

# Davis Phinney Discusses His Racing Career and Today's Pro Cycling Scene

Any discussion of great American cyclists has to include Davis Phinney. Phinney won over 70 races during his time as a pro, and he is generally considered the greatest sprinter in U.S. history. Some ten years after he wrapped up his racing career he was diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease, which he has now been living with for 20 years. But Phinney has not let the disease slow him down too much. He is active in his [Davis Phinney Foundation](#), which works to improve the lives of hundreds of thousands of people living with Parkinson's.

The Outer Line recently sat down with Phinney for a wide-ranging discussion. True to form, he rolled in on a high-end e-bike, which he credits with allowing him to get back to riding regularly. Phinney spoke with us for two hours, and his continuing enthusiasm and devotion to the sport clearly shows through. Below, he reminisces about his career in the sport, offers his take on various riders and teams today, and shares his perspectives on the broader challenges and opportunities in pro cycling.

**The Outer Line:** Thanks for sitting down with us, Davis. So, to start out, and for new fans who might not know your story, tell us a little bit about how you originally got into bike racing?

**Davis Phinney:** I got into bike racing thanks to the Red Zinger race right here in Boulder. That was the first race I ever saw, and I was enthralled – those guys whizzing past within inches, the whooshing sound of the peloton whipping by, all the noise from the crowd and within the race with the guys yelling at each other. I saw that, and was smitten! I rode my bike straight home and announced to my parents that I was going to be a bike racer. That was in 1975, and I was 15. I started racing in 1976.

**TOL:** Who were your original heroes or role models?

**DP:** My original hero, the guy I looked up to the most, was the Belgian racer Freddy Maertens. He was unbeatable during the mid 70's, racking up a phenomenal win count. I loved him.

**TOL:** Did you always want to be a sprinter?

**DP:** No, I didn't really know what kind of a racer I wanted to be. Things were a lot simpler back in those days; the sport was simpler, it wasn't so specialized and most guys were just trying to be good bike racers, not specialists. It really was sort of like in (the film) "Breaking Away" – a bunch of families would just show up in their station wagons at a park somewhere and have a bike race. I gradually started to become good at sprinting, thanks in large part to Ron Kiefel. We really pushed each other to be better, and we got very good at taking corners fast; we thought of ourselves as the "cornering kings" – and so criteriums naturally became our specialty in those early days.

**TOL:** Who were your early coaches or mentors?

**DP:** There were several Cat 1 type racers around Boulder who took me under their wings, showed me the ropes, taught me how to train, how to ride in a pack, and so on. In January of '78, I'd graduated from high school, and after working several menial jobs I took the opportunity to head down to Arizona for some warm weather pre-season miles with Bob Cook, a prominent racer at that time (and later the namesake for today's Mt. Evans hillclimb).

My parents weren't convinced of this whole bike racing idea and they wanted me to go to college; I just wanted to get out of the house, and do some serious training on my bike. Bob was going to college in Tucson, and he became one of my mentors too. We would go for long rides in the morning, and then Bob

would go to school in the afternoon, while I schooled myself in a different way – by reading International Cycle Sport magazines. I spent hours and hours doing that, transporting myself to another world – reading about all the big European races, learning about the race strategies of the top guys, figuring out ways I could get better, dreaming about racing in Europe. This was long before the internet but having access to those magazines provided me a magical window into the sport.

It was during that stint in Arizona that I would first meet Connie Carpenter – my wife and life partner now for nearly 40 years and the mother of our two kids, Taylor and Kelsey. But that’s another story!

**TOL:** When did you get convinced that you were actually going to be a bike racer?

**DP:** By 1978, after my training stint in Tucson, I went whole-hog into bike racing. I was fortunate to find a team in Pittsburgh, the Three Rivers Bicycle Club – sponsored by McDonalds, who offered to pay my expenses to races. I had become good friends previously with Tom Chew after we’d ridden together on a composite team as juniors in the Tour de l’Abitibi. Tom was from Pittsburgh and he joined me on the team. And his family graciously took me in.

**TOL:** So you continued to race in the domestic amateur ranks during the 1970s and early 1980s?

**DP:** Pretty much. In those days, most of the top bike racers in the U.S. – with a few exceptions, like Greg LeMond, Jock Boyer and George Mount, who turned professional to ride for European teams – were focused on getting to the Olympics. There wasn’t really a domestic pro racing scene per se, and pro racing in Europe still seemed kind of far away. So through all those years up through 1984, I remained an amateur, because I wanted to compete in the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles (the Olympics didn’t allow professionals until 1996 – editors).

In 1979, I first went to Italy to race for the National team. Eddy B. (Borysewicz) was the U.S. coach and he wanted us to get more experience racing against the best in Europe. In those early days – man, did I get schooled! But it also proved to be formative. And by 1982, my first year with Team 7-Eleven, I was getting pretty good – especially because I had Ron Kiefel and the 7-Eleven team leading me out. I was winning 30 plus races a year in the States and taking two extended trips to Europe each Spring and Fall. Having the support of a company like 7-Eleven made a huge difference. Jim Ochowicz really created something special with that team, from the blend of riders, the staff... the whole vibe was simply special.

**TOL:** What kinds of teams were you racing against during those years?

**DP:** Domestically, as a team, we were for the most part unbeatable. But there were some strong teams that took us on – Wheaties/Schwinn, DiaComp under Len Pettyjohn’s direction, and Levi-Raleigh all provided stiff competition. And right up through 1984, in Europe our toughest competitors were from the Eastern Bloc, with terrific riders from Poland, Czechoslovakia, the Soviets and the East Germans. They were ostensibly amateurs, but they were well supported by their governments. And they dominated the “amateur” bike racing scene.

**TOL:** So you turned pro right after the 1984 Olympics?

**DP:** Yes, with Team 7-Eleven under Jim Ochowicz, in 1985. We were technically a pro team, but we hadn’t really built any European presence yet, and we were winging it, learning the ropes as we went. For example, I remember one time in Sicily when we were running late; we drove up the road into the start village and came around a corner to see the whole peloton lined up facing us, all ready to start. We had to jump out of the car, grab our bikes off the roof and get dressed in front of the whole crowd. Everybody was laughing at us – a bunch of real buffoons!

Those were some crazy times when we first went to Europe. I think most of the other teams and the fans thought we were sort of a joke, but fairly quickly we began to get results.

**TOL:** When did the fortunes of 7-Eleven start to turn that first year?

**DP:** Well, we got a really big lift when Ron won the first big one-day race of the year in Italy – the Trofeo Laigueglia. He went up against the reigning national Italian champion at the time, a guy named Vittorio Algeri. Ron got into a break with this guy, but once the two of them got away, Algeri wouldn't do any work. Ron started getting frustrated, and finally he sat up and said, "OK, if you're not going to pull, then I'm not going to either" – basically calling Algeri's bluff. And it worked! The famous Italian racer started working with Ron and of course he didn't have any idea who this knucklehead American was. But he was clearly shocked – and so was everyone else – when Ron sprinted past him to take the victory. That was sweet!

Ron's result got us some attention – and importantly, some respect. Later that evening in the hotel, a well-known Italian rider named Gibi Baronchelli stopped by our table and, as is customary when a team has won a race, called the waiter over and ordered us a bottle of champagne. We were clueless about what was happening, but he then proceeded to toast Ron, and the team. It was a simple symbolic gesture, but it meant the world to us.

That result also helped get us into the Giro later that spring, and things started to really take off from there. We hired a new DS, Mike Neel, and under his astute direction Ron and Andy (Hampsten) both won stages in that Giro, Eric Heiden won the inter-race sprint competition, while I was in the hunt on most of the flatter stages. People began to take us more seriously.

**TOL:** Moving on a few years, what did you do later in your career to change your focus or your training, in order to win the final – and quite mountainous – Coors Classic in 1988?

**DP:** The Coors Classic was a special race, and that last year when I won it, I came in feeling fresh, fit and strong. I had raced both the Giro and the Tour that season and even though I hadn't won any stages, that year's TdF had actually been my best Tour. I was comfortable climbing for a sprinter and had finished second in the green jersey competition to Eddy Planckaert. With all that in my legs, I knew that, being a Colorado boy, I could climb well at altitude. The other thing, frankly, that worked to my benefit was that there were plentiful time bonuses on offer. I won four stages plus the prologue, and picked up almost two minutes worth of bonus time in the process.

**TOL:** Looking back, what is your biggest disappointment, the one race you could or should have won but missed?

**DP:** The biggest disappointment of my career was not winning the Olympic road race in 1984. I trained for and was focused on that event for several years. (Editor's Note: In his 2011 autobiography, "The Happiness of Pursuit," co-written with former Sports Illustrated writer Austin Murphy, Phinney says that the Olympic road race consumed him, just like "Ahab was consumed by the white whale.") I ended up finishing in fifth place. It took years, but I gradually came to terms with that – and now I would say that the best racer that day won the race. That was Alexi Grewal, who beat Steve Bauer in a sprint. I was actually having one of the best days of my career, but I made some mistakes, which cost me dearly in the end. As a teammate, Alexi could be a frustratingly independent character, but he definitely rode a brilliant race that day. Nowadays, he supports our foundation when he can and I enjoy spending time with him.

**TOL:** How do you think racing – and sprinting in particular – has changed since your time in the sport?

**DP:** The sport has evolved a lot since my day. Back then, if you had one lead-out guy, that was good enough. One sprinter would just have one lead-out. Maybe (Jean-Paul) van Poppel, who was the best

sprinter of that era, was a little different because he had two or three lead-out men. But things just weren't so specialized then.

Also, you have to remember that there was no such thing as STI shifting until about 1990; the gear shift levers were still located on the down tube. When you got ready to initiate your sprint, you had to sit down, reach down there, stop pedaling, pick your gear, and then go. Once you jumped, you couldn't afford to change gears. If you did that, everybody else would flash past you in a second.

Another important factor is that we didn't have the gearing then that the racers do now – there was no 11-tooth cog in my day. 53-12 was pretty much the biggest gear I ever rode in. And so some of the strongest sprinters would get wound up heading to the finish, but then they would basically run out of gears. Innovations since then in gearing and shifting have absolutely changed the nature of sprinting.

But maybe most importantly, teams are much more organized and disciplined nowadays. Average speeds are much higher, and the risk is higher too. I would say that the fitness level of the average ProTour rider is higher than it was back in my day. Every single rider in today's peloton is supremely fit; when I was racing we lacked the current measurement devices, like wattage output meters and so forth. It was much more a case of training by how you felt. We didn't have the radios back to the car with the DS coordinating everything, nor did we have a team physiologist who was privy to our training data.

**TOL:** What are your thoughts about the status of track racing in the U.S. today?

**DP:** Well, the heyday of track racing in this country may have been about a hundred years ago. I followed it closely when Taylor was riding the pursuit but haven't followed much since.

**TOL:** If you were a coach, what is the most important advice that you would have for young cyclists today?

**DP:** My main advice would be – don't specialize too early. Learn how to ride different disciplines and different types of courses. Do some BMX, some mountain bike riding and racing, diversify yourself. It just doesn't make sense to be 15 years old and riding 500 miles a week on the road.

**TOL:** And what would be your advice about balancing a racing career with other life goals, like your education?

**DP:** Well, you're talking to a guy who went straight into racing, and whose son skipped college and went straight onto the pro circuit. In retrospect, one of the issues we had with Taylor is that he was simply too good too fast. I mean, he was Junior World Champion within a year and a half after he started racing. He made his first Olympic team just out of High School, which put him on Lance's radar, and he just went on from there. He won the Under-23 Roubaix at age 18, then again at age 19 and won two senior World Pursuit (track) titles before age 20.

If we made a mistake, it was that we just didn't allow him enough time to season; he needed more experience and mentoring, certainly more than I could provide. But let's face it, Taylor was not your average pro – he was, and is, supremely talented. And it's hard to hold back against that – especially when he was getting professional contracts thrown at him.

**TOL:** How much do you keep up with and watch pro cycling today? Who do you rate as the top sprinters in today's peloton?

**DP:** Now without Taylor racing, my interest will probably wane a little bit – but I'm still a fan and like to follow women's racing especially, as they ride at such a high level. Also we have a close tie to Taylor's girlfriend Kasia Niewiadoma, who is one of the world's best. And I still follow Team EF.

In terms of sprinting, today seems like sort of a heyday – there are so many great sprinters. I'm a fan of Peter Sagan – to me, he's like a modern day Sean Kelly, plus. Groenewegen is a beast for sure, but all of those guys are very, very good – Matthews, Viviani, Ewan, Gaviria, to name a few. Most any of them have a shot at the green jersey. Practically every team has a strong sprinter, which means that they are all trying to time their lead-out, and that makes for good theater. Personally, I've always liked Mark Cavendish. I mean, 30 Tour de France stage wins is simply phenomenal.

**TOL:** Do you think Cavendish still has some wins in his legs?

**DP:** I hope so. But things change fast, and this sport is not waiting around for anyone these days. I think it's just the nature of sprinting that you reach your physical peak, and then you sort of start to lose that edge, you lose that absolute power. You can keep racing, but you have to transition into a different sort of rider. In my day, it was easier to do that, sprinters were more versatile, the racing was more wide open. But things are so specialized and tightly controlled today, it makes that kind of transition much more difficult, if not impossible.

**TOL:** Who do you think will go down as some of the greatest sprinters of all time?

**DP:** Cavendish, Maertens, Sagan, Kelly, Andre Darrigade, Franco Bitossi, Roger De Vlaeminck – even “the King,” Eddy Merckx won his share of sprints, along with everything else! It's a long list if you use the term “all-time.” Other greats? Erik Zabel, Mario Cipollini, Robbie McEwen, Alessandro Petacchi, van Poppel, Marcel Kittel, Andre Greipel all come to mind.

**TOL:** What about Davis Phinney?

**DP:** (Laughs) No, I wouldn't put myself on that list. Not even close.

**TOL:** Changing gears a little bit, what's your opinion about the activities of the UCI these days, in terms of managing the sport?

**DP:** I really think they need to focus more intently on safety issues around the sport. The accident that Peter (Stetina) had a couple years ago should never have happened. Same with Jesse Sargent. And of course, Taylor's career-altering crash at the 2014 US National Championships was not only horrible but avoidable. More and more you see cars as in Jesse's case, or motorbikes as in Taylor's case taking riders out. Or a host of road furniture in the last few kilometers of a race wreaking havoc with the peloton. That just can't be allowed to happen. There have to be some checks and balances, and if a promoter endangers the riders, there has to be a consequence. The UCI could definitely be doing a better job of safeguarding the riders, in my opinion.

In other areas, I think the UCI could do a better job of pushing women's racing forward, through mandating more race promotion and TV coverage. They are finally starting to do a little more of this.

More generally, I don't see how they can be both the promoter and the regulator of the sport. It just seems like an untenable situation. You really need two different entities that both have respect and authority. But the problem is not just with the UCI, it's the whole structure of the sport.

I also feel like the racing has evolved in a negative sort of way – call me “old guard,” but with team strategy being controlled by the radio, all the commands coming from the team car, the racing is not nearly as “open” and elegant, not as passionate as it used to be. It really is all business now, with the wealthiest teams dictating everything, and riders encouraged to become more like robots, suppressing their personalities – it's a shame. And because it's so controlled it is less interesting, in my opinion.

**TOL:** You mostly participated prior to cycling's "EPO era." How much of an issue was doping when you were racing?

**DP:** We were "pane e acqua" guys for sure. And were lucky to be on 7-Eleven, because in a sense we were naïve; we didn't come from a background of doping. Were there other riders and teams taking supplementation? Sport being what it is, the answer is yes, probably, but it wasn't the huge factor in cycling that it later became. The fact was, we could get some good results, we could win some races, Andy could win the Giro! And all we were taking was a few oral vitamins. In hindsight, I am intensely proud of that fact.

But also, we didn't have the intense pressure from 7-Eleven to get results in each and every European race. This was the pre-internet era, so we weren't under the microscope like the teams are today. 7-Eleven was also an American-based brand, with no presence in Europe – so it is remarkable that they chose to support us racing overseas. But they trusted us, trusted Jim Ochowicz, and our racing schedule. Without that constant pressure, it's not a surprise that we thought and acted differently.

**TOL:** Do you think the sport is cleaner today? Are we finally past the doping era that overshadowed so much of the last 30 years or so?

**DP:** Relative to the hard core doping era, yes, I believe cycling is definitely better off today. However, whether it be through micro-dosing or mechanical doping and so on, there are evidently still ways to cheat – and not get caught. And so you do have to wonder if our system of controls is truly effective.

**TOL:** Davis, we really appreciate you sitting down and talking with us. One final question. Have you ever considered getting back involved in the sport in any way – as a goodwill ambassador, a spokesman for safety concerns, or anything like that?

**DP:** Not really, I feel like my calling is elsewhere. My relevance to the sport is pretty dated now – as a matter of fact, we've got our 40th 7-Eleven team reunion coming up! Without Taylor in the sport, I'm just another fan. I feel it's best that I spend my time and energy helping others in my Parkinson's community. That feels more important to me now.

*By Steve Maxwell, February 19th, 2020.*