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## The Jekyll and Hyde of Belgian Cycling

*World Images: Peter Easton*

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Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "Never lose an opportunity to see anything that is beautiful." There is a moment of great anticipation that cradles the beauty of La Fletche Wallonne just before the first riders break the horizon 100 meters from the finish line on the top of the Mur de Huy. And while this moment brings elation for one, it is followed closely by the cruel despair of defeat for others, the defining space of victory that slips one step in front of defeat, the suspenseful animation that the television screen cannot define well enough: the physical brutality that paves the Chemin des Chapelles. On the lower slopes of the Mur, the riders resemble foot soldiers, marching to seize Li T-chesta, the 1818 fortress that dominates the city, until the weaker are discarded and left behind, sacrificed as the effort of the assault rapidly deteriorates into a chaotic trampling of survival. Peering down the Mur, the bobbing heads of the leaders that first break the horizon seem to be lifted from below by the crescendo of cheering that ignites the climb. Their arched bodies, wrestling over their bikes as if trying to escape the strangling grip of a python, for a moment appear as if they're rising, being pushed from below, pulled from above, the perspective downhill skewing and suspending their forward movement. The upheaval is staggering and belies Emerson's musings. While the beauty here, perhaps, is in the eye of the beholder, the cruelty of the Mur de Huy is brandished in sinister ways.

It's no secret that gauging the difficulty of a climb is best done by riding it. With the Mur de Huy however, one pass of the polaron slaps you in the face; the beautifully assembled and graceful procession of the riders suddenly an exploding kaleidoscope, its shards of glass cutting into the marquee that is unnecessarily painted HU.V. respectively for 1200 meters. For most hilltop finishes, there brings a decreased sense of climax, as the riders' initial appearance in the distance has them either sprinting for victory or reveling in the fatal blow delivered further down the mountain, arms now raised in celebration with victory dripping from their open fingers. For some this brings that moment of arrival to life with a vivacious televised transmission cannot capture. For others, its standing against a barricade, eyes glued to the large screen, anticipating that moment when the first rider will appear, his face contorted and muscles flexed, a sight of human struggle that expresses the heart's desire to do more than the body is willing. For those who lose, and those who challenged and came up short, beauty can appear unbearable. Starting at defeat in the hollow darkness of a hotel room they could well be driven to despair, having been offered for a minute the glimpse of an ecstasy that could stretch across their careers forever before disappearing for at least another year.

La Fletche Wallonne was first run in 1936 in an effort to boost sales of the French speaking Walloon regional newspaper Les Sports, and has only been absent one year (1940) from the calendar. This is quite remarkable considering the bloodshed of World War II that coated the Ardennes. Slotted between the Amstel Gold Race and



Liège-Bastogne-Liège, this midweek semi-classic lacks only the distance when standing in between the major bookends that bring a close to the Classics season and define the racing calendar in the second half of April. Organized by the ASO, La Fletche Wallonne and Liège-Bastogne-Liège were originally run on successive days as Le Weekend Ardennais, awarding not only the individual race winners, but a trophy for the highest overall combined standing in the two races. Only six riders have achieved the "Ardennes double" by winning both races in the same year: Swiss rider Ferdi Kübler was the first to accomplish this, and the only rider to do it twice-1951 and 1952. Belgian Constant "Sant" Ockers in 1955, who went on to win the World Championships later in the year before being killed on the track during an event in Antwerp in 1956; Eddy Merckx in 1972 which followed his fifth victory in Milan-Sanremo and the same year that saw him win the Tour de France for 4th time, including the Points and Combined Classifications, a third Giro di Italia, a second consecutive Giro di Lombardia and the Super Prestige Pernod International for the fourth time; Moreno Argentin in 1991 which was his fourth and final Liège-Bastogne-Liège win and a second consecutive Fletche victory of three total; Davide Rebellin in 2004 also won the Amstel Gold Race and would go on to win Fletche twice more; and Alejandro Valverde in 2006, a year in which he finished on the podium in the Vuelta a País Vasco, the Tour of Romandía, Vuelta a España, and the World Championships.

Translated from French, La Fletche Wallonne means Wallonian Arrow. In Dutch, it's known as Waals Pijl. But regardless of the language or translation, La Fletche Wallonne was established as, and historically was always,

a Belgian race, symbolic of the success carved from the rugged Ardennes landscape that once solidified the region as an industrial power in the late 19th century. As the Spring Classics makes its final push to the end of April, 2011 will see the 75th edition of the Wallonian Arrow and its again a race that dates the riders to conquer the geography of the Meuse River Valley. And while the target for victory is placed squarely on the villainous Mur de Huy, there is a dual identity to the race that can be considered both a blessing and a curse.

The course itself has changed considerably over the years, both in its route and its distance. The event was first run on roads from Tournai, the oldest city in Belgium, and home to two impressive UNESCO Heritage sites and a stone throw from the French border-to Liège (starting with 236 kilometers and peaking at 300 kilometers, its longest ever distance, in 1938), after which Mons, another southern Belgium industrial outpost and site of the first battle fought by the British military in World War I and location



for the finish of the Grand Prix Pino Cerami, a race run in between Flanders and Roubaix and named for the great Belgian/Italian who won La Fletche Wallonne and Paris-Roubaix in 1960, became the starting point. From 1948, the race started in Charleroi until 1960 when the event ran in the opposite direction, starting at Liège and finishing at Charleroi, and then, in Marchinelle, a Walloon town where a mining fire killed 252 miners in the Bois du Carter in 1956. 136 of them were Italians. From 1974-1978 the race started and finished in Verrieres, birthplace of Belgian star Philippe Gilbert, and for two years, the city of Huy was the host (1983-1985). The late 80's saw the race start in Spa and finish in Huy. Since 1990, the race distance has not exceeded 210 kilometers, and now begins in Charleroi. The largest city in Wallonia, Charleroi is a skeleton of its former self, the pylon not an ugly reminder of how this once industrial powerhouse thrived on coal mining and the steel industry. The race is staged outside the Stad du Pays-the city stadium- near the ring road, a logistical minefield to navigate and a rather forgettable place.

Having ridden this loop on a number of occasions, the varying geography of the region is strikingly apparent, and the course seems to snake its way into every joint in the small villages that have fortified themselves into the hills rising above the river as it continually descends to, and rises above, the Meuse. Much of the Ardennes is covered in dense forests, and the region is typified by steep-sided valleys carved by the fast-flowing Meuse River (Maas in Dutch), which runs through Maastricht from France and empties into the North Sea. The Meuse, slicing its way through the river valley like a giant saw blade from the mines, has left steep sided hills, the southern side of which creates the major geographical challenge of the race. Above the valley to the south of the river, the geography is less harsh, with an open plateau of rolling terrain through dairy farms and arable farms, which uses ploughed fields to grow crops of wheat, barley, and oats. The steep, densely forested hills are used in the timber industries, and abandoned mines from the former mining stronghold litter the deeper recesses of the region. The patchwork of farms, sitting on



plains that span the broad expanse that meets rivers and hills, yields the livelihood of the province. Modern life works the fields, and as one rides down the steeply sided slopes plunging towards the river, charreaux appear in the forest, plumes of smoke a reminder of the material riches gathered from the land, the swollen moats preventing not intruders but ghosts from a haunted past that has become defunct with time. Bright yellow fills the open fields of newly blossoming rapeseed, while the grey and muted colors of the river valley line the hillsides stretching above, the soot covered brick echoing its abandoned past.

There is a sense of suffocation in the lifelessness that lines the river, a stark reminder of an abandoned lifestyle, a feeling that is alleviated as one claws through the forests, past the charreaux and into the brightly lit fields that direct a haphazard network of roads, some visible on the horizon, the confluence broken by a drying sun and a slow moving tractor.

Riding the course, I imagine an eagle soaring above, then suddenly diving, rapidly approaching its target at breakneck speed, then, at the last moment, pulling up and soaring upwards to its position high above the fields, moving effortlessly across the sky, before repeating its diving exercise. The most demanding part of the course comes on the 99 kilometers in total which begins, in effect, with what it ends with- the Mur de Huy. A 2010 course revision saw the largest loop of 100 kilometers and the smaller 30 kilometers loop switched, so the final two ascents of the Mur are now 70 kilometers closer. However, moving the two ascents of the Mur closer in distance, I feel, actually negates the difficulty of the larger loop.

Leaving the Mur towards the village of Sreev, the seemingly endless landscape gives no indication of the vicious slopes behind. The terrain brings with it deceiving grade changes, including the formerly categorized Côte de Fallille. A long, narrow, and twisting descent leads to a sharp left, and the first of four climbs in the western "hubbly" of the loop. The Côte de Peu d'Eau is the easiest of the climbs, ascending the

main N941 road. Turning off of this, the route again takes in a narrow descent, plunging back into the forest and the narrow road of the Côte de Haute-Bois. Its average grade is deceiving, since it initially ramps up to 10% as it crawls through the "high forest". A fast and flat section follows to the Côte de Goyenne, which has a narrow entry on a quick right bend that starts immediately at 13%. An obvious pattern is developing here, and this is a prime location for a whitening down of the front group. The two climbs of the Côte de Bohlisseau and the Côte de Bousalle are practically one, the latter a long shallower extension of the former, reminiscent of the Côte St. Roch in Liège-Bastogne-Liège. Another right turn follows and the penultimate climb, the Côte d'Ahin, weaves steeply from the river banks, perfectly connecting the river with the farm land above. This will most likely be the final selection before the Mur, so those with good legs will force the pace, and those struggling will hope for recovery on the descent and the twisting turn in to Huy. The consistent difficulty of the hills and the technical skills required to negotiate some of the roads leading into Huy are more significant with 5 kilometers left, rather than 35. The very element that defines the race-the Mur- is exactly that which cripples it.

- The Crests of La Fletche Wallonne:
- Km 67.0 - Mur de Huy (1st passage) - 1.3 km at 9.3 %
  - Km 106.0 - Côte de Peu d'Eau - 2.7 km at 3.9 %
  - Km 112.0 - Côte de Haute-Bois - 1.6 km at 4.8 %
  - Km 137.0 - Côte de Goyenne - 2.0 km at 3.5 %
  - Km 143.0 - Côte de Bohlisseau - 1.3 km at 7.6 %
  - Km 146.0 - Côte de Bousalle - 1.7 km at 4.9 %
  - Km 157.0 - Côte d'Ahin - 2.3 km at 6.5 %
  - Km 168.0 - Mur de Huy (2nd passage) - 1.3 km at 9.3 %
  - Km 187.0 - Côte d'Ereffe - 2.1 km at 5.9 %
  - Km 198.0 - HU.V (Mur de Huy) - 1.3 km at 9.3 %

As a Belgian semi-classic, La Fletche Wallonne maintains a very distinct aura and is highly regarded among Belgian cycling fans as an extremely important and prestigious race to win. However, I raise the question if La Fletche Wallonne still defines Belgium, and specifically Wallonia or like its

coal and steel industry, is it slowly decaying, if not in the eyes of the fans, but the riders? Belgian riders won 12 of the first 13 races from 1936-49 then 11 of 15 editions between 1953 and 1964. This impressive dominance was followed with a string of nine in a row starting in 1967. Since 1976, only four Belgian riders have won La Fliche-Wallonne five times, and none since 2002. In all they have won 37 of the race's 74 editions. Meanwhile the Italians, who adopted Wallonia as an Italian outpost and stayed in the same mines and factories, have won eleven times since 1990 and 18 times total. As a comparison, for the Tour of Flanders, over the same time period, Belgian riders have won 48 times since 1936, and 20 times since 1976. Comparing it to the former midweek semi-classic Gent-Wevegem over the same period, and 46 Belgian riders have claimed victory, with twelve coming since 1976. Certainly a more international peloton has added to the variables of national victories, but the ever diminishing return at La Fliche Wallonne for Belgium leaves it with a seemingly terrible, yet sufferable, position, and image.

Though started as a midweek semi-classic, and certainly without the monument pedigree of its Belgian neighbors, La Fliche-Wallonne at once suffers from its little brother reputation to Liège-Bastogne-Liège, but it also benefits from the prestige that comes with winning an Ardennes classic, unlike a Flemish midweek race like Gent-Wevegem or the Scheldeprijs- both flat, wind driven sprinter's races. While Gent-Wevegem is rewrapping itself and trying to become a major classic with distance and additional climbs in the far western corner of Flanders, it lacks the overall pedigree that La Fliche already has, not to mention the terrain that can fit snugly into another 50-60 kilometers that could easily help stack La Fliche-Wallonne up as a legitimate late April heavyweight. It has secured its icon in the Mur, which is both its strength and its weakness, being a bit of reserved racing from the favorites, and leaves the major effort until the final ascent of the Mur. With the weight of the Mur, and the prestige of victory at Liège-Bastogne-Liège dangling in front of the riders, the true spirit of La Fliche is not fully realized unless one is willing to risk losing before taking the thrill of winning, and this could be at the cost, win or lose, of throwing away a chance at glory the following Sunday.

The spring of 1999 started with a bang for Wallonian Frank Vandendrioucke as he won Het Volk, was fifth in Overa door Vlaanderen, third in the GP E3 Harelbeke and E3 Prijs Vlaanderen, second overall and a stage win in the Three Days of De Panne, second in the Royal Belgian Sprint in the Tour of Flanders, and seventh in



Paris-Roubaix. But as a Wallonian, the important races are always La Fliche and Liège. Vandendrioucke would go on to one of the most dominant wins in Liège-Bastogne-Liège history, his big ring attack on the Côte de la Redoute the stuff that legends are written about, until they are later crossed with scandal. Leading into the Sunday of Liège, the young Cofidis rider opted for a 200 kilometer training ride behind a dummy instead of racing La Fliche-Wallonne. His arch rival, world number one ranked Michele Bartoli, raced, attacked and won La Fliche in horrific weather conditions, and was a clear favorite as the two time defending champ at Liège the following Sunday. For 227 kilometers, he matched Vandendrioucke, but in the end fell victim to the Belgians' unrivalling strength, unable to march his massive acceleration on the steep slopes above the village of Renouvaux, finishing a respectable fourth, though he narrowly lost the Ardennes prize to Dutchman Maarten Don Bakker. The last Belgian to win La Fliche Wallonne is Mario Aerts in 2002, a 36-year old from Heerlen and neighbor of the town's most famous citizen, Rik Van Looy, known as The Emperor of Heerlen. Aerts, who finished third in La Fliche in 1999, has not won a race since.

The new great Wallonian hope Philippe Gilbert is a true classic star, and has the talent to win on the cobbles and in the Ardennes. He grew up in Renouvaux at the foot of the Côte de la Redoute, the 300+ times his name is painted on the road a clear reminder. Every year, Liège-Bastogne-Liège is of prime importance to the Omega-Pharma rider, and there is very little he is willing to risk this close to victory. He finished fourth in 2009 and third last year. A win at La Fliche would merely be consolation for Belgium's Sportsman of the Year. To win, both is a monumental endeavor, as history clearly defines. Only four Belgian riders have won both races in their careers, and that Ockers and Merckx did it in the same year echoes with the reminders of the sacrifices made and the talent needed. The other two riders are Mr. Paris-Roubaix Roger De Vlaeminck and the Emperor himself Rik Van Looy. All four became world champions, with De Vlaeminck's rainbow title coming in the 1975 Cyclocross World Championships. While greatness, it seems, is reserved for an elite few, the odds are stacked against La Fliche, its very strength snatching itself in the heart.

Snaking along the main road that is a part of the industrial backbone of the region, a few kilometers from Huy, the spirits of the great Belgian riders who have succeeded here whispering in the ears of the contenders, the ghosts of a decimated industry howling louder than the wind, their apparatus pressed against the glass and swirling through the empty factories. The pride that once adorned the top

step of the podium of this race remains, though it has wearily shifted from external pressures that have propped it up, and subsequently let it alone teeter as it attempts to stand on its own. Slowly ascending the Mur, and any number of analogies come to mind. The nervous tension is replaced with the push of personal accomplishment. There are times though when it is a greater pursuit, the effort symbolizing a much grander history, a past filled with an illustrious history, a thriving culture, an industrious region. Regardless of the number of times in a day, or the position within the race, for the riders who scale the Mur de Huy, the whites of their eyes tell a different story than one may see on the surface. Before pulling off her hat trick in 2009, I asked former world champion Marianne Vos to describe the Mur in one word. "Ha, in one word. It is...evil." From the top looking down the Mur, one can take comfort in the poetic words of painter Pierre-Auguste Renoir "the pain passes, but the beauty remains."



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