

Top American At Tour de France Is A Rookie

Written by Frederick Dreier
Friday, 12 July 2013 07:11

The top American at this year's Tour de France is a rookie whose journey to cycling's pinnacle has been anything but ordinary. Andrew Talansky, 24, is in 24th place in his debut Tour, 13 minutes behind Chris Froome of Great Britain and 25 minutes ahead of the next American, Tejay van Garderen.

But just three years ago, Talansky—who was born in New York and raised in Florida—was a no-name rider on a lower-level team in the U.S. domestic league. He had ambitions of racing at the Tour de France, and he got his big break on a snowy New Mexico mountaintop in the spring of 2010.

After finishing alongside Tour de France-caliber pros at the Tour of the Gila race, Talansky saw Garmin-Sharp team boss Jonathan Vaughters leaning up against the team car. Like a kid from the mailroom giving his elevator pitch to the CEO, Talansky approached Vaughters to ask for a job.

"I saw my opportunity and decided I had better take advantage of it," Talansky said. "In this sport, to get to a higher level, you have to perform. But you also have to know how to put yourself out there."

For most top American cyclists, the path to the Tour de France involves years of racing in unglamorous youth leagues in Belgium, the Netherlands and France. Since 1999, USA Cycling, the sport's domestic governing body, has shipped the fastest teenagers to its development houses in Izegem, Belgium, and Lucca, Italy, where the cyclists eat, drink and sleep bike racing. The gritty European leagues hammer some of the young riders into the stars of tomorrow. Many others wash out. Talansky, however, took a different path. A high-school cross-country runner in Key Biscayne, Fla., he picked up cycling at age 17. But after a few rides, Talansky could pedal 100 miles alongside some of the region's top amateur racers. He quickly churned through South Florida's amateur-racing ranks.

Local racer Todd Hancock recognized Talansky's talent and started coaching him. But Hancock steered him away from USA Cycling's European program.

"I know how that meat grinder in Belgium works and I didn't think he was ready," Hancock said. "I thought he needed another year of development."

USA Cycling wasn't that hot on Talansky either. Jim Miller, USA Cycling's vice president of athletics, said Hancock regularly emailed him data from Talansky's training. The numbers were good but not great.

Talansky instead went to Lees-McRae College in hilly North Carolina, where he won the collegiate national-championship race his freshman year. He dropped out after one year to compete with the Amore & Vita team in Italy. But the team's poor living conditions and disorganization chased him out of Europe in the spring of 2009.

"There was no heat. No hot water," Talansky said. "If you woke up and the Nutella was frozen, you knew you were going to have a bad day."

Back in the U.S., Talansky queried team directors and the USA Cycling development program for a job, but no one responded. He raced the remainder of the season in the U.S. without team support, lumping his expenses on his credit card.

But the following season, Talansky's fifth year riding a bike, his body began to change. His legs bulked up. His boyish rosy cheeks collapsed into a gaunt, chiseled face. The training files that Hancock sent to Miller began to tell a different story.

"There was this big jump in the numbers, and it was like, whoa," Miller said. "He had developed

Top American At Tour de France Is A Rookie

Written by Frederick Dreier
Friday, 12 July 2013 07:11

power."

Talansky wowed the peloton at the Tour of the Gila that spring, then raced for the U.S. team in Europe that fall. By year's end, Vaughters offered him a deal to race on Garmin-Sharp on the world stage.

His results at cycling's biggest races have shown continued progression: ninth at the 2011 Tour of Romandie, seventh at the 2012 Vuelta a Espana, second at the 2013 Paris-Nice and a berth at the Tour for Garmin.

"Andrew wasn't raised up racing bikes, supported all the way by coaches, parents, and money," Vaughters said. "He had to scratch and claw. It made him tougher."

In today's cycling climate, boosts in performance raise red flags, due to the sport's decadeslong history with doping. But both Miller and Hancock said there are credible explanations for Talansky's improvement at age 22. Miller called Talansky a "late bloomer," and said he has seen other cyclists struggle through their teens before achieving physiological maturity in their early 20s.

Hancock said Talansky's progression was actually gradual. But since he wasn't affiliated with any pro teams or the national development program, he flew under the radar. "Andrew wasn't in the pipeline—he was an outlier," Hancock said. "In our sport, it can be difficult for outliers to make it in.

Talansky credits his progression to talent and preparation. An outspoken opponent of doping, Talansky has been critical of his sport's previous generation, including Lance Armstrong. He said the success of van Garderen, Taylor Phinney and other riders from his generation are proof the sport has progressed.

"The results we've gotten show that the culture has changed—if it hadn't, we'd be suffering at the back of the pack," Talansky said. "Everyone has a natural amount of physical ability, and now it comes down to what you do with that."

Photo Courtesy: Andrew Talansky, LMC Athletics