

# peloton

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# 12

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# ONE YEAR AGO

One year ago on the second Sunday of April, Roger Hammond set off from Compiègne in search of the win that had eluded him his whole career, the one he wanted more than any other: Paris-Roubaix. A year later and Hammond is in plain clothes, standing quietly, watching former teammates, directors, managers and soigneurs hurry by—just minutes before the race's tidal wave sets off on a crooked northeasterly journey to Roubaix.

It's hard being the other person in a moment like that. You have a vague understanding of the feeling, but even vague is probably an exaggeration. I don't do well with uncomfortable silences, so I ask the obvious, "Is it hard watching your favorite race about to set off?"

"Yeah," Hammond says while scanning the colorful scene before him. "It's really hard. The only consolation I have is that this race isn't even worth starting unless you're in perfect form." The new father looks down at himself, smiles, and says, "I'm most certainly not in perfect form right now."

But still, that silly little detail of not being ready for a race doesn't stop that feeling that he would give anything to jump on a bike and give everything he had just one more time.

It goes against every instinct for a rider like Hammond. Racing is in his blood, and to walk away when the race starts, it's just not right.

That reflective moment soon ends though. Hammond snaps out of the daydream and walks into the fray. He greets friends every which way—he knows everyone—and that's not an exaggeration. That quiet moment off to the side is long forgotten, and it feels like he's about to race. I would have thought he was going to start momentarily if it weren't for the jeans and dark jacket.

It's with a big smile and a hug that he greets another recent retiree, Servais Knaven. Knaven, a winner of Paris-Roubaix in one of the legendary mudfests, is now a director with Team Sky. They chat, and while they chat, two more friends roll up—Garmin-Barracuda's Andreas Klier, and Sky's Bernhard Eisel. It doesn't take long before the thumbs come out and tire pressures are compared. I would put my money on the line and say that they could all guess tire pressure within a quarter bar.

Eisel's tire pressure is significantly higher than Klier's. They all turn to Eisel and laugh, as if to say, what race are you doing today, Bernie?

Words > *Jered Gruber*  
Images > *Gruber Photography & Yuzuru Sunada*

Eisel laughs and rolls off with Klier.

We head off in the direction of the van, and once safely inside and headed to our first stop, we resume the chat on tire pressure.

So what's the story?

"There's a lot of toying with tire pressure at Roubaix. A lot of riders will ride an aero bike or high tire pressure or both for the first part of the race, then, when the important cobbles draw near after 150 kilometers, they'll make a quick bike change to a bike and tire pressures suited for the finale." It sounds like a clever idea, but it's a risk.

"In Lars Michaelsen's last year, 2009, he did that. He was trying to do everything just perfectly, so he opted for the risky bike swap—not at the beginning, but at the end of the race, after the Carrefour de l'Arbre. He got on a fast bike in preparation for the fast finale, but promptly crashed on the sector of cobbles in Gruson. Race over."

The same fate befell even Hammond last year. "I stopped to let out some air







Image > Jucun Simola

**ROGER STOPPED AT THE COBBLE LABELED “MAGNUS BACKSTEDT 2004”; HE STOMPED HARD ON THE ROCK AND KEPT MOVING. WITHOUT LOOKING BACK, HE ASKED (MOSTLY) JOKINGLY, DID IT CRACK?**

from my tires right here,” he points to a seemingly random spot along the road near the Arenberg Forest. “I got on and chased through the field but I was still too far back. I crashed into a concrete median soon after exiting the cobbles. Heino (Heinrich Haussler) came down with me as well. I felt so bad, but Heino shook his head—thank God for that. I had nothing at all.”

On the exact opposite side of the stressful tire pressure and equipment question are the poor Spanish teams. Hammond told us a story he had heard from Spanish hardman, Vicente Reynes.

“The flights for the Euskaltel riders were set up so that if a rider actually finished the race, he would not make his flight home. The team wouldn’t give them their good tubular wheels, so they all raced clinchers at nine bar. Reynes, racing for one of the Banesto descendant teams, wasn’t like them though—he wanted to do well. He was racing for a result, but had his day come to an end after a flat tire: his team didn’t have any more wheels.”

For some riders, Roubaix is a professional obligation. For Hammond, it was the focal point of each season. It was a passion.

Think I’m getting all flowery? Try this.

So we’re driving, and you know that word passion and the feeling that he’d give anything to race? That energy had to come out somewhere. It came out in our chase. We didn’t have press creds, thus, we were not allowed on the course. It just wasn’t possible.

Except, apparently it was. We spent the whole day on the course. Roger, working in tandem with the legendary soigneur Bart Brackez, was a force not to be trifled with. There was no power that could hold Roger and Bart back. No creds? No problem. This was a former podium finisher at Roubaix—do you think something as trifling as a lack of a sticker would keep him off the pavé?

The spirit of the race was in Roger, and it infected everyone in the giant red van. There was this irascible

energy that needed exorcising on this Easter Sunday, and since there was no bike and no cobbles to do battle with, all attention was now on the road—the traffic, the police, the chase.

One can only imagine what it was like on the road when he was racing.

We ended up behind two Katusha cars headed in our desired direction. Two red Katusha team cars with our red, unofficial “Katusha” team vehicle in tow. Perhaps this could work? Could we slip in unnoticed?

That’s a laughable thought, as nothing goes unnoticed by the law during a major classic—except us, of course. Bart rammed the car as close to the Katusha bumper as possible and with eyes locked straight ahead, with nary a sideways glance, with the whole van chanting in unison led by Roger—“Don’t brake, Bart!”—he gunned it on to the course to the joyous howls of laughter from Roger.

Last year, we couldn’t believe our ears when we were told a story of



## IT WOULD PROBABLY BE HARD TO EXAGGERATE HOW MANY TIMES HAMMOND HAS REPLAYED THAT FINISH IN HIS HEAD.

a guy who chased Roubaix with a forged car pass. This year, we were on the course without a single piece of official stickerdom.

It all went down to balls. Big ones. If you drive with the authority that you belong, despite the unsinkable, unquestionable fact that you absolutely do not, somehow it works. I don't have those *cojones*, but Bart and Roger do. With Roger goading Bart on, there was nothing that wasn't possible. Had they set their sights on it; I think they could have pulled off a victory lap on the Roubaix velodrome.

The race came and went on multiple occasions, so did the clattering of carbon wheels on ancient cobbles, as peculiar and distinctive as ever. And the dust? Unimaginable.

As we careened across the cobbles in search of our next stop, Roger described the chaos of the dust.

"I only knew dusty Roubaix. They've all been dry since 2002, so I never had the chance to race in the wet, but I think I would have done well in those conditions [As a multi-time British national cross champ, I think that's a fair bet as well.] At the back, the dust is intense, but even at the front, you're constantly plowing through the storm kicked up by the lead vehicles. One year, I was chasing back from a mechanical, and I couldn't see my own hands on the bars. I could only see the dark forms of the fans on either side of the road. All you could do was point your bike in between the dark shapes and hope for the best. I didn't know if I was riding on the crown of the road, in the gutter, or if I was even on the road."

Through the dust, we bounced along the Quérénaing cobbles. We arrived at a dead end. There were barriers at a hard turn just off the cobbles, with five police officers manning the turn. A Team Sky van had just

been kindly told to go the other way—this would be our stopping point—from here, none shall pass.

Except, Bart wasn't satisfied with the location. He got out of the car, walked up to the police, exchanged some friendly words, and two seconds later, the barriers were moved, and we were back on the course. This was an entirely new level: we weren't even breaking the rules anymore, we now had the consent of the ruling party. This was too much.

We stopped at the Orchies sector of cobbles on the heels of the best recommendation I've ever heard: "This is where the cool kids attack!"

Roger had put in a big move on those cobbles in the past. "It's a good point in the race," he said. Sure enough, as we waited at the end of the cobbles, there came Turgot, followed closely by Tom Boonen and Filippo Pozzato. The big players were coming to the fore—this was the move.

As the stragglers trudged wearily by in search of a happy ending in Roubaix, we started the last part of our chase to the velodrome. The traffic was thick and mostly unmoving, but in the heat of the finale, Roger's energy spiked still higher. He directed Bart like a possessed ship captain on stormy seas. Traffic stopped entirely? Not a problem—there's no one in the left lane—that's the lane for oncoming traffic. That was merely a silly piece of information, if traffic comes, we'll use the left-hand grass (which we did). We would make the finish in Roubaix if we had to drive up the side of buildings to get there.

And we did.

We hurried up the final processional bit of cobbles decorated with the names of all the former winners. Roger stopped at the cobble labeled "Magnus Backstedt 2004"; he stomped

hard on the rock and kept moving. Without looking back, he asked (mostly) jokingly, "Did it crack?"

That was, of course, the cobble that could have been his. He went into the velodrome that day as part of a quartet: Hammond, Backstedt, Fabian Cancellara and Tristan Hoffman. The finish is painful to watch. Hammond is in prime position on Cancellara's wheel heading into the final straight. As the sprint opens up in earnest though, Cancellara moves to his right, opening the door for Backstedt, and shutting it on Hammond—the hand had been dealt.

As we stretched our legs to quicken our speed, Hammond details the finish: "I was the fastest finisher in that group, but sprints on a velodrome can be funny. Cancellara led it out, but he pushed me wide in the sprint, and that was it. My chance was gone."

What do you say to that? How can you respond? For Tom Boonen, who was about to win Roubaix for the fourth time, an opportunity missed in the past is not a big deal, but for Hammond, that was his chance, his chance to forever etch his name into the record books, into history. With one rider's seemingly random move in the final 200 meters on that gray day in 2004, the fates of two riders changed forever.

It would probably be hard to exaggerate how many times Hammond has replayed that finish in his head. However, with or without that win, he enjoyed a great career. He was one of the best classics riders of the last ten years, and to have the opportunity to spend a day chasing his favorite race with him? That's something worth writing about. jp[

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