

Handout Mentality – Walking Up The Koppenberg Falling Off The Kemmelberg

20 years ago, the second of the Spring Classics, the Tour of Flanders/Ronde van Vlaanderen, reached Oudenaarde, around 185 kms into the 259 km event. Leading by two minutes was the Danish rider Jesper Skibby of the Roland team, the lone survivor of a 100 km breakaway. Then he started to climb the Koppenberg hill which rises 74 metres over half a kilometre of rough cobbles. At its steepest the ramp hits 22%.

The bunch behind Skibby sped up in the knowledge that only the front riders would be able to ride up the steep hill – behind them someone would stall and topple over and then everyone behind would have to go up the hill on foot. The road up the Koppenberg was less than three metres wide with high steep banks. Skibby's legs were tired, he was struggling, and before he reached the top of the hill, his wheels went sideways and he fell into the bank on his right. The commissaire, directly behind him with the bunch breathing down his neck, ordered his driver to press on, even though this meant driving over the wheels of the fallen Skibby whose feet were still firmly attached to the pedals.

This story became part of cycling legend assisted by the work of a photographer, Graham Watson who clicked off four shots of the fall from just up the road. You can still buy the sequence, unframed, for \$A41.15 off the net. Watson admits the shots did plenty for his career, but the Ronde organizers decided the Koppenberg was out of place in a modern bike race and it was not used for the next 15 years. In 2002, after some reconstruction which was supposed to include repaving with new cobbles and widening, the hill was again part of the Ronde. Graham Watson, then writing in *Velo News*, reported that huge beer tents had been erected at the foot and summit of the Koppenberg in expectation of a 10,000 crowd and someone had painted "Remember Skibby" on the cobbles. Five Rondes later, in 2006, the year only the first eight riders made it up the hill on their bikes, the Koppenberg was ditched again.

A week or two back I tuned in to SBS to watch edited highlights of Ghent-Wevelgem, the semi-classic race held mid-week between the Ronde and Paris-Roubaix. This time the demon hill was the Kemmelberg, notorious not for its ascent but for its 300m 25% drop on the way down. The cobbles on the Kemmelberg are said to have been laid in a stair-like pattern nearly 100 years ago to enable horses to get a grip as they hauled carts up the ramp. The riders go over the hill twice in the race – that's if they're lucky. As Phil Liggett said, its like going over a cliff face. The cameras lying in wait on the downhill were not disappointed. The road was dry, but after a bidon or three had been bounced out of its cage there was a nice bit of slippery slope and bodies and bikes parting company. Second time around was even better with riders who touched their brakes falling like skittles at a bowling alley.

The cycling press duly reported on the injured and their estimated times of absence from the peloton. The letters section of "cyclingnews.com" hosted a debate on the flying bidons with mountain bike riders noting that *their* machines were equipped to survive steep bumpy descents without spilling a drop – it seems the appropriate cages were available but the teams didn't bother to fit them. I don't remember reading anyone asking why highly paid athletes were risking serious injury launching themselves down a one in four adversely cobbled ramp so that TV cameras could get a money shot. No one made the comparison with the animal that flings itself off the side of cliffs en masse – the lemming. No smartie suggested, since the race was in the Flemish Ardennes, calling the riders "Flemmings."

The reasons death defying descents are still included in races like Ghent-Wevelgem are probably down to a century of tradition in which professional cyclists have been asked to race over roads that should have been resurfaced or abandoned long since. Despite declaring in 1987 that the Koppelberg was out of place in a modern bike race, the organizers of the Ronde dabbled with it again from 2002-2006 and the race still includes a dodgy descent at Steenbeekdries and a steep ramp up the Muur of Geraarsbergen. The Ronde is far from a race for the faint hearted. Belgians like their bike riders to have a hard man image and of course Belgium is the world center of cyclo-cross, where riders shoulder their bikes when the going gets heavy. The country has also been a center for another tradition of pro bike racing – dope. Even though the country was one of the first to write criminal law on sports doping, recent revelations such as The "Lion Of Flanders" Johann Museeuw putting his hand up to a little chemical stimulation at the end of his career and the "pot Belge" (Belgian Mixture) case showed that some Belgians are still dabbling in dope. Pot Belge, was a cheap effective brew of amphetamines, caffeine and sometimes heroin and cocaine, available through sources such as former TVM trainer Freddy Sergant and his wife Monique.

Strange that few are suggesting the same forces that induce professional cyclists to struggle up the Koppenberg or take the dive down the Kemmelberg push them towards the gamble with illegal drugs. It seems to me the thrill of success blinds the thought of the consequences of failure and behind many a successful bike rider is a manipulative manager waving the promise of a twelve month extension of contract. In November 2006 Jesper Skibby released his autobiography, *Skibby: Understand Me Correctly*, in which he confessed to having used dope for more than 10 years. In 1991, the year he joined Freddy Sergant at TVM, he started using steroids, in 1992 growth hormones and testosterone, and finally by 1993 he was also using EPO. He became a successful pro, but like a good soldier, he did not name suppliers or fellow users in the book. Presumably, he accepted being driven over as part of the job too.

