



A DOG IN A HAT

An American Bike Racer's Story of Mud, Drugs,
Blood, Betrayal, and Beauty in Belgium

Joe Parkin FOREWORD BY **Bob Roll**,
AUTHOR OF *BOBKE II*

A Dog in a Hat

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Blood, Betrayal, and Beauty in Belgium

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Joe Parkin



BOULDER, COLORADO

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To my mom, Nancy, who always understood dreams to be as important as reality and encouraged me to follow mine. And to her father, Ira, one of the most interesting people I ever knew, and perhaps part of the reason she was able to understand me.

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Foreword

I DID TELL JOE PARKIN TO GO TO BELGIUM. I DID NOT, HOWEVER, tell him to stay.

But Joe stayed so long I began to wonder what the hell ever happened to him. Then about five years later I saw him coming toward me on the Schelde canal bike path. Now, you see a lot of cyclists on the canal, but there is no mistaking a profi for any of the beer-bellied supporters or even the desperado amateurs. The profis have an aloofness about their pedaling that shows true disdain for the wind, rain, or effort needed to propel themselves down the road. This rider approaching me at warp speed had all that in spades. He also had the emaciated skeletal silhouette many profis have. In fact, this dude was a wraith, with the gnarly skinny that only European pros possess. When the rider slowed and U-turned in front of me and said, “Oy, Bobke,” I thought it was

FOREWORD

one of the spooky Flemish pros who had been pulverizing me for the majority of my adult life.

The rider said, "*Jongen, ik ben Joo.*"

"Huh?" I said.

"Um" (long pause), "um" (longer pause). "It's Joe Parkin."

"*Holy shit, don't lie!*" I yelled. "Joe! Where have you been?"

"*Hier ... um ... I've been here,*" said Joe.

"Whoa, dude, you scared me," I said.

After much chuckling, Joe explained in a rather cryptic mix of Flemish pro speak and half-remembered English that he was making a good living at kermesses, semiclassics, and smaller stage races.

I said, "Are you insane?"

Joe said, "Maybe," not even half joking.

At this stage in Joe's career, he was a true Vlaamse-man. Joe had gotten himself so deep into the fabric of the Flemish pro life, I feared he might not make it out. But as you can read in this vivid account of the hardships and triumphs of pro racing in Belgium, Joe not only survived but thrived in the toughest of all cycling environments. This is what I saw in Joe when we first met. And this is what I meant when I advised him to abandon the remedial form of four-square crit racing that prevailed in the States in the 1980s.

Joe was no longer the rheumatoid doughy tosser type that ruled Stateside racing in those days. He was an avenging angel of misery and, best of all, not a starry-eyed regional time trial champ with delusions of grandeur about to be sent home in a pain-induced coma after falling asleep in a crosswind battle. No, Joe knew the score. Joe had become the inside skinny. Joe was a twelve-toothed assassin.

What was it in those bleak landscapes that carved the fat off Joe's carcass like vultures around a kill? The weeks, months, and years of isolation in Belgium? The vicious, epic races that were virtually unknown by Americans then but are now part of our own cycling lore? The ancient, semi-illusionary dialect of a downtrodden people who revere cyclists as beacons of hope and cultural pride? The food, the dirty deals, the pig-shit toothpaste, the two-faced team managers, the smoky bars, homicidal teammates, and demented competitors? All these things and many more that you will read carved Joe into a missile of sinew, veins, sunken eyes, narrow shoulders, skinny arms, and huge ass and legs typical of a survivor of the toughest game on two wheels.

You should count yourself lucky to have stumbled across a treasure map from the old country of forgotten dreams and buried riches. In Belgium, bike racing rules, and I am not surprised in the least that Joe Parkin was a Flemish prince.

I have a rather ominous premonition that many a cycling fan will take umbrage with the grittier side of our sport that Joe writes about. If you do, you do not deserve to read this book. For everyone else, you may now read and be enlightened and entertained by the most authentic book ever written about making a two-wheeled living as a pro cyclist in Europe.

—*Bob Roll*



Nobody Else in the Photo

TELLING MY DAD THAT I WAS NOT GOING TO ANNAPOLIS OR ANY other military academy was one thing, since I had justified the decision immediately with the announcement that I was going to chase a U.S. Navy ROTC scholarship. Telling him that I was abandoning this latest goal in favor of a chance to race my bike was quite another. My announcement that I was going to put off college for the foreseeable future to race bicycles in Europe rendered him speechless.

Had it just been my dad, you would not be reading this now because more responsible minds would have prevailed, and I would surely have carted myself off to college, perhaps keeping the bike as an itching hobby. But my mom was there too, and she was my saving grace. My mom is an old soul who, while adhering to many of the strong beliefs and values of her and her parents' generations, sees life as something limited only by one's own imagination. I was born with a healthy dose of imagination, and

she always encouraged me to follow it. The announcement that silenced my dad brought only one dose of reality from my mom: “You’re going to need another job,” she said. “The one you have is not going to get you there.”

I was an eighteen-year-old who was living at home while postponing college. I was working a couple of afternoons a week unpacking and assembling bikes at the California Pedaler, a local shop. Within a week of my mom’s assessment, I was also working part-time at a frozen-yogurt shop and full-time at Burger King making \$5.10 per hour. It was September 1985, and the racing season was more or less over. I figured, based largely upon what I read in *Fodor’s* travel guide, that I would need to come up with an open-ended round-trip airline ticket and about \$3,000. With that much money, I could probably live in a cheap hotel for three months.

I had gotten to know Bob Roll during the season; he lived close by and often hung out at the Pedaler. I’d had the opportunity to ride with him a few times and had seen him race some. From the giddyup, I knew I would like him. When I first met him, I had been in California for only a couple of weeks, and my repertoire of rides was pretty limited. I had just come off a ride up Mount Diablo with my training partner and tour guide, Carlos. We stopped by the Pedaler to see who might be hanging out there for Carlos to talk to.

As we rolled up to the shop, I saw a Basso bicycle leaning against the row of old movie-theater seats by the front door. It was a faded blue and bore the scratches of hard use. There was a sticker on it that indicated something Swiss, making it look even more formidable. Then I saw the tires. At first glance they looked like any other set of well-worn road tires, with the little black streaks all

around that indicated they'd probably seen a rain shower or two. But as I got closer I noticed that there was actually writing on the sidewalls as well. The writing was hard to read; it seemed to have been written with a black ballpoint pen. But after a minute or so, I figured it out: "I was born in a crossfire hurricane. I was raised by a toothless biddy hag. ..." The Rolling Stones lyrics continued. Before I could get to the next song, Bob had come out of the shop and was telling me I should trade my bike for his.

"There's pain and suffering in this bike," he said. "I need to have yours. It's brand new. You should give it to me."

At this point, my tour guide, Carlos, interrupted. "They call him Lobotomy Bob," he said. "His name is Bob Roll, and he's been racing in Europe. He's really fucking strong."

"Cool" was about all I could muster. Carlos, with his Puerto Rican accent and theatrical nature, introducing me to this strange guy in front of this bike shop that had once been a drive-through dairy store, made me feel like a kid who had just been taken to the freak show for the first time. I wasn't sure if I was in the presence of greatness or insanity, but I liked it somehow. I was still new to cycling, having only started racing a bike the summer before my senior year of high school. I'd gotten my racing license and won a couple of races in Minnesota, but I hadn't been quite sure I liked the riders all that much. Their overwhelming need for health and fairness over pure competition confused me. Bob was different. His bike, while clean, was beat to hell. It was a tool that he respected and cared for, but it did not sleep with him. Before I even had a chance to tell him that I planned on keeping my bike, he was back on his and rolling down the street.



I won the 1985 Sausalito Criterium in the Junior category, and Bob won the 1, 2, Pro race. I was having a good day and fairly dominated the race. Bob had just returned from the Giro d'Italia and was riding the local event with his Mug Root Beer team. It was the first year that the 7-Eleven team went to Europe as professionals and rode the Giro, and Bob was still in great shape. He simply destroyed his race. I had had some good races and had received numerous offers to race with the bigger regional teams for the following season, but Bob set me straight.

“Don’t do it,” he warned. “Don’t ride with these guys. Go to Belgium.”

It was probably that night or the night after when I made the announcement to my parents and started making preparations. As luck would have it, there was no international racing (or not much of it) in Belgium until June 1. At that point, all of the small races would open to riders from any part of the world. So the fact that I was working ten hours a day and not really training was not such a big deal.

Nor was it a problem that I would not have the money I needed until the end of March. Bob had given me two names and addresses in Belgium. I wrote two or three letters to Albert Claeys, telling him that I was a friend of Bob Roll, who had recommended that I contact him, and asking if I might be able to rent a room from him. Bob had told me Albert was probably my best opportunity in Belgium because he had been working as a mechanic for the 7-Eleven team in Europe and liked Americans enough that having a young American amateur stay with him and his family might be okay. I never got a response.

On April 10, 1986, I packed as much stuff as I could into a large hockey bag, loaded my bike and a spare set of wheels into a green

nylon bike bag, and took off for the San Francisco airport with my dad. My mom was recovering from surgery, and I had said my good-byes to her earlier that day.

Neither my dad nor I had much to say on the ride to the airport. I was too caught up in the task at hand, and my dad, I later found out from a letter he wrote, was sad to see me go. We allowed a little more time than normal to get me checked in. This flight was taking place in the wake of some terrorist activities, so my dad, who had planned on accompanying me to my departure gate, was not allowed past the security check. While I know now that he wished he could walk me right onto the plane, holding my hand the whole time, I think it was easier on me to have him stopped there. He paused for a minute and then gave me his ultimate offering of respect as he reached out his hand instead of hugging me. It was the handshake he would have offered a colleague.



Fourteen hours later, I was in Brussels, totally worn out. I collected my two bags and made my way through customs. We had been told that because of the terrorist activity, we should get out of the airport as quickly as possible. I made my way to the information desk and was greeted by one of the most beautiful women I ever saw in Belgium. It's quite possible that I was seeing her through jet-lag goggles. Or I may just have been shocked that she was not one of the typically frumpy, sometimes angry help-desk people you see in the States. She was, in fact, awake and alert, with long black hair, and, I realized some time later, was very tan for a Belgian.

She gave me directions, and I humped the ever-increasing weight of my two bags to the train platform. I took the train from Zaventem, the Brussels airport, to the central station. There I boarded a train for Gent and sat in a car that was empty except for one other guy, who was probably a year or two older than I. After a few minutes the conductor came on board and punched my ticket. He and the other guy started arguing in a language that I imagined to be Russian. It occurred to me that it was unlikely that two people on a train in Belgium who didn't know each other would be speaking Russian, but the language sounded so strange to me that I couldn't be sure. I knew that this part of Belgium spoke Flemish, a language I had always believed to be a derivative of French with some German thrown in for good measure. I thought Flemish would sound a lot more like French (which I had studied in school) than this Russian-sounding exchange I was listening to. The argument seemed heated and culminated with the conductor kicking at the guy's feet for some reason.

I got my stuff off the train at Gent's central station and sat for a few minutes on a bench. It was just after noon, and I was tired. My original plan had been to call Mr. Claeys once I'd arrived in Gent, but I was too tired; I'd never make it that far. I felt weak and worthless and just wanted to sleep. I decided the best thing to do would be to find a hotel and get some rest.

Each few steps forward with the two big bags on my shoulders felt like a mile, so I had to stop frequently and rest. In fifteen minutes I made it the whole hundred feet from the bench where I had been sitting to the front of the station. Off to my right I saw what looked like a row of small hotels. Many minutes and several rest stops later, I was in front of the first hotel in the row. I stared at it for a minute and then moved to the next one. By the third

or fourth hotel, I saw several country flags and the appropriate word for “rooms” by each respective flag. I set my bags down and entered the hotel. After I handed over 750 francs (about \$17 at that time), I was given a large metal key fob with an old-fashioned key attached. I found my way to the room and didn’t get out of bed until about 11 the next morning. Four hours and one phone call later, I was in Ursel on the doorstep of Albert Claeys.



It’s fitting in many ways that my first task as a European cyclist was a trip to the doctor. This was long before anybody was talking about drugs in cycling, or at least long before the mainstream media knew about it. Cyclists were talking to each other, and the rumors brought back by Americans who had ventured abroad were horror stories. Ever since I had announced I was going to go to Belgium to give racing a try, I’d been collecting drug warnings like bad pennies. From Nancy Reagan to the guys I had raced against as juniors the year before to the coked-up mechanics at the shop where I hung out and pretended to turn wrenches, everybody was telling me to “just say no.”

My arrival in Ursel could not have been more perfect. It was raining, and there were bike races going on. In my mind, rain, cobblestones, and bike races equal Belgium, then as now. Maybe seeing the country for the first time exactly as I had imagined it helped seal the deal. It was my goal to become a professional cyclist—a Belgian cyclist. I was willing to do almost whatever it took to achieve that goal. Normally a trip to the doctor was something I’d undertake only in an emergency, but my new coach, Albert, insisted. Albert had been around cycling for several years.

He was the son of a pre–World War II champion of Flanders who had won a stage at the Giro d’Italia. He had also been a mechanic for some of the bigger Belgian teams of the ’70s and ’80s. He told me I had to go to the doctor to be tested because, after all, one could not make a racehorse out of a jackass. If the numbers were not good, he would send me packing.

I didn’t even ride my bike before I went to the doctor. We headed off to the appointment, and it was one of the longest forty-five-minute car rides of my life. Despite the fact that I was enjoying the surroundings, the food, and the coffee, I was terrified. I have been arrested on two continents and deported from one country; I have crashed cars, bicycles, motorcycles, and an airplane. But none of these traumatic experiences compares with the sheer horror of this doctor visit.

Given the pass/fail nature of the visit, you’d think I would have been afraid of the results, but that wasn’t the problem. Instead, I was stuck on a ghoulish vision of doctors and their evil syringes bent on stealing the innocence of pure-hearted American cyclists. Seriously, you’d have thought my 148 pounds of shaved-legged youth had just been put on the bus to San Quentin. I was scared to death. The office itself was amazing; it had a collection of equipment that to my 19-year-old mind was more suited to an antiques collection than a doctor’s office. The presiding doctors were a father-and-son team, specializing in sports medicine. True to form, they poked and prodded and asked many questions. Their hands were cold and their sense of humor absent. They could easily have been mistaken for cheap caricatures of themselves. I was a perfect patient, lest they harvest my brains. I was asked to lie on an examining table. Though it was not cold, I found myself shaking like a leaf, as I thought this was where the needles would

come out and the soul-stealing would begin. The senior doctor hooked some leather straps to my wrists and ankles, each with wires connected to a tan steel box. Incredibly, I did not die and no magic potion was injected into my veins, but my trembling didn't stop. Dr. Leinders said something to the other two, who began to laugh and then translated for me that he was chiding himself for having cold hands. It was a nice gesture, but not enough for me to let my guard down.

It was amazing how accurately the doctors' numbers foretold the truth. The rest of the tests that day had to do with how well I would perform as a cyclist for the rest of my career. The good doctors had compiled quite a bit of data on riders and had devised a graph that would put me into a category of cyclist. At the bottom of the list was "Cyclo-tourist" and "Amateur" and then a boundary line signifying "Beroepsrenner" (professional). At the lower end of the professional category was the "Kermis racer" and then "Classics racer," with the top level being "Tour winner." I fell into the category of classics riders, somewhere in the middle of that group.

Had I really understood the significance of the tests (that is, had I been a real Belgian), I would probably have made a lot more money in the sport than I did. If I had grasped the significance of the numbers and been raised in a culture that values a rider finishing alone, his clothing covered in pig shit, as much as one finishing with a celebratory group wearing yellow, things would have been different. I would probably have given up the polka-dotted dream I'd carried with me to Europe, settled into the life of a solid classics journeyman, and reaped the rewards available in Belgium to a pro of that stature. I most definitely would not have stood on the scale three times a day to keep my weight down to

that magical, below-70-kilograms (154 pounds) mark I needed to maintain if I were going to transform myself into the king of the mountains. I am sure I would have learned how to sprint better. One of the truly beautiful things about cycling, however, is the fact that there is no such thing as 20-20 hindsight because there are too many variables. If I had understood and accepted the verdict of the numbers, I might not have given it the shot I gave it. Who knows?



Less than a year later, I was an established Belgian amateur cyclist with several wins to my name. I had placed third in the amateur version of the Het Volk Classic while riding for a local Belgian club. This in itself was amazing because Americans were not allowed on Belgian club teams unless they had official residence in the country. The chicanery that got me into amateur classics in 1987 would have amazed even Johnny Cochran, but incredibly, nobody asked any questions. I was being courted by the pros now. This was the era of Greg LeMond, after all, and an American who could actually pedal a bike through the wind, rain, and cold and understand the native language projected an aura of dollar signs wherever he went.

In Belgium, a good local amateur is like an all-state high school quarterback in Texas. A decent local pro has about the same value as the amateur but lacks the promise of greatness in the future. I was a good amateur who held the American card. I was like the actor who goes after a rock-star fantasy—everyone wants to be there when you rise to the top, but they are just as happy to see you fail miserably.

The main source of income for the Claeys family came from the café Albert and his wife Rita, ran together. It occupied most of the ground floor of the house and was connected to the kitchen where we had our meals. I liked to hang out in the café for as long as I could handle the smoke, and I got to know the regulars pretty well. Before each race I was given advice from any number of local drunks. I was constantly reminded of what to do, what to look for, and what to eat—and above all reminded that I must win. After the race, if I had done well, the beer flowed like a river in the café and the race would be replayed until the last supporter stumbled out to his car, usually in the wee hours of the morning. If the race had not gone well, the story would be entirely different. If I'd managed to screw up, only the most hardcore supporters would come back to the café. There'd be only a couple of these, but they would hang on, getting more and more ornery, outlasting the rest of the customers through sheer anger. It would take almost as long on these bad nights to get the café closed up, but the money brought in would be less by a long shot.



I liked the fact that the pros were looking at me. I had come to Belgium to become one, after all. Albert didn't agree. He felt that I was young enough to give the Olympics a shot before turning pro. The 1988 Summer Olympics in Seoul, South Korea, were quickly approaching, and I was riding well. To get on the U.S. Olympic team, I'd have to be approved by American cycling's governing body, the United States Cycling Federation (USCF), so I started petitioning the USCF coaches for a spot on the National B Team for the amateur Tour of Belgium. That seemed to me to be the

best way to get my foot in the USCF's door. But after numerous attempts and a few hundred dollars' worth of international phone calls, I gave up. I was told that it did not matter what races I had ridden or won; if I wanted to be considered for any U.S. team, I had to return to the States and ride the prescribed course of selection races. Although I felt (and still feel) that this reasoning was idiotic, I was relieved and happy that there was no further reason for me to race as an amateur. I would now be able to get on with what I had set out to do in the first place.

To this day, I have a hard time speaking cycling like an American. I cut my teeth racing in Belgium, so its expressions are the ones that come naturally to me. I think the most beautiful one is "nobody else in the photo," which is the ultimate way to win a race—so far ahead of second place that the only rider pictured in the sports section the next day is the guy who won. My last race as an amateur took place on a circuit nearly identical to the one used for the time trial in the Three Days of de Panne. It was a course that would kick the living hell out of me as a pro, but for this last event as an amateur, it allowed me to finish minutes ahead of second place. There was nobody else in the photo. I signed my first professional cycling contract on July 4, 1987.



With my new Transvemij jersey on my back and my new U.S. Pro Cycling Federation (USPRO) racing license in hand, I headed to a professional kermis race to try out my legs. In many cases the team director will make these races mandatory, but for this race I was on my own. There was another race going on elsewhere, so I didn't expect to see many other Transvemij riders show up.

In Belgium it is illegal to get dressed for a race in or around your car. Amateur racers often knock on doors to find garage space to use as dressing rooms. Pros usually have it better. Either they are invited into the back courtyard of a café or restaurant or they will find themselves in the living room of one of the houses lining the start/finish straight. If you find yourself in one of these houses, it's because you have been brought there as the guest of another pro, and you'll be obliged to go back to that same place year after year. A friend of Albert, a rider by the name of Patrick Versluys, invited me to come along to some old lady's kitchen about 20 yards from the start line. There were two other racers there as well.

The routine for getting ready for a kermis race is painfully comical. Typically the rider will sit down and place a small bath towel in front of the chair for his feet. He'll then start pinning on his number. Once he's made sure all of the pins are pointing the same direction, he'll take off his shirt and start taking inventory of his race gear. He'll probably sit until twenty-five minutes before the start before getting dressed the rest of the way. Whether or not he plans on being "good" for the race, he will not leave for the start line until ten minutes or less before the gun.

In those days, if a rider planned on being "good" for the race, then exactly fifteen minutes before the start a syringe would come out. Some clear liquid would be sucked up into it from any number of different ampoules and injected, either subcutaneously or intravenously. If injected subcutaneously, the substance was usually a low-grade amphetamine. Injecting it this way would create little time-release lumps under the skin that the riders called "*bolleketten*," which basically means "little rocket balls." Depending on the length of the race and/or its importance, a rider might

have as many as four of these little balls hidden under the sleeves of his jersey or legs of his shorts. The shoulder area was the typical spot, since that was an area that might still have some fat on it. If the amphetamines were surgical-quality, the rider would probably shoot them directly into the “canal.” There are plenty of medical preparations that have genuine, legal uses for a cyclist, but as a general rule, anything being shot fifteen minutes before the start of a lesser race can be considered suspect.

Of all the strange stuff I got to see during my career as a racer, one of the strangest was something I saw before that first kermis. One of the guys in the kitchen, a third-year Dutch pro, started getting ready on a slightly different schedule than what I would come to recognize as normal. Versluys and I entered the kitchen about an hour before the race was to start, and the two others had just gotten themselves situated when we walked in. I had not even gotten the first pin pushed into my number when the Dutch guy started filling a 1-cc syringe with clear liquid from a 10-cc “*potje*.” Satisfied with the amount, he poked the needle into a little tent of skin on his arm and shot it. Ten seconds later he started giggling like a four-year-old and pointed to the hair on the arm he’d injected. “*Kijk kijk kijk kijk*,” he said, in between giggles. He was apparently hoping we’d enjoy the sight of hair standing on end as much as he did. Five minutes later he did it again, and then again, and again after that. After each injection, he was equally amazed.

The other two laughed at the show each time. I couldn’t laugh. I wasn’t scared, really; I think I was more shocked than anything else. I had been warned that it would be weird here in the big time. Some time before, when it had begun to look like I might have a chance of getting a contract, I had often been told that a couple

of years in the pros made one crazy. After each of these warnings, I smiled and nodded dutifully, not understanding whether it was supposed to be the drugs or the culture of the professional peloton that would make one crazy. In retrospect, I think it is probably a combination of the two and dependent on how deeply a rider gets into each.

I was 11th in the race. I attacked out of a big group with about 2 km to go, and surprisingly, I was not caught.



Jules de Wever was the first *sportdirecteur* I'd know in the pro ranks. Jules had done a long stint with the famous Ti Raleigh team in Holland alongside Peter Post. He was now the boss of the two-year-old Transvemij/Van Schilt team, which would become known as TVM in the following years. The team was, honestly, mostly a collection of worn-out veterans and rookies, with a few kermis racers thrown in just to add to the discord. I doubt that it would be possible to put together a more dysfunctional group of people. The veterans disliked the rookies. The Dutch hated the Belgians. The Dutch hated me. The Belgians distrusted the Dutch. Nobody had much respect for the kermis racers. Nobody but, I think, Jos Lammertink and I had any respect for Jules.

Throw together any group of highly motivated, highly competitive, and sometimes chemically altered athletes, and tensions will mount—but this was terrible. I'd grown up listening to my father's stories about being a drill instructor in the U.S. Marine Corps. I had been the new kid in eleven different schools before getting my high school diploma. I fully expected to get hassled for being a rookie and maybe a little more for being an American.

But what I encountered on this team was ridiculous. It was so full of holes and factions that no teamwork was ever accomplished. Despite the fact that I was in the same room getting dressed with the rest of the team when Jules introduced me, I was still asked repeatedly throughout the race who I was and what I thought I was doing. When I tried to get to the front of the field to help out our teammate and local favorite, Jan Bogaert, I was told to get back and stay out of the way—by another member of the Transvemij squad. Bogaert, a Belgian sprinter and kermis specialist, won the first race I entered with the rest of the team. He won it by himself, with a little help from Jos Lammertink.

About a week later we shipped off to Burgos, Spain, for a week-long stage race in the hills. The race started with a short prologue, followed the next day by a 125-kilometer (km) stage in the morning and a 22-km team time trial in the afternoon. I had been neither the best nor the worst on the team for the first two stages. I was scared about the team time trial; I had never done one before, and the Dutch are specialists at the race. About two hours before the start, the team's head soigneur showed up in my room and placed two suppositories, one for my roommate and one for me, on the windowsill. I had bought a couple of American magazines in the airport on my way down and spent the next hour staring at the pictures. My teammate fell asleep. As we got ready to go racing, my teammate noticed the suppos had melted. He scraped what he could off the windowsill, but I left mine right where it was. Set aside the fact that I was still trying to pay attention to what Nancy Reagan and the others had to say, there was no way I was shoving anything up my butt—let alone some sort of melted goo complete with Spanish windowsill particles—for a kind of race I had never done before.

I was the first one dropped. I don't think it had anything to do with the suppository. I think it was the fact that I was supposed to get dropped. In the years since, I have done several team time trials and have learned how the game is played. If they want you gone, you're gone. It is quite easy, in fact. The bulk of the team simply holds the rider in question out on the front a little too long before coming over the top of him so that he can rest for his next turn on the front. As soon as he is clear of that lead bike position, the rest of the team accelerates so hard that they snap past him as he comes through to grab the last wheel position. A little gap will form, one that he has to close quickly. By the time he is firmly planted back on the wheel in front of him, all of the other riders have done a half turn and his nose is stuck back out into the wind again.

I lasted just three turns and was gone. By the time we reached the finish line, four other Transvemij riders had joined me dangling off the back. The survivors weren't even in the top five. Two days later, I climbed into the number-two team car halfway through the stage and gave my number to a race official. Before the prologue I had weighed 70 kilos (154 pounds). After four days in Spain, I weighed just 62 (137 pounds). Welcome to the pros.



It was late in the season of my first half-year as a professional cyclist when I got the call from Jules that I'd be doing the Paris-Brussels fall classic. I was excited—Paris-Brussels was, after all, a real classic, complete with big teams and fast riders—but I was also a little shocked. Paris-Brussels has always been considered a sprinter's race, and although I have been called a lot of things

over the years, “sprinter” has never been one of them. Jules told me that I had been riding well; I just needed to figure out when and how things happened in the pro peloton.

Although Jules de Wever was indeed giving me an opportunity to go learn in a big race, I think he was also sticking me in there to get back at the owner of the team. Jules was not going to be the number-one director for the next year. Cees Priem, who was currently pedaling out his final days as a bike rider, would be taking the reins in 1988. Jules could stay on if he wanted, but there was no way he would let himself be relegated to driving in the kermis caravan. Besides, I don’t think Cees had much respect for the old man. Priem was, after all, a tall Dutch rider with a résumé, and De Wever was a small Belgian director who had not done much with the mixed band of idiots he’d been commanding.

I hated Cees Priem. I still do. Less than a week after we returned from Burgos, Jules called to tell me I had to race a kermis race somewhere in East Flanders. He had watched me race in Spain, of course, so he knew I was not exactly 100 percent, but he told me I had to go. The team had gotten a contract with the race organizer, and we needed a certain minimum number of riders on the line or there would be no start money for its director.

Jules told me to stay in the race until the halfway point and then go home. I have dropped out of a lot of races over the years. Sometimes I dropped out because the training plan called for half a race. Other times I just did not feel like racing that day. But I was still a sparkly fresh rookie at this point, and the thought of bailing out of a perfectly good bike race was not part of my vocabulary. On the other hand, I was still physically and mentally beat from my less-than-stellar pro stage race debut, so going home after a few laps sounded like a great plan.

We had just gone through the start/finish line for the go-home lap minus one when I heard Cees Priem yelling at me: “What are you doing back here? You must be at the front. Your job is to be at the front.” I had to look back over my right shoulder to about 5 o’clock to find him. I was trying to process the fact that some dude I didn’t know was yelling at me from behind to go ride at the front. We were hardly even in the same time zone as the front of the peloton.

“Eh?” I barked. When in doubt, respond with a questioning noise in at least a similar dialect to the region in which you’re racing. It didn’t work.

“You must be racing at the front. You are a young boy,” was his clarification.

“I’m sick. I was in Burgos, and I got sick. Jules said I must only start,” I said and then repeated myself in Flemish. *“Ik ben ik ziek. Ik heb in Burgos geweest. Jules zegt dat ik moet alleen de start nemen.”*

It didn’t matter. According to Cees, I was worthless and should go to the front.

I endured the verbal flogging for the rest of the lap, and then about forty of us peeled off the back of the peloton and down a hidden alley a few hundred yards before the start/finish line. Cees Priem was there too; so much for leading by example. I began the process of getting out of my contract with TVM for the 1988 season.



When you learn to fly, people constantly tell you about your first solo: the moment when your instructor steps out of the plane to let you take off and land by yourself. Your first solo is supposedly

the most magical experience in your flying career. However, I did not see real flying magic until the first time I flipped the airplane upside down. That magic was amazing! Similarly, I am not sure I noticed I was a real pro until I was lined up at the start of Paris-Brussels.

At that point in my months-old career, I had already been beaten up by the press, drug-tested, dropped by my own teammates, fined for hanging on to a team car (at 120 kilometers per hour), bunged up by crashing into a drunk while chasing after a 200-Belgian-franc prime (less than \$5 at that time), and yelled at more times than I can remember just for being a rookie. But standing on the start line of Paris-Brussels I was a real pro bike racer, with my name printed in the official program and everything. It was a late-season classic that I had no chance of winning. I was riding for a second-rate team in an also-ran classic. I had no hero card and no favored-to-win teammate. Still, I felt I had made it to the big league.

In the late 1980s, if a rider did not have a great palmarès, he had to have a great presence on television. In other words, you could get away without any results as long as you could find your way to the front of the peloton and in front of the cameras when the race went live. Therefore, when the Eurovision helicopter flew over the race with two hours to go, the shit hit the fan. Riders you'd never seen before were now ready to run you off the road for the chance to show their team jersey and sponsor's logo on European television for even a second or two.

Paris-Brussels was a long race that year, 310 km. I do not remember even getting into the big chainring until we got close to the Belgian border. The slow tempo created a false sense of security because I wasn't ready for the tempo to lift when it did.

From the Belgian border until just 40 km to go, I don't think I shifted. I did look back a couple of times just to make sure there were no more gears to use. There never were.

Between 40 km and 20 km to go, there were some changes. The chaff had been weeded out for the most part, and the favorites took time to pee, eat a little bit more, and size each other up for the final push, all the while holding an average of close to 50 kph. At 20 km to go, Sean Kelly moved to the back of the peloton to pee one last time. Two of his KAS teammates hung back with him, one of them pushing him along. That was the moment when I knew I had made it. There was 20 km to go, and the Irish great Sean Kelly had just forced a little reprieve.

I had been eating and drinking pretty well throughout the day, and my gut was distended like that of one of those famine children on TV. Still, I ate some more warm, mushy crap from my back tight pockets and washed it down with lukewarm tea. Then I ditched everything except one bottle. I cannot remember anything after that until the sign indicating that I had 10 km to go.

At that moment, the man with the hammer came to visit. A bike racer, especially a rookie in his first big classic, fears the man with the hammer as much as the grim reaper. The man with the hammer beat the living hell out of me—all at once—and the peloton rode away from me with 10 km to go.

Even though I was now riding alone, I just needed to hang on for another 10 minutes, and my first classic finale would have been in the record books. I settled for simply finishing my first classic and opted for survival-mode pedaling. Nope ... too fast. I slowed down again. I looked back to see the bus behind me. Every big point-to-point race has a bus that collects the dead, and at 300 of 310 km, this bus was full of sweaty, stinky, impatient losers

wanting to hurry up and get it over with. The last thing I wanted to do in the whole world was to get on that bus. Who can't pedal a bike 10 km anyway?

I'm not sure what the exact distance to go was because there were no signs. Suffice it to say that after 300-something of 310 km, the flesh was no longer willing to humor the spirit. I had to climb into the bus. At 200 km, we had been almost an hour behind schedule. Wim Arras crossed the line at 8 hours and 24 minutes to win the race. Four years later he would be turning wrenches on my bike.