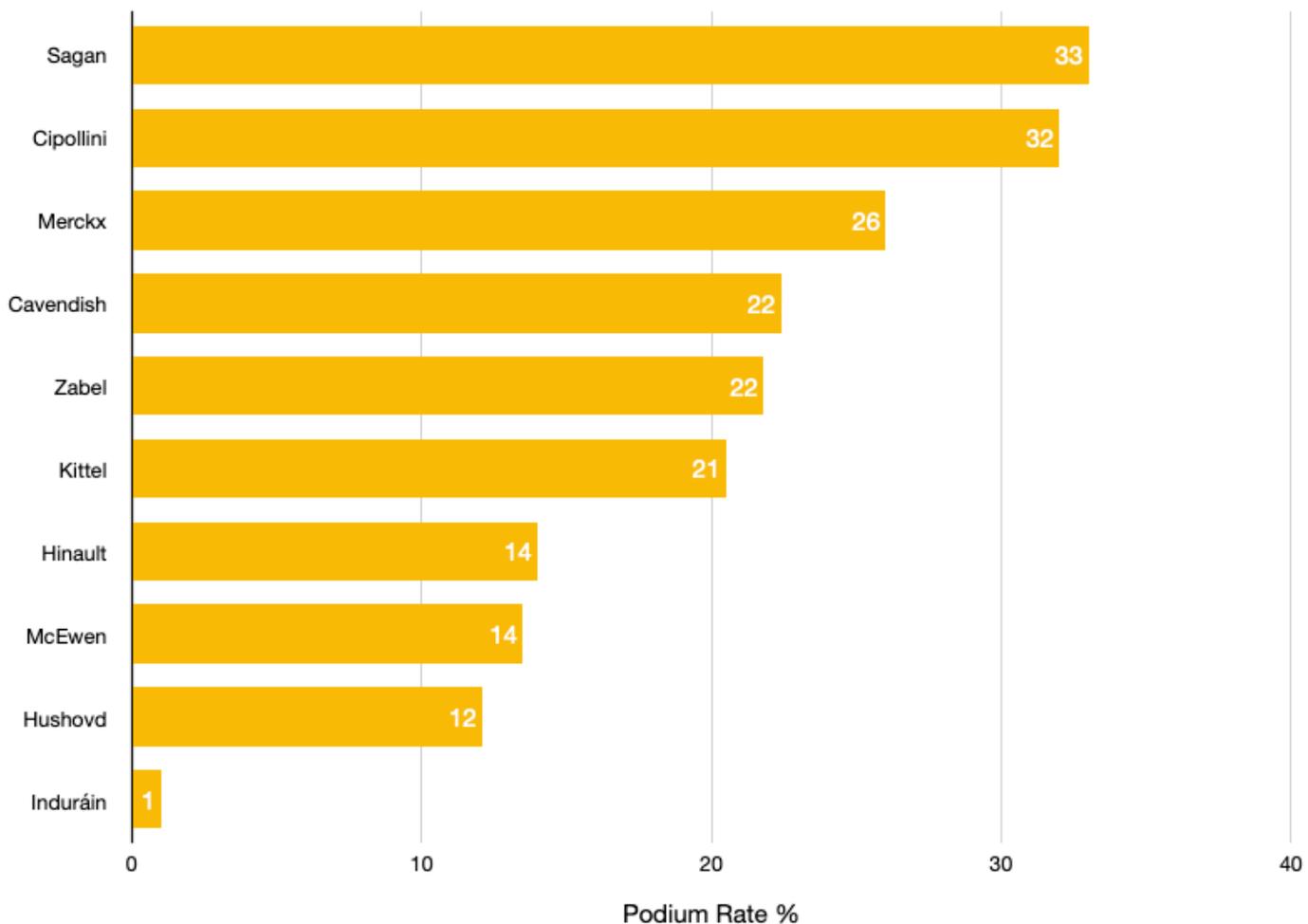


# Peter Sagan — the Best Tour de France Rider Since Eddy Merckx?

[Peter Sagan](#) has 12 [Tour de France](#) stage wins to his credit, and has won a record seven sprinter's green jerseys. But despite these other-worldly results, his metronomic consistency at the Tour is almost criminally underrated. Despite "only" being ranked 16th on the list of Tour de France stages won with 12 stage wins, the three-time world champion holds an astonishingly high "podium rate" in mass-start stages of 33 percent, with 45 individual podium finishes. This means that for every one in three times Sagan lines up at a (non-time trial) Tour de France stage, he lands himself somewhere on the podium. This is even more impressive when we recall that he has never finished on the podium in a mountain stage – which can make up about a third of the event's overall stages.

This raw figure is obviously impressive, but to put it into perspective, [Alejandro Valverde](#), Mr. Consistency himself, has a TdF mass-start podium rate of just .07 percent, and [Bernard Hinault](#), one of the best racers of all time, has a Tour de France mass-start podium rate of 14 percent. [Mark Cavendish](#), who has the second-most Tour victories of all time with 30, has a mass-start podium rate of 22 percent, more than a third less than Sagan. Erik Zabel, the winner of six green jerseys at the race and one of the most consistent Tour de France racers of all-time, also has a mass-start podium rate of 22 percent. And even the Norwegian Thor Hushovd, one of the most consistent and versatile sprinters of all-time, ranks well below with Tour mass-start podium rate of 12 percent.

Tour de France Mass-Start Podium Rate

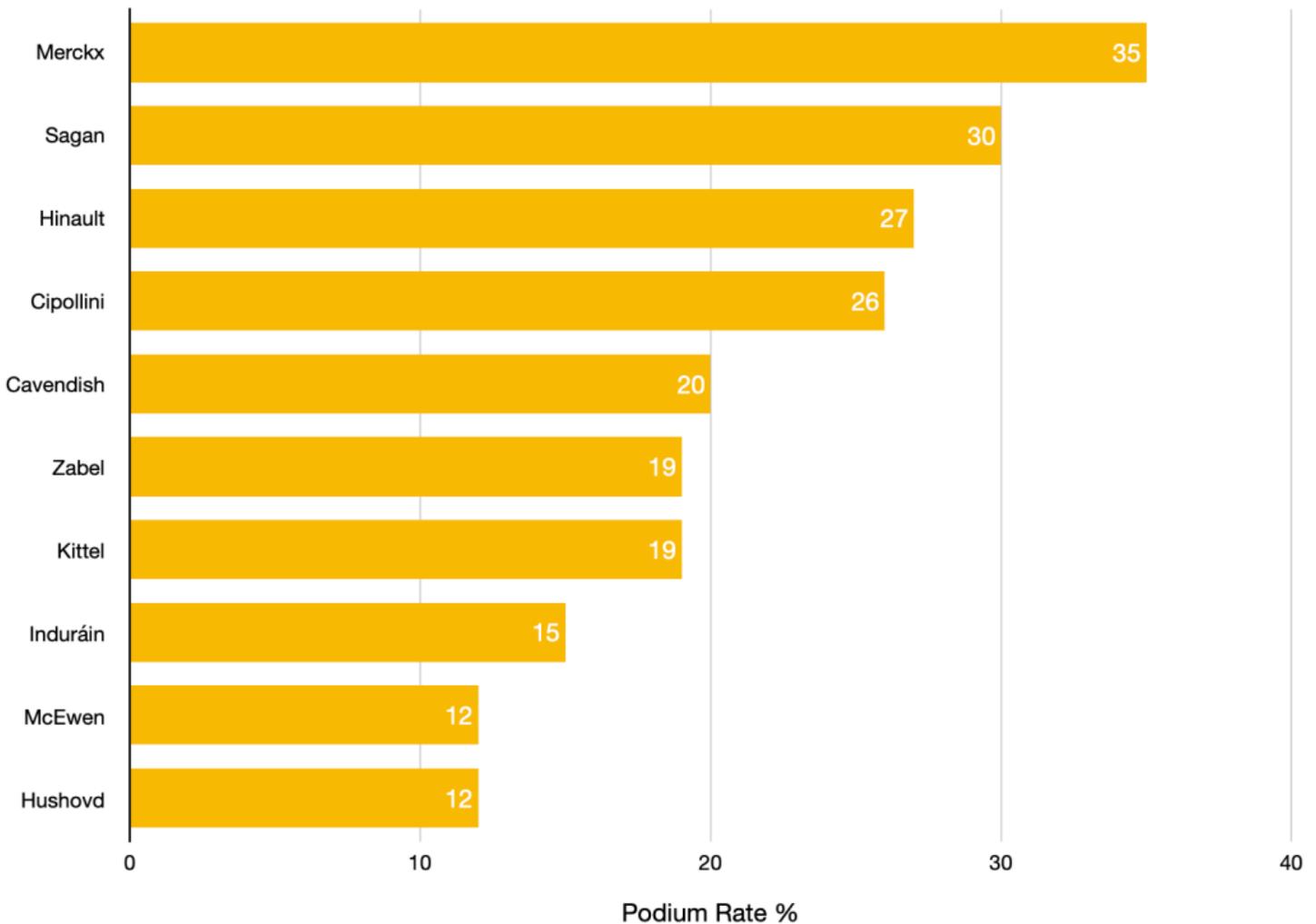


Even the Cannibal himself, [Eddy Merckx](#), by consensus the greatest male road cyclist of all-time, has a Tour mass-start podium rate of 26 percent, still well below Sagan. Italian sprinter Mario Cipollini is the only rider that comes close to Sagan, has a mass-start podium rate of 32 percent. But it's worth noting that Cipollini never finished a Tour de France and would famously drop out every year, after the key sprint stages and before the race hit the mountains. Meanwhile, Sagan has finished every Tour de France he has started except for the 2017 event, when he was disqualified following a disputed sprint on stage 4 in which he collided with Mark Cavendish. Thus, if you go strictly by the rate of mass-start podium finishes, Sagan is clearly the most consistent Tour racer of all-time.

However, besides the mountains, Sagan has another Achilles heel – he typically doesn't perform that well in time trials. In fact, he has never targeted nor podiumed in an individual time trial at the Tour de France. The mass-start metric discussed above gives us the clearest view of Sagan's dominance in the chaotic and difficult-to-predict nature of non-time trial racing. However, some overall riders, like Merckx or five-time Tour-winner Miguel Indurain are also strong time trialists, and they have been able to also rack up a massive number of podiums in those events. Thus, if we change our metrics to include all Tour de France starts, the gap to Sagan begins to close.

Including time trials and prologues, Miguel Indurain has a podium rate of 15 percent, and Hinault bumps up to an impressive 27 percent. Under this metric, Merckx, with a whopping 23 podiums in time trials and prologues, has an overall podium rate of 35 percent, slightly higher than Sagan's mass-start rate, and by far the highest found while researching this piece. These figures from Hinault and Merckx are even more impressive when we consider the typical strategy for a general classification victory. GC riders would typically be expected to score lower podium rates since, in theory, they would be laying low in the pack in most of the flat stages, to conserve their energy for the high mountains. For reference, Chris Froome's Tour de France podium rate is 5.8 percent.

Tour de France All-Starts Podium Rate



Sagan's dominance earlier in his career and his personality has perhaps numbed us a bit to his brilliance and freakish versatility on the bike. Certainly, the eccentric Slovakian is revered and is arguably the most popular figure in the sport, but his light-hearted nature, showmanship, and refusal to play the straight-man with the media perhaps leads to an under-recognition of his absurd consistency. Compare this to Mark Cavendish, a darling of the media, who is heavily covered when he hasn't even been selected for a Tour de France team since 2018. Sagan may sometimes seem as though he doesn't take the sport completely seriously – buttressed by his famous and literal “Why So Serious” tattoo. To some, this may make him seem like he doesn't care as much about achieving results – but the numbers back up his historic ability to consistently rack up results across the entire WorldTour calendar. In fact, his podium across all races is 37 percent, which is actually higher than his Tour tally.

So who is the most consistent rider in Tour history? Merckx has a slightly higher overall podium rate, and was a strong performer across all types of stages. Sagan has an absurdly high podium rate, considering that he can't really play in time trials or the mountains. And Sagan is certainly unlikely to ever threaten Merckx's 34 Tour de France stage wins. So perhaps the Cannibal once again remains the greatest of all time, but Sagan is clearly the most consistent Tour racer of the modern era by far. When he lines up next weekend in Nice to attempt to win an 8th Tour de France points jersey, besides appreciating his star power within the sport, we should all behold the brilliance of the most consistent and versatile rider to come along since Merckx.

*Written by Spencer Martin, August 26th, 2020*

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