

Are There Any Limits to What Mathieu Van Der Poel Can Achieve?

Cycling fans everywhere groaned. Dutch cycling fans, in particular, were very disappointed; some Dutch cycling journalists cursed out loud.

The Netherlands had not been so close to a rainbow jersey for 35 years, when Joop Zoetemelk took victory at Giavera di Montello in 1985. Mathieu van der Poel had started the world championships in Yorkshire as a [top favorite](#). And he fulfilled that role with grandeur, taking the initiative to create a decisive breakaway for himself – and he seemed headed for almost certain victory. When the bell rang for that last circuit in Harrogate, most of us thought that “now there is nothing that can go wrong.”

But alas, only a few hundred meters later van der Poel blew up, and any chance of victory evaporated in just a few seconds. What happened? We don't really know. Maybe he hadn't eaten enough, and he just [bonked](#). Maybe he was over-confident – too impulsive, a little bit too assured of his own power and strength. Or maybe he didn't have the right gear and clothing for the absurdly cold and wet conditions in which he was racing.

Whatever the reason, we suddenly learned that van der Poel is not invincible – he may be the closest thing to “Superman” that cycling has, but there are still limits to what he can achieve and accomplish. (Losing this past weekend at [DVV Trofee Hotondcross](#) – that is, finishing third – broke his streak of 36-straight cyclocross race victories, also demonstrated that there are at least some limits to his superpowers.)

For the average fan or the neutral cyclist, the sudden collapse of van der Poel could also be seen as a thing of beauty. It proved just how tough cycling can be, demonstrating once again the unpredictability of sport. The top favorite or the strongest rider doesn't always win. That's what makes cycling, and sports in general, exciting to watch – it's unpredictable, you never know what might happen. And even van der Poel himself didn't seem to quite know what happened. Less than an hour after the finish, after a refreshing shower, the Dutch phenomenon was asked what he had learned during this hard race. His disappointing answer: “Nothing.”

Of course, after the race, virtually everyone had an opinion about what happened. A frequent strategy in cycling is to let your opponent make the first move – set the pace, reveal his cards first, hide in the pack as the race strategy of your competitors starts to unfold. Don't waste any unnecessary energy.

But this isn't the way van der Poel races, he finds that strategy way too boring. He likes to take control early on; he likes to fly. It is by this unabashed strategy of taking the offensive early on that he has become one of the world's best in not only road racing, but also mountain biking and cyclocross. That aggressive and attacking style is van der Poel's biggest weapon; it makes him unpredictable, and it forces his competitors to sit up and take notice, to expose their strategy early, or to risk suddenly being left too far behind.

Van der Poel's attack in the [Amstel Gold Race](#) earlier this year on the Gulperberg at 45 kilometers from the finish was called suicide. It caused Julian Alaphilippe and Jakob Fuglsang to attack a climb further up on the Kruisberg. This suddenly made it the open race that the Dutch champion wanted. His perseverance and not wanting to give up until the very finish, created the most spectacular race of the year. Every cycling fan has now watched the videos of this incredible finish – an unprecedented and phenomenal feat by any standard, catching all of his competitors completely off-guard.

And at the Yorkshire world championships van der Poel didn't have any problems with playing the role of favorite, and it didn't take him long to “set the cat amongst the pigeons” once again. At 33 kilometers from the finish, he decided it was time to throw open the race. He had studied his rivals and calculated that

many of them were at their limits. Tactically, it was ideal for van der Poel that there were already a few riders ahead; he knew that when he attacked, he wouldn't be alone in the front. The fact that his jump, and then his collapse, resulted in Mads Pedersen winning, shows that Van der Poel is pretty astute at reading a race. The other favorites – like Peter Sagan, Greg van Avermaet, Alexander Kristoff, Michael Matthews, and Jakob Fuglsang – had already waited too long. They were effectively out of the race before the last lap began. All of this underlines again the fact that the Dutchman is one of the best one-day riders of this generation.

Despite his collapse at Yorkshire, van der Poel shouldn't second-guess himself, or try to change his identity or strategy as a cyclist. As he gains more experience and puts more race kilometers into his legs, he will continue to learn and hone his sense of race strategy.

The only thing that Van der Poel should watch out for, and should vigilantly guard against, is simply making sure that he doesn't demand too much of himself. To be able to perform at the very top level in [three different disciplines](#) for twelve months year, requires a huge amount of stamina – both physically and mentally. Even another once-in-a-lifetime superstar, Marianne Vos, was unable to do this, and she eventually ran into a wall of a physical burn-out. One moment you can be flying along, the next moment you just have to park your car.

After Yorkshire, the world still knows Mathieu van der Poel is one of the best cyclists in the peloton. But hopefully, he now also knows that he is only a human being – and that he must carefully choose his options, plan his schedule, preserve his strength, and try to listen to what his body is telling him.

In short, van der Poel and his circle of advisers must simply make sure that Mathieu doesn't want or try to do too much. In the end, the only limit to what van der Poel can achieve may be his ability to regulate and control his own desires and competitiveness.

By Raymond Kerckhoffs and Steve Maxwell, December 18th, 2019.