomas is a former Tour de France champion and Geoghegan Hart is a former Giro champion. These are not nobodies. Roglic was 6th at :17.

So after nine days of racing, the GC standings had Evenepoel comfortably in the lead, with Thomas at :45, Roglic at :47, Geoghegan Hart at :50, and Almeida at 1:07. It looked as if Remco had the world by the tail, with the only question being whether he could hold his own in the steep mountains of the later weeks. However, this is where the Fates intervened. That evening he tested positive for COVID and had to leave the tour. That moved everyone else up a place, with Thomas now in the *maglia rosa* but with Roglic just two seconds behind him.

Murphy's Law was not done with the riders. On Stage 10, Aleksandr Vlasov (BORA-Hansgroh) took a DNF. He had been in 7th at 1:48, so still a contender. On Stage 11, on a rain-slick descent, several riders went down, including Thomas, Roglic, and Geoghegan Hart. Thomas and Roglic were quickly back up and soldiering on, but Geoghegan Hart was hauled off in an ambulance, his Giro over. He'd been in 3rd at :05, so very much still in the hunt. That's three out of the top seven gone in three days. That moved Almeida up to 3rd at :22. We now know we had our podium right there—Thomas-Roglic-Almeida—although which of them would end up on which step remained to be determined.

Nothing too dramatic happened until Stage 16, a significant uphill finish to Monte Bondone. Within the last few kilometers, Almeida attacked and Thomas stuck with him, but Roglic couldn't hang on. His top mountain lieutenant, Sepp Kuss, tried to pace him up those last pitches but Roglic looked beat. He eventually finished 3rd at :25. With the time bonuses factored in, that left the standings with Thomas 1st, Almeida 2nd at :18, and Roglic 3rd at :29. Those are small gaps with a lot of racing still to come, but many people wrote Roglic off at this point. He looked tired...whupped.

But it ain't over 'til it's over. On Stage 18, the next big mountain finish, Roglic and Thomas finished together but Almeida came in :22 behind them. Now Roglic was back in 2nd at :29 and Almeida dropped to 3rd at :39. The next stage was a monster in the Dolomites: two Cat 2 summits, two Cat 1 summits, and a brutal final,

out-of-category ascent to Tre Cime Lavaredo. Behind the remnants of a breakaway—a brilliant win by Santiago Buitrago—Roglic, Thomas, and Almeida finished 4th, 5th, and 6th. Thomas and Roglic went at it like two heavyweights in the center of the ring. Roglic attacked and then Thomas attacked. Back and forth. Right near the top, Thomas launched what looked like the definitive knock-out punch, gapping Roglic. But the gritty Slovenian found something left in the tank and stormed back around Thomas to take :03 out of him at the line. This was hot stuff! *Mano a mano...* show me what you got. Meanwhile, Almeida was gapped again, losing :23 to Roglic.

So...one more meaningful stage to go (discounting the mostly ceremonial final stage around Rome), with Roglic :26 behind Thomas. Stage 20 would tell the story, and what an amazing stage it would be. One more time trial but this one with a serious stinger in its tail: the final 8 km (5 miles) averaging over 11%, with four kms between 14% and 19%...as a time trial! That's as brutal an ITT as we've seen in a grand tour in many a year.

You probably know what happened: Roglic won the time trial and beat Thomas by :40 to erase his :26 deficit and win the Giro by :14. That's the short ver-



sion, but there were moments of panic and despair baked into that cake. The big one was the Roglic mechanical, right in the middle of the steepest section. He threw a chain and couldn't get it back on right away. For a moment there, it seemed as if Fate had dropped another load of bricks on his head...after crashing out of the last two Tours de France and last year's Vuelta, how much bad luck could one guy endure? At that point, it was looking like he could beat Thomas and win the stage but it was no sure thing he could pull back all the seconds he would need to win the Giro...and then this setback. Arghhh!

He had a mechanic there with a new bike in a few seconds and was up and moving again, although starting from scratch on a 17% wall is no small feat, even for a top-tier pro. Fortunately a man nearby gave him a hearty push to get moving. If what I read in Twitter is to be believed, that helpful guy was Mitja Miznar, a teammate to Roglic on the Slovenian ski-jumping team...an old friend, back when Roglic was the Junior World Champion (in ski jumping).

The mechanical and bike change cost Roglic 19 heart-stopping seconds, an eternity in a time trial. But he got back at it and flat out hammered the final section, while just behind him, Thomas was hitting his own wall, visibly wilting on the steepest pitches. Afterward, Thomas was gracious in defeat, saying Roglic was the deserving winner and noting that without the mechanical, the gap would have been even wider. Although he was bested by Roglic, Thomas did a respectable ITT. He was 2nd, :02 ahead of Almeida. That gave us a final podium of Roglic, Thomas at :14, and Almeida at 1:15.

So add a Giro to the Roglic *palmarés*, along with three Vueltas. How would things have played out if Remco Evenepoel were still in the field, all the way to the end? (To finish first, first you must finish.) No fault of his he had a COVID positive. Gotta feel for the guy.

Now we're left to wonder if he will change his plans to do the Vuelta in the fall and instead jump into the Tour de France in July. So far, his name is not on the Soudal-Quick Step start list for *le Tour*. Tadej Pogacar (UAE) is on the start list, suggesting he expects to be recovered from his Liege-Bastogne-Liege injuries. And Jonas Vingegaard will be defending his *maillot jaune* as team leader for Jumbo-Visma. For now though, let's enjoy the memories and the video replays of one of the most exciting Giros in years.

July, 2023 • 289

In Between the Grand Tours

Usually, for a column hitting the street on July 1—with the Giro d'Italia over and the Tour de France yet to begin—I step away from the world of pro bike racing and find something else to talk about. This July, though, I've decided to post an interim installment of race stuff.

Back in my May Spring Fling opus, I reported on eight races of between four and eight stages, plus all the one-day classics. Now I only have three stage races to review: the Critérium du Dauphiné (June 4-11), the Tour de Suisse (June 11-18), and the Tour de Romandie (April 25-30). That last one was way back before the Giro but it was too late for me to cover in my May column. (Actually, I could have squeezed it in but that column was already bulging at the seams.) So I'm reaching back and hauling it up to the present moment for a little review.

For this year at least, the Tour de Romandie was kind of a B-list event: not too many of the really top tier riders were there. Quite a few big names on the start list but for most of those notables, their best days are behind them. Also on board, as always, a lot of fresh young talent, looking to become stars or at the least to survive at this level.

It was a six-day event, including the almost meaningless 4-mile prologue. Stages 1 and 2 ended in mass field sprints for the bulk of the peloton. The only two stages that really mattered were 3 and 4. Stage 3 was a time trial. It was less than 12 miles but it had a more-or-less continuous climb in the middle of almost four miles at over 6%. Not brutal but enough to separate the sheep from the goats. Juan Ayuso (UAE Team Emirates) was the fastest, with young US rider Matteo Jorgenson (Movistar) at :05 and Ayuso's UAE teammate (and team leader) Adam Yates at :17. That left Ayuso in the leader's jersey with Jorgenson at :18 and Yates at :30.

Stage 4 was the only mountaintop finish and it was a serious test. After four categorized climbs, the final ascent to Thyon 2000 was 21 km (13 miles) at almost 8%, with a stretch of 3 km near the top at around 10%. On yet another day of miserable rain, about 50 riders made it onto that last climb still together, but the long, steady grind soon saw that group shedding riders out the back. Eventually, with around 9 km to go, they were down to about 10 riders up front. Between 9 km and 4 km, maybe half of those riders tried to get off the front, with no success. Meanwhile, GC leader Ayuso slipped out the back of the lead group and kept fading,

eventually losing 3:28. No problem for the UAE team, though, as just about the time he was cracking, Adam Yates was rolling away off the front. It wasn't a dramatic attack; just a little upping of the tempo with no one else able to stay with him. Little by little, he opened up a healthy gap. Thibaut Pinot (FDJ) made a valiant charge to try and catch him but it was too little, too late. (They should put "Too Little, Too Late" on Pinot's tombstone. It's the theme song of his whole career.)

After all the riders were back in their team buses, trying to dry off and warm up, the GC standings had Yates on top and the surprising Jorgenson at :19. The final stage was another field sprint, so that's how things ended up. Perhaps the only significance we can take away from this event is the fact that Yates is in pretty good shape and will be lining up alongside his team leader, Tadej Pogacar, at the Tour de France. Pogacar lost last year's Tour at least in part because his team was weak and disorganized. Adding Yates to their roster might go some way toward fixing that problem.

Now fast forward to June. The 8-stage Critérium du Dauphiné was a much more interesting race altogether, not least because it assembled a much more exalted start list of better GC riders. The course was significantly harder as well.

The Dauphiné takes place in Southern France: Provence and the Southern French Alps. As such, it does a good job of replicating the challenge and feel of the Tour de France, if only for a week. The conventional wisdom is that this is the definitive launching pad for the Tour de France; that if you win here, you will likely go on to win the big race in the following month. That was true for Chris Froome in 2013, '15, and '16, and for Geraint Thomas in 2018. But not in the years since. Regardless, it is always a prime-time tune-up for la Grande Boucle. Will that be true this year?

The only one of the big four of today's cycling pantheon—Pogacar, Vingegaard, Evenepoel, Roglic—entered this year was Vingegaard (Jumbo-Visma). Roglic was resting on his laurels from the Giro d'Italia. Pogacar was still recovering from his Liege-Bastogne-Liege injuries. Evenepoel, after being forced to abandon the Giro with a COVID positive, had elected to enter the Tour de Suisse. So it may not have been the very toughest test of the best against the best, but Vingegaard still had to contend with a strong field... almost everyone else who might figure as a top-ten contender in a big race.

Long story short, Jumbo-Visma controlled—domi-

nated—the race from start to finish. On the first three stages, all ending in field sprints, Christophe Laporte won Stages 1 and 3 and was 4th on Stage 2 (a painful uphill sprint won by Julian Alaphilippe). Team leader Vingegaard took some stout pulls in the run-ups to those sprints to help deliver Laporte to where he needed to be. Team leaders who are climbing specialists don't always get in the trenches like that. You can be sure the rest of the team appreciated it.

Stage 4 was a time trial of just over 19 miles, with the final 6 miles steadily uphill...not a serious, categorized climb but still uphill, all the way to the finish. Mikkel Bjerg (UAE Team Emirates) won. Vingegaard was 2nd at :12. Other GC hopefuls? Ben O'Connor (AG2R) at :41 and Adam Yates (UAE) at :57. With all the prior stages having been "same time" field sprints, those numbers reflected the overall standings as well: O'Connor and Yates :29 and :45 behind Vingegaard.

Stage 5 did not look like a decisive stage. Hilly, for sure, but not in a big way, and with 14 km of rollers and downhill to the finish after the last summit. Perhaps a day for a breakaway? Yes indeed, but the breakaway was not what most folks expected. On that last climb—Cote de Thésy: a little under 4 km at a little over 8%—Vingegaard attacked the lead group and set off on a 16-km solo escape to the finish. All of the other hopefuls—places 2 through 19—trailed in :31 in arrears. It was a bold, confident move and it left the little Dane in first, O'Connor at 1:10, Alaphilippe at 1:23, and Yates at 1:26.

All three of the remaining stages featured uphill finishes. Stage 6 was the least daunting with two fairly moderate climbs, back-to-back, to finish it off. This time an authentic break got away and the last three riders out of that bunch managed to stay away and take up the first three places. Places 4 through 22 all came in together: all the GC contenders, with Vingegaard among them. So no change for another day.

Stage 7 was a big, bad bully of a stage, with the HC Col de Madeleine mid-stage (25 km at 6%) and then the double-whammy of Col du Mollard (18 km at 6%) and the top part of Col de la Croix de Fer (13 km at 6% but the final 7 km at 8%). (I have a special feeling for this finish. We did it on a tour in 2009, and while it didn't wipe us out, we weren't doing it at race pace.) A small group containing many of the best climbers in the world were still together well up the Croix de Fer ascent, but with a bit over 5 km to go, Vingegaard once again attacked and left everyone else behind. Yates fin-

ished at :41, Jai Hindley (BORA-hansgrohe) at :53, and O'Connor at 1:04. Seven other riders came in at 1:10.

The final stage might have been even harder than Stage 7, with seven categorized climbs, including an HC, a Cat 2 and two Cat 1s in the latter half of the stage. If you just looked at the profile briefly, without really studying it, you might have missed the final uphill to the finish (la Bastille, near the city of Grenoble): just a little blip of under 2 km (just over a mile). To be rated a Cat 1 at less than 2 km...you know it's got to be the steepness that does it. The average is about 14% but the steepest bits are 24% and most of the last, cruel sections are in the high teens., and all on a narrow, one-lane road. Insane...but also jolly fun for the crazy fans thronging the roadside or for those of us watching from the comfort of our sofas.

Over all those big climbs and descents, the situation resolved itself with Giulio Ciccone (Trek-Segafredo) off the front by a good bit, with the yellow jersey group chasing. After a hair-raising final descent into Grenoble, where Ciccone nearly bought the farm on one cliff-hanging turn, the leader hit that final "little" climb with a lead of :55 over the chase group of 14. On the lower slope, Vingegaard was content to sit in and let UAE teammates Rafal Majka and Adam Yates set the tempo. But at exactly 1 km to go, in an 18% hairpin, he came to the front and simply rode off. Yates and O'Connor tried to respond but couldn't match his tempo. Ciccone managed to stay away and win, al-

though his lead on that short climb was cut from :55 to :24 at the end. Yates finished :10 behind Vingegaard and O'Connor was another :16 behind Yates.

Final podium: Vingegaard on top, Yates at 2:23 and O'Connor at 2:56. Those gaps are an eternity in an 8-stage race. Other big stars—Jai Hindley, Egan Bernal, Enric Mas, Mikel Landa—were further adrift. David Gaudu, 2nd behind Pogacar and ahead of Vingegaard at this year's Paris-Nice, was almost 26 minutes behind. Richard Carapaz, a winner of the Giro not that long ago, was over 35 minutes back. The point is, Vingegaard blew everyone else away. He and his team took no prisoners. How might things have differed if Pogacar, Rolic, or Evenepoel had been there? Who knows? What we're left with is Vingegaard heading for *le Tour* looking like a well-stropped straight-razor. Stay tuned...

The Tour de Suisse does not have the star power of the Dauphiné, nor the level of difficulty. It seldom does and it certainly did not this year. Hard to figure why Remco Evenepoel and his Lotto-Soudal team elected to do this event and not the Dauphiné. These decisions are not made on a whim. It's also hard to figure out who might have been his strongest challengers for this race. Scrolling through the start list, no one really jumped out as a serious threat. Perhaps that's why he chose to do it!

Stage 1 was a short time trial, less than eight miles. ITT specialist Stefan Küng won it with Evenepoel nipping at his heels, :06 back. So far, so good. Stage 2 was a field sprint and the overall didn't change.

Stage 3 was the only genuine uphill finish of the week: 11 km at 8%...a hard but steady grinder. Midway up that last ascent—6.5 km to go, in yet another downpour—Evenepoel threw down the attack everyone was expecting, firing off the front of a select group of around a dozen riders. At first it looked like the winning move, perhaps for the whole week. But all he managed to do was get about ten seconds ahead of the group and hang there, not expanding his lead at all. And while he was doing this, he pulled two riders with him on his escape: Mattias Skjelmose (Trek-Segafredo) and Felix Gall



(AG2R).

Now...let's hit pause for a minute and consider this. Mattias Skjelmose and Felix Gall are not exactly household names in the current front rank of Europros. I had to look them both up to learn about them. Skjelmose is 22 and Danish. Gall is 25 and Austrian. I've seen Skjelmose in and out of top tens in various races lately, so not quite an unknown. Notably, 2nd at Flèche-Wallone this year behind Pogacar. Gall is 189th in the UCI rankings. Skjelmose, although only 22, is already ranked 17th. Perhaps it's time he became a household name!

Anyway...Evenepoel attacked and we would have expected him to power off into the rainy distance, never to be seen again. Instead, he only gained five or ten seconds over the little chase group and plugged away there, getting nowhere, with these two riders glued to his wheel. Finally, at 2.6 km to go, Gall attacked and rode away. Skjelmose soon took off in pursuit, but Evenepoel didn't respond. Didn't or couldn't. Skjelmose came around Gall and won the stage. Evenepoel kept chugging along, on his own. Juan Ayuso (UAE) bridged up out of the little group, passed Evenepoel and dropped him. No reaction from Evenepoel, who eventually finished with the little group, :21 behind Skjelmose.

This is the World Champion we're talking about. The defending Vuelta champion. Winner of Liege-Bastogne-Liege the past two years. One of the brightest stars in our current firmament. What's going on?

More of the same the next day. Stage 4 is almost an uphill finish. 19 km of mostly uphill, with one small descent in the middle, and at the end, another little downhill over the final three or four km. Somewhere earlier in the stage, Felix Gall got into a break of about ten riders that went off up the road. How the teams of Evenepoel and Skjelmose allowed their biggest rival to get in a break is beyond me. Somewhere on that last climb, he dropped his breakaway cohort and soloed home alone. Behind him Evenepoel and Skjelmose and a much reduced group chased hard but never caught up. Evenepoel won the little sprint for 2nd, with Skjelmose 3rd, so they both were awarded a few bonus seconds. However, they both finished over a minute behind Gall. The overall after this stage was Gall first, Skjelmose at :02 and Evenepoel at :16. Close!

Various riders in that chase group had tried attacks over the last miles but nothing panned out. Evenepoel never tried a thing. He just set a steady tempo that

brought back each attacker and eventually netted him 2nd place. As I was watching, I was thinking: what the heck is he thinking? If he were as strong as he's supposed to be, he should have chewed these guys up and spit out the seeds. Then again, perhaps what he was thinking about was the time trial on the final stage: 16 miles over a mostly level course. He's almost certainly the strongest time trialer among the GC favorites... although Skjelmose was 6th in the Stage 1 ITT (just :13 behind Evenepoel), and Ayuso won the ITT at the Tour de Romandie...

Stage 5 was another hilly stage, with two HC summits and one Cat 1 summit. The second HC ascent was Albulapass: 17.4 km at about 7%. The top of the climb was about 10 km from the finish and all of that last section was fast downhill. Juan Ayuso (UAE) began this day in 6th place, 1:18 behind the leader, Felix Gall. On that last big climb, there was a break of 11 riders around a minute ahead of the yellow-jersey group. With 14 km to go, Ayuso jumped off the front of the leader's group and quickly bridged up to the break and then left them behind. Gall, Skjelmose, Evenepoel? None of them tried to cover Ayuso's move. He went over the summit alone and soloed all the way down the hill to win. Skjelmose was 2nd at :54, Gall was at :58, and Evenepoel was way back at 1:20. With time bonuses factored in, Skjelmose was now back in the leader's jersey, :08 ahead of Gall. Ayuso's big day moved him up to 3rd at :18, and Evenepoel was bumped off the podium, 4th at :46.

But the bigger news on this day was of a serious crash on that last, fast descent to La Punt. Gino Mader, 26, Swiss (Bahrain-Victorious) plunged into a gorge and ended up underwater in a creek. He was resuscitated at the scene but later died in the hospital. This is the first fatality in a top-tier pro race in several years and it cast a pall over all aspects of the stage race. After consulting with Mader's family, the organizers decided to continue with the final three stages of the event.

Stage 6 was neutralized and run as a tribute to Gino. Stage 7 was actually run off at race pace, sort of. It was announced beforehand that times would be recorded 25 km from the finish, at which point most of the group was still together. At 17 km to go, Evenepoel launched one of his signature solo breakaways and flew home ahead of everyone else. He did it as a tribute to Mader, finishing with one hand over his heart and one pointing to the heavens. It was a classy gesture.

For the record, he finished ;34 ahead of a group of

sprinters who chose to duke it out for 2nd place. Because everyone was given their time from 25 km out, it's impossible and anyway moot to try and calculate how much time he would have gained on those ahead of him in the standings. They all sat up and cruised in after the 25 km-to-go point.

So it all came down to the final time trial. Evenepoel rode well but so did his rivals. Ayuso finished first, Evenepoel was 2nd at :08 and Skjelmose was 3rd at :09. That left the final standings with Skjelmose on top, Ayuso 2nd and Evenepoel a distant 3rd. A good result for Evenepoel but not what he might have expected.

Perhaps that COVID positive during the Giro meant more to Evenepoel than just a failed test. Perhaps the viral load really did knock him back a bit. (When I caught a mild dose of COVID last August, I was tired for a couple of weeks...afternoon naps were a regular part of my days. And then I was just that wee bit sluggish for a month afterward.) Even an extremely fit 23-year old might lose his tip top performance if he were recovering from the virus...just enough to slip from 1st to 3rd.

In any event, Evenepoel and his team have made it official: no Tour de France for him. Nor will Primož Roglič be there. Neither of those riders has made any official announcement about their plans for the rest of the season, but the obvious inference at this point would be that we'll see them both again at the Vuelta a España.

So that leaves Jonas Vingegaard and Tadej Pogacar squaring off in the Tour de France. I'm neither brave nor foolish enough to predict a winner. But I can summarize what we know now. Both of them had active and successful spring campaigns, winning just about every race they entered. In their one head-to-head match-up, Pogacar comfortably defeated Vingegaard. But then there's Pogacar's LBL accident. His general fitness is good, but the fractured wrist is still not quite 100%. In fact, he was so impatient to get back on the bike and back to serious training that he may have aggravated the injury and set his recovery back a little. It now looks like he's going to have to wear some sort of brace on his forearm during the race. Clearly, this is not what you want when beginning the longest, hardest race of the year.

So all bets are off! Gentlemen: start your engines!

August, 2023 • 290

The Little Great Dane

If you read my racing-related columns, you know I'm reluctant to make predictions about upcoming events. We see too many upsets and surprises and fickle-fingers-of-fate to venture out onto that thin ice. However, in last month's column (about the races between the Giro d'Italia and the Tour de France), I did say that Jonas Vingegaard (Jumbo-Visma) was in superb shape going into le Tour, coming off his dominant win at the Dauphiné; and I expressed some reservations about the fitness of Tadej Pogacar (UAE Team Emirates), still working his way back from his broken wrist at Liege-Bastogne-Liege.

Not predictions exactly. Just observations. But they proved to be pretty accurate.

I'm sure you all know who won: Jonas Vingegaard, piling up a Grand Canyon-sized gap of 7:29 between himself and Tadej Pogacar. Only once since 2000 has the distance between 1st and 2nd been so large: when Vincenzo Nibali beat Jean-Christophe Peraud by 7:37 in 2014.

It should also be obvious that, as most folks expected, this was a two-man battle. No one else really mattered. There were plenty of moments of glory for lesser lights but they didn't factor into the GC battle to any significant degree. To paraphrase Macbeth, they strutted and fretted their hour upon the stage and then were heard no more.

Last year, the talking heads, including this one, all agreed that Vingegaard's Jumbo team had been physically and tactically stronger than Pogacar's UAE team, and that advantage had helped the upstart dethrone the seemingly, formerly invincible two-time champ. I don't see people making that assertion this year. I would still give a slight edge to the Jumbos but the UAE team did okay...pretty much what one would hope to achieve. And Jumbo didn't have Primož Roglič in their line-up as an added weapon to torment Pogacar. So call the team aspect just about a wash.

There were ten stages out of 21 where Pogacar and Vingegaard took seconds or minutes out of each other. Of those ten, Pogacar got the better of Vingegaard seven times. And he looked good doing it: wicked attacks that gapped his rival. The problem was each of these attacks netted him only a handful of seconds apiece. Vingegaard hung in there and limited his losses each time. But on the three stages where Vingegaard got the better of Pogacar, he put big time into him: 1:04

on Stage 5, 1:48 on Stage 16, and a whopping 5:45 on Stage 17.

The first of those big gains—on Stage 5—came when Vingegaard attacked on the last pitch of the last climb: Col de Marie Blanque: 5 km at over 10%. Pogacar chased but couldn't reel him back in, even with almost 20 km of downhill and false flat from the summit to the finish, and even with a hammering group of ten around him to keep things on the boil. (Vingegaard hooked up with three other riders for his run down the mountain to the finish.)

That seemed to support the premise that Pogacar was not fully back from his injuries and his long lay-off with less-than-ideal training. But he looked unperturbed and on Stages 6, 9, and 13, he attacked Vingegaard and chipped away at his lead, eventually trimming it from :53 after Stage 5 to just :09 after Stage 13. I at least began to think Stage 5 had been some sort of fluke and that Pogacar would eventually bust through into the lead for good. But that :09 deficit was as close as he got.

Stage 16 was the only time trial of the Tour and it was a real Race of Truth: only 22.4 km (14 miles) but with the final 6 km steadily uphill, including 3 km at 8.5%. Pogacar rode really well. He almost caught his two-minute man, Carlos Rodriguez, and when he finished, he had set the fastest time of the day. However, while he was almost catching the man in front of him, the man behind him was almost catching him. Vingegaard crossed the line just :12 behind Pogacar, which means he beat him by 1:48...a huge gap and a stunning victory against one of the best time trialers of this era.

The real shocker though was Stage 17. Pogacar called it his worst day ever on a bike. Said he was dead. This was on the last long climb of the HC Col de la Loze (28 km at 6%). With about 10 km to the summit, Pogacar blew up. Dropped off the back of the group with the other top guns and continued to fall away, with just one teammate left to sheepdog him home. His top lieutenant, Adam Yates, was allowed to continue up the hill, trying to protect his 3rd place overall, which he did. Meanwhile, Vingegaard was pushing on, with Sepp Kuss pacing him, as they worked their way up through a disintegrating breakaway group of about 30 riders. Two more Jumbo teammates were in that break and as each one was reeled in, they gave it one last shot of energy to help Vingegaard up the hill... more clever team strategy for Jumbo, getting those guys in the break. (It's the little things...)

Pogacar eventually struggled home in 22nd place, 5:45 behind Vingegaard. If the Tour wasn't over after the Stage 16 time trial, it certainly was now. There has been a huge amount of speculation as to why Pogacar cratered so badly. Was his fitness not back to 100% after the crash in late April and the long recovery? Was the wrist still troubling him? He crashed earlier in that same stage, landing on his left side—same side as the broken wrist. You could see the blood on his elbow later. Pros crash so often we sometimes almost take them for granted, like a rain squall or a flat. But anyone who has hit the pavement at 25 or 30 mph knows it's a brutal jolt to one's body. Most of us would climb in a sag or call for a ride home and then be off the bike for however long it took to feel whole again. In this case, Pogacar took that pounding an hour or so before tackling one of the hardest ascents of the entire tour. So was that what did him in? I've seen a number of interviews with him and I'm none the wiser as to what really laid him low.

He had enough left to out-sprint Vingegaard on the last mountain stage (20) for the win. The bonus seconds trimmed a bit off Vingegaard's lead and perhaps made Pogacar feel a bit better about himself and his tour. But it was picking through the crumbs after the banquet was over.

Three years ago, after Pogacar's second consecutive TdF victory, everyone was amazed at this young talent—just 22 at the time—and wondering how many Grand Tours he might win before he was done. Two Tours later and he still has just the two wins...and in the meantime, the little fishmonger from Copenhagen has won the event twice himself. Back then, we were wondering: who could possibly beat Pogacar? Now we know. That said, I'm not anywhere close to consigning Pogacar to the scrap heap of history. He's barely into the prime of his career. This ain't over...



Tot Ziens, Douwe

We lost one of our best biking buddies this past month: Douwe Drayer. (It's Dutch, pronounced DOW-ah.) But Douwe was more than just a pal on rides. He was a good friend, a great friend, and quite simply one of the nicest human beings you might ever meet.

Douwe was laid low by a double whammy of lung cancer and prostate cancer. He fought them off for years but they finally caught up with him on August 9. He died at home in San Francisco with his long-time girlfriend Leslie at his side. He was 82.

Douwe was born and raised near Haarlem, a small, charming city just west of Amsterdam. Like many a young man from that seafaring nation, he began his adult life on ships, as a steward on the Holland-American liners plying the long route between Europe and the Dutch East Indies. This is when ocean liners were still staid and quietly elegant. (I sailed from New York to Southampton on Holland-America's *Statendam* in 1966 and can attest to their luxurious but understated charm.)

Douwe found his way to San Francisco and the larger Bay Area in the '70s. After that beginning as a steward on luxury liners, he spent most of his adult life in the higher echelons of the service world: *maitre d'* at the Blue Fox, manager/sommelier at the St Francis Yacht Club, general manager at the Concordia Argonaut Club, and more in the same vein. One of his gigs was as head waiter in Thom Weisel's private dining room at Montgomery Securities. (Weisel founded the cycling team that would become US Postal with Lance Armstrong and crew. Douwe often met with the team members when they dined there.) His old-world charm and sophistication made him a natural in those roles. There wasn't much he didn't know about wine but he always loved finding those hidden treasures on the middle shelf at Trader Joe's.

Douwe smoked as a young man and it eventually came back to haunt him. In 1985 he was diagnosed with lung cancer and given six months to live. Most of one lung was removed and then more chunks were carved out until he was down to less than one complete lung. Riding a stationary bike was part of his therapy to build up his remaining lung. He bought a real bike and that began his long love affair with all things cycling.



If you're counting, that six months to live in 1985 ended up stretching out to 37 years. After the original diagnosis, he counted every day, every year, as bonus time. And that right there is the essence of the man: he accepted the cards he'd been dealt and never once complained. He would laugh and say, "What are you gonna do? Just accept it and enjoy whatever life you're given!"

I met Douwe in the very early '90s through our mutual friend Robin Dean. Robin hooked up with Douwe on one of those American Lung Association three-day biking fundraisers around Napa, Marin and Sonoma Counties in 1987. As much as I count Douwe as one of my all-time best friends, he and Robin were even better friends. And that's Douwe in a nutshell: if you knew him even a little, you wanted to be his friend. For all

his worldly-wise sophistication, at heart he was simply charming...amiable, witty, happy. His smile could light up a room.

Needless to say, with less than one complete lung, he was not exactly a speed demon on a bike. For some of his acquaintances in the bike world, that was his defining feature: he was *soooo* slow! But no one ever heard one word of whining or excuses from the man about his level of performance. He simply plugged away at it, doggedly but cheerfully. Always happy to be out there on two wheels.



Bill & Douwe; Blue Wallowa Tour, 2009

Considering his disadvantages, he did pretty damn well with his riding. He and Robin used to like to ride the Wine Country Century on the first Saturday in May, party well into the evening, then drive down to Berkeley and do the Grizzly Peak Century the following day. Perhaps not surprisingly, he gravitated to the world of randonneuring for his cycling challenges. Speed may matter for the *vedettes* at the front of a typical *brevet*,

but slower riders are welcome as well, and the time limits for finishing are quite relaxed. If you can manage the distance, you can take a good long while to get 'er done. Douwe did all the qualifying brevets ahead of Paris-Brest-Paris, I think in 1999. For some reason, he missed one of the required 600-km events and petitioned to be allowed to ride it on his own on another date. He did so...solo, through day and night, with no support. That's 372 non-stop miles for you non-metric types. He made it to PBP (at 1200 km, the crown jewel of the *randonnée* world). He started but did not finish.

Got to Brest and partway back before having to hop on a train to complete the return to Paris. He then hung around and cheered his friends home at the finish.

He was a member of both the Santa Rosa Cycling Club and the Sacramento Wheelmen. Because he lived in San Francisco—in a snazzy little penthouse atop Laurel Heights—he wasn't a regular on weekend club rides. But he was a regular on our summer club tours. He often rode alone because of his lack of speed but he almost always finished the daily stages. And he was always happily in the thick of things when we circled 'round our camp chairs and convened the wine club after rides...no such group would have been complete without him. His last SRCC tour was the Mendocino-Lake Tour in 2021. He took part in a number of tours in Europe as well, including one on which he summited le Mont Ventoux, one of his prouder cycling accomplishments. (Try that with two lungs!)

Aside from the official club rides and parties, maybe my favorite memories of him revolve around the weekends when he would drive up from the city and we would party from Friday afternoon to Sunday afternoon, with other friends in the mix. A ride on Saturday and another on Sunday morning. Or if it rained, a chance to sit around the breakfast table with cups of good coffee, regaling one another with

our old bike blarney. Good food, good beer and wine... good times. No matter who else was included in those jolly weekends, we never really felt Happy Hour was officially launched until Douwe would push in through the kitchen door, a cheery grin on his face and his arms full of bottles of reds and whites, smoked salmon, cheese, and often a bouquet for the lady of the house. Douwe was a good-looking guy and a dapper dresser.

He always looked put together...the shoes, the shirts, the slacks. It was the same with his bike kit: always very well turned out, on the premise that if you can't be fast, you can at least look fast. Many a woman in the club had a bit of a crush on him. One of them once said to me: "He's the perfect metrosexual...sigh!" His bikes were as stylish as he was. Always top of the line and lethally elegant.

When the lung issues finally got to be too much, he bought an e-bike and was able to extend his cycling career for several more years. Overnight, we went from soft-pedaling the climbs to keep him in sight behind us to having to dig deep a bit to keep him from disappearing off the front. He loved it and we loved that we still had him as a riding companion. Our rides went from centuries to 20-miles and a cup of coffee, but we still were having fun; still getting out there together.

He rode almost every day, right up to near the end. Lord knows how many times he rode across the GG Bridge...many, many hundreds. He liked to ride around to Tiburon and would often call me while sitting on a bench by the Angel Island ferry dock...just to remind me that he was out on his bike while I was stuck in a chair in front of my monitor. He'd say, "I'm out riding; why aren't you?"

A couple of years ago his long-standing battle with lung cancer became more challenging when joined by a nasty prostate cancer that his oncologist described as spreading like wildfire. It had metastasized into his spine. We had one of those delightful weekends here last March, thinking it might be the end. But he rallied around one more time and was still out on his bike until the summer. But finally, finally, the two-cancer tag team pinned him to the mat. Knowing the end really was near this time, a small gathering of friends was organized here in Sebastopol for Saturday, August 5. I think 14 people

were there, all old friends. Many others would have loved to be there but we didn't think he could handle a larger crowd. It was a wonderful afternoon and at times pretty emotional. We tried to keep it upbeat but a lot of hearts were aching.



Years ago, Douwe commissioned Patrick Amiot and Bridgette Laurent to create one of their whimsical sculptures for the terrace of his apartment in San Francisco. Of course it was a cyclist: Douwe to the life, right down to the Paris-Brest-Paris logo on the jersey. It stood out there for years, overlooking everything from the Bay Bridge to the Golden Gate. Just recently though, knowing the end was in sight, he bequeathed the sculpture to our friend Clay Popko, and it now has pride of place in Clay's front garden in Sebastopol. Bridgette came over and touched up the paint so it

looks great. Douwe was able to see it installed in its new home when he came up for that final visit.

Leslie drove him back to San Francisco on Sunday. That's the last time I saw him. He died three days later. As the tired old line goes: we are poorer for his passing but richer for having known him.



Intimations of mortality have been much on my mind lately. My mom died on July 15, three days after turning 102. She died peacefully in her own home, with me and my wife and my brother and sister with her. It was a good end to a good life...a cause for celebration rather than grief.

Two weeks before that, we had managed to drive her from her home in Bend to our old summer vacation town on the Oregon coast for our annual family reunion. In spite of poor health, she was determined to get there and have that week as the final capstone to her life: one more visit to her beloved beach and one more time to be with her three kids, four grandkids, and three great-grands. She spent the week looking out at the ocean view with all of her family gathered 'round, pretty much in a state of blissful rapture. At the end she said, "Now I can go home and die." And that is what she did. You could hardly plot out a nicer exit strategy.

We will miss both Douwe Cornelius and Annis Rebecca. Both classy people who made our lives better. But we rejoice in what they gave us: the many years and all the good times. The shared adventures and quiet moments. It's hard to write this without becoming a bit misty-eyed. Those good souls are gone. Those windows have closed. But we'll hold them close in our hearts.

October, 2023 • 192

Three for Three

In the month of **SEPP**tember

What a Vuelta! Holy moly, what a Vuelta! So amazing! So exciting! So unexpected! So complex! So...right.

The third and final Grand Tour of the year, the Vuelta a España, will have finished up a couple of weeks before this column hits the street. Given that time lag, you must already know what happened (assuming you're a fan of pro bike racing). So no spoiler alert needed. My only warning is that this race was so much fun but so complex and tangled that this is going to be a long read. Grab a cup of coffee and a croissant and settle in for a while...

Jumbo-Visma swept the table clean, in more ways than just winning. First of all, they occupied all three steps of the podium: Sepp Kuss first, Jonas Vingegaard second, and Primož Roglič third. One team hogging the whole podium at a Grand Tour may have happened before, although I can't offhand remember when, or which team might have done it. But we know this for sure: no single team has ever won all three Grand Tours in the same season *with three different winners* (Roglič at the Giro d'Italia, Vingegaard at the Tour de France, and now Sepp Kuss at the Vuelta). Never before, through all the history of bike racing. That is simply astonishing.

Just to make sure we understand that Jumbo-Visma is the best team in the world right now, add this: during the middle week of the Vuelta, the 8-stage Tour of Britain was going down. Who won? Why of course, Wout Van Aert of Jumbo-Visma! It's like the seagulls in *Finding Nemo*: "Mine!" "Mine!" "Mine!" We get everything and the rest of you can dig around in the dumpster out back for any scraps we left behind.

That makes the Jumbo-Visma riders seem like arrogant bullies, but in fact, as far as we, the sports fans, can tell, they're all really nice, humble, cheerful guys. Especially Sepp Kuss! More about that later.

How did we get here? We know Vingegaard and Kuss took part in the Tour de France in July. Vingegaard won and Kuss finished 12th in the role of the team's last, best mountain *domestique*. He completed all three Grand Tours this year, which is more than either of his team leaders did.

Roglič had not done much since winning the Giro back in May. So he did a tune-up ahead of the Vuelta

at the 5-stage Vuelta a Burgos (August 15-19). He won the overall, won the points jersey, was 2nd in the KOM...and won three out of the five stages, including an ITT. No obvious rust from the long layoff.

There was an all-star cast of very good riders entered at the Vuelta, hoping to make life difficult for the Jumbos: defending Vuelta champ Remco Evenepoel (Soudal-QuickStep); Juan Ayuso, Joao Almeida, and Marc Soler (UAE Team Emirates); Mikel Landa, Wout Poels, and Santiago Buitrago (Bahrain-Victorious); Enric Mas (Movistar); Aleksandr Vlasov (BORA-hansgrohe). Some talking heads rated it the best all-around start list of any recent Grand Tour.

We last mentioned Evenepoel after his rather anemic third overall at the Tour de Suisse in June. Since then he had won the Belgian National Championship Road Race on June 25, won the one-day classic San Sebastian on July 29, and participated in the World Championships, held in August this year. He was the defending champ in the road race but was never in contention this year, finishing 25th. However, he won the time trial on August 11. (Will the real Remco please stand up? Some days he looks invincible and other days not so much.) Neither Roglic nor Vingegaard took part in the Worlds.

Another reason why the Vuelta was so exciting was its parcours: it was loaded with challenge. Ten out of 19 stages (minus the two time trials) featured uphill finishes, six of them Cat 1, two Cat 2, and two *Especial* (out of category). They came at the riders early and often: Stages 3, 6, 8, 9, 11, 13, 14, 16, 17, 18. Add in Stages 15 and 20, which were hilly, and it looked like a leg-breaking monster. Those 12 hilly stages averaged 11,500' of gain. Overall, the 19 non-TT stages averaged over 9100'. For comparison, the Tour featured five mountain finishes and averaged 8700'. The Giro featured seven uphill finishes and averaged 8400'.

The pre-race chatter was all about whether Remco Evenepoel—so dominant last year but so off-and-on this year—could stave off the two-pronged attack of Primož Roglic and Jonas Vingegaard. Roglic had been pointing toward the Vuelta all summer but Vingegaard was only added to the roster after winning the TdF. It was a daunting prospect for Evenepoel and for all the other GC wannabes, but no one imagined ahead of time how much harder and more complicated it would actually turn out to be.

The race started with one of their ridiculous team time trials: 9 miles around the city streets of Barcelona.

I'm no fan of these short TTTs and this was the worst one in recent memory: a tight, technical course run at night, under street lights, in the rain. What could possibly go wrong? Lots of riders sliding out in the slick corners. A total fiasco. Jumbo-Visma, usually among the best teams in these TTTs, finished in 11th place, :32 off the lead and :26 behind Evenepoel's Soudal-QS team...a lot of time to lose in just nine miles. I did not see it nor hear the commentators mention it, but I understand Vingegaard had a flat, and that would explain the time loss: a precious few seconds to make a bike or wheel swap.

Stage 2 ended with a field sprint and nothing much changed among the favorites. Stage 3 was the first real mountain finish, with two Cat 1 ascents, including the final one: 8 km at 8%. Evenepoel surged out of a group of all the big players to win by one second. With time bonuses factored in, he took over the lead, :05 ahead of Mas, :31 ahead of Vingegaard, :37 ahead of Roglic, and :49 ahead of Kuss, who, perhaps as a sign of things to come, looked really lively on that last climb.

Stages 4 and 5 were sprint finishes and nothing much changed among the GC ranks, except Evenepoel snapped up six bonus seconds in an intermediate sprint on Stage 5, padding his lead a little.

Stage 6 was the next uphill finish and that shook things up. Most of the stage was only moderately hilly but it ended with a good, husky climb: 11 km at 8%, with the last five km averaging over 10%. A huge breakaway of 40 riders was allowed up the road. Most teams had at least one and often several riders in the break, so no one was motivated to chase down the *escapados*. Jumbo-Visma put Sepp Kuss in the break with a couple of teammates in what, in hindsight, turns out to have been perhaps the most pivotal move of the entire tour.

Sepp's role going into the Vuelta was that of a *domestique*, there to work for his two superstar teammates, Roglic and Vingegaard. We all know he's a brilliant climber but still...he's spent his entire career in that support role, pacing his leaders up the big ascents and then dropping off to save his energy to help again another day. Rarely has he been allowed to spread his wings and go for a win. Prior to this tour, his biggest accomplishments had been winning the 2018 Tour of Utah and one stage of the 2019 Vuelta.

So okay, he's in the break. So are a few other big names: Romain Bardet, Mikel Landa, Marc Soler, Wout Poels, Santiago Buitrago, Hugh Carthy. Midway up

that final climb, the break had fallen apart. (The first 17 finishers were out of the break but spread over 2:33; the other 23 from the break were scattered all over the mountain.) With 3 km to go, Kuss dropped the last of his breakaway cohort and soloed on to victory, looking as fresh and cheerful as could be.

Meanwhile, at almost the same time Kuss was going solo, three minutes back, Roglic was jumping off the front of the elite group of GC favorites. No one immediately chased after him. Evenepoel in particular was dropped and appeared to be tapped out. Vingegaard soon jumped across to Roglic, dragging Enric Mas with him, and at almost that same moment, Jumbo-Visma's Attila Walter came back to Roglic and Vingegaard—out of the remnants of the break—and put in a good, hard pull for his team leaders until the 1 km-to-go banner. At 500 meters to go, Roglic and Vingegaard dropped Mas and rode in together, the first non-breakaway riders to finish, a handful of seconds ahead of Ayuso, Almeida, and Mas. Evenepoel, after having looked so dead at 3 km, put in a late charge to come in 3:24 behind Kuss and :32 behind Roglic and Vingegaard.

Thanks to the time lost in that opening team time trial, Kuss did not quite make it into the leader's jersey at the end of the stage. He was :08 behind rookie Lenny Martinez (Groupama-FDJ). Evenepoel dropped to 8th, 2:47 behind Kuss but still a few seconds ahead of Roglic and Vingegaard.

Stage 7 was a flat sprint stage and nothing changed. Stage 8 was the next mountain finish and it was loads of fun (for those of us watching, anyway). There were five categorized climbs with the final one a little beast... Xorret de Cati: only 4 km but averaging over 11%, with a pitch in the middle over 20%. The summit was 3.2 km from the finish. There was a steep descent of about two km and then one final uphill...not too steep but still hard work. Jumbo-Visma and Soudal-QuickStep shared the work of setting tempo as they approached the climb, whittling the lead group down to Kuss, Roglic, Vingegaard, Evenepoel, Mas, Ayuso, Almeida, and Soler. Lenny Martinez, the leader, was gapped at about 6 km to go and never got back to the front.

Just as they hit the steepest pitch at 5 km to go, Kuss threw in an attack and gapped the group. Evenepoel, with no teammates, had to do the work of chasing him down. He did so, impressively, chugging up that 21% wall sitting down, and pulling Kuss back before 4 km to go. In the process, he pulled Roglic and Vingegaard along with him. He led over the summit at 3 km to go,

and was still in front into that final, uphill kilometer. He sprinted for it and at first it looked like a repeat of his win on Stage 3, but Roglic whipped around him on the outside and took the stage.

Martinez lost 1:10, lost the leader's jersey, and fades out of our narrative. Kuss took the lead and never relinquished it over the final 13 stages. The top dozen riders were still a mix of those whose teams had a good TTT on Stage 1 and those who benefited from being in the big break on Stage 6, and finally, the cream of the crop who would eventually rise to the top. But at this point it was still an unsettled leader board.

Stage 9 was another uphill finish with what should have been a fairly testing final climb. But a soupy landslide across the road right near the finish caused the *commissaires* to change things a bit. They managed to get the mess cleaned up enough so that seven riders out of a break could do the whole distance. But behind them, they took everyone else's times about two miles below the original finish line. The results ended up looking really screwy, and I confess I don't fully understand how they reconciled the times. The bottom line though is that Kuss stayed in the lead, Soler was at :43, Evenepoel at 2:22, Landa and Roglic at 2:29, Vingegaard and Mas at 2:33, and Ayuso and Almeida not too far behind. Nobody complained about the times and placings, so I guess they got it right.

Stage 10 was the only ITT of the Vuelta, 26 km and almost dead flat, with one small climb early on. Filippo Ganna, an ITT specialist, finished first, with Evenepoel :16 behind and Roglic another :20 behind Evenepoel. Almeida and Vlasov were 4th and 5th, Ayuso and Soler 7th and 8th, and Vingegaard, usually a real tiger in time trials, was 10th at 1:18. Kuss was 13th at 1:29. So Sepp lost a little time but stayed in the lead, with all the other major players still in the top ten, still within about three minutes. Notably, Vingegaard, the newly crowned TdF champ, was down in 7th place at 2:22. Was he a little tired from his Tour de France? What's up with that?

Stages 11 and 12 were a chance for the GC rivals to rest a bit and let others strut their stuff: a big breakaway of nobody important on Stage 11 and a mass field sprint on Stage 12...no changes at the top of standings. The top dawgs were keeping their powder dry for what was ahead: seven out of the next eight stages in the mountains, including some of the hardest climbing on this or any other tour, in this or any other year. It stacked up as a murderers' row of punishment.

Stage 13 was epic. Three massive ascents in the Pyrénées: Aubisque, Spandelles, and Tourmalet to finish things off (19 km at 7.4%, with the last two km at around 10%). The bulk of the stage was run off in a fairly orderly way. A few breaks but mostly the peloton stayed together under the control of Jumbo-Visma and UAE. The only remarkable element—and it was really remarkable—was the fade-away of Remco Evenepoel. Right from early in the stage, he lost contact with the leaders. For a while, the gap stabilized at under two minutes but as the long, grueling climbs took their toll, the gap widened and widened and widened. He didn't really look like he was suffering, riding a steady tempo with his team gathered around him. He was just slow (relative to the leaders).

The leaders...what were they doing? Jumbo kept things under control until about halfway up the Tourmalet. Then their assorted workhorse tempo-setters clocked out for the day and it was down to Vingegaard, Roglic, and Kuss, with a handful of other team leaders hanging on. Just under 8 km to go, Vingegaard jumped off the front. A few of the others chased and hung onto him briefly, but by 7 km he cut the cord and was off on his own, going solo to the stage win. (So that answered the question as to whether he was tired from the TdF!) Behind him, Kuss and Roglic and Mas all tried little attacks but nothing really opened up until Kuss lit it up at 1.2 to go. He took off *soooo* fast...the cliché scalded cat. It was so much fun to finally see Sepp off the leash, riding like a leader and not just a *domestique*. He kept the hammer down and crossed the line :30 behind Vingegaard. And as fast as Kuss reeled off that last km, Roglic was almost as fast: he crossed the line just :03 after Kuss.

It was the most complete triumph for the Jumbos... first, second, third...and that rewrote the GC standings completely: Kuss still first, Roglic at 1:37, Vingegaard at 1:44. Ayuso, Mas, Soler, Landa, and Vlasov were 4th through 8th, none of them absolutely out of it yet but all looking up at the trio of hard boys ahead of them. It made sense for Vingegaard to attack on this stage, even if it meant leaving his teammates behind. At 2:22 down, he had some time to make up. I have to assume this was the team plan all along.

As for Evenepoel, he finished 60th, over 27 minutes back. 27 minutes?! The TV guys said it was probably the worst day of his professional career. No doubt. But when Tadej Pogacar suffered what he called the worst day of his professional career in this year's Tour, he

lost 5:45 to Vingegaard. I called that time gap “whopping” in my TdF review. If 5:45 is whopping, how should we describe a loss of 27:05? That left him in 19th place, 27:50 out of first. Obviously, his defense of his championship from last year was over.

Stage 14 was another really tough climbing day, with a Cat 3 and a Cat 1 to finish and two out-of-category summits. If you thought Evenepoel would disappear from view after his Stage 13 meltdown, with all hopes of an overall win gone...well, you don't know Remco. He got into the break of the day—five riders—and took the max points on every one of those four summits, which also means he won the stage. I can't get inside his head, but it would appear that, overnight, he hatched the bright idea of reinventing himself and his goal at the Vuelta from winning the overall to becoming the King of the Mountains. After this stage, he had enough points to take the lead in that competition and to don the polkadot jersey.

He kept at it for the rest of the tour, getting into the breaks on Stages 15, 17, 18, and 20. He won Stage 18 and was a close 2nd on Stage 20. Every day he was scooping up more KOM points until his lead was way out of reach: 135 points over the 51 points of 2nd place Jonas Vingegaard. Of course, Vingegaard wasn't contesting the KOM; he was still battling for the overall or riding in support of teammates Kuss and Roglic. Which just points out how silly and frivolous the KOM competition can sometimes be.

Occasionally the KOM—supposedly honoring the best climber—will actually go to the best climber. But often it goes to a rider who is no threat for the overall and so is allowed—by the real best climbers—to get into the breaks and squirrel away KOM points. Anyone who is a threat for the overall will not be allowed to get away like that. I thought Evenepoel going for the KOM was actually rather demeaning: here's a young rider who has, in a couple of years, marked himself out as one of the top three or four riders in the world... winner of last year's Vuelta and last year's World Championship; winner of other really big races...and now here he is, in his blue polkadot jersey and helmet, capering around like the court jester while the real heads of state are still fighting it out for the overall. Frankly, I was embarrassed for him. But if that's what he needed to do to salve his pride, okay...good for him. For the record, all his hustle and bustle on the climbs eventually moved him from 19th to 12th and from 27:50 down to 16:44 down. Not all that great but hey,

check out that polkadot jersey!

Anyway...behind the five-man break and Remco's side show, all the top riders finished together in places 6-17. So no change at the top. Stage 15 was more of the same: a breakaway filling the top spots at the finish and all the top riders coming in together. No change.

But now things start to get really hinky...

Let's pause for a minute and consider the situation. 15 stages complete and five to go (excluding the final, semi-ceremonial stage into Madrid). One of those five stages is flat but the other four are hilly, often to an extreme degree. In other words, lots of places for big things to happen, for the standings to be shuffled around.

Sepp Kuss, the hard-working, sweet-tempered *domestique* from Colorado, is, rather improbably, in the lead. His two superstar, Grand Tour-winning teammates are 2nd and 3rd: Roglic at 1:37, Vingegaard nipping at his heels at 1:44. Ayuso, at 2:37, Mas at 3:06, and Soler at 3:10, even Landa at 4:12, are all still in the hunt...perhaps not for 1st but at least for a podium step, should any of the Jumbos falter.

There is an unwritten rule in racing—one of many unwritten but well understood rules—that you do not attack a member of your own team when he has the lead. Like most unwritten rules, this one is elastic and subject to all sorts of exceptions and variables and what-ifs, such as Vingegaard attacking his teammates on Stage 13 to claw his way back up to the podium. It is a team sport and you're supposed to support the best-placed rider on your team. But what if the team brain trust thinks the best-placed rider at some point may not be able to hold his lead? What then? Do other teammates take over the leadership? The annals of racing are replete with examples of situations like this and they all play out in different ways and leave us, the fans, debating the merits or faults of whatever happened, long after the events are over.

Keep all that in mind as we move on to Stage 16. This stage had a moderate, rolling profile right up to the end, where it tipped up into one relatively small ascent: 5 km at 8.5%. A small breakaway hit the hill first, with the assorted leaders arriving together just a bit behind. Jumbo had four riders left: the big three plus Attila Walter. The latter pulled for a bit but then, just under 4 km to go, on a steep pitch, Vingegaard attacked. Which is to say, he not only attacked the riders from other teams, he also attacked Kuss and Roglic

from his own team, both ahead of him in the standings.

He won the stage and leapfrogged Roglic into 2nd place, just :29 behind Kuss. Just inside the final km, Roglic jumped off the front of the chasing group, with Ayuso, Mas, Vlasov, and Kuss chasing after him. In the end, they all came in together and were given the same time...except for Kuss, who was :04 back. So, in effect, Kuss was attacked twice by his own teammates. Neither Vingegaard's nor Roglic's attack was in response to accelerations from rivals. There was no need to do what they did. It gets worse...

Stage 17 was arguably the hardest stage of the tour. The first half was moderate but then there were two Cat 1 ascents in the second half and finally Altu de l'Angrilu, often referred to as the most feared climb in professional cycling. (Its overall stats: 13 km at 9.4%. But that's so misleading. The first six km are hard but not brutal and the final km-plus is easy—under 4%—but the six km in the middle...whooo! 800 meters of gain. In non-metrics, that's over 2600' in 3.7 miles...over 13%. But even that is misleading. From 3.5 km to go to 1.5 km to go, it's between 17 and 24%.)

With 4 km to go, the lead group was down to Kuss, Roglic, and Vingegaard for Jumbo-Visma and Wout Poels and Mikel Landa for Bahrain-Victorious. Poels was the workhorse, doing all the pulling. (Why B-V thought it good strategy to pull the Jumbos up the hill, I have no idea.) Just under the 3 km to go banner, Roglic attacked. Poels was dropped immediately and then too Landa. Vingegaard and Kuss chased after Roglic, caught him and stuck with him. But just past the 2 km to go banner, Kuss was gapped. It's a yard, then two, then three... You can see him get on the radio to the team car, probably saying, "I'm getting dropped!" Vingegaard, on Roglic's wheel, looks back and sees Kuss falling away...and he turns back to the front and motors off up the steep, steep pitch with Roglic.

By 1.5 km to go, the gap was close to :30 and Kuss was out of the virtual lead, or so it seemed. But then Mikel Landa, finding a second wind, caught Kuss and pulled him all the way to the finish, pulling back some time. Kuss was 3rd and Landa 4th. They came in :19 behind Roglic and Vingegaard. With bonus seconds factored in, Kuss was still in the lead but only by :08 over Vingegaard and 1:08 over Roglic.

Once again—second day in a row—Kuss, the faithful *domestique*—was attacked and dropped by his two superstar teammates. The most charitable spin you can put on this is that the team strategy was to consolidate

their hold on all three podium steps. They certainly did that. Ayuso, in 4th overall, was now 4:00 behind. Landa was at 4:16 and Mas at 4:30. But they could have done that without dropping Kuss. When they saw he was losing contact at 2 km to go, they could have eased off just a touch and kept him hooked on. So what if Landa clawed back up to them. He'd started the day 4:12 behind, so if he managed to finish with them, he'd have been about where he ended up anyway. It didn't appear that anyone else was going to catch them or get past them, so why not keep Kuss safe?

It was an impressive show of force by Roglic and Vingegaard but it was a bad look for the team, throwing such a popular and likeable teammate under the bus. After Stage 16, there were rumblings from the press corps about dropping Kuss. After Angrilu—which happened to be Sepp's 29th birthday—that boiled over into a media feeding frenzy about team tactics, loyalty, "gifts," and every little permutation of bike etiquette and sportsmanship. The face the team members and management put out to the public was uniformly bland and cheery and inclusive. Kuss in particular was diplomatic about the situation...unfailingly kind and positive. But you know, behind the scenes, the team realized they had a potentially ugly public relations disaster on their hands.

Kuss has been with Jumbo-Visma for six years and is signed up for 2024. Over that span, he has worked tirelessly for his team leaders. Look no further than Stage 16 of this year's Giro, when Roglic was dropped by Joao Almeida and Geraint Thomas: Kuss paced Roglic over the final miles to limit his losses. Roglic only won the Giro by :14 over Thomas. Without the time saved that day, Roglic might not have won the Giro. Kuss has been there for them, time after time, steep hill after steep hill, burying himself for the leaders. And through it all, he's remained the nicest guy in the pro peloton, always smiling, always happy. A true gentleman. Everyone likes him. Now you're going to snatch this victory away from him? Roglic already has three Vuelta crowns and this year's Giro; Vingegaard was just coming off his second straight Tour de France victory. And over his entire career, Kuss has never been given the opportunity to win much of anything. I mean, c'mon.... Add to that the idea that the team had a shot at doing something that has never

been done before and may never be done again: win all three Grand Tours with THREE different riders. That's historic on a grand scale. That's really too good to pass up, to mess up. You can imagine the discussions amongst the team members and management after this stage. The good news is they finally got it. The next thing we hear from the team and from the riders, before Stage 18: "We're all in for Sepp!"

If you read the comments at the bottoms of some of the internet reporting on this whole kerfuffle, you will see that 80% of the fans are rooting for Kuss. But a smaller contingent says the strongest rider should win and presumably, because they dropped Kuss, that would have to be either Roglic or Vingegaard. To that I say: utter horseshit! You folks have been steeped too long in the old Bernard Hinault "no gifts" mentality. Anyway, it's not a gift. It's a debt repaid, a favor returned. It's karma. It's one good turn deserves another. One hand washes the other. It's the way the world is supposed to work. I was just rereading an account of the first San Francisco Grand Prix in 2001...Lance Armstrong, fresh off a Tour de France victory, worked his ass off in the one-day race to pull George Hincapie up to the lead. George then took over and won. Was Hincapie a better rider than Armstrong? Of course not, but he'd pulled Armstrong up so many hills, so many times...it's payback. Anyone who thinks that's not how pro cycling works is a simpleton.

Harrumph! Please excuse my rant. Once Jumbo-Visma was clear on the concept, the final four stages were mostly free of drama. Breakaways on two stages and field sprints on two, with Vingegaard, Roglic, and Kuss rolling in together each day, safe and sound. Vingegaard even soft-pedaled one finish to drop off Kuss and allow the final gap from Kuss in 1st to him in 2nd to grow from :08 to :17. Roglic remained 3rd at



1:08. Judging by all the happy images at the finish of Stages 20 and 21, you would think having Kuss as the winner was the game plan from the very beginning. If it was, they had a strange way of getting there.

I don't know that much about Vingegaard but I have watched Roglic for many years now and he has always come across as just about the classiest guy in racing, the very best embodiment of good sportsmanship. I have a hard time thinking of him as a ruthless, cut-throat sort of competitor. Not that he doesn't want to win, but not at the expense of someone like Sepp... at least that's my benefit-of-the-doubt take on him. I want to think that what happened on Angrilu was what we might call the red fog of war: maxxed out, locked in, head down, on a 24% wall, just boiling along, brain gone into robo-mode...losing track of Kuss. Maybe I'm naive. I want to think that when the heat of battle was over, he was probably a little chagrined at how that played out. I doubt we'll ever know.

But what we do know is we just saw one of the greatest Grand Tours of all time, with towering athletic feats and with plot twists right out of a novel. In fact, there is a novel with approximately this plot: *The Yellow Jersey* by Ralph Hume...a mid-pack *domestique* ends up in the lead at the Tour de France and...well, you'll just have to read it.

The subplot after all this is what will these three riders be doing next year? If Vingegaard is going to be the team leader at the Tour de France again, you have to wonder if Roglic might want to find another team where he can be the leader at *le Tour*. But where do you find another team as strong as Jumbo-Visma? He'll turn 34 this month...not a kid anymore. He can hear the clock ticking. Go for it now or forget about it. Will Kuss return to his role as the humble, helpful *domestique* or will he want some leading roles himself? We'll have to wait a few months for that to play out. For now, we must be content with reliving this last, best Grand Tour of 2023. *Chapeau!* to all the riders and teams and sponsors who made it possible.

PS: One week after the Vuelta we had the Men's Elite European Continental Championship, similar to the World Championship in that riders ride for their national teams, not their trade teams. 1st place: riding for France, Christophe LaPorte (Jumbo-Visma); 2nd place: riding for Belgium, Wout Van Aert (Jumbo-Visma); 3rd place: riding for the Netherlands, Olav Kooij (Jumbo-Visma). Another Jumbo-Visma podium. "Mine!" "Mine!" "Mine!"...

2023 Racing Wrap-up

It's time to look back over the racing season of 2023: who did what and who ended up on top?

I started compiling Top Ten lists of the best riders back in 2013...11 years ago. I've just been browsing my archive and revisiting all of them: such ancient history! So many almost forgotten riders...even though they were good enough in a given year to make a Top Ten list.

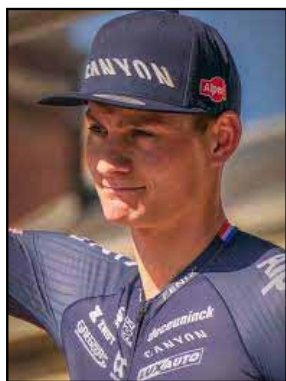
Trying to come up with my list this year has been giving me almost more trouble than any previous year. After pushing and pulling at all the UCI rankings—total UCI points, stage race rankings, one-day race rankings—and just my own subjective take on the season past, I've decided I can't manage a list of the ten best for 2023. I'm limiting it to just a half-dozen. Why? Because these half-dozen riders so thoroughly dominated the season that everyone else is simply off the back, not worthy of anything close to top ten stature. (Sorry to all the others, but you just got whupped, bumped off the ten-step podium.)

Five out of my six are stage racers...all-'rounders. Presumably I consider them the best five stage racers in the pro ranks, at least for this year. Looking back over my previous ten "Top Tens"—some of which ran to over a dozen or had Honorable Mentions tacked on—I can see that I waffled a good deal as to whether to include pure sprinters or one-day specialists...classics riders. In recent years, I've leaned more toward the stage racers. As the term "all-'rounder" suggests, these brightest stars of the cycling firmament should be brilliant climbers, among the best time-trialers, and, when needed, above average sprinters. Also: superb bike handlers...great descenders and always nimble in the tight spots. And finally, the intangibles: heart, smarts, *grinta*, *panache*. That's the theory anyway. But ultimately, the results are what count, no matter which skill sets are employed to get there.

Let's get to it, beginning with our one classics rider...

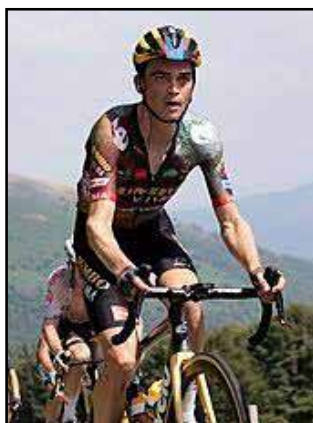
• **Mathieu van der Poel, Alpecin-Deceuninck, 28, Netherlands • 6'0", 165 lbs**

Only one rider finished ahead of Mathieu van der Poel in the season-long, one-day race rankings: Tadej Pogacar (and I will get to him presently). Among the traditional classics riders, van der Poel gets my vote this year because of an impressive trifecta of victories:



Milano-Sanremo on March 18; Paris-Roubaix on April 9; and the World Championship Road Race on August 6. He was second at the Tour of Flanders (behind Pogacar). He won the 5-stage Tour of Belgium in June and had a few other top three finishes. He's also the current cyclo-cross World Champion (for the fifth time). In looking up his *palmarés* for this year, I was interested to discover that he comes by his talent naturally: his father is Adrie van der Poel (winner of Liege-Bastogne-Liege ('88), Tour of Flanders ('86), Amstel Gold ('90), Paris-Tours ('87), and Classica San Sebastian ('85). His grandfather is Raymond Poulidor, winner of the Vuelta a España ('64), Paris-Nice ('72, '73), the Dauphiné ('66, '69), Milano-Sanremo ('61), Flèche-Wallone ('63), and three times 2nd at the Tour de France ('64, '65, '74). Not a bad pedigree!

• **Sepp Kuss, Jumbo-Visma, 29, Durango, Colorado • 6'0", 134 lbs**



If this list were based only on the UCI World Ranking, Kuss wouldn't be here: he was 16th. He was 6th in the stage race rankings. But he had an unusual season, culminating in his amazing win at the Vuelta a España in September. No way can we keep the winner of one of the three Grand Tours off the list! Aside from that, we have to take

into account the fact that he rode all season—and for all of his career, pretty much—as a *domestique* for his team leaders, Primož Roglič and Jonas Vingegaard. In that role, he completed all three Grand Tours this year, something neither of his team captains did. (He was 14th at the Giro and 12th at the Tour, very good placings for a support rider.) He had more race days than anyone else on this list: 77...in fact ten more than his nearest rivals, which speaks to his ironman fitness. We really don't know how good Kuss can be. We know he's a very good climber but perhaps only an adequate time trialer and sprinter. But who knows? Now that he has a Grand Tour in his resumé, he may find opportunities to grow into a larger, leading role next year.

• **Remco Evenepoel, Soudal-Quick Step, 23, Belgium • 5'7", 134 lbs**



So much was expected of Evenepoel this year after he burst onto the racing scene last year. He did have a good season this year, but it was a bit less impressive than what it might have been. He

won the UAE Tour in February. He was 2nd at the Volta Ciclista a Catalunya in March. He won *la Doyenne*, Liege-Bastogne-Liege on April 23 (for the second year in a row). He was leading the Giro d'Italia after nine stages—including winning the time trials on Stages 1 and 9—when he had to withdraw because of a COVID positive. He finished a rather lackluster 3rd at the Tour de Suisse in June. He won the Belgian road race national championship on June 25. He won the Classica San Sebastian on July 29 (for the second year in a row). And he capped off his season by winning the World Time Trial Championship on August 11. He also won the Mountains classification at the Vuelta, but after having entered the event as the defending champion, that was a rather sorry consolation prize. His assorted wins and other top finishes added up to 3rd place in the UCI World Ranking.

• **Primož Roglič, Jumbo-Visma, 33, Slovenia • 5'9", 143 lbs**



I want to make it clear: all three of my final riders on this list are so close that I really cannot rank them...except you can infer whatever you want from the order in which I present them here. Roglič had a wonderful season, his best in some time. He won the 7-stage Tirreno-Adriatico in early March, winning three stages and taking home not only the

GC jersey but the Mountains jersey and the Points jersey...a clean sweep. In late March, he won the 7-stage Volta Ciclista a Catalunya, winning two stages, leading from start to finish, and also winning the Points classification and finishing 2nd in the Mountains classification. In May he won the Giro d'Italia, highlighted by his stunning time trial win on the penultimate stage. He won the 5-stage Vuelta a Burgos in August, winning three stages, the Points classification and finishing 2nd in the Mountains classification. He finished 3rd at the Vuelta, all tangled up in that extraordinary Jumbo-

Visma soap opera. (Read last month's column for the whole story.) Finally, he won the Giro dell'Emilia on September 30, finishing with a powerful sprint at the end of the last, brutally steep climb. And a 3rd at Il Lombardia on October 7. All those wins and good placings added up to 4th in the 2023 UCI World Ranking.

• **Tadej Pogacar, UAE Team Emirates, 25, Slovenia • 5'9", 145 lbs**



The only reason Tadej Pogacar is not the final rider on this list is because he didn't win a Grand Tour (for the second year in a row). A lot of informed cycling fans still think he's the top rider in the world and, in fact, he finished 1st in the UCI World Ranking and it wasn't even close: Tadej Pogacar...7686 points; Jonas Vingegaard...6304 points. How did he do that, without winning a Grand Tour? He won the 5-stage Ruta del Sol

in February, winning three stages and leading wire to wire, while also winning the Points classification. In early March he won the 8-stage Paris-Nice, winning three stages and the Points classification. He finished 4th at Milano-Sanremo on March 18, 3rd at E3 Saxo Classic on March 24, 1st at the Tour of Flanders on April 2, 1st at Amstel Gold on April 16, 1st at Flèche Wallonne on April 19, 1st at both the Slovenian road race and time trial championships in June, 2nd at the Tour de France in July, and finally 1st at Il Lombardia on October 7 (for the third year in a row). His incredible run of success was interrupted by his crash at Liege-Bastogne-Liege on April 23, where he broke his left wrist. Without the injury and long rehab, who knows what he might have done at the Tour de France? Add in the fact that 2nd at the Tour de France is worth UCI 800 points, same as 1st at either the Giro or the Vuelta.

• **Jonas Vingegaard, Jumbo-Visma, 26, Denmark • 5'9", 132 lbs**

Vingegaard had a season nearly as successful as either Tadej Pogacar or Primož Roglič, with the added flourish of winning the big one: the Tour de France (for the second year in a row). He kicked off his season by winning O Gran Camiño in February, winning all three stages and the Mountains classification. He finished 3rd at Paris-Nice (behind Pogacar) in March. He won the 6-stage Itzulia Basque Country in April, winning



three stages and the Points classification. In June he won the 8-stage Critérium du Dauphiné, winning two stages and the Points classification. And of course he won *le Tour* in July, handily beating Pogacar. At the Vuelta, he finished 2nd, :17 behind his teammate Sepp Kuss and ahead of his other teammate Primož Roglič. (Any one of the three could have

won but it made the best sense for Kuss to win the final Grand Tour after his two team leaders had won the Giro and Tour...a feat that may never be duplicated.) All of that landed him in 2nd place in the UCI World Ranking.

At the end of my write-up about that crazy Vuelta, I wrote this: "The subplot after all this is what will these three riders be doing next year? If Vingegaard is going to be the team leader at the Tour de France again, you have to wonder if Roglič might want to find another team where he can be the leader at *le Tour*. But where do you find another team as strong as Jumbo-Visma? He'll turn 34 this month...not a kid anymore. He can hear the clock ticking. Go for it now or forget about it. Will Kuss return to his role as the humble, helpful domestique or will he want some leading roles himself? We'll have to wait a few months for that to play out."

We did not have to wait a few months for that to play out. Immediately after winning the Giro dell'Emilia in October, Roglič announced he was leaving Jumbo-Visma and signing for two years with BORA-hansgrohe. It probably is not as strong a team as Jumbo-Visma (Jumbo-Lease a Bike for 2024), but they should field a good team to support him at the Tour. And Jumbo won't be as strong with Roglič gone, so that might even things out a bit. Another interesting transfer: Mikel Landa is leaving Bahrain-Victorious and joining Soudal-Quick Step, where he will presumably add some strong support for Remco Evenepoel in the mountains of the big tours. It's a long way from now until July, but at the moment, it looks as if we could have a four-way battle royale at the Tour de France: Jonas Vingegaard vs Tadej Pogacar vs Primož Roglič vs Remco Evenepoel. The talking heads are already hyperventilating about that prospect. But before we spend too much time looking forward to that possibility, let's enjoy looking backward at the epic season just concluded. It has to rank as one of the most amazing seasons in years.

It's Green Again!

If you read these columns with any regularity, you will have read this one before. Or not exactly this one, but the same theme: the changing of the seasons.

It's nearing the end of November as I write this and I have had a little worry nagging at the back of my mind for a few days: I did not yet have a topic for my December column. However, there is nothing like a bike ride to open my mind to new topics...or, in this case, to an old topic that seems new again (as it does every year). I set off on a ride this morning and, within a few miles of home, I was smacked upside the head by this observation: "It's green again!"

If you live in a region where rainfall is more-or-less constant, all around the calendar, this may not make much sense or at least not be cause for comment. But in our California world, it stops raining in April or May and doesn't start again until the end of October. The green grasses carpeting the meadows in the winter and spring dry up and go to sleep. Their hollow husks turn golden and stay that way through the summer and fall.

As long as we're not suffering through one of our occasional droughts, we can just about set our watches by the return of the rain and the re-greening of the meadows that follows along behind that fresh infusion of moisture. Right around Hallowe'en, we get our first real rain. It arrives right on schedule every year, like a train pulling into the station. Then, over the month of November, our mostly balmy Indian Summer days will now and then be interrupted by a day or two of rain... then more sun...then a little more rain. I think, this year, we have had four days of rain so far. Perhaps trace amounts on other days, but only four where we could look out the window at a seriously wet world. Wait...it just started raining again, as I'm writing this. So make that five days so far.

Just five days. But that's enough. Even after the lightest little spritz of drizzle at the end of October, we could already see a soft green fuzz pushing up through last season's tired old grasses. It takes a while for the new green to push the old dead foliage aside, but by Thanksgiving, the change is a done deal...and a pretty dramatic change it is. Anyone who says we don't do dramatic seasonal changes in California is simply not paying attention.

I went out yesterday with an old friend for an

easy cruise around the wine country. Then today I headed up into the West County hills...the Killer B's: Bloomfield, Burnside, Barnett Valley. I was following the route of a classic club ride we list near Valentine's Day every year: The Sweetheart Ride. In February, it's something of a Rite of Spring for the more ambitious club riders. Some stout climbing and a good deal of rollicking descending, always with a fair bit of lunatic hammering. Now, solo, in November, it was a more sedate excursion. No half-wheel hell on the climbs and only a moderate amount of madness on the descents. I even stopped to take the photo that accompanies this piece...just to prove my point: it really is—all of a sudden—green again. Woo hoo!

No local cyclist ever complains about all the weeks and months of no-rain from May through October. We love it. But the hills and meadows do look rather bedraggled when the dry, spent grasses are drooping and broken far and wide. If you happen to be a "serious," hardcore rider, one with big plans for the new year, you might feel a bit ambivalent about the return of the rain. You might chafe at losing some of your riding days. But deep down, at some atavistic level, I have to believe most of us feel some sort of glow of goodness and rightness when those meadows turn green again. Climate change notwithstanding, the seasons around here are still doing what they're supposed to do, at least most of the time.

Heading up into the holiday season—the "dark" side of the year—I want to wish all of you the best seasonal cheer, whether you honor the little guy in the manger or are more attuned to some pagan celebration of the Winter Solstice. It's all good. And most especially, here's wishing all of us a safe and sane 2024. It could be a rocky rollercoaster of a year...a world of weirdness afoot. I hope things stay calm and commonsensical for you and your family and friends.



Ida Clayton? Yes!

Happy New Year! Yes indeed, it is that time again: time for new beginnings and new possibilities...and, in the case of this column, new pavement.

I know, I know...I've prattled on a few times before about the state of asphalt in the North Bay, but bear with me here as I roast that old chestnut one more time. Two things occurred at just about the same time a few weeks ago to get me going on this topic once again...

First off, I heard on the local cycling grapevine that a wonderful but rather obscure cycling road has just been repaved (to a very high standard): Ida Clayton Road. If you know the road, you don't need me to explain where it is or where it goes. And if you do know it, you'll be as tickled as I am to learn about its new paving.

But if you don't know the road—which is more likely to be the case—I will give you a quick summary about it. It's eight miles long, rising up out of Knights Valley, the remote, quiet region just south of Alexander Valley and just north of Napa County. It's not a dead end, although it is often ridden as one, because, over the summit, up on the shoulder of Mt St Helena, it turns to gravel and tilts down into Lake County very steeply. Its name changes too, to Western Mine Road.

Riding through on Western Mine commits a cyclist to a long, hard loop. For years, the Santa Rosa Cycling Club offered an annual ride called the Clear Lake Double Metric that did just that, with a start/finish in Healdsburg. As the name implies, it took 125 miles to close the loop and most of that was hard friggin' work.

If we weren't up for something that hard, we would occasionally ride to the summit, where the pavement ends, take a break, and then turn around and head back down the hill. This is what I did on a cold December Saturday recently. I parked my car at

San Miguel School, north of Santa Rosa, and rode out Faught and Chalk Hill to Hwy 128, then south to Ida Clayton. With a little bonus loop in Knights Valley, it was a bit over 50 miles. Just about right for a nippy winter day.

The big challenge is the main climb, which of course becomes the big payback on the return trip. According to Ride With GPS, it's exactly four miles at an average of 8.4%, with the steepest pitches around 13%. That's not the hardest climb you've ever done, but it is serious work, lasting most of an hour (at least at my tempo).

Once the main climb is done, there is a pleasant level cruise for about three miles, all in a forest that does a passable New England fall color display in November. (It was just at the tail end of that seasonal turning when I rode it.) And then, finally, there is another, shorter climb to the tippy-top summit. While the big climb has been paved beautifully, I am sorry to report that, about halfway through the level traverse, they packed up their paving stuff and went home. The last bit up to the last summit still has the atrocious pavement of yore.

That's a little puzzling: why go to all the trouble to pave the first six miles and leave the last two in their same sorry old shape? But what's even more puzzling is why they paved this road at all. Mind you, I'm not complaining! The new asphalt is faultless...asphalt-



Bikes and Dogs

less? Even climbing is easier with such a smooth surface: you can tap out a nice, steady cadence without lumping and bumping through potholes and patches. But of course the marquee attraction is the descent back to the valley...hoowheee! Serious gravity candy!

But with all the roads around the county needing attention, why the public works folks chose this very out-of-the-way road for an expensive makeover is... odd. I mean, it almost literally goes nowhere, and there are probably no more than a dozen driveways off the road in eight miles. Doesn't exactly seem like a high priority. This is not the first time they've elected to pave some remote roads (but ones cyclists love). Cavedale and Lichau and Schultz are another few back-country byways that surprised us when they were repaved but that we all were happy to have resurfaced.

The other thing that occurred just about the time I heard about Ida Clayton was that my biking pal Charles Beck sent me an e-mail with a jpg attached of a painting he had done. Charles, in addition to being an excellent cyclist and all-around nice guy, is an excellent painter, mostly of North Bay landscapes...often the hills around his home on Joy Road, above Occidental. You can visit his website and see for yourself: <http://artofcharlesbeck.com/>

Anyway, what was the subject of this new painting? Ida Clayton and nearby Mt St Helena (previous page). I replied to his note, reminding him about the two of us doing that Clear Lake Double Metric together at least once, back a few years...what a hard ride it was, but so gloriously beautiful.

He replied and added a bit of hot news: Bittner Road, the really tasty descent near his home and studio, slinking and twisting down to Occidental, has just been paved too. With all the rain we've been having, I haven't had a chance to get out there yet. But it's on my to-do list. (PS: I did it recently: sweet!)

Whatever bureaucratic voodoo Sonoma County is employing to arrange its paving priorities, the results are looking good for back road biking. I used to piss and moan about how lousy the roads were in this region, but over the past few years, my, how things have changed. There are still quite a few lumpy old roads out there but not nearly as many as there used to be. Ida Clayton and Bittner are just a couple of the many roads that got spiffed up this year, and reports in the local paper say much more is planned for next year. Keep it up! Every mile of new pavement just makes riding in Sonoma County that much better.

How can it be that I've written 295 of these columns over the past 25 years and have never done one about those sketchy encounters between cyclists and the dogs that love to chase them?

I have mentioned the classic bike-dog interface a couple of times. In one of my earliest columns—*Living Dangerously*—I cited a statistic that 8% of all bike accidents involve dogs. And in my January, 2003 column, I recounted a spectacular crash of my own caused by a dog. But aside from that, nothing, and certainly no single column devoted just to these all-too-common occurrences.



I cannot now recall where I dug up that 8% figure for dog-bike crashes. And now, 25 years later, I have to wonder if it's still even accurate; if it still represents the current state of affairs. Because it seems to me I have fewer encounters with dogs than I used to have, thanks, presumably, to better enforcement of leash laws and to a general shift in society's attitude toward loose dogs.

It's a bit like the paradigm shift we experienced with smoking: look back at all those classic movies, where the ritual of lighting up and puffing out smoke rings was an essential, unquestioned facet of everyday life. It was that way when I was growing up. I can recall my father lighting up an after-dinner cigar...in an upscale restaurant...in the 1970s. Now? The poor nicotine addicts have to huddle in doorways, like street people, to get their fix.

When I was a kid, on the suburban fringe of Portland, dogs were absolutely free-range. They roamed everywhere, often in packs. Some were friendly but others

were downright frightening. My own dog—a Samoyed Husky—chased down a cyclist right in front of our house and knocked him off his bike. The dog ended up with a dislocated shoulder. Did that teach her a lesson? All it did was bank a fire of hatred and vengeance for that poor paper boy, so that she chased him every time she saw him. Did we tie her up or put her in her kennel? Some of the time we did; other times she was loose. No one thought anything of loose dogs or of dogs chasing bikes or the milk man or the garbage man or the mail man. That was just the way it was.

Now, just about any loose dog is cause for upset and censure. People will catch them and take them to the dog pound—excuse me: the animal shelter—or call the pound to come and get them...put them on the pound's equivalent of Death Row unless the owners can be found (and fined).

I can't prove this with any hard numbers, but my subjective impression is that we don't have nearly as many of the potentially ugly encounters with our canine companions as we used to have...incidents like the one I described in that 2003 piece.

But I've been riding adult road bikes since 1966 and tooling around Sonoma County since 1983, and that is long enough ago that loose dogs were still the rule, rather than the exception. I have only ever had that one really violent crash caused by a dog—the one recounted in that 2003 column—and that wasn't even a case of the dog chasing or attacking me.

If you don't dig up that 2003 column, I'll give you the thumbnail account of it. I was out riding with my teen-age son. I had just finished saying to him, "Sooner or later, you will have a run-in with a dog, etc."...when I came around a fast, downhill corner and a big golden lab shot out through a gap in a roadside hedge and went right under my front wheel. Big front somersault and all sorts of extravagant mayhem.

(My son was behind me and had a front-row seat for the whole fandango.) In spite of how bad it must have looked, I was almost entirely unhurt. Just one small patch of road rash and a busted helmet that saved my noggin. My new bike was trashed but we followed the dog home—he appeared unhurt—and his people's homeowner's insurance more or less paid for a new bike.

I've had many other encounters with dogs that were not so blameless as the one in that collision...dogs that had malicious intent...dogs that either wanted to rip me apart or simply wanted to chase me away from their turf: some sort of guard-dog imperative. Under that heading, I can say I was once bitten by a big dog, enough to draw blood. But I was trespassing at the time—riding a private road—and I don't hold it against the dog for doing his job as he felt it needed to be done. But many other dogs being aggressive, out on public roads? No...not acceptable.

Some of the dog-sagas have been more humorous than anything else. There used to be a Jack Russell terrier that would race down his driveway to chase us every time we went by (on a road we used often so this happened over and over). The problem (for the feisty little dog) was that he was on a chain that stretched to just about the foot of the driveway. He'd come pelting down the drive at full speed...then hit the end of the chain and just about pop his head off when the chain



went taut. Time after time, he never seemed to learn... the furious dash, the chain pulled tight, and four little paws flying in the air. He's gone now. The driveway is empty. Perhaps he lived out his full span of years or perhaps he finally broke his little neck with one charge too many.

Some dogs live up to the mythic image of the courageous fighter, saving their people from a bear or a wild boar or a cougar. But others are gutless cowards. If you try to outrun them, they'll chase you. But if you go at them, they back down. I recall one big hound up on Westside Road: I could see him setting us up as our group of riders approached, getting the angle of attack just right. So I jumped out of the saddle and sprinted right at him, barking like the biggest, baddest dog in town. He was so astonished! He tucked his tail down and took off as fast as his legs would carry him. The guys I was riding with were quite impressed. I guessed lucky that time. With another dog on another day, who knows?

I was chased once by a very determined pit bull. I did not confront that one. I sprinted off at the best pace I could manage, heading into a mild uphill. That damn dog just would not quit, I could hear him behind me, huffing and puffing and growling, the paws slapping the pavement. I was absolutely maxxed out, with him just a few feet behind me, halfway up a half-mile hill. I was considering hopping off and smashing him over the head with my bike when he finally gave up and went back home. I've had several other dogs run with me uphill, not to catch me but just to lollop along beside me..."Hey! Hey! Hey! Isn't this fun?"

The stories are endless, but for me at least, they do seem to be mostly in the past (knock wood). I hope this is the case and not just my subjective but perhaps mistaken observation. I hope my old stat of 8% is now down to 5% or so. Even 1% is too much, but as long as folks keep having dogs—man's best friend—we can expect the occasional close encounter of the canine kind. Just not so many, okay?

What if...

Does the name Michael Shermer ring a bell for you? If you've been around cycling long enough, it might. He was just one of four competitors, along with Lon Haldeman, John Howard, and John Marino, in the first Great American Bike Race in 1982. The GABR was subsequently rebranded as the Race Across America... RAAM. Shermer is still around and has had a busy and interesting life since his days as an ultramarathon cyclist. Among other things, he currently publishes a magazine called *The Skeptic*, dedicated to investigating and, usually, debunking pseudoscience and irrational religious beliefs. (I'll bet they're having fun with the MAGA/QAnon crowd!) I don't subscribe to their magazine, although I do subscribe to their skepticism...but recently a friend sent me a copy of one article Shermer had written that really whapped me over the head. Here are the first two paragraphs of that piece...

How do lives turn out as they do? Is it genes or environment or some combination thereof? It is both, of course, but there is something more at work, and that is contingency—a conjuncture of events occurring without design. Contingencies are the sometimes small, apparently insignificant, and usually unexpected events of life that have outsized effects. You zipped instead of zagged. You went left instead of right. You went to the party instead of staying home. You took this job instead of that job. You married this person instead of that person.

After the fact, with the hindsight bias fully engaged, it seems so obvious and postdictable as to how and why one's life unfolded as it did. But at the decision tree bifurcation point—the garden of forking paths, as Jorge Luis Borges titled his short novel—who knows what is to come next? Such stories of apparently random and unpredictable events are typically presented as rare and exceptional, but in fact I suspect they are so common as to make contingency a force in life as potent as genes and environment, and thus worthy of consideration not only by social scientists, but by biographers, autobiographers, memoirists, and historians.

My desktop dictionary defines "contingency" as "a future event or circumstance which is possible but cannot be predicted with certainty...the absence of certainty in events." Following along this road soon finds us in the deep philosophical waters of determin-

ism, predestination, free will...the Fickle Finger of Fate, good luck, bad luck, making your own luck... nature versus nurture...playing the cards you've been dealt. On and on: a dizzy dive to make your head spin. But as murky as this might seem, I think skeptical Mike is onto something here. What it is ain't exactly clear, but if you cast your mind back over your own cycling adventures, I think you will recall an almost bottomless well of incidents where tiny shifts in time or place made huge differences to you...perhaps even life-or-death differences.

A few cases in point from my own cycling life...

- Five of us had stopped along a country road for a munchie break. We started riding again and five minutes later a large pick-up truck, going way over the speed limit, out of control, flew off the road just 20 feet ahead of us. Had we left that break five or so seconds sooner, we would have been right where the truck careened off the road. We would have all been wiped out...killed or maimed.
- A club ride—20 riders?—had taken a rest stop at a store in Napa. We left together and maybe ten minutes later, an Acura slid across the road towards us, on its roof, at maybe 50 mph. It slid right across both lanes, across the shoulder just in front of us, and ended up on its roof in the ditch. Turns out the driver had been racing a buddy in another car and had lost it in a curve. Had we left that rest stop maybe 15 seconds before we did, this upside-down car would have plowed right through our group.
- On a blustery day, I was riding slowly over the little summit on Martinelli Road, west of Forestville, when, just 20 yards ahead of me, a mature oak tree simply toppled over into the road, smashing down across both lanes, taking all the overhead wires with it on its way down. Never made a sound until it hit the road. Had I been a few seconds further up the hill, it would have nailed me.

I could, without really trying, list another dozen moments where a few yards or a few seconds would have changed everything. We were there—where we were, when we were—and this or that did or did not happen. Or something happened and we just missed it...or we didn't miss it. Sometimes we dodge the disaster and other times not...

- I had heard there was brand new pavement on Lawndale and Schultz Roads, over by Kenwood. I put together a ride to go out and sample that tasty new tar.

I had initially planned to ride south on Hwy 12 into Kenwood and take Warm Springs to the south end of Lawndale. But at the last second, I decided to turn onto the north end of Lawndale, off Hwy 12. Just a few minutes later, I had a head-on collision with a truck on Schultz, coming around a blind corner in my lane. Had I stuck to my original route, I would not have met that truck, with a destroyed bike and several broken bones to show for it.

My only other car-bike wreck was in May, 2012, on Wright Road on the western edge of Santa Rosa. I won't try to make the case that there was some spooky confluence of events that put me in front of that BMW, although of course there was: all the movements and decisions made by me and by the driver that got us to that spot at the same time. Spooky or not, when I reported on the wreck in one of these columns, I paraphrased the old Dr John song: "I was on the Wright Road, but it must have been the wrong time." They say timing is everything. It often seems that way.

The world is a vast and messy game board. We roll the dice and hop three or six spots up the way and...what? We land on Go to Jail or we are rewarded with some bonus. When good things happen, we call it serendipity: "the occurrence and development of events by chance in a happy or beneficial way." If things go bad, we might call it Murphy's Law: "Anything that can go wrong will go wrong, and often at the worst possible time." Or we might simply say, Shit Happens!

All of this uncertainty and luck and destiny...it seems somehow especially relevant for cycling. Suppose for a moment you have elected to withdraw from the hurly burly of the world. You have locked yourself into your home. You have enough money so you don't need to work or venture out. You have your groceries delivered. You watch TV or YouTube or you read books on your Kindle. You live in a small, one-story home (no stairs to fall down). In short, you engage in no activity that might put you in any danger, never mind what a mind-numbing, boring life that might be. But at least your exposure to the vagaries of that jungle out there is minimized as much as possible. In contrast to that, as we so often reflect, the act of cycling gets us out into that real, messy world, with all its presumptive risks and rewards. We are little moving pieces in a vast, complex time-space matrix, dancing around with a zillion other moving pieces, most of them bigger and heavier and harder than we are.

We do have free will. We do make choices, and some

of them ratchet up the risk: pushing the limits on a downhill; dodging through traffic like a bike messenger; checking our phones while riding... But over and above and below and around our choices are other variables which are all beyond our reckoning or control. Depending on how cautious or reckless we each may be, we make what allowances we can for the wild cards out there, from traffic to broken glass to black ice. We choose to leave the rest stop when we do. We choose to turn onto this road instead of that one. But all of our planning and prudence only account for a tiny fraction of all the curve balls that might affect us, or, as folks say today, that might impact us, as in the impact of being hit by a truck.

So where am I going with this? I'll tell you this much: I do not believe in some higher power that is orchestrating all this. Remember the woman mountain biker who was attacked by a mountain lion, and then two other riders beat on the lion until it ran off? She said: "I believe Jesus was looking out for me!" Hey, if Jesus was looking out for you, would he have let the lion jump you in the first place? No. I try not to use words like capricious when describing the random nature of events: the tornado that turns one house into matchsticks and leaves the one next door untouched; the landslide that takes out one house and not the one 20 feet away. There is no caprice involved...no sense of malicious or capricious intent. Those are just the uncertain, unexpected contingencies that make our world so...interesting.

Contingency is such a modest, unloaded word for this vast tapestry of chance. We control the few variables we can but, in the end, we have to be reverently humble in acknowledging that most of what goes on out there is beyond us. Staying alert and in the moment is probably the best we can hope for in steering clear of trouble, or steering toward better prospects.

This column has gone on long enough already but I need to pass along one more story. It's not even a cycling story. But it does bear on those moments when life bends one way or another and what may have seemed insignificant at the time ends up being vitally important. So bear with me. You might enjoy it. There is one line in Shermer's first paragraph that really jumped out at me: "You went to the party instead of staying home." Oh yeah...

This story happens in the first weekend of June, 1970, in Bolinas. On Friday, I broke up with someone I'd been living with for over four years. For the first time

in all those years, I was single, able to make my own decisions as to where to go and who to see without having to enter into consultation and negotiation with another person. I didn't get much sleep on Saturday night—working a night shift—and on Sunday morning I was a bit foggy and tired.

I had been invited to a Sunday afternoon party at a neighbor's place. This wasn't a fancy party heralded by a formal, printed invitation with an RSVP at the bottom. I didn't really know the people all that well. I think I may have just run into the guy on the street and he said, "Hey, we're having some folks over on Sunday afternoon...c'mon by if you feel like it." I wasn't all that sure that I did feel like it. I was tired. I might have just gone for a walk on the beach. I might have taken my canoe out for a paddle around Bolinas Lagoon. I might have smoked a joint and listened to music. Or, most likely, I might have just flopped down on my bed for a nap, catching up on that lost sleep.

But in the end...what the heck...I got on my bike and rode out to Agate Beach for the party. When I walked into the kitchen, I saw an interesting looking lady sitting at the table: Nancy. I immediately sat down with her and we spent the next hour bonding...drilling into one another. Kismet. Fated to be mated. She was up visiting from Los Angeles and someone had dragged her out to this party, where she knew no one. Later that evening, she flew back to LA, and on the plane sat next to a guy named Barry. They got acquainted and kept up the friendship in LA.

Two weeks later, Nancy came back to Bolinas to visit me. A few months after that, we were married. And then, a few months after the wedding, she was dead, taken out by a sudden and aggressive cancer. But before she became too sick to travel, we had driven down to LA to meet some of her friends and family. These included airplane Barry and his girlfriend, Kathy, a recent graduate of UCSB.

After Nancy died, Kathy and I started writing to each other. We were getting to know and to like one another. Among other news, she let me know she had parted ways with Barry. I urged her to come up to Bolinas for a visit. She did so, 51 years ago this month. I came home from an afternoon of tennis and found her asleep in my bed. We've been together ever since.

To say that Kathy has been the best thing that ever happened to me would be a serious understatement. She has made me a better person. We complete one another, and the sum of our lives together is so much

greater than each of our lives alone might have been. So...I went to the party instead of staying home. I was sooooo close to not going to that party. So close.

I think of our two children, Robyn and Evan. I think of our three granddaughters, Lila, Simone, and Augusta. They owe their very existence to the fact that I did in the end choose to ride my bike out to that party. And that Nancy was brought to the party. And that she met Barry on the plane that same day. And that Barry's girlfriend was Kathy. And that I was free, for the first time in years, to attend the party without a partner attached to me. All on one weekend in June. When I think about NOT attending the party...staying home, taking a nap, whatever... It absolutely terrifies me: what I would have missed.



Kathy at home, Bolinas; Spring, 1973

Contingencies...little wrinkles in the fabric of life. Forks in the road, some turnings of our choosing and some that are mysteriously chosen for us by whatever that force is we call Fate. I think of Robert Frost's poem:

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

Well, you know what Yogi Berra said about that: "When you come to a fork in the road, pick it up!"

April, 2024 • 298

April = Wildflowers

Sooner or later, almost every year, right around now, I will fall back on one of my favorite old topics: Spring-time! Kissing Winter goodbye and rejoicing in the changing seasons and the improving weather...the temps going up and the rainfall not coming down and all that implies for our cycling lives. I might jump on it as early as February, if it's one of those too-soon false summits of weather wonderfulness we get some years. Or perhaps as late as May, if other topics have kept me occupied until then. But I rarely let a year go by without beating this drum. I just can't help myself. It's my favorite time of the year.

One of the things I like best about the season is the arrival of the wildflowers, waking up from their long winter's nap, popping their pretty heads up and populating the meadows and hillsides with their colorful confetti. I haven't heard any supposedly smart people talking about this on the news yet, but I have to think this is going to be a great year for the blossoms...perhaps a superbloom. We're into it already and it's only going to get better for the next couple of months. In our neck of the woods—the North Bay—March, April, and May are prime time for wildflowers...especially April.



I saw my first California poppies of the year on March 16, out along Marsh Road, south of Valley Ford, during the annual Apple Cider Century. Someone this year suggested a "cider" ride should be in the fall, and I guess I'd have to agree. (I created this ride 31 years ago and named it in honor of the gravenstein orchards that used to surround Sebastopol, where the ride starts and finishes.) But the name Apple Blossom was already taken for the town's annual festival, held in



April, celebrating the orchards and the agricultural industry that prompted boosters, back in the day, to dub the region The Gravenstein Capitol of the World. Most of those orchards are gone now, replaced by pinot noir vineyards, and we just learned the last of the apple-processing plants is moving out of the area. There just aren't enough apples being grown here anymore to support the plant. When I was first riding here, in the early '80s, the blooming of the apples in April was one of the highlights of the year...pink-and-white popcorn covering every tree, almost anywhere you looked.

But I digress...

I saw my first blue sky lupine on March 21—the Vernal Equinox—along Westside Road. That ride, a humble little Thursday jaunt up to Healdsburg and back, was so staggeringly gorgeous, with the yellow mustard and oxalis in the vineyards, the lupine putting in their first appearance, purple owl's clover, and those little orange and white mini-daisies whose names I never manage to remember...not to mention the grasses as green as Ireland. It felt like riding in a dream, or perhaps in a movie where the cinematographer has put some clever filters on the cameras to make everything super intense...lucid, luminous, numinous...

One of the best North Bay locales for wildflowers in April is Pope Valley and Pope Canyon (above), out on the far side, the quiet side, of Napa County. It isn't always a knock-your-socks-off spectacular, every April, but even in a weak year, it will still be a good show. And when

it's really cranking, it is sensational. Make plans to do a ride out that way this month.

And speaking of making plans for April, have you ever done the Chico Velo Wildflower Century (April 27)? It's a great ride, and it deserves its "wildflower" name. In a good year, the blooms along Cherokee Road on Table Mountain are amazing (below)...worth whatever effort it takes to get up there. Chico is a fun town on the weekend of the Wildflower. Cyclists everywhere, cruising the streets, in the many excellent restaurants, and hangin' out at the ice cream parlor after dinner.

But you won't have to hop in your car and drive to Chico or even to Napa to revel in the wildflowers this month. They'll be out there along every country road, anywhere you look, from Chileno Valley to Knights Valley; from San Geronimo Valley to Alhambra Valley. You do have to look though. Don't be so focused on your cyclometer or your powertap or whatever data has you in its thrall that you forget to notice the great show Mother Nature is putting on all around you. You only get so many springtimes in this life; don't let this one slide by unnoticed.



Who? What? Where? When?

If this is May, it must be time for my annual review of the Euro-pro racing season as it has played out so far, over the late-Winter and early-Spring months: who has done what? And what might it tell us about the prime-time races ahead, with the Giro beginning just five days after this column hits the street.

I just reread my May column from last year to sort of limber up my mind for this task. That column was long...perhaps too long for any but the most manic fans. I said I wasn't going to cover every race but I ended up mentioning most of them, both stage races and one-days. I hope to go on a bit of a diet this time around and skip some of that minutiae.

One way I hope to trim things down is by focusing on just a few riders: the ones we think of as the biggest stars with the best prospects for good results in the months ahead. What have they done so far that makes us think they're in good form? Or not.

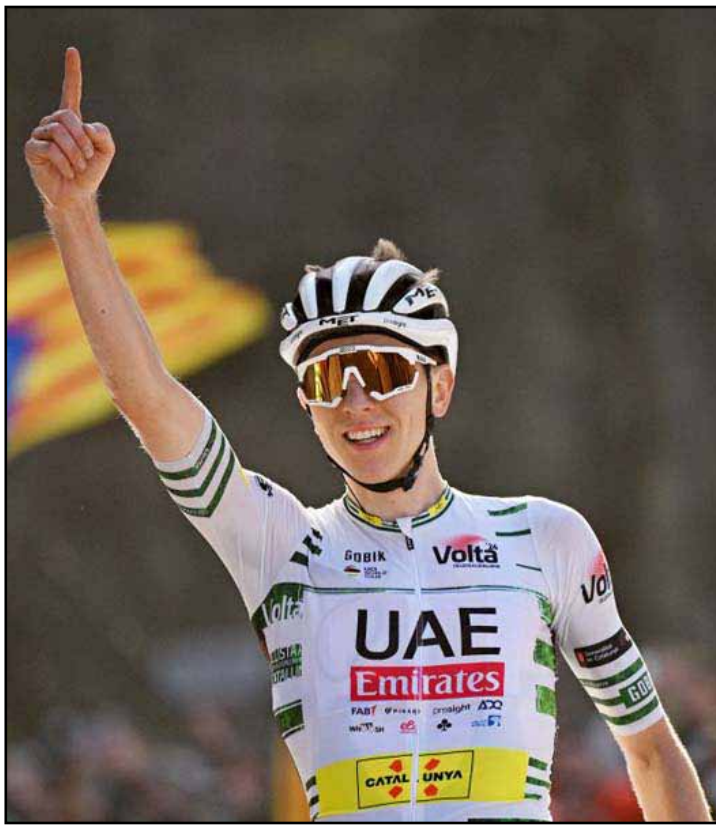
But before I get to the big boys, I want to tip the old chapeau to Matteo Jorgensen (below), the 24-year old American with Team Visma. He rather improbably won Paris-Nice, the prestigious 8-stage race in early March. There was not much to suggest such a win in his rather sparse *palmarés*, aside from 2nd overall at last year's Tour de Romandie. He pulled it off with strong performances on the final three stages. He backed that up with a win at the one-day race, Dwars door Vlanderen, on March 27. He attacked out of a five-rider break with seven K to go and made it stick. At 6'3"



and 154 lbs, he's built somewhat along the lines of his famous teammate Wout Van Aert. (Van Aert crashed badly at this race and that put a serious crimp in his Spring season.) Jorgensen may never fill Van Aert's shoes but these were impressive victories against top-tier competition. Nothing minor-league about them.



Also: Matthieu van der Poel (Alpecin-Deceuninck) (above). Just as he was on my list of top riders for 2023, he is again my only one-day classics rider to get a mention this spring. After tearing up the Winter cyclocross season again—14 wins, including the World Championship (for the sixth time)—he hit the ground running for the road racing season. He won the E3 Saxo Classic on March 22 with a 44-K solo breakaway. Two days later, he finished 2nd to Mads Pederson (Lidl-Trek) in a two-up sprint at Gent-Wevelgem. A week later, he won the Tour of Flanders (for the third time) after a 45-K solo breakaway. Two weeks after that, another win at another Monument: Paris-Roubaix (for the second time) after a 10-K breakaway. Finally, 3rd at Liège-Bastogne-Liège on April 21. That's a full season right there, although I doubt we've seen the last of him this year.



On to the big shots. Might as well start at the top: Tadej Pogacar (UAE). The chipper Slovenian has had a successful spring season but one that bears only a hazy resemblance to his 2023 campaign. His calendar last year was jam-packed with races, of which he won almost everything he entered...until he crashed at Liège-Bastogne-Liège and broke his wrist. This year, heading into May, he has only 10 days of racing: three one-day races and the 7-stage Volta Ciclista a Catalunya. On March 2, he won Strade Bianche (for the second time). In 2022, he won with a 42-K solo breakaway; this year, it was an 81-K break. On March 16, he finished 3rd in the sprint at Milano-Sanremo. On April 21, he won la Doyenne—Liège-Bastogne-Liège—with a 32-K solo breakaway. In between those classics was Catalunya. He finished 2nd, equal on time, in the uphill sprint on Stage 1. He won Stages 2, 3, and 6—all mountain finishes. And, just to remind us that he can sprint as well as climb, he won the bunch sprint in Barcelona on the final stage. On the other two sprint stages, he finished with the same time as the winners. (In other words, he finished with the winner's time on every single stage.) The final GC: 3:41 ahead of Mikel Landa and 5:03 ahead of Egan Bernal...big gaps for a 7-stage race. He also won the mountains jersey and the points jersey.

So...four events entered...three firsts and a third. But the big news about Pogacar is that he is entered in the

Giro d'Italia as well as the Tour de France. The competition looks stiff at the TdF but, I have to say, I don't see anyone else entered in the Giro who is quite at his current level. One might surmise his relatively light early-season schedule was part of a larger plan that includes the Giro.

Next up: Jonas Vingegaard (Team Visma). He opened his account for 2024 the same way he did last year, by almost running the table at the 4-stage O Gran Camiño (February 22-25). He was a tepid 45th in the opening time trial—I don't know why he was so slow: no crash or mechanical—but then won the other three stages, all hilly finishes. Final classification: Lenny Martinez (FDJ) at 1:55 and Egan Bernal (INEOS) at 2:11. He also won the mountains and points jerseys. From March 3-10, he did Tirreno-Adriatico. He finished 9th in the opening time trial and won the two significant mountain stages, 5 and 6, chased home each day by Juan Ayuso (UAE) and Jai Hindley (BORA-hansgrohe). Final GC: 1:24 ahead of Ayuso and 1:52 ahead of Hindley. Not huge gaps but he looked in control throughout.



That brings us to the 6-stage Tour of the Basque Country (April 1-6). But this chapter of the story is about more than just Vingegaard. If you follow the sport at all, you know what happened. On Stage 4, on a fast descent about 36K from the finish, there was a mass crash in a corner. Several "important" riders were involved, including Vingegaard, Primož Roglič (BORA), and Remco Evenepoel (Soudal-QuickStep). It was a nasty wreck, with big boulders and a deep concrete culvert right where all the bodies flew off the road. Vingegaard got the worst of it: a fractured collarbone, fractured ribs, and a collapsed lung. That put a halt to his Spring campaign. However, they say he is mend-



ing well and should be ready for racing again by the Dauphiné in June and the TdF in July.

Remco Evenepoel has also had a fairly light but productive schedule this Spring. On February 2, he won a rather obscure one-day race in Portugal—Figueira Champions Classic—with a 51-K solo breakaway. He won the 5-stage Volta ao Algarve (February 14-18). He finished 2nd but equal on time to Dani Martinez (BORA) on the two uphill finishes—Stages 2 and 5—but he beat Martinez and everyone else in the ITT on Stage 4. He finished 2nd, :30 behind Jorgensen at Paris-Nice. While Jorgensen was clawing his way up the leaderboard over the final stages, Evenepoel was tagging along right behind him. On the final stage, Evenepoel went off on one of his patented solo breaks,

but this time Jorgensen stuck to him like glue and they finished together. Remco got the stage win but Matteo got the overall.

And then he crashed out at the Basque Country. He sustained a fractured collarbone and a fractured scapula (shoulder blade). He is also expected to be ready for the Dauphiné and the Tour de France.

Primoz Roglic is the only one of the Big Four to have a wimpy 2024 program thus far. His first race of the season was Paris-Nice and he didn't do much. He was kinda, sorta in the mix up to the final day, in 6th place at 1:21. But he suffered what appeared to be a classic bonk on the final stage, finishing in 17th place, 4:04 off the lead, which

dropped him to a feeble 10th in the final overall, well off the pace and, notably, a good distance behind his own teammate Alexandr Vlasov. His only other race was the Basque Country. He won the time trial on the first stage, in spite of missing a turn and briefly going off-course. He was :11 ahead of Evenepoel and :15 ahead of Vingegaard. I'm thinking, "there's that old Primoz we know so well!" But then he also crashed in that hot mess on Stage 4. He didn't break any bones but was banged up enough to have to abandon. He's supposedly in better shape, recovery-wise, than either Vingegaard or Evenepoel. He had better be, considering his rather anemic early-season form. He too is slated to ride the Dauphiné and TdF.

The stages for the Giro look fascinating, with a bunch of new summit finishes I don't know much about. Not a single out-of-category climb anywhere but lots of Cat 2 and Cat 1 challenges and two serious time trials: a longer, conventional one and a shorter one with a wicked uphill finish. The first significant mountain finish is on Stage 2, so they're not wasting any time in getting after it. Bring it on! May,



The Happy Assassin

He's back! That cheerful young man from Komenda, Slovenia: Mr T. Pogacar (UAE). Boy howdy, is he back. You'd have to have been living on the dark side of the moon to not know what he did at the recently concluded Giro d'Italia. Of course he won, as expected. But how he won was even more impressive than most folks anticipated.

I said last month that I didn't see anyone else entered in the Giro who was quite at his level. For once, I made an accurate prediction. His two most likely rivals were Dani Martinez (BORA-hansgrohe) and Geraint Thomas (INEOS). That proved out. But the margin of victory over Martinez, in 2nd, was 9:56, and over Thomas, in 3rd, 10:24. We have to go all the way back to 1965—60 years!—to find a wider gap between 1st and 2nd. Pogacar was simply riding in a race of his own...marching to a different drummer.

Along the way, he won six stages, matching the record set by Eddy Merckx in 1973. He wore the *maglia rosa* for 20 straight stages—all but Stage 1—breaking Jacques Anquetil's 1960 record of being in pink for 18 stages.

He could quite easily have won a couple more stages. He could have won Stage 1 and had the jersey for the whole Giro. He was 3rd but equal on time on that stage, joining a late 3-rider attack that put some distance between him and any other GC riders who entertained even the slimmest delusional fantasies of contending for the overall...20 seconds ahead of all his probable rivals right out of the gate. (Last year's final margin of victory after 21 stages was 14 seconds...Pogacar had more than that after one stage.)

He beat Filippo Ganna in the first time trial on Stage 7 by :17. Ganna (INEOS) is arguably the best time trial rider in the world right now. He caught and passed three riders who started ahead of him. And he still lost to Pogacar. Granted, it had a stiff uphill finish, which favored Pogacar. In the second, flatter ITT on Stage 14, Ganna beat Pogacar by :29. It might be a stretch to assert that he could have won that stage, but any minor flub by Ganna and it could have happened.

He won uphill finishes on Stages 2, 8, 15, and 16. He also won Stage 20, dropping his rivals on the two monster ascents over Monte Grappa before a long solo descent to the finish. The other two uphill finishes

of the tour were won out of breakaways, although he still finished 2nd on one of them and probably could have won if he'd wanted to be greedy. On the other, he finished with the same time as Martinez and Thomas, ahead of all the other hopefuls. In other words, throughout the entire Giro, he never conceded a single second to any other serious GC contender.

Aside from the overall dominance, what stands out is how easy he made it look. We know it wasn't easy for him. He was working hard. But his version of working hard bears only a vague resemblance to the way the other riders were working hard. He looked comfortable, cheerful, unruffled...often with a smile and a wave to the *tifosi*, even in the middle of dicey downhill. How can anyone not like this guy?

One of my favorite moments was at the finish of Stage 16. Pogacar had reeled in breakaway rider Giulio Pellizzari (a neo-pro, just 20 years old) right near the end and beat him by :16. Pogacar waited for the kid to come in and congratulated—or consoled—him. Pellizzari asked Pogacar for his pink sunglasses and Pogacar not only gave him the glasses, he stripped off his pink jersey and gave him that as well. Pellizzari doesn't have a single pro race win yet but he now has something almost better to frame and hang on the wall of his den.

So there you go...a Giro that will be remembered not for nail-biting, edge-of-the-seat tension but for a display of cycling excellence so superior, we haven't seen anything like it in almost

a lifetime. For sure, the level of competition was not as stout as we might have liked, but that is sometimes the way the cards are dealt. And for sure again, the competition ought to be much more challenging at the Tour de France in July, when Pogacar tries for the elusive Giro-Tour double. If Jonas Vingegaard (Visma), Remco Evenepoel (Soudal-QuickStep), and Primož Roglič (BORA-hansgrohe) are all there and all recovered from their Basque Country injuries, it could be one helluva battle.

I will be watching *le Tour* avidly to see how it all transpires. But don't expect me to follow up with one of my usual post-Tour reviews because this is my final *On the Road* column (see page 1).

