

Breakaways And Mythical Mountains

Written by Andrew Talansky
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If you looked at stage 14 of the Tour de France, on paper, you would have seen a lumpy day with some small hills, and nothing really of note. In reality, it was from it. Again, just as we had in the Pyrénées, our team had an inkling that something big could happen on this day. Sky had shown weakness the day before in the crosswinds and everyone had the same idea: a breakaway would go to the line and potentially take quite a bit of time in doing so.

We set off with a plan: put myself and David Millar in the break, and do all we could to win the stage. While things rarely go according to plan in this sport, on this day things clicked, and after a furious first hour of racing, David and I forced ourselves into the 18-rider move that would spend the day off the front and ultimately battle it out for the stage win. Sometimes, when you see a breakaway roll off in the first kilometers of a race, it is generally because everyone is confident those riders will be caught by day's end. However, when riders have to force themselves off the front, going as hard as they can, only the strong survive and the group that ends up off the front is worthy of being there.

When a rider first makes it into the move, he feels like prey, being chased by a giant beast, or in this case, the peloton. Suddenly riders around him, most of whom he's been battling for position for two weeks, are his friends. We are all bound together by one goal, that is, to stay away. On this day, it took a while. Teams that missed the move chased like madmen behind while the 18 of us up front did our utmost to keep them at bay. Finally, the will of the peloton broke and we were free.

As the race progressed, it was interesting to observe the subtle, but noticeable, change that took place among those of us at the front. While we all shared the work equally to begin with, as the finish approached, I could feel the tension mounting. We all knew that the attacks would begin, it was just a matter of who and when. Once they started, the glue, the common goal that held us together for most of the stage, disintegrated and we became, once again, like a pack of wolves.

As the attacks became more frequent, the weaker riders were dropped. When we lost David Millar on one of the climbs with less than 15 kilometers remaining, I felt isolated. Having David in the break with me gave me a sense of reassurance; I felt like there was someone watching out for me and guiding me through the day. His experience at such escapades made me confident that we could succeed and losing him rattled me. Although we only spoke a few words in all that time we were off the front together, his presence alone was enough to put me at ease. Before he was dropped he told me, "don't hesitate, race for the win."

I tried to remember this all the way to the line, but to be honest I can't remember much. Those last few kilometers are a complete blur. All I remember is pain, sprinting over and over again, trying to make sure I wasn't left behind, doing all I could to hold the wheel in front of me, trying to keep myself connected to whoever was attacking. I remember thinking that all I needed to do was get to the line with what was left of the group and I would have a fighting chance at the win. That was my goal.

With one kilometer remaining, I thought I had lost it. I closed down a move and right as we slowed another couple riders attacked. We were at a standstill. I was watching the Tour de France ride away from me. Then someone responded and I sprinted again to get on a wheel as we flew inside 800 meters to go. I could see the first rider, seemingly ages ahead of us. Inside 500 meters to go I realized we were going to catch the leaders — it was going to be a sprint. Inside 300 meters I waited, and that is where I made my mistake. David had told me not to

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hesitate, but I did. That is where David's experience comes into play, that is why you will rarely, if ever, see him do anything other than win when he comes to the line in a breakaway. He did it last year in the Tour (and many times before that) and he tried to help me do it on Saturday. On stage 14 of the Tour de France, the greatest bike race in the world, for a brief moment I thought I was going to win. In the end, I let my fear of losing stop me for a split second, and that made all the difference. I think I learned more from losing that day than I would have from winning. I never make the same mistake twice and that moment of hesitation will forever be burned into my psyche.

When it was all said and done, though, the day had been a success. I had gained back over seven minutes on the overall GC and I was back in the race for the white jersey. It was, however, a short-lived comeback. On Sunday we climbed Mont Ventoux, at the end of what I would say was the most demanding day of the Tour thus far. This race continues to put itself head and shoulders above anything else I have ever done.

Throughout the stage, I was hopeful. I felt surprisingly good, considering Saturday's efforts, but just a few kilometers into the tree-shrouded lower slopes of Ventoux, I knew it wasn't going to be my day. That didn't stop me from fighting and hoping that maybe, just maybe, I could hang on. Of course, this sport cares nothing for our personal hopes or aspirations, and the reality was that I couldn't do it.

A couple kilometers after getting dropped from the front group, I emerged from the trees, and still with six kilometers to go until the summit of one of the most mythical and historic mountains in cycling, the enormity of the Tour hit me full force. There, in the naked, barren landscape that characterizes Ventoux, for just a brief moment, I felt alone, on the slopes of a mountain that has created heroes and crushed souls, and has literally killed a man in Tom Simpson. Then, I was suddenly brought back to reality; thousands of people were screaming, clearly intoxicated, some with alcohol and others only with the love of our beautiful sport. I saw all of this through my half-closed eyes, my face a mask of pain as I fought and clawed my way slowly to the top. Coming around that final hairpin, with 100 meters remaining, images flashed through my head. Images of all the winners, and stragglers, I had seen crossing this line, all the faces of anguish and agony, riders coming to a complete collapse, and I realized I was one of them. As I sat on the ground, collecting myself, body still aching, mind still numb, I felt content — content in knowing I left a part of myself on that mountain, knowing that I had done all I could do on that day. It might not have been enough to win, or even be at the front, but it was what I had to give. It's easy to lose focus of the present, to always want more, but every now and then, at seemingly the strangest places and times, I'm able to step back and appreciate that I am living my dream. I will continue to give everything I have for the remainder of this race. What that means, only time will tell.

Photo Courtesy: Andrew Talansky, LMC Athletics