

For the Love of the
Cobbles

Only those who are in top condition can say that the Ronde van Vlaanderen is not hard. For all others, it is the Way of the Cross. –Andrea Tafi

For the Love of the Cobbles

*A Journey Inside Cycling's Cobbled Classic
Racing Season, and a Ride Across the Hard
Surfaces of Belgium and France*

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Prologue

On a spring afternoon in 1985, I did what I usually did when nothing was going on. I hopped on my bike and rode to my friend Steve's house. It was spring break and I was home from college with no particular plans, so falling back on my high school routines was like slipping into an old sweatshirt. Those routines consisted of gathering across town -- biking on the nice days -- at either Steve's house or another friend's, and if anything like a quorum could be found, basketball or football or some warped rendition of baseball would happen. But on this day there was no quorum. Steve was home, hanging in his room, watching TV.

"Check this out," he said¹ as he flicked on CBS Sports, showing a bike race from France. I'd caught a glimpse of the Tour de France before, enough to know the name and register some basic comprehension of the need for some people to race their bikes. Back then I poured over the sports pages every morning, and knew from the agate page (the one with the scores, standings, etc. in small type) that Frenchman Bernard Hinault had won the Tour de France a few times, making him the top bicycle racer in the world. Honestly, I haven't the slightest idea how I knew this, but somebody must have said it or written it, and I didn't care to disagree. But this was April, the Tour was three months off, and the race we were watching, called Paris-Roubaix, was unlike anything else I had ever seen, or even expected to see.

¹ If you think I, or anyone else writing a book from memory, recalls mundane conversations verbatim from 25 years ago, then... cool! But hey, this is probably pretty close.

Steve got me up to speed: Hinault wasn't around,² but a group of international stars was at the head of the race, and an American named Greg LeMond was one of them. No American had ever accomplished anything in European cycling, the hub of the sport, until LeMond came along just a few years earlier, won a surprise world championship, and placed third in his first crack at the Tour de France. This information wouldn't rock my brain for another season, but it was enough to bait the hook. And the roads of northern France proceeded to set it.

The 1985 running of Paris-Roubaix was a classic edition of the Hell of the North, the infamous race over rugged cobblestones through communities known mostly for the devastation they suffered in consecutive world wars. The dark legacy hanging over the region was greatly enhanced that day by intermittent rain showers and thick dark clouds. Mud covered enough of the road so that every spin of a bicycle wheel helped splatter the riders beyond recognition. Videos from that day might confuse a casual viewer as to whether color TV had been invented yet. For the riders, navigating the cobblestones was a brutal, awkward exercise, and the constant threat of crashing kept everyone -- even us first-time viewers -- on the edge of our seats. People like me who hadn't been to war are prone to thinking that the battlefields looked exactly like this.

The American broadcaster CBS did its best to enhance the drama. Anyone who got caught up in the LeMond Era of the

² Bernard Hinault only appeared sporadically and swore off riding Paris-Roubaix after 1981. Ever the diplomat, Hinault declared the race "bullshit" to the waiting media, seeing no reason to hide his feelings. And he'd just won the race. In 1985, explaining why he was home rather than in Compiègne, Hinault remarked, "I have a wife and two children, so I don't want my skin ripped off."

mid-1980s will doubtlessly remember their approach: selective editing heavy on crashes, uptempo synthesizers, shameless use of dramatic language (you can say “hell” on TV, apparently... over and over...), and the tag-team of John Tesh and some unfamiliar British guy calling the action.³ I don’t know how CBS tried to sell cycling to an American audience back then, but the race was a gift from the Cycling Gods: unfathomable visuals of riders so caked in mud that only their eyes and mouths could be recognized. Action that featured the sport’s biggest names, including “our guy.” And a fantastic slugfest of a race with all the drama, aggression, tactical nuance and brute athleticism that veteran cycling fans prefer.

The race lead changed hands numerous times, not in the mundane way of cyclists in a break taking turns but in a more serious manner. With the race winnowed down to a dozen or so guys in contention, attacks happened in small groups and failure was constantly an option. At one point mega-stars Eric Vanderaerden of Belgium and Francesco Moser of Italy had broken away from the field, the young Belgian clinging to the wheel of the cagey Italian -- known as “the Sheriff” -- who’d won three previous editions. But suddenly Moser lost his rhythm, veered into a deep puddle by the side of the road, and keeled over. Watching on Youtube thirty years later I still can’t believe what I’m seeing: one of Paris-Roubaix’s greatest champions unceremoniously kicked to the curb by the infamous cobbles. Vanderaerden, game for a two-man attack, knifed through the headwinds alone, but with 15 miles to go he eventually succumbed to an eight-man group of riders poised to duke it out for the win. The powerful Renault-Elf

³ Phil Liggett, who’s no longer even slightly unfamiliar.

squad in their black and yellow stripes were the home team, and they now had two guys up front.

Eventually Renault's young French star Marc Madiot went clear with a well-timed winning attack, step one of his eventual ascent into the pantheon of Cobbles Riders (two Paris-Roubaix wins, marriage to a former Miss France, and knighthood in the French Legion of Honor). Bruno Wojtinek, Madiot's less heralded teammate, escaped for second, and Irish master Sean Kelly outsprinted LeMond for third after the two swerved around a pileup that happened as their six-man group swung onto the wet velodrome track. Intrepid to the last drop, this race. Afterward LeMond was among the 35 riders who survived to finish (officially, at least), out of 172 that started. As he talked to Tesh on the velodrome infield, the layer of mud on his face made the young American look like he'd just stepped in from a minstrel show. Through this mask of shit shone his clear, wet eyes and his satisfied smile, a bizarre juxtaposition of human and inhuman that further drove home the beautiful madness being celebrated on this day. It gets better though: Tesh also interviewed Theo de Rooy, a Dutch rider who occasionally led the race in the final 90 minutes before succumbing:

de Rooy: "It's a bollocks this race! You're working like an animal, you don't have time to piss, you wet your pants. You're riding in mud like this, you're slipping, it's a piece of shit..."

Tesh: "Willl you ever ride it again?"

de Rooy, not hesitating for a second: "Sure, it's the most beautiful race in the world!"

Punctuated by a borderline-insane laugh by de Rooy. I don't remember if this exchange aired in real time, but thankfully it's preserved in legend now. Like the shattered Dutchman, I honestly didn't know quite how to respond to what I'd just seen, but Steve did. He'd talked to some guys who knew about a weekly circuit race in the Boston suburbs maybe ten miles from home, and by summer we were on our beater bikes trying out the sport of cycling. Within a year I had embarked on a fund drive and picked up an entry-level Bianchi racer, gotten completely hooked on the soap opera of LeMond's career, and eventually made myself into a hack racer and permanent cycling fan. The Tour de France was as much the centerpiece of my viewing as it is of the cycling calendar, and with other fans like my big brother Pete and my friend Drew I celebrated the glorious battles on the slopes of the Alps and Pyrenees. We heralded Lance Armstrong's arrival at the front of the Tour, delved deeper and deeper into the sport as the internet grew and dramatically expanded the level of available information. I'm now nearly a decade into hosting the Podium Cafe, a website and community of cycling fans, where we obsess over cycling 365 days a year.

But as great as all that has been, I never forgot that first brush with the sport. I never forgot the sights, the result, and most importantly I never got over the sense that, however great the Tour was, racing on cobblestones was something else entirely.

This book is a journey to the cobblestoned classics, a series of races in Belgium and France that begin with a late February sneak preview and meaningfully unfold over three weeks in March and April. They constitute a season within the season, drawing certain riders (including some who structure their

entire year around this period) and certain fans to ride in a particular style of races. They live among the more broadly-defined Spring Classics, which include ancient events like Milano-Sanremo in Italy and the Ardennes races in Wallonian Belgium and the Limburg region of the Netherlands. To people waiting for the grand tours to begin, the Spring Classics are what you watch and celebrate while you wait. But the Cobbled Classics are the heart of spring racing, and they are as unique from Milano-Sanremo or Liège-Bastogne-Liège as the Tour de France.

Apart from the racing style is the fact that they are centered in the Flanders region of Belgium and nearby northern France. The races are inseparable from the area, with its biking culture, its passion for cycling, its endless riding routes, and for a lot of people its massive contribution to the beer brewing universe. The Cobbled Classics aren't merely a thing to watch, but to cozy up to on the streets of Flanders, side by side with many of the sport's most devoted fans. They are a place to visit with your bike as well — the important streets and climbs get reused year after year and have themselves attained legend, even UNESCO heritage status... but they are public streets which you can ride for yourself 364 days a year. Experiencing the intensity of riding the course, of cheering with the home fans, and of absorbing the competition over three weeks — it's a package deal, a cultural and sporting festival that's so memorable, unique, and yet still (for now) so accessible, that it resembles few other sporting events anywhere in the world.

This book is about the whole package. It's a mix of first-person account and something resembling sportswriting. It falls short of being a definitive guide to race history, but deals with

enough of the history to (I hope) give readers the full context for the experience of the Cobbled Classics. It was started in 2010 and focuses on those rather memorable editions as a vehicle for telling a more timeless story of the races. And I'd better hurry up and put it to bed before it's time to update it, again, with the 2016 results.

-Seattle, Washington, April 2016

4: Deinze, Gent-Wevelgem, Crosswinds and Calendars

The next morning came around all too quickly. Not in some metaphorical way, but literally, in the sense that I was still making a major time zone adjustment when Europe decided to skip its clocks ahead and begin daylight savings. Further complicating matters was the fact that the train line to today's race had some sort of outage between Gent and De Pinte, so my tram to the train ended with me on a bus... then a train, and finally to Deinze, starting place for the 72nd running of Gent-Wevelgem.

Not unlike E3 Prijs being named after a highway that doesn't technically still exist, Gent-Wevelgem never sets foot in Gent, not anymore. There's a trend in cycling that the oldest races with place names in them almost never actually start or finish in those places. Sure, Paris-Roubaix finishes in Roubaix, Paris-Tours finishes its autumn course in Tours, but neither starts anywhere near Paris. Liege-Bastogne-Liege finishes in Ans.

Gent held on gamely as the starting point for today's event for some 70 years, until 2003, when it was moved to Deinze, about 15km down the road in the direction of Wevelgem. I can't find any definitive explanation about the move, but the usual culprits are the cost of staging a race in large urban

areas, and the willingness of other, smaller towns to pay for the privilege of playing hosting to a start or finish. Take your pick.

Regardless, upon arriving in Deinze, it was immediately apparent that they run a different kind of show here than at E3 Prijs. Not surprisingly -- E3 is the only race among the big Belgian spring races that operates outside the Flanders Classics cooperative, a marketing entity whereby organizers of the member races coordinate and fight for the best calendar spots. That's a whole other subject, but for now it's fair to say that the Flanders Classics including Gent-Wevelgem and de Ronde make E3 feel a bit mom-and-pop, with a bandbox stage, big screen hanging from a rented crane, and no cordoned off area for the teams, who spend the morning being swarmed by the public. E3 is a bit mom-and-pop. Here in Deinze, things were different. Slicker, more managed, more of a show. Welcome to the big-time.

An MC entertained the crowd from a stage looked that like a crosscut of an airplane hangar, beefy and elevated well above the crowd with a soaring aluminum arch overhead announcing Het Nieuwsblad, the large Belgian daily newspaper, as the primary sponsor. Between the stage and the press area, where I signed in for the day's action, was a corral of steel fencing, virtually unbroken for a quarter mile except for a few crossing areas.

The press center connected to an indoor VIP area, which I was shooed out of until I explained that I was trying to find the teams. They were on the far side of the VIP hospitality section, in a large dirt lot fenced off from the fans. If E3 represented the epitome of cycling's lack of barriers between the stars and

the fans, Gent-Wevelgem by comparison feels a bit like a Habitrail.²⁵

No doubt this made for a slightly more peaceful start to the day for the participants, who could warm up on a trainer untroubled by anyone save the VIPs and press folks wandering around. But Belgian fans can only stand so much separation from their heroes, and there was some subtle, if serious, payback in the fencing arrangement.



Some young Tonsport Vlaanderen guy milling around. Photo by Chris Fontecchio

²⁵ This awesome metaphor (OK, simile) will likely be lost on any reader under 40. A Habitrail is a modular housing system for hamsters and gerbils that was wildly popular back in the 1970s, where your little rodent could go from one room to another via tubular hallways, etc. Apparently they still exist, though I haven't heard anyone talk about them in a few decades.

Once a rider warmed up and was ready to sign in, they had to follow the trail of fencing to the sign-in area, which was the width of the road, but as you approached the stage, the pathway devolved into a human slot-canyon about five feet wide and a good hundred feet long, swarming with autograph-seeking fans on both sides. This made for one hell of a gauntlet, and reminded me of a famous samurai castle I once visited, which used a similar setup to lure attacking armies into a congestion trap where they could be doused in boiling oil.

Riders managed to survive, and the race start scene was politely joyful. A band played to keep the crowd's spirits high. Outside the fan gauntlet a young rider from Topsport Vlaanderen idled by the barriers, chatting with family members, a moment charmingly reminiscent of practically every local criterium scene in the world.

I made my way around the stage to the ramp where riders exited for the race start and watched the famous names roll by. I managed a quick hello with George Hincapie, America's most-decorated classics rider²⁶ then with the BMC team, once he was done exchanging friendly greetings with Spanish sprinter Oscar Freire, of Rabobank. Moments later, as Tyler Farrar was cheerfully pressing the flesh, shouts came up that the race was starting. Farrar excused himself and was off in a flash, as were Tom Boonen and Saxo Bank's Matti Breschel, Fabian Cancellara's lieutenant, having a chat on the ramp when they heard the word. Cancellara himself, star from 24 hours ago, was still up on stage talking to the MC. Before I

²⁶ Submitted without comment: Hincapie's greatest achievements were all nullified in 2012 as a consequence for his testimony in the Lance Armstrong USADA investigation, wherein Hincapie admitted that he used performance enhancing substances during his peak years.

could move off the ramp exiting the stage, Cancellara hurriedly signed in for the race, then used those bike-handling skills to plummet deftly down the ramp, pinning me and the other VIPs and journos milling around in place against the rail, and took off chasing the race. Not an ideal way to start, for him, but I think my adrenaline rushed more than Cancellara's. Standing there an inch from the speeding champion was a bit like an F-15 stadium flyover, experienced from the top row.²⁷



Tom Boonen and Matti Breschel depart just after the race has left. Photo by Chris Fontecchio

Of course, as hectic as that sounds, all the late-starters rejoined with no difficulty. The race is 220km long, a solid five hours in the saddle, so nobody charges out of the gate very quickly, even with a prospect as tempting as leaving a couple heavyweights like Boonen and Cancellara behind. Within

²⁷ In hindsight, I am glad to have dodged his bike and a place in history as the guy who took out the favorite for the Monuments in a stupid pre-race mixup.

minutes the caravan was gone, and with the finish 40 km down the road in Wevelgem, there was no setting up in the press center. Deinze was done hosting the race, and the action shifted to Belgian Rail.

I'm pretty sure I have never experienced a public transportation interlude in the middle of a major sporting event that I was trying to attend, but this turned into another one of cycling's charming wrinkles. I was one of the first people to arrive at the platform, like a clueless, anxious tourist, so I settled in to munch my feedbag from the press center, the highlight of which was a box of soy milk whose "heart-healthy" label was covered by a sticker with Russian writing on it, placed there apparently to protect Russian consumers from knowingly doing something healthy. By the time I finished my standard-issue ham and cheese sandwich, the platform was starting to fill up for the short hop to Kortrijk. From there we changed trains onto something of a race-special, a double decker car set aside for people who bore Gent-Wevelgem VIP tags around their necks. I doubt the press was part of that plan, but I had my official lanyard and wasn't going to walk back to coach until someone made me. Wevelgem was only a few stops up the line, and the ride passed without incident, unless you count several women breaking spontaneously into song at the sight of Bissegem Station.

Gent-Wevelgem may be a keystone event in the Flanders Classics lineup but the parcours (race course) is something of an outlier for Vlaamse Wielerweek. Races like E3 and Dwars door Vlaanderen and even Driedaagse de Panne all employ

portions of the Ronde van Vlaanderen course in a sort of week-long patchwork dress rehearsal.

Gent-Wevelgem, by contrast, trades the Flemish Ardennes for West Flanders, avoids the Ronde course entirely, and in the process carves out a stature second only to the Cobbled Monuments. In fact, for years, starting in 1960, Gent-Wevelgem was routinely spoken of in the same breath as the Tour of Flanders and Paris-Roubaix. Raced on the Wednesday between the two Monuments, Gent-Wevelgem occupied a sort of near-monument status in a week-long Holy Trinity of racing.

The only downside was that being the mid-week event meant it could never be on par with the Sunday headliners. The most ambitious classics champions tended to make half-hearted efforts in Gent-Wevelgem, for fear of physically overdoing it prior to Paris-Roubaix. By the new millennium contenders for the two bigger weekend events were expected to start Gent-Wevelgem, for training purposes, but duck out at the first sign of misery. Not since 1985 had the Tour of Flanders and Gent-Wevelgem shared a victor. Nobody ever won all three in a single week.²⁸ Few riders with a realistic chance ever tried.

But the Wednesday position between the main events had its benefits too, branding the race as the unchallenged #3 classic, best of the non-Monuments, and starting in 2010 the organizers decided to cash in on that stature by moving the race to the Sunday before Flanders -- a direct challenge to the previous day's E3 Prijs, which had carved out a niche over the

²⁸ All of these records fell in 2012 when Tom Boonen won everything in sight, but over three weekends, not in a single eight day period, per the old calendar.

years as the preeminent Flanders warm-up race. Indeed, if successful, Gent-Wevelgem could bill itself as the second of six major races spanning consecutive weekends and encompassing four of the five Monuments of cycling -- from Milano-Sanremo to Liège-Bastogne-Liège. Keeping this kind of company would be good business for Gent-Wevelgem.

But in 2010 the riders were unimpressed with the calendar change, and subsequent editions of Gent-Wevelgem have failed to elevate the race to *the* pre-Ronde event. A certain class of riders won't easily give up on the E3 dress rehearsal, and Gent-Wevelgem is unlikely to scrap its formula, the thing that gives it its character, to be more of a Ronde preview. But if being unlike the other Flanders previews, Gent-Wevelgem is like no other race in the world... isn't that good enough? Because if there is one common element to the top classics that makes them so cherished, it's that each one is basically unique.²⁹ E3 and Dwars door Vlaanderen will probably always be really good, fun races, but events like Gent-Wevelgem are what keep cycling from becoming a formula.

Gent-Wevelgem began in 1934 as a tribute to Flanders/Roubaix double-winner Gaston Rebry, citizen of Wevelgem,

²⁹ My favorite race on the uniqueness score is Milano-Sanremo, the Italian spring monument. It's the longest race of the year, just a hair under 300 km. It's pretty flat and doesn't disintegrate like the cobbled races do -- and some people complain about this. Often it ends in a sprint -- another thing people complain about. But it's not an ordinary sprint, it's a longish, wide-boulevard sprint by guys who have been riding a good two hours longer than they would before any other sprint. The sprint is preceded by the Poggio, a climb of 4km followed by a twisting, squirrely descent. So among the ways you can win MSR are by attacking on the climb, attacking on the descent, attacking from a few km away, and sprinting. No major classic is open to more different potential endings by a wider group of riders than MSR. Even when it does end in a sprint, there is plenty of drama in the battle to make that happen.

and being on the west side of the Leie (Lys) River³⁰ became the race's identity. Unlike the slew of races passing through Oudenaarde en route to some portion of the Vlaamse Ardennen, Gent-Wevelgem has mostly stayed out in West Flanders. Not always, and it's had its Ronde-knockoff editions back in the early days, but by 1945 the race was featuring climbs in the region around Ypres, due west of Kortrijk, and by 1957 climbs in French Flanders, just over the border from Ypres, had mostly replaced the Flemish Ardennes. Recent editions have circled all the way to the North Sea, with the fearsome Kemmelberg in the Heuvelland area near France as the major upward obstacle.

As horrible as the Kemmelberg is -- a long, cobbled, winding pathway that hits 23% gradient -- the race has acquired a reputation for favoring sprinters. A 2008 entry on the UCI website describes the course as "almost completely flat," which has been true, but the windswept environs of West Flanders offer their own unique set of challenges to the peloton. Well, one challenge, really. A one-word obstacle that strikes fear in every weaker rider's heart. The crosswind.

Crosswinds, in cycling, are simply winds coming at the riders from the side, but their effect is nowhere near so straightforward. Drafting is what makes the sport a game, for the simple reason that riding in the slipstream of another rider reduces your wind friction, and riding behind a pack can make you feel like you're being sucked along by a vacuum. Knowing when and how to draft, at least until it's time to make your

³⁰ Or, if you prefer, the Gent-Kortrijk axis, a key line of demarcation in understanding the classics.

move, is the key to victory, or at least survival. But crosswinds upend the normal order where riders can hide for hours in the shelter of a large pack in a long, flat race. When the wind hits from the left, for example, the slipstream of the guy in front of you moves around to his right. Not directly, since you're still rolling forward, so locating the slipstream can take a moment. But let's say the sidewind is strong enough that the slipstream is now at a 45-degree angle from the guy you're drafting. Anyone not 45 degrees to the right and rear of him, or you, or somebody, is stuck out in the wind, burning precious energy reserves just to keep up.

So echelons form -- diagonal lines of riders across the road, one behind another at just the correct angle. From the air they look like rolling back-slashes of flesh and machinery. But echelons line out across the road, and to make matters worse the roads in Flanders are exquisitely narrow, so a single echelon might only offer shelter to half a dozen guys, gutter to gutter. When one echelon runs out of space, as it quickly does, it's time for the other riders to drop back and form another.

To a racing pro, you not only need to be ready to form echelons, you also have to pick the *right* echelon. Your sextet or octet or whatever of guys has to sink or swim on its own, and if the echelon in front of you is setting a stronger pace, they are going to disappear up the road and leave your race-winning hopes for dead. If you fall in with a weak or ambivalent group, you might as well be in the wind all by yourself, because if you don't your day is over. Worse, everyone knows this, and often they know when crosswinds are coming, so the competition to make it into the best group is strong, and the guys who succeed are gonna hit the gas and weed out anyone

weaker or less attentive. Positioning counts for an awful lot in cycling. But in the Tour of Flanders, you know where the decisive climbs are about six months before the race starts, and when to get in proper position. In Gent-Wevelgem, you may or may not get much more than a two-minute warning from your team car that there are crosswinds ahead.

In mellow-weather years, the race really isn't very hard, and the honor roll includes plenty of pack sprinters not known for winning classics. The great Mario Cipollini only won a handful of one-day races among his dozens of grand tour stage sprint wins, but he won three times in Wevelgem. On occasion the win is contested among large groups of 30 or more riders. Most years, though, the weather converts the race into a challenge nearly on par with the Monuments, and the finale features one or two or a handful of riders sprinting for the win. Some years, it's a war on the level of the world's hardest races. In 2009's grim, storm-lashed affair, the race broke up very early, in the first 45 minutes, and 99 of the 186 starters abandoned prior to Edvald Boasson Hagen's two-up sprint win over his Kemmelberg breakaway partner, Alexander Kuschynski.

The wild-card nature of the race, counting on the elements to define it, sets Gent-Wevelgem apart from the other non-Monuments. Races are usually measured in geographic terms - how hard are the climbs? -- but closer up riders will frequently mention how weather played a role, and Gent-Wevelgem showcases this fundamental element of Cycling as well as any race on the planet. Still, the endless tinkering goes on, and beginning in 2010, along with the move to Sunday, G-W's organizers added six additional climbs to the Monteborg-

Kemmelberg circuit, which is run twice, bumping the number of climbs from four to a Ronde-like sixteen. Some additions, such as the Rodeberg, merely returned to the race from editions in the 1950s and 60s, so the effort to beef up the course is not without some historical connection. But in 2011 the climbs totaled 18, again more than Flanders. It would be a shame if the race morphed into yet another Flanders dress rehearsal. Gent-Wevelgem is an oddity. That's a good thing.³¹

My first stop in Wevelgem was checking in at the press area, a grammar school complex not far from the train station with a few rooms set aside for our use. To the right was one room for the English media, with a 19" TV and enough people to fill a phone booth... maybe. To the left was the Flemish room, with a giant screen broadcast, food, coffee, and pretty much all the journalists, including the English speakers, despite the fact that the thermostat timer was set on "Monday." The broadcast came on, and on cue VacansOleil's Johnny Hoogerland went on the attack, confirming every cliché about cyclists playing to the TV cameras. Amusing, but I needed to see the sights, grab a sausage, eat some frites, and down a beer (ah, unpaid work...), so I headed out to join the crowds.

On Menenstraat, where the finish line stood, a juniors race was going on, but I couldn't tell what was happening in any respect. Riders passed through the finish area solo or in small groups, frequently enough and spaced widely enough that I had no idea who was chasing whom. There was no peloton to speak of. I didn't get it at the time but talking later with Stephen Gordon, the guy I met on the train, he described the

³¹ Spoiler alert: it hasn't. By 2012 the race was back to only 11 rated climbs, and in 2015 the number further shrank to nine. Meanwhile the race added to its name, now officially listed as *Gent-Wevelgem: In Flanders' Fields*. Maybe it's hit on an identity after all.

dominant racing style, from junior levels on up, as all-out attack. "It's just the way they like to race, they way they've seen everyone else win, and it's the way they win. And since everyone else is going to be attacking, you've got to attack. If you want to stay where you are you've got to keep moving up. If you're not moving up, you're moving back. So if you want to actually move up, you've got to attack. because everyone else is doing it you have to too. I don't know how it got started like that, but that's the way it is, and it's not changing. To them that's what racing is. Racing is hard, racing is all out. In the US it's meant to be more of a tactical game where you only go hard later."

Ah, the social contract. The kids racing around Wevelgem on this breezy spring day were born into a system that bred them to bolt away from any peloton that showed a danger of forming. So round and round they went, hammering into the wind, racing all out. Racing in an attacking style is doomed if you're the only one thinking that way, but in Belgium that doesn't appear to be an issue. Aggressive riding is infectious. The cliché'd description of a Belgian rider's ambition is to win with nobody else in the picture, and that seemed like a probable result for these kids.

Today's edition of Gent-Wevelgem unfolded under nondescript weather conditions, and consequently the pack survived intact through the entire western swing of the race and the first of lap of the climbing circuit, the set of eight ascents that would decide the race, or at least set up the finale. Without major crosswinds the sprinters were licking their lips and thinking if they could bomb it down off the

Kemmelberg and close up whatever gap the stronger guys have opened up, it could yet be their day.

But the classics studs had other ideas. With Astana's Max Iglinsky and Liquigas' Daniel Oss up the road, Matti Breschel, the striking victor four days earlier in the Dwars door Vlaanderen, blasted away from the pack on the Rodeberg to join in the lead. Sensing the moment, US champion Hincapie and treble world-champ Oscar Freire, two former winners here, followed suit and joined the front. This move meant too much firepower was up the road for the remaining contenders to sit back, and next to arrive were Sep Vanmarcke, a 21-year-old rider from Topsport Vlaanderen, and HTC's Bernhard Eisel, a veteran Austrian sprinter who likes these races. Then came the move everyone was waiting for -- Silence-Lotto's Philippe Gilbert, one of the sport's most dangerous riders on any day and a perfect rider for the newly reconfigured Gent-Wevelgem, came thundering up to the lead with the help of his teammate Jurgen Roelandts. When Gilbert goes, this late in the race, it's business time.

Or so you would think. Cycling's one-day, all-or-nothing races are about playing your cards and hoping for the best. It's easy to look back on any classic and point to the split-second moment where the winning move occurred; the dozens of stories in the press across Europe, Australia and North America will all come up with the same answer later that day. But recognizing that moment as it's happening is another matter. If you attack late enough in the race to draw some companionship, your move's success often hinges on who else comes with you.

There's the team makeup -- a group off the front of the race will be left alone, all the way to victory, if it contains at least one top rider from all the teams who are strong enough to have any say in matters. Or, to put it another way, breakaways fail when the strongest team misses out and is forced to chase the leaders down. Today, the lead group contained more or less the best hopes for BMC, Liquigas, Omega Pharma, HTC, Saxo Bank, Rabobank, Astana and Topsport. Powerful Quick Step missed out, but their man Boonen kept his leg warmers on all day, a subtle sign that he was just getting in some training after a hard ride yesterday.

Also missing was Garmin-Transitions, the American squad aiming to boost its credentials in the classics. Tyler Farrar would be their top choice, but the native of Wenatchee, Washington hesitated when the top guys headed up the road, in ones and twos, and in the end his patience wasn't a virtue. Farrar did chase madly all the way to the finish line, but the firepower up the road was simply greater than anything he could muster in support.

When trying to gauge a break, the individuals involved is the other primary factor. Big names don't make pointless attacks. When the leaders go, it's time. Here, Breschel and Hincapie were the designated leaders of powerful Saxo Bank and BMC squads. Freire, with a blazing sprint and a knack for one-day races, was Rabobank's best hope. And Gilbert is the main attraction at today's race, Belgium's athlete of the year in 2009 after running off a string of victories that boggles the mind, including the rare "Autumn Double" -- victories in the esteemed Paris-Tours sprint and the ultra climby Giro di Lombardia monument -- a victory sandwich nobody had tasted

for nearly 50 years. The leaders even contained a couple extra teammates, Roelandts for Gilbert's Lotto squad and Kuschynski for Oss' Liquigas, which meant two guys in the front to do the dirty work. This group wasn't coming back.

Nothing changed much over the Kemmelberg, though the scintillating riding of Breschel undoubtedly raised some alarms in the other camps. But his rivals caught a big break when Breschel suffered a flat with 16km to go and dropped back to the Farrar chase group. Then the leaders got a bit testy with Freire: having a sprinters' pedigree means that nobody besides other sprinters is interested in arriving at the finish with you. So Liquigas dispatched their spare rider, Kuschynski, to cut the chord. With Freire riding at the back of the group, Kuschynski found the Spaniard on his wheel and took his foot off the gas, allowing a gap to open up. This is a game of chicken: one rider seems willing to let the race disappear, daring the other rider to do something about it. The other rider, aside from getting angry, has to calculate whether he wants to sprint back on to the field and tow the guy who created the problem in the first place along with him. Kuschynski didn't care, his sprinter mate Oss was up ahead so he was quite pleased to put himself out of business if he could take Freire with him. Team tactics aren't for the shy. A few conversations ensued, but Freire knew he had been played, and he drifted backward to the Farrar chase group.

Approaching Wevelgem the leaders were Gilbert and his helper Roelandts, Hincapie, Oss, Vanmarcke and Eisel. Vanmarcke showed his doubts in the sprint -- or his Belgianness by trying to win with nobody else in the picture, as they say -- launching a breakaway with 3km remaining. But he

seemed to cramp up before long, and the sprint was back on. Hincapie tried an early run, futilely, and in the final meters Eisel took the win by a full bike length, with Vanmarcke recovered for second place over Gilbert.



Bernie Eisel, Sep Vanmarcke, Philippe Gilbert. Photo by Chris Fontecchio

Eisel was a solid winner, climbing and sprinting well and showing that HTC could count on him in the classics after

losing Hincapie and 2009 Gent-Wevelgem winner Edvald Boasson Hagen from their squad. But the story of the day was Vanmarcke. A young Flemish kid stepping up to take second on the big stage, pretty much in his first major race, was exciting enough. But for him to beat Gilbert was like a quiet rookie dunking over LeBron James.

Charmingly enough, it turned out Vanmarcke was the kid I'd seen leaning against the fence in Deinze, talking to his family or close friends or whomever, about four hours earlier. Lots of riders sit around beforehand looking relaxed and smiling, but rarely do you catch a guy enjoying his last few moments of anonymity. Vanmarcke has evolved quickly into one of the regular challengers for cobbles glory, with a second at Paris-Roubaix in 2013 and an Omloop Het Nieuwsblad win in 2012.

Anyway, photos were my challenge of the day. After a single stab at playing reporter, I decided it wasn't possible for me to add much value to the cycling discussion with a who-what-where and some post-race quotes. I like all of those things, but the straight news sites can do them perfectly well, and my friends back at the Podium Cafe had already seen the race and listened to the interviews. What would go over better would be some bits from the sidelines, beyond talking about frietes.

Not being exactly a professional photographer (ahem), I didn't have permission to get to the photo well -- the mosh pit of official photographers just past the finish line, to one side -- and it didn't take much Dutch to understand the guy near the well who was telling me to get bent. Writers get to wait at the far end of the finishing straight. Ever notice how the end of a sprint consists of riders crossing the line at full speed and then

immediately slamming on their brakes to avoid running into a human wall? Those are the writers. They're sort of a fleshy safety net in case of brake failure.

I decided my goal was to get a shot from the sideline, as close to the finish as possible. By then, I guessed, either guys will be bearing down on the line or in the early celebration phase, so the chance of a striking image was good. For the first (but not last) time I noticed that races often have a truck parked in the vicinity of the finish, across from the VIP grandstands. Once the easily accessible vantage points are spoken for, you can expect people to start wedging themselves into some uncomfortable spaces for a good view, but much of the space between the truck parked maybe 40 meters from the finish and the steel race barriers was unoccupied. The main issue involved some cement posts built into the sidewalk, which had to be climbed to get to the open space next to the truck. The police didn't seem interested in whether or not anyone got in there, and with some hand signals I made it clear to the kids blocking the opening that I planned to slip by them. With little more than bruised ribs, I had myself some grade-A real estate as fine or better than any opening in the surly photogs' well.

The finish of the race was kind of a blur, though I got a prize picture of Bernhard Eisel bearing down on the finish line, with Vanmarcke and Gilbert in a line over his left shoulder. It took another minute to extract myself from my ad-hoc photo well, then a few more minutes to salmon my way through the crowd to where I could get past the barriers and talk to a few riders. By then the leaders were off to their interviews and doping controls, before stopping by the media center. After two days, I got the routine, and as an experience it didn't do much for

me. I stuck around the press room for Eisel's appearance but packed up pretty quickly thereafter and headed into the darkening streets.

The party in the main street pubs seemed centered around a bar with a bunch of Quick Step posters in the windows and maybe a mural or two on the brick wall overlooking the parking lot. It was a cycling bar, though without much Dutch I could tell when I peeked in that my interaction was going to consist of being in a bar, drinking another Jupiler, and heading out. So, duly noted, but that's it. In a few different directions there were other buildings without signs -- rec centers? private clubs? -- whatever. But the sounds of VIP socializing were unmistakable. I wouldn't use the word festive, I was a long way from Bourbon Street, but Wevelgem and the cycling fans of Greater Kortrijk were enjoying their Sunday of racing, no doubt. For me, though, I was relishing a day off from the race routine tomorrow, so the train back to Gent beckoned. At the station, surrounded on a few sides by more well-attended pubs, I got to the open-air platform, an island of peace until a gang of tipsy Norwegian kids ambled up to wait. So far I hadn't detected much of an international flavor to anything. With Flanders-Roubaix week still several days from starting, that was likely to change, and the outsiders were slowly beginning to straggle in.

By 2012 Gent-Wevelgem and E3 Prijs had learned to coexist as neighbors on the cycling calendar. My visit in 2010 coincided with the first Sunday edition of Gent-Wevelgem in a while, just one day after E3. That was too close for comfort, and riders complained about having to choose one or the other. Things got worse a year later, when G-W's top-level UCI status and

E3's lack thereof meant that pretty much everyone was forced to go with the former, even though the latter was considered the better prep for de Ronde. Most strikingly, Tom Boonen was pulled from the E3 roster, after setting the record, and told to go after UCI points in Wevelgem (which he did, by winning). The organizers of E3, disgusted, threatened to shut the race down.

Only in 2012 did a solution appear -- a brilliant one, moving E3 to Friday, enabling riders to recover and go hard in Gent-Wevelgem too. Fans had an excuse to start their weekend a few hours early, a modest demand on the race's part. The organizers of E3 had compromised, moved off their Saturday spot, but in exchange for UCI World Tour status -- equal footing. Boonen obliged by returning to Harelbeke, then winning it. Two days later he became the first rider to win E3 and Gent-Wevelgem in the same year. And everyone agreed, it was a win-win solution.



Do people actually enjoy this? Photo by Chris Fontecchio

9: The People Come Out To Ride de Ronde

Friday started out perfectly enough... in Amsterdam, at the luxury hotel where my friend Joel was staying, on a business trip. Joel lives a block away from me in Seattle, travels with a frequency that I can hardly comprehend, and was as excited as I was about meeting up halfway across the world from our cozy neighborhood, in one of the more intriguing cities. Nothing about the logistics was easy, including getting there Thursday after waking up in Gent, biking to where the Europcar office had once been, biking another 15km or so to where it now was, moving out of my b&b in Gent, trekking down to Oudenaarde to drop off my stuff (which itself consisted of some helpless wandering in search of street that I couldn't pronounce), and driving to Amsterdam with just in time for dinner. My brother was arriving in Brussels Friday afternoon, so at no point did I develop any illusions about seeing Amsterdam in any meaningful way. But after a quick breakfast we managed to squeeze in enough time at the Rijksmuseum to see a few master works -- including several minutes staring in wonder at Rembrandt's *De Staalmeesters* (Syndics of the Drapers' Guild), a favorite of mine -- and depart the Netherlands with some satisfaction.

The plan was drawn up where I would pick up my brother Pete arriving at the Brussels airport, drop down to Oudenaarde, unload his stuff, and get to Gent in time for a 5pm press conference with the Garmin-Transitions team. Reality was more like, start driving, slow down, crawl along for three hours, talk

to Pete on the phone, pick him up two hours late, and go to Oudenaarde for the night. Not that Pete was complaining; he was too busy chatting up Fabian Cancellara in the baggage claim area after taking a connection from Zurich with the Swiss star. Nice way to touch down in the World of Cycling.

Upon arriving in Oudenaarde we did manage to zip over to the Koppenberg, five minutes from our apartment by car. I had built up Joel's expectations enough that he opted to spend the extra hour he had available before hopping on a train back north walking up the hallowed stones, and for Pete's part he had waited too many years to see the stones and wasn't interested in delaying another day. The highlight of that exercise was when, near the top, a box truck had gotten in a spot of bother, blocking a few cars who for some reason were trying to drive the infernal slope. Last in that short line was an HTC-Columbia team car, and as we walked by the window lowered and Mark Cavendish, then the world's best sprinter and future World Champion, asked if we knew what the holdup was. Did I mention my brother was having a good time in Belgium?

All this and dinner with some friends from the Podium Cafe had my brother, coming off an overnight flight, desperate for sleep... no small matter since the next morning, Saturday, it was our turn to ride the Tour of Flanders for ourselves. Or, not exactly: the Ronde van Vlaanderen for Wielertouristes comes in three sizes: a 75km sampler, a 150km heart-of-the-matter version, and the official, entire 250km course, from Bruges to Ninove.⁸⁶ We split the baby. A course of 150km, including all

⁸⁶ Exact distances change and certainly the entire format has been altered since de Ronde moved its finish to Oudenaarde. But last I checked there were still three basic options:

the *hellingen*, promised a long enough day in the saddle, an early start, and a lot of mysterious logistics to trip us up.⁸⁷



Me, my bro, Mark Cavendish's car and the Koppenberg.

Out of mercy I let Pete sleep til 7:30, which put us rolling out in the intermittent rain and cold of a classic Flemish spring day around 9am. We departed from Ninove, the finish line of the

ride the entire route, ride the entire Vlaamse Ardennen portion, or ride a selection of climbs squeezed into about half that latter distance, e.g. 75km.

⁸⁷ Why am I whining about logistics? Only as a warning to Americans coming to Flanders and expecting to find their way around with no trouble. It doesn't work that way. But while you're spinning your wheels, you'll probably encounter enough pro cyclists to make you stop caring.

Ronde van Vlaanderen as well as our adventure -- a logistical necessity since nobody relishes doubling back to the car via a train ride across Belgium in their freezing, wet bike clothes.⁸⁸ The 150km version was exactly right for us, purist inclinations aside. This version replaces the opening 150km of the actual race course -- the flat, ceremonial portion that mostly isn't deemed worthy of TV coverage -- with a 50km reverse loop that joins the course with 100km and all of the famous *kasseien* and *hellingen* still left to go.

The purpose of riding the cycloportive is to experience what cycling permits like no other sport: a real connection between us regular folks and the rarified action we love. Cycloportives are a European phenomenon where a famous race course is closed an extra day ahead (or so), and opened up to anyone interested in riding... in this case (and probably many others) for a fee, in exchange for all the forms of support you need, like food, water and mechanical assistance.⁸⁹ A handful of the 19,000 starters on this day, generally the ones rolling out as early as the organizers allow, will actually compete in a race to the finish, but the thousands of less driven participants will concentrate more on surviving and soaking in the experience.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Also, while very friendly to cyclists, I'm not sure the Belgian Railway relishes the idea of hundreds of mud-covered wielertourists descending on them at once.

⁸⁹ And apparently it's a growing trend. There was no Paris-Roubaix sportif in 2010, but there is now. The Skoda Challenge version is run the day before the actual race, with a longer-running Paris-Roubaix sportive taking place in June. Sportives have existed for many years around the Tour de France and other great events. There are even extreme sportives such as Paris-Brest-Paris imitating races that no longer exist. Sportives such as the Maratona degli Dolomiti also race or ride over the famous locales of the Grand Tours without being strict imitations of pro events. In sum, if you want to imitate what you've seen on TV, chances are there is an organized event to hook you up.

⁹⁰ In the US, the slightly Italianized version — the Gran Fondo — has firmly taken hold. Since we lack legendary race courses, a typical gran fondo is organized around a particularly beautiful and difficult ride, of which we have an endless supply, especially in the West. They sound like plenty of fun, but the European version of riding stages of the races we love are on another level.

And what an experience it is. Name another sport where you are allowed to even touch the surface where the champions do battle, let alone take up your own version of the event? Sure, a few lucky folks walk gingerly onto the field at Yankee Stadium or the Super Bowl or Old Trafford, but even that minimal contact is way outside the norm. The people who get to really use the famous sports facilities are even more limited. You know who gets to tee it up at Augusta National? The members of Augusta National. I recently spent a morning at Seattle's Safeco Field, attending Fan Fest with a friend who has season tickets. The Mariners, like a lot of other sports franchises, have unearthed a revenue stream in tours and events like this party, and they do a nice enough job impressing the kids. We were allowed to play catch in the outfield under watchful eyes. The kids skid into second base before ushers moved us out to the next limited station. The infield grass was not to be touched. It was still certainly fun enough. But the overriding message was that the hallowed grounds of Safeco Field were being heroically defended from the invading hordes.

Cycling could not be more different. You can cycle up the Koppenberg any day of the year. Even on race day⁹¹ casual riders and fans need only clear the course for a few hours prior to the women's race, and it's open for business as soon as the last men's rider and his escorting course vehicle go past. Cycling lets fans in closer than many, many sports -- the scene at the start line is a close-quarters parade of greetings and autographs. Cyclists aren't hard to talk to, and on the days before a race they're not hard at all to spot, riding the open

⁹¹ Of which there are several. De Ronde and KoppenbergCross on November 1 are the two I can name, but apparently there are some local races that run up the thing as well. Because... if you had a Koppenberg, you'd race on it as often as you could, right?

roads in their kits (though good luck catching up to say hello). There's a prevailing sense of tolerance among the riders toward their fans, like you would hope to find in a sport which needs all the support it can get.⁹²

What's really going on, however, isn't so much Cycling letting fans into their cloistered world -- it's them venturing out into our world. The hallowed grounds of the sport are 99.9% public property, save for the odd velodrome or ski resort road. The definition of a racer is someone who can surmount whatever the road and weather conditions of the real world throw at them. Alpe d'Huez is a mountain road in France, open to traffic every day. The Gavia and Stelvio and Mortirolo passes are ancient routes connecting adjoining valleys and populations. The Madonna del Ghisallo is a public road, along with the Angliru, the Mur de Huy, the Poggio di San Remo, the Champs-Elysees (though mind the traffic), the Cauberg and the Cote de la Redoute. Even the Paterberg, built by a farmer to attract cyclists, is publicly available.

Cycling these pathways gives anyone who takes up the challenge a chance to get even more of a taste of what the great races are like. What they do and what I do is the same basic experience, albeit under vastly different conditions and speeds. Maybe a pedestrian can't feel it, but any conditioned

⁹² This is an evolving matter, to be fair. The two biggest changes in terms of fan attention in the last decade are the rising popularity of the classics and the explosion in media outlets. At some point the most famous riders need to take greater measures to protect themselves and their sanity from the rising tide of interview requests and fan interactions off the bike. Such measures already exist around the *maillot jaune* at the Tour de France, and Lance Armstrong's last forays into Europe, including this 2010 Tour of Flanders, came with his praetorian guard. Still, they aren't likely to trickle down very far, very soon. There will always be a large number of *domestiques* going about their business in an untroubled manner. And at any given race the contenders are a different lot than the last given race, which should mean that, apart from a chosen few, most riders should remain pretty accessible to fans for the foreseeable future.

cyclist can. You feel the varying road surfaces, the climbs, the winds, the broken rhythms of the course, and the way a section of rough cobbles takes the starch out of your legs so the subsequent climb can deliver the *coup de grace*.

This was what my brother and I paid 40 Euros for the privilege of experiencing at the Ronde van Vlaanderen Sportive, along with the weather conditions that have helped make the spring classics famous(ly miserable). But it wouldn't be the full experience without a long, slow march before the real action got going. As I said, we opted for the 150km version, which started at the finish line and circled back 50km before joining the course.⁹³ This still left us with two hours of getting acclimated before the real work began. Rain and hints of snow came down in ten to fifteen minute waves, varying in intensity but often heavy enough for a good soaking. The intervening sunbursts did little to warm up frozen extremities, though on that score the temps were manageable if you didn't stop exerting yourself for too long.

Prior to joining the heart of the Ronde parcours, we stopped twice at the designated pit stops, which were either open-air tents or warehouses decked out to feed and hydrate the masses. Croissants, honey-waffle cookies, bread, fruit and drinks were in long supply, but the key to the stops was to fight any rational impulses and get back on the bike as quickly as humanly possible. Before your core temperature could plummet and rigor mortis could set in on your ambition.

⁹³ Like I said above, the design of the 150km route has also completely changed since 2011. Because de Ronde itself now turns in loops around the Vlaamse Ardennen, so too does the mid-distance sportive roll out of Oudenaarde and join the course pretty quickly. The first climb of the 2016 edition, the Wolvenberg, comes at the 9km mark. I suppose I can applaud one element of the course change then — the aligning of the Wielertourist event more closely with the race. Yippee.

Those opening 50km, delivering the Cyclosporive from Ninove to the real Ronde course, were spent largely on forgettable roads, places like two or four-lane tarmac strips where you can settle down and start building your anticipation of the hallowed cobbles and climbs. Such roads give the day a certain rhythm: dull grind -- excited burst -- dull grind -- food stop -- dull grind -- excited burst.. and so on. Not unlike the actual Tour of Flanders.⁹⁴

Luckily for us, in addition to the lack of wayward pedestrians we were in no particular hurry on the open stretches, no battles in advance of the cobbles and skinny roads, at least not early in the day. Position meant nothing to us, and time didn't either, for a while. But we did need to finish up in under nine hours, which seemed like forever to Pete and me, having done 110 miles in Vermont a few years back in about five hours. This would be harder and slower, for sure, but a four-hour buffer seemed ample... until about the halfway mark of our bumpy journey.

Immediately after we joined the actual race course, the cobbles began. Honestly, I don't remember all of the climbs as well as I remember the stones. Sections like the Paddestraat, Holleweg and Haaghoek that seemed to go on forever. The locals passed by me on these sections with seemingly little

⁹⁴ Actually the opening phase of de Ronde is usually dripping with significance, finding villages which merit an up-close look at the race, and lined with excited spectators. Compared to a great many races, it's very exciting and emotional, at least for fans. It's only overshadowed in excitement by the latter half of the race, and if most of the riders aren't keyed up about the opening stanza, it's because nobody can afford to be excited about all seven hours in the saddle.

effort, and even Pete, coming off a brutal New England winter where outdoor training was often a distant dream, would pull away from me. I had heard enough people say that keeping the pace high would diminish the effect some, but for at least the first few long passages I simply couldn't manage.⁹⁵

This plus the rain increased the need to stop at every food station, to get warm and get blood sugar stores replenished. The stations didn't offer much warmth -- if anything, they made life colder. The first one or two were in warehouse spaces, open on both ends, and crammed, wet and chaotic in between. Food choices were mostly unheated too, the message being get back on your bike if you want to warm up.⁹⁶ Later stations were outdoor affairs, though thankfully we were beyond caring by then.

Still, as improbable as it seemed, time was actually becoming an issue. Our 3pm finish target became 4, then 5, then half past get me the hell out of here. The only true solution was to stop thinking about it, which wasn't hard -- all it took was a sign saying "Paterberg 3km" or something along those lines.

The flat cobbled streets of Flanders remain one of the sport's under-appreciated elements... for now.⁹⁷ Most casual fans can name the Muur or the Koppenberg, and maybe another dozen famous cobbled climbs. The organizers of Paris-Roubaix have

⁹⁵ [Insert chicken noises.]

⁹⁶ The correct message, by the way. This isn't luxury travel. Or worse, cricket.

⁹⁷ The notable exception is during Omloop Het Nieuwsblad week, which typically features three long stretches of "flat" cobbles in the finale after the last *helling* has been climbed.

instituted a cobble rating system whereby people from 185 different countries can describe to you why the Forest of Arenberg is more treacherous than the stretch at Quiévy. Those are the headliners. In that arena, the flat cobbled stretches in Flanders struggle to compete for the public eye.

And yet we underestimate them at our peril. The worst stretches of cobblestones north of the French border might look tidy compared to the legendary *pave* of Paris-Roubaix, but to an American cyclist unaccustomed to Roman-era road-building technologies I can assure you, they leave their mark. And make no mistake, *de Ronde* would be nothing without them. I've hunted around for English descriptions of the big flat sections tearing the race apart, but the history of *de Ronde* is too cluttered with hills. So does that mean they aren't decisive? Not even close.

First, even if nobody attacked on the flat cobbles, they would still play a major role in the outcome, simply by draining the precious energy reserves of the peloton. Cobbles demand that you apply more power to get over them, obviously, but the position battles leading into the cobbles, described above, are equally exhausting. Worse, when the line stretches out on the cobbles and the wind hits from the side, gaps open up quickly, and some real urgency is required to close them. The peloton has already spent half a day battling the wind, rain, constant twists and turns, and funneling effects from skinny roads. The long, flat stretches of cobbles apply the coup de grace to the energy reserves of many, many riders.

In fact, the *Ronde van Vlaanderen* planners have been including clear mention of the handful of named cobble

stretches in the official maps since the turn of the millenium, if not earlier. The earlier ones I found, you had to scan closely to see "Mariaborrestraat," but starting in 2002 the official race maps have included graphics mentioning certain notorious stretches by name and showing other flat, unnamed stretches with the ubiquitous cobble graphic and a sector length in meters. The locals know them, the racers know them, and so, obviously, does the race organization. The only people who sometimes don't give them their due would be the media, and the fans who depend on it.

Well, peel away those blinders... here are the eleven stretches of flat cobbles notorious enough to be named and rated by the race (one to five stars, though nobody warrants more than four at present):

Lippenhovestraat

Locale: Velzeke-Ruddershove, just north of Zottegem

Stats: 1300 meters, three stars.

Pretty chunky rocks but as I have no personal experience here I can only guess that this wide, tidy stretch doesn't have any other hidden treachery. At least in the Omloop, where it features late in the race, riders can be seen using the vertically aligned cobbles on the margins, to save a few jostles.

Huisepontweg

Locale: About 5km north of Oudenaarde

Stats: 1500 meters, three stars.

The Huisepontweg was banned from de Ronde when it fell into disrepair, though as of 2008 it's been cleaned up.

Distinguishing character would be a rather large windmill alongside the road. Older pictures show a definite crown in the center of the lane, with muddy, disorganized stones sloping away to the margins -- very Paris-Roubaix-looking. Another old photo shows the dry crown framed by deep puddles. It's no shock to find that the race organizers wanted it out, and less of a shock that nearby residents would have preferred something tidier.

Funnily enough, the repair of the Huisepontweg has its own forty-year saga, with locals in Wannegem-Lede calling for the route to be paved smooth back in 1969. But as often happens in these parts, cycling intervened. First the route was designated as an historic monument, not unlike the Koppenberg, which threw a spanner into the plans.⁹⁸

Worse, some local bigwigs, including Guy Verhofstadt, who served as Prime Minister of Belgium from 1999-2008, used to ride on these stones, and refused to let them be removed. Former president of the Flanders regional government Kris Peeters⁹⁹ eventually shook loose a million euros for the route to be redone in cobbles. Now the crown is gone and the stones are remarkably orderly, lacking the old charm, but narrow, and overall probably making for a more realistic host to a bike race.

⁹⁸ The Mayor of Bruges, no stranger to the presence of protected sites, suggested the entire Ronde van Vlaanderen be a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Appealing on a certain level, though even Belgium, owners of the world's most incomprehensible system of government, might balk at a process that would require checking with the UN before changing the route. Hm, unless it prevents the exclusion of the Muur....

⁹⁹ Peeters, who is my brother's age, is now Deputy Prime Minister of Belgium, a man on the move.

Varentstraat

Locale: The Kaster district of Anzegem, between Kortrijk and Oudenaarde.

Stats: 2km, three stars

Redeveloped in 2009 after falling into disrepair, this old Roman road¹⁰⁰ is a nice, uniform stretch of cobbles, with a 90-degree bend in the middle. Anything over that 2km length is gonna hurt, but as the first cobbles of the day, they... hurt a little bit. Only because I wasn't really ready for what lay in store. Now, if I doubled back to Varentstraat, I'd probably find these stones somewhat quaint. And I might even jump on the dirt footpath that runs alongside, and that the riders use without a second thought during the race.

Paddestraat

Locale: Velzeke-Ruddershove, just north of Zottegem.

Practically adjacent to the Lippenhovestraat.

Stats: 2400 meters, three stars

The Paddestraat is among the longest sectors, on par with Mariaborrestraat and slightly shorter than the Kerkgate. For some reason it only warrants three stars; as it lies north of Oudenaarde, our route missed out on it. Anyway, the margins of the road consist of packed dirt, a relief valve for anyone sick of cruising over the big bumps, as long as it's dry. It winds

¹⁰⁰ Apparently Roman roads still exist throughout the former Empire, and including a few in Belgium. The classic Roman road outside Italy would be a long-distance stretch connecting two cities of some significance. Varentstraat, for example, was part of the Roman road connecting Bavie in northern France to Oudeberg in West Flanders, and was recorded by Joseph de Ferraris in his maps dating back to the 1770s (more on them in a sec). Anyway, Roman roads are known also for having a center crown to promote drainage, as well as a footpath alongside. This is a whole separate book topic. I'll stop now.

back and forth and has a slight tilt to it — uphill in the race, which makes for good control. The road supposedly traces part of the old Roman Via Belgica road from Boulogne to Cologne. Today, it's home to a monument to the Tour of Flanders: a cobble suspended inside a wheel, set on a pillar which lists all the race winners since 1973.

Mariaborrestraat

Locale: Etikhove, south of Oudenaarde a few km, in the shadow of the Koppenberg, albeit on the opposite side.

Stats: The official statistics list the Mariaborrestraat at 2.4km, including the Steenbekdries and the descent of the Stationsberg. So I guess you could break the Mariaborrestraat into three parcels:

- * the first 800 meters: turning off the N60, a secondary highway connecting Oudenaarde to Ronse, the road dips slightly and the cobbles are very rough. This was actually the first serious stretch of flat cobbles I encountered on the whole trip. On my first big riding day I had gone first to the Koppenberg and the Korte Keer, which summits on the N60. From there I descended the Koppenberg on the highway heading back toward Oudenaarde, then noticed the Ronde van Vlaanderen signs pointing to the next right turn. So I turned, rode about another 50 meters -- and started bouncing around like I'd stepped into the 1906 San Francisco Earthquake. These are hard, hard cobbles.
- * The Steenbekdries comprises the next 700 meters of cobbles at a manageable 5%, frankly the easiest stretch of Mariaborrestraat.
- * Lastly, the Stationsberg descent is another 900 meters at 3.2%, and is really as bad as it gets. Rarely if ever does de

Ronde descend on cobbles at any sort of pitch, and maybe those guys wouldn't mind if it did, but to anyone not used to the sensation of getting rocked on the stones, having to fight gravity really adds a layer of nastiness to it. By the time the street made its semicircle around the train crossing and past the iconic Maarkedal station, my wrists were atrophying from the death grip I had on my brakes.

Doorn

Locale: Oudenaarde, on the northwestern edge of town.

Stats: 1,650 meters, four stars.

Doorn means "thorn," not a bad name for this straight, narrow stretch of old-style cobbles. They rate four stars, which is what they'd get from Paris-Roubaix too, thanks to the road shape and the cobbles themselves. The shape is pure farm track: barely wide enough for three bikes across, with mud framing the road and deep ditches running parallel on both sides awaiting anyone who comes unglued. The stones are big, albeit not rounded like the classic *kinderkopje* (baby heads) but flatter and maybe manageable at times. Still, it's an old road, no two stones are alike, and there are sneaky little gaps all along the way. In wet weather those gaps hide under puddles, waiting for any tire unlucky enough to come rolling through. The sign at the entrance reads "weg in schlechte staat," i.e. road in a bad way. Don't say you weren't warned.

Holleweg

Locale: Volkegem, a few km east of Oudenaarde.

Stats: 1500 meters, four stars

Another patch of very rough cobbles, sandwiched in among several difficult challenges. The Holleweg rides along the crest

of a hill, which is climbed via the Kattenberg from the north (cobbled), the Boigneberg from the south (paved), and two more routes from the west, the Wolvenberg and the Volkegementberg. Neither approach is all that difficult, but the Holleweg is. Stones are large, come in a variety of patterns, and get pretty rough, particularly on the margins. Like the Doorn, this is an old stone path in the process of slowly disintegrating. Plenty of ways to get in trouble... especially when wet.

How old is the Holleweg? It appears on one of the famous Ferraris Maps, a 1770s-era charting of streets in what was then the Austrian Netherlands. The Ferraris Maps, created by Joseph De Ferraris, are a collection of 275 detailed and beautifully drawn maps comprising the earliest-known mapping of Belgium. Drawn mostly in lavish green, brown and red, the maps show roads, houses and other buildings, castles, canals, redoubts, forests, and numerous other details of 18th century Belgium. Apart from sitting in three separate museums, the maps are known to have guided Napoleon's forces through the country during his campaigns. That's the first known charting of the Holleweg. How long it was there before De Ferraris discovered it is anyone's guess.

Kerkgate

Locale: Mater, barely 1km east of the Holleweg.

Stats: 2,500 meters, four stars.

The Kerkgate is really as bad as it gets. Coming in the race (or the cyclosporative) on the heels of the Holleweg, there is almost no letup with the infernal stones. The road goes up gently for much of the stretch, which takes away the relief anyone might

have felt at the sight of cobbles that don't quite meet the "baby's head" or 'disrepair' descriptions. The stones aren't as slow as their illustrious neighboring kasseien, but toss in a 2-3% grade and you won't be setting any speed records. The road itself only dates back to the mid-19th century, making it one of the more modern stretches of cobbles.

Donderij

Locale: Nukerke, between Oudenaarde and Ronse.

Stats: 1500 meters, four stars.

Some of these ratings are a bit perplexing. Yes, the Donderij is a 1500-meter segment, but newer cobbles, nothing to get anguished about. The difference between new and old, if you haven't already grasped, is the difference between easy and hard. Toss in a hill and you've got another story, but even on the Koppenberg the new stones are nothing like the old ones. Fortunately, for entertainment's sake at least, there are plenty of the latter on hand at the Kopp.

Anyway, perhaps the 50-meter rise in the road is what warrants the rating. At race pace, in the midst of a long day, the incline probably hurts a bit extra.

Ruiterstraat

Locale: Mater, almost connecting the Holleweg to the Kerkgate.

Stats: 800 meters, one star

How does a one-star stretch of cobbles rate a name and a listing in the Ronde Hall of Cobbles? Beats me. Maybe the 800

meter length. Any time you're spending more than a couple minutes bouncing around, you notice it.

Haaghoek

Locale: Sint-Konelis-Horebeke, further east from the Kerkgate closer to Brakel.

Stats: 1,700 meters, four stars

Legendary cobbles, really one of the signature roads in all of Flanders, and another entry in the Ferraris Maps. Cobbles are cobbles sometimes, at least over the 90% of the country that's flat. But this stretch has some real character. The cobbles themselves are very rough, particularly at the beginning; of a piece with the Holleweg and Doorn stones. They change patterns; they vary in states of decline; and at times they threaten to toss you into a ditch. What separates the road in character is how it sinks in the middle, causing a slight descent at the start and rise at the end, not unlike the Forest of Arenberg in France. And anytime you're making that comparison, you're onto something.

To underline the importance of the "flat" cobblestone sectors, look no further than the Omloop Het Nieuwsblad, the late February race that features them like no other. In the 2012 edition, an initial selection was made on the Taaienberg, started by Boonen and including Thor Hushovd, Sep Vanmarcke, Matti Breschel and Juan Antonio Flecha among the big names. Boonen and Flecha had teammates in Dries Devenyns and Matt Hayman, making the former two even more dangerous. But Vanmarcke, already a protagonist, had

ideas. First he used the Molenberg's short but wicked slope to crack Breschel and Hushovd a bit. They used the descent to catch back on, but next was the Paddestraat, and the two Scandinavians cracked again, never to return. Finally, on the Lange Munte, a long, wind-bitten stretch of bouncy stones found on the run-in to Gent (and not usually occurring in de Ronde), Vanmarcke attacked once more, cracking the two lieutenants and putting himself back on level terms with the two remaining rivals, Boonen and Flecha. Deprived of Devenyns' help, Boonen started his sprint too early and got smoked by a wide-eyed Vanmarcke, who was stunned to have beaten a guy who towered over the sport when Vanmarcke was a teenager.¹⁰¹

Nice story, but in truth Vanmarcke, who grew up riding these very roads, used the cobbles like they were an extension of his body. Each acceleration, on the hilly stones or the flat ones, diminished his rivals, be it the fatal double blow he landed on Hushovd and Breschel or the more subtle effect of putting the older stars under pressure. He didn't crack Boonen or Flecha on the Lange Munte, but in burning some of his matches he burned several of theirs too. Against a superior sprinter in Boonen, Vanmarcke usually loses, but the more exhausted everyone was in the final meters, the greater the chance that victory goes to the guy with a little bit of gas in the tank, not the fastest sprinter. By this measure, Vanmarcke had a chance. A great chance, as it turned out.

¹⁰¹ Boonen went on to have a season for the ages, so don't weep for him. If anything, he was wisely managing his form at this point, five weeks before de Ronde.

Back to my own tale of cobbled woe, after the Paddestraat burnt matches weren't nearly as big an issue for me as banged brain cells. My first long pass on the cobbles left me feeling slightly punch-drunk. On subsequent passages I relaxed my shoulders slightly so I didn't jar my brain as much, but I couldn't let go of the death-grip on my bars, and my frozen claw-hand became tough to unravel at the end of, say, six or seven cold, brutal minutes. My rear tire was on the skinny side (stupid, I know) and would occasionally slip between stones that my wider front tire had bounced over, giving me the sensation that someone was ever so briefly grabbing my rear wheel. Anything resembling a descent was far worse, as I struggled to contain the forces of gravity from pulling me where I wasn't psychologically ready to go.

And not without reason. I saw only a few low-speed spills, but I did see some debris which gave me pause: pumps, bottles, pieces of derailleurs and whatnot. They say anything not bolted down can shake loose, and it often did. In prioritizing staying upright I may have been a bit timid, but I wasn't crazy.

I was fit, however, so when we started climbing, I managed to recoup at least a share of my dignity. Going up the cobbles was unbridled joy, as long as it didn't hurt too much, and it basically never hurt too much. Over slopes like the Oude Kwaremont and Taaienbergh I ground my way to the summit. And on the three occasions when I didn't simply ride up and over the hills, it was not without a little "help" from some of my neighbors. There was the guy who swerved left and stopped, pinning me against the grassy embankment of the Paterberg. There was the guy who swerved right as I was coming past him on the Koppenberg, though in fairness my

rear tire was acquiring a nice coat of mud by then, so I wasn't long for that ascent. And then, of course, there was the particularly tall chap in front of me who splayed himself across the entire width of the Kapelmuur (right at the spot from which we would spectate from the next afternoon), his body going right and his bike left, momentarily shutting down all traffic on the hill.

This last one interrupted what was shaping up to be the day's most triumphant moment, the part described in the prologue, where the aura of the Kapelmuur put me in a higher state of being. As iconic as the other climbs may be in their own right, it's the Kapelmuur which, to me, symbolized the apex of the race itself, where champions don't merely survive as they do on the earlier ascents but where they are transformed into the legends hanging on the walls of every sports pub within 100 miles or more. Unlike any other section of the course, my never having been there before did nothing to dent sensation of something very familiar, not to mention utterly unique and remarkably beautiful. Also, unlike any other section of the course, spectators lined the roadside in more than the odd grouping standing gamely in the rain and urging on the tourists. Here you saw them, lots of them. You heard them cheering "courage" (the French version of the same spelling) and whatever other Flemish encouragements they could offer.

I was also feeling strong, having gotten over the first 600 meters of climbing with little trouble, so when my human landslide of a companion fulfilled his destiny, I paused for only a moment. Within seconds he had gathered himself and cleared the path, I had skirted around him and remounted, and the climb was back on, before the experience could slip away.

The reward for this was not only getting over the 19% gradient section on my bike, but turning left and skirting along the walls of the pub which framed the penultimate slope -- packed airtight on race day with bodies on the patio and hanging out of the windows, and maybe half-full today. Across from the end of the pub was the right turn up the round, grassy hilltop to the chapel, where trees give way to sky (now showing a bit of blue again) and where fences were replaced by the tiny church's dome.

In the thirty years since the Vesten/Kapelmuur version replaced the old Abdijstraat Muur, thousands of racers -- including most of the greats -- have surely felt the same sense of relief in seeing the top of the last really hard climb, knowing as we did that nothing could stop us from finishing what we'd started, be it a tourist jaunt or a winning ride into Flemish Heaven.¹⁰² And while I know it's a job for the professionals, every one I've asked has expressed some sense of awe. I'm sure they would understand my utter exhilaration of getting having made it that far, worked that hard, all over this dreamscape of cycling history. While gathering my wits at the top alongside at least a couple dozen other stopped riders -- because everyone stops at the top of the Muur, for at least a moment -- the weight of the ride evaporated from my mind instantly. Tired legs and

¹⁰² Yes, I was referring to the race, but it's worth pointing out that the experience of climbing the Muur recreationally should also be referred to as Flemish Heaven. I ran through the details before, and maybe the old Muur was tougher (maybe), but there is no way it was more moving. A gritty, urban(ish) cobbled climb is a good thing, but can't hold a candle to the recent Muur, where the narrow city streets pass by shops and a public square, then rise through a dark, dense forest, then climax at an exquisite little chapel often painted against green grass and a blue sky. In a country known for grey weather and unspectacular vistas, there is a lot -- a LOT -- to be said for the aesthetics of this wonderful climb.

cold feet meant nothing anymore. It was almost all downhill and downwind to the finish.¹⁰³

Waiting there at the finish in Ninove, nearly nine hours after we set out, was a drab festival of wet riders and muddy bikes, sponsor tents, impromptu pubs, disco music, and of course a frituur. We'd grabbed finishers' tee shirts, had our hands full of gear, but no way were we leaving the scene without a celebratory cone of frietes. In Belgium, the frietes rarely ever disappoint, but these had to be the sweetest ones I'd tasted all week. Intense physical activity and junk food are strangely compatible bedfellows.

We drifted out past a sparse crowd of cyclists and loiterers hanging around the parking lot, past the vendors and the disco tent. We had our own engagement and a few complications to deal with as well. The next day wasn't merely the biggest day of the cycling calendar, it was also Easter, to be followed by a bank holiday Monday. We needed a few provisions, for starters, and a tank of gas. Earlier in the morning, all of this seemed like something worth putting off, when we figured to be done riding by no later than 4pm. Only now it was well after six, the country was shutting down, and people were waiting for us in Oudenaarde.

¹⁰³ Ahem, except for the Bosberg, another favorite climb of many Flemish fans, though I have to say I had stopped caring by then. Between exhaustion and needing to get back to Oudenaarde, and above all the anticlimax associated with anything that came after the Muur, I can't say I recall much about that climb besides knowing that we were almost done when we got over it.

This was the night of the official Podium Cafe gathering. The Podium Cafe, the website I started in 2006, had grown well beyond its original purpose of giving me, Pete, our friend Drew and a few other folks a place to chat about cycling, in place of the cumbersome email chains we had been relying on (and clogging our employers' servers with). Now it was a virtual cafe frequented by cycling fans from every continent -- well-known regulars, semi-regulars, passers-by and people lurking from a distance,¹⁰⁴ all there to consume a pretty good daily supply of news articles, interviews, analytical exercises, race predictions, interactive features, fantasy games, fashion critiques, and jokes. Lots of jokes.



But the lifeblood of the Cafe is perhaps the live threads, where on race day people log in to the site while watching the action

¹⁰⁴ There are over 6,100 registered members at present.

and chat with each other about anything from what's happening to what might happen next to, oh, beer, food, geology, rodents, and so on. [That's a series of inside jokes, sorry.] As unbelievable as this concept would have seemed a decade or so ago, it really is like gathering in the local pub to watch the race with fellow zealots, drifting back and forth between the action and whatever else people care to chat about.

One tradition says it all. Starting in maybe 2008, someone came up with the idea that you couldn't (or shouldn't) celebrate the greatness of the Tour of Flanders without beer.¹⁰⁵ More than a few threads have devolved into a true night at the pub experience, and there is nothing outrageous for fans of the Tour of Flanders to crack open a beer at whatever hour feels right. [The race coverage starts at 6:30am Eastern time, a/k/a the middle of the bloody night in Seattle.] Inevitably this led to the designation of the Koppenberg as the official toasting time, for reasons I can't remember, but it makes perfect sense. The more poignant moments later in the race are too engrossing to stop and do something as ridiculous as saying cheers to your computer, but things are still pretty casual when the race reaches the Kopp. And nobody misses the climb of the Kopp.

In subsequent years the Tour of Flanders has carved out a niche in our community, not unlike in the rest of the world, whereby a significant number of people will swear that it is the pinnacle of the sport. Those folks (OK, us folks) will insist that this race, thoroughly obscure to most American minds, in a

¹⁰⁵ This isn't a frat house -- by no means is it expected that everyone consumes alcohol. But beer is pretty ubiquitous to begin with, and the Belgians have made sure to create a strong linkage between the suds and cycling. Make of it what you will.

somewhat overlooked corner of Europe, represents the totality of suffering, wits, beauty and suspense, while catering to a pretty wide variety of skills so as to make the outcome extremely difficult to predict. Never mind whether that opinion is shared widely — as it increasingly is, particularly among American fans — love of Flanders has become one of the Podium Cafe’s trademarks, and quite a lot of us wear it proudly.

Whether or not de Ronde rules the Classics is beside the point. The true message of Ronde worship is that cycling should be loved for its full character -- a mix of the race, the landscape, the history and the passion that goes into it. Whether Flanders or Paris-Roubaix is the *best race* is a matter of taste. But in the US and many other countries, the popular perception, if it exists at all, has generally been that Paris-Roubaix is the most famous, therefore the best of the Classics. Flanders, for seemingly ever, was woefully underrated. The perfect fit, then, for defiantly proud die-hard fans of this brutal sport.

So it was fitting that the biggest in-person celebration to date of internet cycling fanhood¹⁰⁶ would take place half a block away from the Centrum Ronde van Vlaanderen museum in Oudenaarde. In the week leading up to our gathering, the Podium Cafe had been a veritable hog wallow of Flanders love. I posted exhaustively detailed pictures of *hellingen*. I live-blogged the consumption of a particularly large bowl of

¹⁰⁶ Internet cycling fanhood has expanded a bit in the last six years, to say the least. Meanwhile, the Podium Cafe has hosted a couple large gatherings in the US, associated with first the 2013 Cyclocross World Championships in Louisville, then the 2015 road World Championships in Richmond. Next on the docket: a return to Flanders in 2017.

mussels.¹⁰⁷ I devoured and passed on tidbits of Flemish cycling media with nearly the same gusto, including my favorite: a picture of Tom Boonen's girlfriend walking a small dog with Boonen's face cropped in. That one of the nation's largest magazines was still goofing around with digital photo cropping on its cover was Flanders in a nutshell. Fun, sure, but we're a long way from Milan or Madison Avenue.

Writing up every detail finally came to a halt by the meetup, however. I'd gone offline for much of Thursday and Friday during a side-trip to Amsterdam, Friday night my brother arrived, and Saturday was spent entirely in the saddle. And as we finished up the cyclosporive, we were already due back in Oudenaarde.

Waiting for us was a bright orange banner hung in the front window of the Pub and a dozen or so unfamiliar faces of very familiar people. We made introductions: a couple from San Francisco, two dudes from Montreal, another couple from Australia and New Zealand, friends from DC and London and Utrecht and Malmo. We shared a night in the pub, not remarkable in any way that is worth recounting except for the fact that it happened. The internet doesn't just imitate real life, it sometimes leads us to it. Thanks to so many hours of time online with these fine people (and so many others), I was at a pub talking cycling with familiar, friendly cycling-mad people, something that would almost never happen organically back home.

¹⁰⁷ OK, post-blogged, since eating mussels requires two hands. But between the jet lag and the alcohol I forgot the entire concept of time, and 158 comments later the meal was history.

This is really what we toast when we're watching at home in the American pre-dawn hours and the Tour of Flanders peloton hits the Koppenberg. Community. More specifically the community that unites around an almost secret, visceral, spectacular passion. For decades I longed for the chance to experience this great monument like the true fans, packed inside supporters clubs with the race blaring over the conversation. And now, from the comfort of my own living room, I can.



15: Paris-Roubaix, All Day

The highways circling Paris and heading north are quiet at 7am on a Sunday, despite providing access to two of the country's biggest sporting events taking place that day -- the Paris Marathon downtown and Paris-Roubaix up north. Compiègne, where Paris-Roubaix now starts, is about an hour from downtown, far enough that you won't really find any evidence of this iconic event, half-named after the City of Lights, in the city itself... save for the pages of *L'Équipe*, the national sports daily newspaper. There is a trickle of traffic consisting of people like us, sucking up the prospect of a long day for the chance to chase the Hell of the North over the sport's most terrifying roads. But the race scene is all encamped in Compiègne, and has been for days.

Compiègne is a perfect alternative to Paris as the jumping off point. For starters, Paris is too far from Roubaix to accommodate a modern classic, where 250km or so is considered reasonable and 300k is not. The early races started from Porte Maillot, on the northwest edge of Paris proper, and were 280km long, relatively short by comparison to the other major classics of the day. Starting in Paris wasn't any crazier than coming in from Bordeaux. Sanity became an element of the sport sometime between the pneumatic tire and the disc wheel.

More than logistics, Compiègne feels right as the gateway to the race's heart. This is a northern race, one whose landscape was distinctively scarred by the ravages of the Great War. Well, Compiègne is fittingly located at the southern end of the

gently rolling open spaces of the north (as opposed to the busy, less distinct suburban areas). The town was also a command center at the western end of the battle line at various points in World War I and the site of the eventual armistice with Germany.¹⁵⁰

With another long day in the saddle on tap, the race departed before 9:30, which meant we had to leave Paris at about 7am. A sizeable crowd was gathering, and available parking was half a mile from the startline or so. In case we had any trouble remembering Compiègne's history, winding through Compiègne's streets -- with names like Avenue de l'Armistice, Avenue de President Georges Clemenceau and Rue de President Roosevelt -- will provide you with relentless reminders. The start happens just behind the Town Hall, built in 1505 and towering over the center square. The space was pretty tight around the start area and packed with fans. A roped off area provided some comfort for the VIPs, but none of it felt like a big deal. The Tour of Flanders feels like a big show, from the organization of the start area all the way through to the finish. Paris-Roubaix is much more... provincial. Unadorned.

After the usual drill -- guys coming up on stage in singles and groups, riders sitting around chatting, the gun going off, the caravan rolling out -- the flag dropped on the spectators too. Like the peloton, we didn't exactly hit the gas right away. We had a long day in store for us, and if we were to make it to

¹⁵⁰ That would be the armistice which ended the fighting phase of WWI and eventually led to the Treaty of Versailles, which became a symbol of Nazi grievance in the lead-in to WWII. So naturally, when Germany prevailed in the Battle of France in early 1940, Hitler selected Compiègne to host the signing of another armistice, emphasizing the element of revenge.

Roubaix in decent shape, the first stop would have to be for food. A bakery on the route back to the car was filling up with fans, but before long we had bags full of breakfast and lunch, plus some *caffes-au-lait*.

At the car, as we sorted ourselves out Paul chatted with the guys next to us in the lot, who had a plan to see the race next at Saint-Python. We figured on catching an early *secteur*, far enough from the Trench to make that the second stop, and Quievy-Saint-Python sounded good enough to us. They told us to follow them, and we did, for a while, though eventually we lost them and found Saint-Python ourselves. Not that it's hard to find. This area of France is quiet, especially on a Sunday morning, so the commotion and traffic of the race is unmistakable. We drove to the road closure at the juncture where the race course crosses a railroad track, coming downhill slightly over modest cobbles. Dumping the car strategically near the exit, we settled in with a few dozen other fans, including the obligatory Belgians, and waited for the commotion.

A sizable breakaway came by first, more than a dozen guys, looking pretty determined. Several minutes later the peloton rolled through, intact and very business-like, in a decidedly restrained way. The latter kicked up a fair amount of dust, suggesting that it was going to be one of *those* Paris-Roubaix editions. The mud gets all the attention, but the dust leaves its mark too.

There wasn't much to take away from the experience of seeing one of the world's hardest sporting events at an early phase when the combatants are still saving themselves that we

couldn't have figured out on our own. But this wasn't anthropology, it was sport. Cool to see it in and of itself. Still, they number the *secteurs* for a reason: so people can engage in their own competition to see as many race passages as possible. Not that we were competing; being rank amateurs in this category and completely bereft of local knowledge, we planned to stick to the fundamentals -- four stops, with Arenberg and the finish yet to come.



Early Paris-Roubaix breakaway group, in Quiévy. Photo by Chris Fontecchio

As soon as the peloton passed, the mad scramble for the next location was underway. The effort was led in part by a couple team cars, HTC and another one, driven by *soigneurs* who had

handed out some water bottles at our Saint-Python crossing and were off to their next appointment. Behind them formed a high-speed caravan, including us, of people off to their next race passing too, and figuring that these guys might know something we didn't, on the theory that they couldn't afford to be wrong. They weren't, and more so they put on a brief clinic in how to get to the next spot without wasting two seconds. Both lanes of the road were fair game. Country roads were good enough, if they presented a chance at a shortcut. Speed limits were more or less irrelevant. The only limiting factor was the potential for churchgoers in the road, but you can see the steeples from a distance, and when you have a big enough caravan, even that's not a threat. By the time we made it back to the A route, we were ahead of schedule again.

The Paris-Roubaix parcours has settled into something of a routine, whereby the race includes 27 or 28 *secteurs* of cobblestones, numbered in a countdown (i.e. reverse order), deliberately grinding down the peloton en route to Roubaix. As of 2007 the race organizers instituted a system that formalized what everyone was already thinking, actually rating each *secteur* with 1-5 stars to indicate its difficulty. Every year brings slight changes to the exact order, and some *secteurs*¹⁵¹ get an occasional year off, but the following analysis (based on the 2011 course) is more or less what you can expect each year.¹⁵²

¹⁵¹ Is it getting annoying that I keep putting this word in italics? By now you know it's French for sector. The whole "-eur" thing is a dead giveaway, since that sound is about as English as bright sunshine or Renee Zellweger. So anyway, I'm dropping the italics... but I just can't bring myself to call a stretch of cobblestones in Paris-Roubaix a "sector." That's not their name. You understand, right?

¹⁵² If you think it sounds lame that I'm going off the 2011 map, here are some stats for 2016: 27 *secteurs* of cobbles; every single one of them is included in this list; 52.8km total.

Each secteur has its own story, but not all of them are terribly fascinating, so perhaps it's best to view the race in phases.

Phase 1: Compiègne -- Troisvilles

Each year there are approximately 98 km of smooth tarmac before the race assumes its full identity. This phase is notable for the favorites biding their time in the comfort and safety of their surrounding teammates, and the inevitable break up the road, because sponsors need their due in big races, and because teams like to use breaks to tactical advantage, and because... well, some people just need to ride away from the pack. For some two and a half hours the race glides through the gentle landscape of the Aisne Department, whose otherwise quiet history was interrupted by the most severe ravages of the Great War. It's a landscape dotted with monuments and cemeteries, a place bearing witness to the birth of trench warfare and the death of a generation. The helicopters and TV cameras largely take a pass on this segment of the race, joining the action just in time for the first stretch of stones.¹⁵³

Phase 2: Troisvilles -- St-Python

The cobbles get underway, with four quick secteurs in succession, totalling 9.2km of pave out of 15.5km of "road."

¹⁵³ We are getting closer to the arrival of full-race coverage. The Tour of Flanders leaves out the first two hours or so, and really, these seven hour days have nothing going on at first. But the Tour de France has had some full-stage video presentations and we live in an era where you can watch your dog sleep on the couch from your office workstation. So a Compiègne-to-Roubaix video option can't be far off.

The sheer length of the pavé secteurs means that the riders start burning a few matches, though of course the Bigs do their best to minimize the work.

27. Troisvilles - Inchy (km 98, 2200 meters), Rating: ***

Downhill on the cobbles... this is a good way to get out your early terrors. Said to be in good shape.

26. Viesly - Quiévy (km 104.5, 1800 meters), Rating: ***

Straight and generally lacking in surprises.

25. Quiévy - Saint-Python (km 107, 3700 meters), Rating: ****

They're not big bruisers. On the other hand, 3.7km is forever, and there's a long, slow uphill drag. Also, I bet these stones get pretty slick on a wet day. The road consists of smooth, square pavers set in dirt that comes all the way to the surface, to minimize the bouncing around.

24. Saint-Python (km 115.5, 1500 meters), Rating: **

Unless the internet is lying to me, there is no actual St. Python. Too bad; I was never all that inspired by the stories of the saints. Maybe if one of them had been named after a deadly snake or a troupe of British comedy geniuses, I would have paid more attention. Anyway, these 1500 meters are still just preamble.