

The Fall of King Eddy

Merckx stood as tall in defeat as in victory

BY CHARLES HOWE

It scarcely seemed possible that the exploits of Jacques Anquetil could be put in the shade, but just five years after '*Maître Jacques*' won his fifth Tour de France, Eddy Merckx started his own Tour career by becoming the first to win all three classifications, including the GC by 17:54 (still the largest margin since 1952), 8:30 of it coming during a single stage in the Pyrénées that he won on a solo break of over 130 km. By the time he was through in 1977 at only 32 years of age, Merckx had equaled Anquetil's records for Tour wins, and far exceeded him with 34 stage wins and 96 days in yellow, while adding 5 Giri d'Italia and 1 Vuelta a España, for a total of 11 Grand Tours to Anquetil's 8, as well as 32 one-day classics, 3 world professional road race titles, and the world hour record, in contrast to Anquetil's lone classics win at Liège-Bastogne-Liège and his 1956 hour record. Like Michael Jordan, Merckx is the sort of rare athlete about whom the case is closed: he is simply the best ever at what he did. Beyond his unexcelled *palmarès*, however, it was his character – his competitive integrity, loyalty, and sense of honor – that distinguished him as a sportsman of the highest order. Two gestures seem typical: it was Merckx alone who represented the *peloton* at Tom Simpson's funeral, two years later doffing his cap in tribute as he passed the spot on the Ventoux where his mentor and friend had fallen. And it was Merckx who visited Luis Ocaña at bedside in hospital after the latter had crashed out of the 1971 Tour.

Ocaña's ill-luck most likely extended Merckx's reign, for the Spaniard had crushed Merckx in the Alps and led by over seven minutes at the time of his abandon, but *malchance* may have cost *Le Cannibale* the win in 1975, which is, ironically, considered by some to be his greatest performance. Merckx had been competing in and winning all manner of races almost without respite for 10 years, and some claim that his wicked and unprecedented pace had begun to exact its toll by this time, but you couldn't tell from results that spring, which included wins at Milan-San Remo, Tour of Flanders, Liège-Bastogne-Liège, and the Amstel Gold Race – his second-best spring classics campaign ever. He appeared to be on his way to a record sixth Tour when he won the 16 km, stage 6 individual time trial to assume the yellow jersey, then won again in the 37.4 km stage 9b ITT to run his margin on third-placed Bernard Thévenet to 2:20, but the increasingly confident Frenchman took back a surprising 0:49 on the mountainous 11th stage through the Pyrénées. After four tries at the Tour, six stage wins, and the runner-up spot in 1973, Thévenet was on the verge of breaking through from perennial contender to Tour champion.

Three stages later, Merckx was punched heavily in the back by a French fan as he neared the stage finish at the summit of the Puy de Dôme, where he conceded another 0:34 to Thévenet. After turning around and coasting down the mountain to identify his attacker, Merckx lingered in the riders' room for half an hour after the stage was over, clutching his injured liver, which became inflamed, requiring medication. The timing of the blow could not have been worse: after a rest day and transfer to Nice came the race's most daunting stage, 217.5 km long with climbs of the col St. Martin (Cat. 3, 1560 m), col de l'Couillole (Cat. 2, 1678 m), col des Champs (Cat. 1, 2191 m), col d'Allos (Cat. 1, 2250 m), and the mountaintop finish at Pra-Loup (Cat. 2, 1630 m). A truly epic showdown loomed.

Thévenet initiated the action as he dared to attack Merckx just before the crest of the Champs, and Merckx reacted instinctively, countering so hard that he had a 60 meter gap and was first over the top before Thévenet knew what had happened. A fearless descender, Merckx pressed his attack at over 80 kph, screaming in rage as he nearly collided with a group of journalists who had parked too closely at the road's edge. Gimondi followed in furious pursuit; at the same spot as Merckx's close call, his team car swerved and hurtled over the precipice. The driver and team manager were thrown clear, slid for a distance, then latched on to the undergrowth and watched as their vehicle tumbled end-over-end off the side of the mountain, smashing the bikes mounted on the roof as it went. A much more cautious descender, Thévenet meanwhile had suffered a flat, but kept his nerve and resumed the chase.



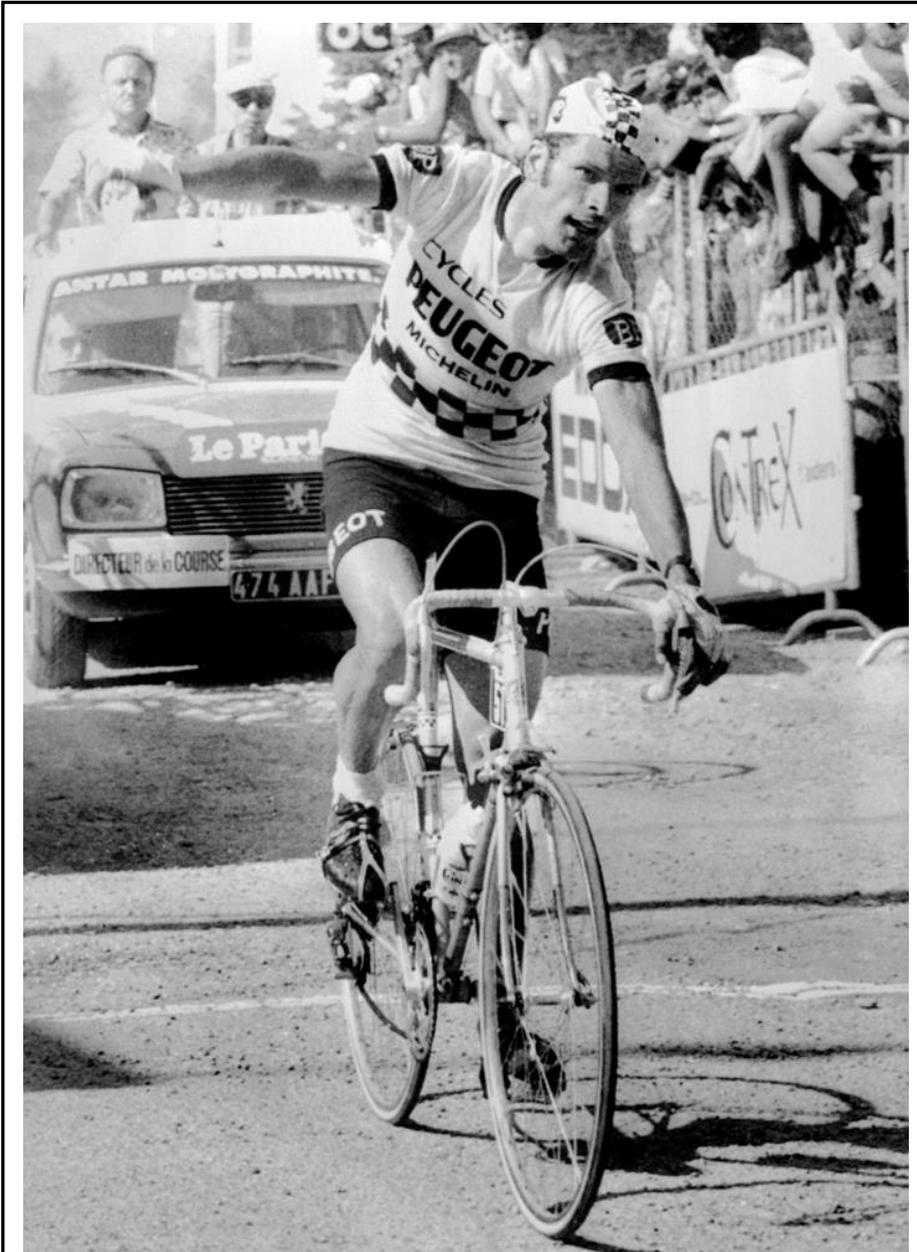
FINAL MOMENTS IN YELLOW – In full attack mode on the col d’Allos, Merckx looked to be on the very cusp of his sixth Tour win. (Photo: John Pierce/PhotoSport International. All rights retained.)

Like a desperate gambler, Merckx was going for broke, betting the whole works on one number. He led over the Allos, pushing his advantage to more than a minute, where it remained with just 6 km to go. Some claim that what happened next was due to the medication he had taken for the blow to his kidneys, but signs point equally to a classic bonk, or hunger knock, as Merckx came completely undone: his pedal stroke became labored and lost its rhythm, his hands clenched the handlebars in a death grip, his eyes filled with anguish, confusion, and panic. First Gimondi caught him, with 3 km to go, offered a wheel but got no response, then came Thévenet, who noticed that Merckx seemed unaware he was on the side of the road where the tar had melted in the heat of the day, and was riding tire-deep in it. Although close to his own limit as well, Thévenet pressed on, caught Gimondi, sat on for a while, then escaped for a solo win that gave him the lead by 0:58 and ended Merckx’s time in the yellow jersey at a record 96 days. His gaps were 0:23 on Gimondi, 1:12 on Zoetemelk, 1:42 on Van Impe, and 1:56 on Merckx, who was gracious in apparent defeat: “I tried everything, and it didn’t work. Only the strongest win, and Thévenet is the strongest.”

Two mountain stages remained, however, and Merckx hadn’t really conceded anything. He attacked on the col de Vars the next day, but Thévenet, emulating Coppi and Bobet, soloed away on the Izoard as the Bastille Day crowd went *fou* all around him, gaining another 2:22 on Merckx, who trailed in second within a group containing the other top five GC riders. Then, during the rolling, neutralized start to the final alpine stage the next day, Merckx touched wheels with Olé Ritter and pitched face first into the pavement. Stunned by the fall, he had a broken cheekbone and torn sinus, and was advised to abandon. He refused, prompting the attending doctor to disavow responsibility, and was actually able *take back* two seconds on Thévenet, coming in third on the day. Five stages remained, but Merckx, his jaw wired shut and able to take in only liquids, *still* refused to give up, and actually gained 15 seconds on Thévenet in an uphill time trial the following day. A crash on the penultimate staged delayed Thévenet by 16 seconds, reducing his final margin to just 2:47. Each man spoke in earnest praise of the other after the Tour’s inaugural finish on the Champs Élysées.



HELPLESS – Merckx could but watch as Thévenet caught, passed, and drew away from him on Pra-Loup.



THE KING IS DEAD, LONG LIVE THE KING? – An epic stage win saw Thévenet arrive at Pra-Loup with nearly two minutes in hand over Merckx, giving him the yellow jersey, but the race was far from over.



WHAT TOOK 'EM SO LONG? – The Champs Élysées finish now seems so natural, even obvious, but until 1975, the Tour had traditionally finished on a velodrome...



...Merckx was accorded the honor of leading the peloton onto the into Paris...



...but Walter Godefroot was the inaugural winner on the world's most famous avenue.