

Flanders Is Racing, Racing Is Flanders

Cycle Racing as a National Sport

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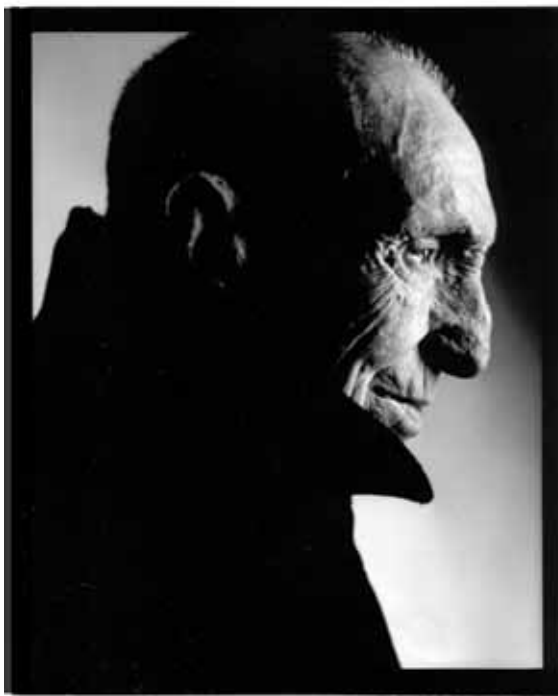
[PATRICK CORNILLIE]

It was hardly more than thirty-five years ago, but what seems perfectly normal today was still a rarity back then. In the small village of Erpe-Mere, somewhere in East Flanders, an American appeared at the registration table for a junior cycle race. He was a lad of seventeen from Washoe Valley, Nevada. As soon as the starting pistol was fired, he moved to the head of the peloton. The spectators watched, amused, and shrugged: 'Ach, another foreigner who thinks he can race. And from the United States, too, where cycling means nothing at all to people...' But in the second lap the Yankee was still in the lead; at a later stage none of the other competitors could keep up with him and, after a solo of sixty kilometres, he won the race by six minutes. In the weeks that followed, the lad proved his skill in a succession of Flemish villages, with the same scenario each time.

The young American was extremely fast – that was a fact. All he now needed to do was refine his brute strength, hone his tactical skills, and familiarize himself with the traditions and culture of cycle racing. He learned fast. The next summer, as a junior, he became world champion, an achievement that he repeated as a professional – at the age of 22 and as the first non-European to do so. His name: Greg LeMond. In 1986 he was also the first non-European to win the Tour de France.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s LeMond was not the only American to leave family and friends behind, cross the ocean and throw himself into adventure. Australians and Canadians followed in his footsteps – and one or two cyclists from New Zealand and South Africa. They were Phil Anderson and Alan Peiper, Davis Phinney and Jonathan Boyer, Steve Bauer and Frankie Andreu, and they descended on host families in Flemish villages such as Marke, Nevele and Gullegem. Later, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, it was Russian, Lithuanian and Ukrainian riders who chose to make Flanders their second home. They had hardly any money, but they did have a bicycle. And a dream – a boy's dream of becoming a champion! They wanted to learn the ropes. And what better place to do that than Flanders, where there is always a race going on somewhere, and where there are good clubs, soigneurs and mechanics. When it comes to cycle racing, Flanders has a rich history, a great tradition.

Albéric 'Briek' Schotte.
Photo by Stephan
Vanfleteren.



Born in France

Among non-Europeans, Flanders is regarded as the birthplace of cycle racing. But that is not actually the case. Even in the invention and development of the bicycle – an essential part of the sport's history – the region played no part whatsoever. That history begins when the 'running machine' (or 'draisine') invented by the German Karl von Drais became a pedal cycle, with pedals on the front wheel, the brainchild of a Frenchman called Michaux. In the mid-19th century the bicycle became a very important status symbol. The first 'sporting demonstrations' took place in 1868 in Parisian parks, as an entertainment for 'le beau monde'.

Nor did Flanders play any part in the chapter in the bicycle's history in which, with the further development of spoked wheels, the heavy and uncomfortable Michaux-type cycles – which still had thick wooden spokes – were replaced by lighter bicycles. It was cycle builders from France (the true birthplace of the bicycle) and England (the country where, at the time, the industrial revolution was most advanced) which brought about this remarkable innovation. The same is true of the bicycle chain (invented by a Frenchman called Guimet and a Briton called Lawson), the inflatable tyre (invented by Dunlop, an Irishman), the easily removable tyre (developed by Michelin, a Frenchman) and, later, the

first experiments with gear mechanisms (refined by Campagnolo, an Italian).

New inventions always generate competition, and this is no less true of the evolution of the bicycle. There were the first 'cycling competitions' with the Michaux, and from 1880 penny-farthing races over short distances were held, often amounting to recklessness. The taste for cycling as a sport blew over from England to Belgium, where it was a phenomenon found only in the cities. Between 1885 and 1890, the 'safety' – or low, safe bicycle – displaced the penny-farthing, and races in parks and along boulevards made way for long-distance races, which were feasible with the new low bicycles. Although the first *Liège-Bastogne-Liège* race was held in 1890, in its early days it was beset by confusion and it did not become an annual race for professionals until 1908. The same was true of the Paris-Brussels race. This first took place in 1893, but it was a whole thirteen years before the second such race was held.

France had progressed much further when it came to organising major cycle races. Before 1900, it was certainly the country where cycle racing enjoyed the greatest popularity. The newspapers saw cyclists as a source of revenue and challenged them to ever greater efforts over ever longer distances. In 1891 they came up with a race that was held every year until 1988, from Bordeaux to Paris: a distance of no less than 600 km. *Paris-Roubaix*, held for the first time in 1896, was initially 'only' a preparatory race for Bordeaux-Paris.

The Lion of Flanders

How far can a person go, how great is his endurance on a bicycle? In 1903, the newspaper *L'Auto* came up with the idea of sending a peloton of daredevils out onto the road for a genuine *Tour de France*, in six stages, over a distance of 2,428 km – a task that was considered impossible. Not only the press, but also the bicycle manufacturers bid strongly against each other. They wanted riders under contract to their companies and were willing to pay up to 3,000 French francs per month – more than a government minister's salary – for the top riders.

At this time, cycle racing still meant very little in Flanders, although a *Fédération Vélocipédique Belge* was founded in 1892, and in 1900 Emile de Beukelaer of Antwerp was elected the first president of the recently established *Union Cycliste Internationale* (UCI). But after a brief resurgence at the end of the 19th century, Belgian cycle racing appears to have slipped into a downward spiral. For a long time the bicycle remained a rich man's toy and, notably, the first Belgian cycling clubs were established mainly in the university cities.

The tide did not turn until after 1900. From a diversion for rich men's sons the bicycle gradually metamorphosed into the symbol of the lower classes' social mobility. At the same time it ceased to be an exclusively urban phenomenon. But this evolution was slow, and the bicycle was far from becoming generally popular. In Flanders, racing was often no more than a fairground attraction. For real cycle racing you had to go to France, where the major races were held and where there was money to be won. A certain Cyriel van Hauwaert, a simple country lad from Moorslede, understood this only too well. In 1906, from just over the border, he watched the finish of the *Paris-Roubaix* race, and saw the frenzied spectators and the hero worship. He wanted to take part in a race like this, no matter what it took. The following year, in spite of French protectionism and chauvinism, he made it to the starting line of the *Paris-Roubaix* race.

Eddy Merckx.
Photo by Stephan Vanfleteren.



And promptly finished in second place. When two weeks later he did even better and actually won the *Bordeaux-Paris* race, there was no stopping him.

The sport of cycle racing thus took root relatively late and slowly in 'poor Flanders', but as soon as the bicycle became affordable for the man in the street, it became the Flemings' top sport. Before long Flanders had more races and better practitioners of the sport than anywhere else. In that respect, 1907 was the year everything changed. Cyriel van Hauwaert was the first Fleming to win an international classic, an achievement that met with an enormous response. Moreover, the following year he added *Milan-San Remo* and *Paris-Roubaix* to his victories. The modest farm hand immediately found himself thousands of francs richer. This appealed to people's imagination, since the daily wage of a farm worker at that time was no more than 1 franc for 15 hours' hard work.

In France, Van Hauwaert was nicknamed 'the Lion of Flanders'. In his own region he became a role model for many others who hoped that the sport would help them, literally, to crawl out of the mud. At the beginning of the 20th century, there were few opportunities to do so. Young men were doomed to a life of 'hard labour' – unless they tried their luck as cyclists. They sought hero status on their metal steeds. A few made it straightaway. They left for the cycle tracks or the Tour de France and came back rich and famous.

The realization that it was possible to cycle one's way to a small fortune, and hence greater esteem, prompted many a factory hand and farm worker to reach for their bicycles. Following in the footsteps of Van Hauwaert, they went

to take part in the major French and Italian races. And they were successful. In 1912, Odiel Defraye of Rumbekke won the first Belgian Tour. This was an enormous boost for the sport in Flanders. What was previously seen as a pastime soon became a professional occupation.

As a result the number of races increased just as quickly. In 1908, inspired by the 'Flemish Lion' Van Hauwaert, a Flemish Championship was held in Kool-skamp. This, in turn, inspired an actual *Tour of Flanders*, established by Karel Van Wijnendaele and held for the first time in 1913. At this time, too, many cycle tracks were built. At one point there were more than 50 in use in Belgium. Well before the Second World War, therefore, track racing was very popular.

There is no conclusive scientific answer to the question of what cycle racing awakened in broad swathes of the Flemish population. But it appears clear that it had a powerful influence on thinking and lifestyles in those days. It was a new topic of conversation for the man in the street, it aroused people's curiosity and it encouraged them to read. Karel Van Wijnendaele founded not only the Tour of Flanders but also *Sportwereld*, which between the wars was the top newspaper for sports fans. In his contributions Van Wijnendaele reinforced and glorified the feeling that racing cyclists are 'gods'. Not infrequently, he would paraphrase the 19th-century writer Hendrik Conscience and let fly with sentences along the lines of: 'If anyone should dare to speak disparagingly of Flanders, tell them of its cyclists, whose achievements leave the world speechless!' He made ordinary men into stars, and that appealed to ordinary people. Someone just like them, a boy from their village or area, became a sporting cyclist and part of a fairytale. On Mondays, when the sports results were published, and during the Tour de France in particular, *Sportwereld* sold like hot cakes – often as many as 120,000 copies per day, phenomenal figures for that time.



Bruno Risi.
Six-day race (Ghent).
Photo by
Stephan Vanfleteren.

A nation enraptured

Interest in a sport grows by grace of its stars, and since that celebrated year of 1907 there has never been any shortage of these in Flanders. Supporters look up to champions. This explains why, although skating is popular in the Netherlands and cross-country skiing in Norway, these disciplines will never be popular in Flanders. There isn't a single Fleming who has achieved anything of note in these sports. But cycle racing is a very different matter. Flanders may not – historically speaking – be 'the birthplace of cycle racing', but with its rapid succession of champions, its many races and enormous public interest, it has become *the land of cycling*.

With Philippe Thys (1913, 1914, 1920), Firmin Lambot (1919, 1922) and Leon Scieur (1921), initially it was the French-speaking Belgians who triumphed in the Tour de France, but thereafter West and East Flanders took command. Lucien Buysse won the Tour in 1926, Maurice De Waele in 1929, Romain Maes in 1935 and Sylvère Maes in 1936 and 1939. Georges Ronsse won the world title two years running (1928, 1929). Before the Second World War Karel Kaers, Jean Aerts, Eloi Meulenberg and Marcel Kint also won the rainbow jersey. They also excelled in the classic races, along with Jules Van Hevel, Gerard Debaets, René Vermandel and Gaston Rebry among others. On the track, too, Flanders has produced top cyclists: Jef Scherens sprinted to the world title every year from 1932 to 1937.

After the German invasion in May 1940, the sport recovered as quickly as it



Nico Verhoeven
(Roubaix). Photo by
Stephan Vanfleteren.

had been disrupted. Rarely has it attracted so many fans as during the Occupation. Cycle racing flourished as never before. Indoor and outdoor cycling tracks attracted mass audiences, thousands sprang to their feet at the spectacular sprints of Poeske Scherens. With the exception of the *Tour of Flanders*, there were no major classics, but all the more town-fair races and criteriums – often with potatoes, butter or bacon as prizes. De 'Witte' Van den Meerschaut, Staf Van Overloop, Georges Claes and Robert Van Eenaeme were the 'big names' in these races.

After the Liberation, when the international cycling calendar returned to normal, the sport remained extraordinarily popular. Although Flemish riders were no longer among the winners of the major races, the likes of Briek Schotte and Rik Van Steenbergen, and later Raymond Impanis, Fred De Bruyne, Germain Derycke and Rik Van Looy were successful in the one-day races. Alberic Schotte became world champion in 1948 in Valkenburg and again in 1950 in Moorslede. Rik Van Steenbergen was a dominant figure for almost 20 years, notching up 3 world titles, a whole series of classics, stages and track-cycling victories. Rik I was succeeded by Rik II (Rik van Looy), the 'Emperor of Herentals'. He won all the great classic races at least once, along with two world titles.

The late 1960s and the 1970s were the heyday of Belgian cycle racing. Walter Godefrout, Herman Vanspringel, Roger De Vlaeminck and Freddy Maertens were among the world leaders in the classics, and Lucien Van Impe shone in the Tour de France. At the same time Patrick Sercu became the undisputed king of the track. Erik de Vlaeminck rode to victory seven times in the world cyclo-cross championship. But the champion of this generation was of course Eddy Merckx, the finest road racer of all time. He became world



Peter Van Petegem
(Kapelmuur,
Geraardsbergen). Photo
by Stephan Vanfleteren.

champion three times, won the *Tour de France* five times, the *Tour of Italy* five times and the *Tour of Spain* once, as well as a record number of classics: *Milan-San Remo* (7x), *Liège-Bastogne-Liège* (5x), *Paris-Roubaix* (3x), *Ghent-Wevelgem* (3x), *La Flèche Wallonne* (3x), the *Tour of Flanders* (2x), the *Tour of Lombardy* (2x) and the *Amstel Gold Race* (2x). In 1972 in Mexico he set a new world record for the hour with 49.431 km. Merckx's achievements held the whole nation entranced.

As far as successes are concerned, Flemish cycle racing had to yield quite some ground after the period of Merckx and Maertens. At the end of the 1990s Johan Museeuw was the only Fleming who could compete with top international cyclists in one-day races. But the supporters continued to enjoy the sport. The number of spectators for the *Tour of Flanders* and other spring races such as the *E3-Prijs Harelbeke* and *Ghent-Wevelgem* grew year after year. At the same time, cyclo-cross in particular enjoyed an enormous 'boom'. The level of public interest was phenomenal, and with Mario De Clercq, Erwin Verweken, Bart Wellens and Sven Nys our country produced one world champion after another. Cyclo-cross is even more of a purely Flemish affair than road racing. In 2009 no fewer than 1.2 million Flemings watched the Belgian cyclo-cross championships on their public broadcasting channel. The Walloon channel *La Deux* attracted only 47,000 viewers. No other sport highlights the differences between Belgium's two communities as strongly as cyclo-cross.

A national religion

Following in the tracks of cyclo-cross, since 2000 road racing has also enjoyed a renaissance. This has everything to do with the successes of Tom Boonen and, recently, Philippe Gilbert. Their popularity takes us back to the great days of Van Looy and Merckx. Boonen became the icon of a trendy generation and has attracted thousands of female supporters to the sport. Gilbert is currently the strongest one-day rider and the Flemish have taken him to their hearts, despite the fact that he is a Walloon. Cycling is still very popular. Politicians, businessmen and professors take to the saddle during weekends and holidays to compete against each other. They are only too keen to ride in the team vehicles during the *Tour de France*. The doggedness of the poor country boy who looked to racing to make a living and a future may have largely disappeared; the people's sport of times gone by may have become commercialised, doping may now be commonplace, but all this has done nothing to diminish the fascination: the sport's accessibility and epic character endure. In Flanders, cycle racing is and will remain a sport for all people from all walks of life. The riders aren't stars you watch from a distance in a stadium or across the width of a court. Cycle racing takes place in the streets. You can get up close to the cyclists, so to speak, even before the start, and ask for an autograph. And as a Fleming you have the advantage that even if the peloton doesn't go past your front door, at least it will regularly pass through your area. Moreover, cycle racing still represents the often lonely and always unequal struggle between the athlete and the elements: the rain and wind, dust and mud, cobbles and hills.

It is difficult to gauge what cycling means to social, socio-economic, sporting and cultural life in Flanders, but during the past century it has undeniably had a great influence on every sphere of existence. The major races have become red-letter days in the calendar, 'festivals' as it were. For a Fleming, the year begins on the day that the first race results are published in the newspapers, and spring is associated with the restless excitement that heralds the start of a new cycle-racing season – the 'resurrection' of the road racer – rather than with the awakening of nature. For a Fleming, Easter no longer means Easter, but the *Tour of Flanders* – it isn't called the 'High Mass of cycling' for nothing. Flanders is racing and racing is Flanders; it seems to have become a 'national religion', full of emotion and devotion, popular adoration and the annual 'pilgrimage' to the sacred places along the route.

Every rider dreams of being adorned with the title of 'Flandrien' in the 'Ronde'. He wants to be identified with the dogged, gruff, resilient worker and warrior from a distant, eroded past.

Time and again, every Fleming becomes passionately intoxicated by the images of Cancellara and Boonen juddering over the cobbles of the Steenbeekdries in the rain. He willingly surrenders to the bacchanal of sweat and snot and spattering mud, becomes intoxicated by the penetrating smell of oiled calves, the thundering mass of the peloton. The Tour of Flanders brings us close to delirium. An estimated 1.5 million people follow the race on television, and almost the same number line the route, cheering the riders on to the finish. This means at least one out of every two Flemings is gripped with cycling fever. Cycle racing remains a heroic activity, a sport that is tailor-made for the Flemings. ■