

Andy Hampsten – Looking Back, and Looking Forward

American pro cycling in the 1980s is synonymous with Greg LeMond and Andy Hampsten. Both were supremely talented riders. While LeMond was a superstar who paved the way for American pros as both a junior and a pro World Champion and multiple winner of the Tour de France, Hampsten quietly rose through the U.S. ranks until he got his first big break on the international stage in the 1985 Giro d'Italia. Hampsten's climbing ability, mental toughness, and tactical instincts helped him build an impressive set of career credentials – including winning a mountain stage at that '85 Giro; fourth place at the Tour de France in 1986 (supporting LeMond) and in 1992, when he also won the stage to l'Alpe d'Huez; winning the Tour of Switzerland in 1986 and 1987, and the Tour of Romandy in 1992; and taking stages in such races as Paris-Nice and the Coors Classic – when the Colorado event was still a major event on the calendar.

But it was his victory in the 1988 Giro, famously highlighted by his legendary ride over the Gavia Pass in a driving snowstorm (as well as two superlative climbing stage wins) that cemented Hampsten's place in cycling's lore and history. He was not just the first American to win the Giro; he won a Giro that was perhaps one of the toughest of the 1980s, one which was made even harder with the harsh weather conditions. Hampsten's ability to quietly deal with adversity on the road was what made him a champion rider, but it also prepared him to successfully leave the world of pro cycling behind when he retired in 1995. Twenty years on, Hampsten now splits his time between the cycling mecca of Boulder, Colorado, designing custom bikes with his brother Steve; and the storied countryside of Tuscany, where he runs a popular cycle touring company with his wife Elaine. *The Outer Line* recently caught up with Hampsten in Boulder, and had a chance to hear some of his reminiscences as well as his thoughts about the current state of pro cycling, and the future of the sport.

A Career on His Own Terms: Hampsten is a modest and self-effacing former racer, but he wears his enthusiasm and love of the sport on his sleeve. When he says, "I'm just some guy who raced his bike through the snow" – this barely scratches the surface of how challenging it was for him to win the 1988 Giro. Yet it is this humble approach and his hard work as a junior that made Hampsten's career possible. He rose steadily through the American ranks after medaling twice in the Junior World Team Time Trial championships in 1979 and 1980, joining the small Levi's-Raleigh team after missing selection to the well-known 1984 Olympic team. He was offered a temporary contract to race with 7-Eleven's fledgling U.S. pro team in the 1985 Giro, and he says that's where it all came together for him. "Winning that mountain stage opened the door for me," he says of his first pro race win in Italy.

LeMond saw his talent, and helped facilitate a contract for Hampsten with the French La Vie Claire team for 1986, an experience which Hampsten says shaped his racing instincts and opened his eyes to European racing culture. "The opportunity all of a sudden to actually be on a team and race with guys like Bernard Hinault was unbelievable. It was very educational and just a super-fun experience to be on that team." After winning the Tour of Switzerland that year, and earning the best young rider's White Jersey at the Tour de France, Hampsten began to recognize the extent of his racing potential and decided to move back to 7-Eleven the next

year as its dedicated team leader.

Hampsten had a distinct advantage on the American team. He says he was never “over-raced,” despite a schedule of 100 racing days per year, and there were never any expectations for him to do a rotation of post-Tour de France Criteriums. “The team really looked after me, and tried to work out what would be best for my results in June, July and August. If the test results showed that I was stuffed, they would let me go home and rest. Whereas if I had been the leader of a European team, I probably would have been thrashed by the team. And that’s what leads to the situation where people get tempted into drugs.”

Many of the European riders hired into the 7-Eleven team (and the later iteration of the team sponsored by Motorola) were shocked at a system that actually looked after the health of *all* of the riders, says Hampsten. The Italian teams were totally different, he says. “If the leader of one of those teams was doing badly in a stage race, nobody else on the team could ride for a result; they thought that would overshadow or disrespect the leader.” But on Hampsten’s team, even though he was the team leader, on a given day he might work for any rider in any race, and no one was expected to have to race when sick. “That was a different model back in those days.”

“We had a good culture on that team,” says Hampsten, “and it came from the top down. Mike Neel, our director at the beginning, had previously trained racehorses, and he kind of coaxed us in the same way. He would say ‘don’t eat crap after the race, it’s going to damage your engine.’ That was just one of his philosophies, and he was totally against any kind of doping.” Hampsten also points to the influence of Dr. Max Testa at the time. “Max was also very good with us; he understood stress and illness very well. If we ever needed IVs, it was with sugar and vitamins only. We always raced 100% believing that we could do it without drugs. I can tell you that I was always really reluctant to take anything; I read every single line on every single vial or bag.”

Hampsten says it was a psychological advantage to know and believe you could race and win without using performance-enhancing drugs. He recalls a conversation with the celebrated distance runner Frank Shorter, who told him, “Never underestimate the strength of your convictions; don’t worry about what others are doing or who is taking what. Just do what you do and wait for your moment to shine.” Hampsten says he truly believes that this sense of conviction – of knowing that you are doing the right thing – could actually be transformed into a physical advantage in races for him.

Reforming The Sport: Hampsten wound down his career on the U.S. domestic scene after spending the better part of seven seasons at the top end of European racing; he retired at the end of 1995. By this time, the waves of change which had started during his career were beginning to have a profound effect on pro cycling. The influx of EPO and blood doping had changed the racing landscape, and various UCI reforms aimed at modernizing the sport were starting to develop – a lot of change has happened since he left the pro peloton. Although he now has many other responsibilities and interests, Hampsten still follows the pro sport as much as possible. He has a lot of observations, insights, and personal recommendations on how to make the sport better in the coming years.

For example, Hampsten says he doesn't believe the current season is too long, because most riders don't really race the whole season. "They focus their racing on the first part of it, the middle part of it, or the end, you know? Classics guys are happy to go out and race the Middle East races in February, because they aren't going to try and win the Tour later in the season." For this reason, he doesn't believe that a long season necessarily means more doping – an argument that some observers have put forth. To him, every single race "is crazy hard – if you're going to cheat, you're going to cheat; it doesn't matter how long the season is." Hampsten typically raced about 100 days a year, and that didn't seem outrageous to him in the least. Riders should be able to race more if they want to, he says.

Regarding calls to move more towards a league structure, or requirements for all the top riders to be competitive in more events, Hampsten takes a more pragmatic viewpoint. He doesn't see any advantage to this model. "For example, if every star had to ride every event, would races like Paris-Roubaix have to take out all the cobbled sections, so that Chris Froome could ride it? Such changes could destroy the character of important races." For Hampsten, the most exciting races are the lesser-publicized ones, like the Three Days of De Panne, in which hungry young unknown riders have an opportunity to make an impact, or where riders like Nairo Quintana this past spring – climbers with no real chance on the cobbles – put in a 100% effort to improve and broaden their skills.

But it all comes down to the racing, and for Hampsten, races can be a lot more fun to watch if "everybody in the race really wants to win the damn thing." He sees little point in putting emphasis on the star riders if half of them show up simply because they have a contractual obligation (and especially if they say so publicly before the event), or because they are using the race as a training regimen for something else and plan to drop out early. "What is less interesting than watching the Schleckes when they were having a bad season? Who cares about the Schleckes if they're only there to loosen up? Yet, the US Pro Challenge seemed to think that the race wouldn't amount to anything if they didn't get the Schleckes. What sense does that make if we're trying to build up the sport? You've got to have people in the race who really want to win it!"

But this observation doesn't discourage Hampsten. Overall, he is very optimistic about the possibilities of a brighter future for pro cycling. To him, cycling is unique in a variety of ways. While one baseball game or football game is pretty much like the next game, one bike race may be quite different from the next bike race. Paris-Roubaix is nothing like Liege-Bastogne-Liege; one kind of rider excels or wins one event, and a different kind of rider wins the next one. Hampsten believes that this unique character, and the different kinds of riders that certain races favor, is a part of cycling's legacy that should definitely be preserved.

But he also recognizes that some of the unique aspects of cycling are both a blessing and curse. "It is a unique and beautiful sport, but it is cursed with the inability to sell tickets or have any major revenue source. That was the whole idea with track cycling 80 years ago – it was exciting, and you could charge a ticket. Maybe there are better ways that we can charge people to get into the Worlds, or post-Tour criteriums; but it's never going to be easy." Hampsten does believe the sport can do more with sponsorship opportunities. While he sees the Grand Tours for what they are – three-week long travel commercials for France or Italy, for example –

he also sees ways in which sponsors can connect with customers in new ways, through group rides, product events, and personalized marketing. Hampsten also believes that the sport often underestimates the intelligence of dedicated cycling fans. “The folks who can figure out a way to watch the Three Days of De Panne are smarter and more curious than we give them credit for. Cycling fans want more information and they follow the sport down to the smallest and most intricate detail. We just have to find the right way to connect with that curiosity.”

A Stronger Rider’s Union: During Andy Hampsten’s career there was no rider’s association. There were some national associations, led by the French, but no organization which the American riders could join. Though the landscape has changed, Hampsten has yet to be thoroughly convinced the current movement towards a more formal rider’s union is on the right track. “Maybe I’m just a grumpy old man, but I think the riders should be very careful in terms of what they ask for, or what they are complaining about. I mean, the riders can’t say that on the one hand they don’t want to ride in snow, but on the other hand they don’t mind jumping in front of speeding trains!” Hampsten admits that he doesn’t know too much about the current activities of the ANAPRC or the CPA, but says, “I would really encourage guys like (Christian) Vande Velde, or whoever is going to be the figurehead there, to make sure he listens to some of the older guys, and to get a range of different viewpoints.”

Hampsten believes if a union pressures the sport to back away too much from some of the physical challenges, cycling could lose some of its viewership. The public and the fan base has become accustomed to watching challenging events over all kinds of surfaces and through all kinds of weather. “No one should get too hung up on snow or on heat – there is always going to be a cold day or a hot day. That’s just part of the sport.” Hampsten says that the current proponents of a stronger union just need to think about how the public views some of these issues, and “make sure they don’t shoot themselves in the foot.”

On the other hand, Hampsten is absolutely clear that events like Peter Stetina’s accident at the Vuelta al Pais Vasco should never happen. True safety is a critical issue to him, and he believes that all race promoters should have to drive their courses and remediate potential dangers. And if certain dangers can’t be corrected, they at least have to be very clearly marked and announced in the route books. “There is no excuse for what happened to Peter. Maybe there should be a representative of the teams or the players, or maybe it’s the union today – someone who knows all the rules, and that double-checks every race route for this kind of stuff before the race happens. Or find out who takes care of that kind of thing for the good races, like the Tour, and see if you can duplicate that skill or role for all the other, perhaps less supported races.”

Anti-Doping – Then and Now: Hampsten is candid about his views of the doping culture which compromised the sport and peaked after his retirement in 1995, and he has some ideas for what could be done to resolve it in the future. Hampsten says he never felt like he was “trapped” in cycling, or that he had nowhere else to go, and hence, “I never really had the temptation to dope in order to keep my rightful place in the peloton. But I think a lot of the European guys did feel that way,” he says, “and some guys probably still feel that way. You also have to remember, in my time, that many of the riders were asking for a lower hematocrit threshold (*regarding the 50% threshold adopted after 1996 – editors*), but it was the UCI which

wanted the ceiling to be higher. You can see how that might have seemed like kind of an open-door policy, or an invitation, to riders in my era.”

Hampsten believes that the temptation for doping is still there in the peloton. He remembers his early days as a pro, and points out that “when you have a bunch of 20-something kids, they can make some bad decisions if the opportunities are there.” He points to “everything from bad advice from an agent, to a questionable prescription obtained from a veterinarian to a family friend in the medical profession.” To stop this behavior, he would like to see some kind of stronger and more consistent reinforcement of the current rules – more clearly stated and enforced, so that riders understand the repercussions, and explicitly understand that if they’re caught, they may not be coming back. “A lifetime ban would be so nice,” he says. In any event, he says, cycling has to get away from the mentality of just not getting caught. “We have to get past this,” says Hampsten, “and to a point where we have a culture where cheating isn’t tolerated at all.”

At the same time, he says, “It seems like today’s riders are subjected to a humiliating regime of testing and policing; there has to be a better way.” Hampsten believes that a more comprehensive course of ethics training could help everyone to understand the rules and expectations. “You have to remember – with a bunch of 20 year olds though, this is where the decisions can really go wrong.” Returning to the topic of a rider’s association, Hampsten does believe that a stronger union could have a positive impact by providing training to help riders start their careers clean and stay clean. He believes that not enough is being done to influence the peer group mentality of the peloton, and that the right role models – and the right presentation format – can help connect with and show younger riders what it takes to be a clean rider. And if the sport moves toward some kind of certification model in the future, it has to be done at the peer group level – perhaps as a requisite to joining a future riders union – to have a lasting change. “We have to somehow or another create a different kind of social atmosphere – a peer pressure to race clean,” he says.

Agents in Pro Cycling: On a different topic, Hampsten says he doesn’t believe that most of the pro sports agents that are becoming increasingly active in pro cycling today are really playing a very important or useful role, and he suggests that young riders think hard before they give up a significant portion of their earnings to an agent, who may not really do all that much to help them further their careers. Ultimately, Hampsten sees things as they’ve always been: you have to have results to become a pro cyclist, not just someone representing you.

“When I was coming up, the main issue for us was how to get paid and not have our amateur athletic status jeopardized (*when the Olympics were not open to professionals, prior to 1996 – editors*). If you’re a Grand Tour winner, okay, maybe you need some help in weeding through all your offers, which maybe aren’t worth your time.” But most of the peloton doesn’t really need that. Hampsten thinks that with the right guidance at the beginning – or assistance from someone who works for the union as a legal advocate – most riders should be able to manage their own affairs. He suggests that the sport should adopt standard legal forms and agreements; then, examples of standard contracts could be explained to everyone, and used to help riders manage their careers. “Remember, again, these are 20-something kids, and it would help if they had some training to help them figure out who’s a shark, versus who is a real

advocate for them. Some mentorship would help them weed through the kind of people who hang around and influence teams and riders for better or worse. You know, ‘if you hear these catch phrases, these are warning signs.’ And on that point, perhaps it’s time to have a real ombudsman to whom riders could report these kinds of things.”

Post-Career Preparedness: If there is one issue that Hampsten seems to feel particularly strong about, it is the issue of how poorly pro cycling prepares its athletes for their post-racing careers. He thinks that pro cyclists might have the right type of background, but they don’t necessarily come out with the polished skills to really get hired in the professional world. Hampsten relays the story of a friend who formerly competed as a downhill skier for her national team. When she was on the team, all the team members had to go through the training and certification to be a professional ski instructor. This provided her with a marketable skill, and it taught her how to interact and work with people. After later suffering a competitive career-ending injury, she had the skills to work in the field and make a living and move forward.

“The sport really has to work on this,” says Hampsten. “Maybe start as early as juniors, to help them bridge the skills gaps; high school is not the same as the world of pro cycling, and the real world *after* pro cycling.” He also believes that role models can also be found outside of the traditional pro ranks, such as promising riders who didn’t make it as pros, but who were successful in their chosen professions. And the needs here are really basic, Hampsten believes – “financial literacy, balancing your check-book, that sort of thing. Heck, even personal hygiene I can’t tell you the number of guys that used to miss racing days because of dental problems – they never learned how to take care of their teeth! This is really basic stuff that many riders need some help on, or maybe just a push.” The sport should try to find these types of people – who could share how the skills learned from racing can be applied to a successful professional life after you climb off the bike.

Hampsten says that his previous sponsor Motorola provided its riders with classes on interviewing, communications and marketing, so that their riders could handle the press better. The riders were able to “read” the questions and provide better interaction as a result, which improved the public perception of the team as a whole as well as the rider’s skills and self-esteem. He thinks pro cycling should seriously investigate these types of programs. “In my own business, it’s hard for me to hire ex-racers as guides; some have done racing in the past, but not many pros have real people skills.”

Hampsten points to the tradition of race organizers, teams, and touring companies hiring ex-racers to drive cars and lead VIP events, and he thinks this is a good starting point for some, but limiting for others. He believes it is more important for riders to have personal financial literacy training before hospitality training. He explains further, “Right now, the entire burden is on the individual to better themselves. You essentially have to coach yourselves – you have to know nutrition, weight-lifting, all the aspects of the sport. But no one is helping the riders to ask questions from experts outside of the racing environment. Financial, legal, psychological; the racer makes all the decisions, good or bad, and if you don’t make a good choice it will have real consequences. Couldn’t the sport, the union, or the teams have experts that write or teach topics that will be important to the riders’ careers when they leave? ”

Again, where Hampsten sees the potential of a union is in offering support to riders who are trying to be better professional people. “This kind of training is not difficult,” he says. Simple skillsets in media and communications are a good place to start, and would help riders better interact with the public, how to talk with sponsors and executives, and how to give public presentations. “Racers are not always comfortable being idolized. Many are nervous and uncomfortable in their role. If we could prepare them with better interaction and speaking skills, it would improve the image of the sport, true, but it might also help them get a job later, too.”

Developing the Next Generation: Hampsten also has ideas about how to improve the way young riders are trained and prepared for a pro career. To him, longer-term talent development is as much about reinforcing the love of riding the bike as it is about developing complex and rigorous training programs and multi-year race objectives. In terms of specific advice to young riders, Hampsten is both pragmatic and encouraging. He says that his experience has taught him that the best juniors don’t necessarily make the best seniors, and the best elites might not be the best pros – but no one should be discouraged from trying. And he encouraged a long-term career view for aspiring pros. “Don’t try to do too much work before you turn eighteen! You should be having fun, and mix things up by doing other fun sports like soccer and BMX. Don’t put in the super hard work until your body’s really ready for it. No sixteen-year-old should be doing four hour intense training rides. Take the time to learn everything, how to pop a wheelie, do the track, get experience in all the skills you need before trying to be a pro. If you’re going to be a successful racer, it has to be fun.”

He believes that the growth of the gran fondo and cyclo-sportifs calendars is natural. “These events are really catching on because so many people love to ride bikes, and they also love to watch bike racing, and the opportunity to ride the route of the race. These events can help you recapture that essence of when you first got on the bike and fell in love with the sport.” He believes that introducing new riders to cycling through these kinds of rides will help to attract new talent as well.

Hampsten is also a keen advocate of the U.S. collegiate cycling system and the local high school racing associations popping up all over the country. “I really love the idea of having more experienced riders teaching skills to the younger riders.” He points to the example of ex-pro Laura Charameda, and her work with junior racers in California, providing advice, leadership, and passing on skills that young riders can build on for success.

Hampsten’s final thoughts? “Bike racing is just so super, super cool!” he says. “Cycling is a great activity for young people to focus on. Most people originally got into bike racing because they just loved riding their bike – pure and simple. You can start riding a bike when you’re five years old, and you can still be doing it when you’re in your 70s, even 80s.” He laughs, his eyes open wide and his enthusiastic grin is contagious. “What other sport can say that?”

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Joe Harris and Steve Maxwell, May 31, 2015