

ARGYLE

BEHIND THE SCENES OF THE PRO CYCLING LIFE

ARMADA

MARK JOHNSON



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FOREWORD

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.

—*Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities*

“Hey, wow . . . ummm . . . hey, are you Jonathan Vaughters?” was the first thing I heard as I thumped into my seat for the long flight back to Denver from Paris this past July. At first I thought I had sat in the wrong seat or left my passport somewhere (again), but my not-so-silent admirer quickly told me all about how big a fan of the team he was, and how great 2011 had been, and how cool argyle was, and how awesome . . .

I was flattered, but this was the first of many circumstances that made me realize how the outside world viewed Garmin-Cervélo’s 2011 season. It created a much bigger stir than I would ever have ventured to guess.

I say “outside world” because when you are directing a race like the Tour, you are submersed in a micro-society that lacks big-picture perspective on the outside world. In my little world, 2011 had been a constant and nasty battle, a tightrope act with no net and no forgiveness. Of course, I had celebrated

and appreciated the victories, but I was always all too aware that professional cycling is a game of “What have you done for me lately?” It took this overly enthusiastic fellow passenger to make me realize that most people had looked at our 2011 as a dream season.

The dissonance between my 2011 and that of the broader world was tied up in the knowledge of how many difficult decisions had to be made through the year. And how each and every one of those decisions also carried the possibility of throwing the entire 2011 season into the bin if they were interpreted the wrong way or didn’t have the intended outcome. We had a unique team in 2011, one with many top-tier riders but without any definitive super talent like an Alberto Contador or a Philippe Gilbert. Our strength was always in our numbers and in our ability to play a calculated and cold game, one that flew in the face of cycling traditions. And, as is often the case, our strength was almost our undoing. While playing a tight, numerical game may be highly effective, it does not lend itself to satisfying individual objectives and personal goals. No

one individual gets his way, which inevitably leads to tension. That tension was the reality of 2011.

Of course, tension is the common currency for all cycling teams and seasons. A cycling team is always an odd compromise among many parties. Riders have their individual ambitions, sponsors have their ideals and goals, the rules of the game and tradition have their pull on the agenda, the press has its loud opinion, and somewhere caught in the middle of all this rests the team. And specifically, the team manager. Not to diminish the role of the team, but the final decision as to how to execute the great compromise that makes up every choice in cycling rests with that individual.

Decision-making ability is what I've heard people refer to as power. Yet power was not what I felt in so many situations over the year. Instead of power, I felt the immense weight of responsibility before every decision I made. In each case, someone would be upset. Maybe a rider, maybe the press, maybe the fans, maybe a sponsor. Accepting and

dealing with their upset is part of the responsibility of power, I suppose. Furthermore, what many don't realize is that after I made a hard decision, I felt totally powerless as I watched the inevitable consequences unfold. Even when you win, the consequences of these decisions roll on, in the media and in the minds of fans. The consequences are yours for life, and once you've made your final choice, you are powerless to change the consequences.

So, for me, instead of a glory-filled romp, 2011 was a series of lonely and difficult decisions followed by anxiety as I awaited the results. From folding the former Cervélo TestTeam and its riders into our squad to allowing Johan Vansummeren to go ahead in Roubaix to leaving him and Dan Martin at home for the Tour de France. From the misconstrued "don't chase" order in Flanders to infamously leaving Thor Hushovd off the Vuelta squad. Each and every choice balanced the interests of the riders, the sponsors, the UCI, fans, media, and investors. That's what I remember about 2011.

While this may seem a melancholy assessment for such a brilliant year, making tough choices is where I find my pride. Each and every time, in retrospect and maturity, the hard and often unpopular decisions proved to be the decisions that were best for the team as a whole. There is a certain satisfaction in taking harsh criticism in the moment, swallowing hard and accepting the blows, and then being proven correct with the passage of time.

As I sit here in December and look back at 2011, I realize how many impossibly difficult and unpredictable decisions we had to make and how most of them turned out exactly as we hoped. And right there is why I feel a true sense of success. It's not the performances or the wins unto themselves that make me know 2011 was our best season; it's the process that went into creating those wins—the decisions that went into them. Above all, it's knowing that the process that led to wins is on solid

ground for the future. That brings sound sleep, in a way that lucky wins never do.

When you're in the middle of so much movement, it's difficult to reflect properly and understand each event and each accomplishment. I remember riding with the guys down the Champs-Élysées on our victory lap; was I thinking about what an incredible Tour we'd just had? Sadly, no. Instead, I was daydreaming about what we needed to do to make it better in 2012. It's the nature of cycling: Never look back. That said, I hope this book and these memories will allow me a bit of storytelling peace someday. Cycling is such a magnificently gorgeous sport that to not stand back and look at it, for all of what it is and what it represents, would be tragic. While I've got next year to deal with now, I'm sure you'll enjoy this trip through Slipstream's finest year so far.

—Jonathan Vaughters



WINTER TRAINING CAMP

1

Dave Zabriskie sits on a glowing Plexiglas stage in a darkened ballroom at the AC Hotel Palau de Bellavista, a hotel perched like a shimmering glass-and-steel sentry above the cobblestoned passageways of Girona. Dense curtains block views of the snowcapped Pyrenees. A lattice of studio lights illuminates the six-time U.S. time trial champion, while revolving fan blades cast shadows on a backdrop. A nest of Mavic wheels spins between the stage and boom-mounted television cameras. Zabriskie, the third American to wear the yellow jersey, following Greg LeMond and Lance Armstrong, looks like an action figure in a life-sized diorama.

DZ, as his teammates call him, stands up, puts his right hand on the small of his back, tilts slightly to the right, and winces. It's January 31 at the team's winter training camp, and while his Garmin-Cervélo teammates spent five hours riding in the Catalan countryside earlier today, back pain kept the 32-year-old off the bike. The American television network Versus is in Spain to film Zabriskie and his teammates talking about themselves. In four months the vignettes will be

broadcast during the Tour of California and then the Tour de France.

Script in hand, the director asks Zabriskie about sweltering days ahead in July. "The Tour de France; what is it that makes it such a special event?" Gliding on a dolly, the camera films Zabriskie's response. "The energy that everyone is feeling is different," he says. A machine suddenly pumps fog onto the set, and Zabriskie leaps up. The vegan waves his hands at a descending cloud. A camera operator assures him it is harmless. Zabriskie arches an eyebrow.

The assorted Garmin-Cervélo riders move through the three photo and video sets in the ballroom as if passing through stations of the cross. Christian Vande Velde, the U.S. star who has been with the team since 2008, rides the rollers for the camera.

When the director tells world champion Thor Hushovd they must be confusing him with stage directions, the Norwegian, a man of few words, responds with a faint smile. "I trust you guys."

While the veterans like Hushovd and Vande Velde take it all in stride—their work takes place on

OPPOSITE Girona, Spain, the team's European headquarters and location of the winter training camp.



ABOVE Dave Zabriskie on the television set in the team's hotel. RIGHT Rider decals before being applied to team bikes.



the road, but this is where the bills get paid—the younger riders, including 25-year-old Irishman Dan Martin, are agog. Martin, who turned pro with the team in 2008, snaps photos of the set with his camera phone.



THE DAY AFTER THE VERSUS FILMING WRAPS up, team director (*directeur sportif* in cycling vernacular) Bingen Fernandez sits in the soaring glass hotel lobby with his laptop open to a spreadsheet. It's a daunting digital abacus with hundreds of cells scheduling some 250 days of racing for the team's 29 riders over the next 10 months. Fernandez, 39, rode for six years with the Basque Euskaltel-Euskadi team and eight with French squad Cofidis. His experience is an asset for the still fairly young Garmin-Cervélo team.

The soft-spoken Basque says Garmin-Cervélo is different from traditional professional cycling teams. It takes an empirical approach to both winning races and creating a sustainable business that supports riders, staff, owners, and sponsors. "There must be a change in cycling," he says in Spanish. "I think we need to leave the old things in cycling behind and adapt ourselves to modern life." However, hailing from the tradition-bound Basque country, he also values his sport's conventions. "I like the old way of thinking a little bit," he says. "But I'm also inventive. I like a combination. I like to innovate on top, but preserve the roots."

Fernandez, who straddles worlds, cultures, and value systems, is a proxy for the revolutionary ethos of the Garmin-Cervélo team and how it is disrupting

the 150-year-old profession's history. The team was started by ex-pro and current CEO and sporting director Jonathan Vaughters in 2003 as a development team for young U.S. riders. Vaughters is a one-time U.S. Postal Service rider who raced professionally from 1994 to 2004 in Europe and the United States, and a former teammate of U.S. superstar Lance Armstrong. Vaughters quit racing because he did not buy into a culture that systematically overlooked, hid, and ignored doping. Then he made it his goal to make the sport more financially stable for riders, team owners, sponsors, and race organizers. Slipstream, the holding company he created, is ushering in a new approach to the sport, most strikingly by rejecting drugs as tools for higher performance. Doping scandals scare sponsors away, and Vaughters knows that changing cycling's doping culture is key to ensuring the sport's financial stability.

The challenges inherent in this project are constant. The week before the camp kicks off, Vaughters fires the team's longtime directeur sportif Matt White, when he learns the Australian referred a past rider to a doctor not approved by the team. While it seems an honest mistake, the shadow of doubt is enough for Vaughters to can the well-liked and widely respected director, ending his three-year tenure.

Dan Martin says the move sends a valuable message to the organization at the beginning of the year. "It shows that there's no exceptions. Matt White is one of the most important parts of this team. He's crucial to the development of the team, and it shows that even he wasn't exempt from not playing by the rules."

In Martin's eyes, firing White keeps nonracing pressure off of the riders by making the team's success equation manifest: For any medical or nutritional issues, riders have doctors and scientists on hand whom they can trust. "We have to consult the team medical staff for everything. That takes the risk away from the team, and it takes the pressure off us as well," Martin says. The medical staff members, he adds, "have got our careers in their hands." There is neither a need nor an option to go outside this circle of vetted advisers. "I've grown up with this team, and it's the only way I've ever known.

"We've very much developed this anti-doping culture, as opposed to the sweep-it-under-the-rug culture," the talented young rider continues. "This transparency that we've had from the beginning is one of the reasons that I came to the team."



WHILE VAUGHTERS AND THE TEAM'S PRESS officer deal with the fallout of letting a longtime director go, across town it's just after sunrise at the team *service course*, when head mechanic Geoff Brown rolls up a metal door with a clatter that echoes across the frost-covered countryside. *Service course* is a cycling term for a team's mechanical headquarters, in this case a triple-bay garage in an industrial park on the outskirts of Girona. The unadorned cinder block structure swallows the team's bus and fleet of trucks and cars like a whale

On January 31, Christian Vande Velde (top) and Ryder Hesjedal film promotional pieces that will air during July's Tour de France.





eating fish. The industrial park is so new the building does not yet have gas or electricity. Brown starts the morning by plugging a fat extension cord into a generator. Dressed in mechanic's overalls and a wool hat under a snugged sweatshirt hood, he pulls on a pair of gloves, walks to a well-used espresso machine, and brews a steaming cup of coffee.

Brown started working in his father's bike shop in Ottawa, Ontario, when he was a kid. After he wrenched for the Canadian national team through the 1992 Olympics, the Motorola team offered him a job that later became a position with the U.S. Postal team. "I headed off to Europe, and I've basically been here ever since," the 51-year-old says, laughing. He has seen a lot.

Next to Brown's bike stand, a recycling bin overflows with cardboard boxes from the hundreds of Cervélo bicycle frames and Mavic wheels that arrived during the previous week from the team's sponsors. Toward the back of the garage, a tower of unopened bike boxes awaits the arrival of the rest of the six-person mechanic staff.



ABOVE Andreas Klier trains indoors on a day dedicated to media interviews. LEFT Thor Hushovd in the rainbow-striped jersey he won at the 2010 World Championship road race in Australia.

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Mark Johnson has covered cycling as a writer and photographer for national and international publications since the 1980s. His work has been published in cycling titles including *VeloNews* in the United States, *Cycling Weekly* in the UK, *Vélo* in France, and *Ride Cycling Review* in Australia as well as general-interest publications including the *Wall Street Journal* and the *San Diego Union-Tribune*. A category II road cyclist, Mark has also bicycled across the United States twice and completed an Ironman triathlon. He has a PhD in English literature from Boston University and has worked as a freelance writer and photographer for the Slipstream Sports cycling team since 2007. His other passion is surfing, which he does frequently from his home in Del Mar, California.



PHOTO BY JOEL WESTWOOD

- VICTORY AT PARIS-ROUBAIX
- FOUR STAGE WINS, SEVEN DAYS IN THE YELLOW JERSEY, AND THE TEAM PRIZE AT THE TOUR DE FRANCE
- STAGE WINS AT THE TOUR OF CALIFORNIA AND THE VUELTA A ESPAÑA

Fighting for first place with a budget half that of its main ProTour competitors, the 2011 Garmin-Cervélo team became one of the most admired teams in pro cycling.

From winter training camp to the Champs-Élysées, **Argyle Armada** is a portrait of life as a member of a pro cycling team during a time of painful transition for the sport. Inside the team buses and stage-race hotels, cycling struggles to shake off the hidebound traditions of the past and expand to a global sports franchise. The charge is led by Garmin-Cervélo team founder Jonathan Vaughters and his unconventional band of bike racing revolutionaries.

Brilliantly chronicled by writer-photographer Mark Johnson, who was embedded with the squad throughout its 2011 season, **Argyle Armada** is a deep look inside one team as it battles for the future of professional cycling.

FOREWORD BY JONATHAN VAUGHTERS

