

## Remembering Greg LeMond's thrilling victory 30 years later

America is a country rich in sporting tradition, and in the annals of American sports there have been many stories of amazing comebacks – by both individuals and teams. However, perhaps no story is bigger than Greg LeMond's comeback to win the 1989 Tour de France – exactly 30 years ago today, on July 23, 1989.

LeMond came back from nearly dying in a hunting accident, then doubling down to rally from a 50-second deficit to French great Laurent Fignon on the final day's relatively short individual time trial, to barely eke out a win in one of world's most challenging and grueling sporting events.

To understand why Lemond's win that year should be considered among the greatest comebacks in American sports history, one must reflect on the years leading up to his historic win in Paris that year.

In 1983, as a 22-year-old, LeMond captured the World Championship of road cycling, the biggest one-day event in the sport. Due to his age and the fact he was an American, he was immediately thrust on to the world stage. It was a seminal moment for American cycling.

By the following year, Lemond was battling the best of the sport in the world's biggest event – the Tour de France. In 1984, LeMond rode in support of winner Fignon. He then changed teams in 1985, to the famed La Vie Claire squad, where he waged an unusual battle with teammate and Frenchman Bernard Hinault. It was a well-documented period of his career, chronicled by ESPN's 30 for 30 documentary "Slaying the Badger" (as well as a book of the same title). During the 1985 Tour de France, LeMond was often held back to help Hinault, in order for the Frenchmen to win his record-tying fifth Tour de France.

By 1986, LeMond was too strong and Hinault had to succumb to the rising star instead of trying to win a historic sixth Tour de France. It was the dawning of LeMond's reign. He had stormed the sport, becoming the first American to win the Tour, and he was clearly its new darling.

But in 1987, an early-season crash in Europe knocked him out of racing for a few months. He returned to the U.S. to heal up. Following his recuperation period, he took a hunting trip with some relatives, where his brother-in-law mistakenly fired at him in the bush, hitting LeMond, and leaving 60 pellets lodged in his body, including one in the lining of his heart. After coming close to bleeding to death, a flight-for-life helicopter flew him to a trauma center in Sacramento.

"As I laid in the field, I thought I was going to die," LeMond said.

Fast forward to February 12, 1989. LeMond sat in a Chinese restaurant in Santa Rosa, Calif., north of the Bay Area. Earlier in the day, he had completed a 110-mile ride over hills.

"I honestly think it will take two to three years before I can come back to the level I was at when I won the Tour de France in 1986," LeMond told me, over a hefty portion of chicken and fried rice. "And, I'm still not sure I can get back to that level, especially in one or two years.

It's incredibly difficult, and it's an incredibly difficult sport and incredibly difficult event."

But later that night, as he left the restaurant, it was evident a cool confidence had re-entered his headspace.

"I want everyone to know, I'm not going away," he said. "I've got that feeling again."

In May of that year, he slogged through America's biggest race, the 10-day Tour de Trump, a 927-mile

race up and down the East Coast. He finished way down in the overall standings and more than a half-hour behind the eventual winner, Norwegian Dag Otto Lauritzen. The race included many of the top riders that would race in the Tour de France later that summer, including Points jersey winner Sean Kelly of Ireland, King of the Mountain jersey winner Gert-Jan Theunisse and Combination Classification jersey winner Steven Rooks, both of The Netherlands.

If America's premier bike race was an indicator, LeMond was nowhere near the form needed to conquer the 21-day Tour de France six weeks later.

"The one thing about Greg LeMond," said American Ron Kiefel at the time, "he can get into top form relatively quick."

LeMond was a physical freak. His multiple recordings of Volume Oxygen intake ratio tests in the low 90s were some of the highest ever recorded. His ability to produce insane "wattage for an extended period without cracking", as they say in the cycling vernacular, was legendary.

Simply put, LeMond's freakish physiology meant he could ride longer at the limit than other cyclists while producing a lot of power. This, of course, transfers into superb strength in both hill climbing and time trialing.

By July, LeMond had slimmed down by putting in extra miles and races. Yet, he entered the Tour de France with many unanswered questions.

LeMond was always a cyclist that could "build into a race," meaning while many other athletes might start to feel physically decimated going into the third week of the Tour de France,

LeMond was improving. That would be 'the feeling' he was talking about back in February.

American great Bobby Julich said LeMond was one of those few riders who actually improved as a grand tour got harder.

"There are riders, and I was one of them, that seemed to feel better in longer stage races, especially as the race went on," Julich says. "It is a physiological thing as well as a psychological thing. LeMond was no doubt in the same boat, and probably a much bigger boat."

LeMond built into the 1989 race not knowing how his form would peak over three weeks. He did know the final week featured his favorite climbs in the Alps and an individual time trial, his specialty. LeMond rode well and without mistake or incident the first two weeks and, nearing the end of the three-week race, found himself within striking distance of Fignon and Spain's Pedro Delgado, another pre-race favorite.

An epic battle ensued going into the final week. Fignon had resurrected a late career push in an attempt to win his third Tour de France. In the process, the French crowd became torn between the two riders. LeMond had been adopted as a French fan favorite because of his brave comeback attempt, aggressive racing style, willingness to speak the native tongue, and perhaps also because of his French-sounding name.

For Fignon, it was bittersweet. He felt somewhat betrayed by the French public, which often seemed more endeared to LeMond. It was evident LeMond's comeback story was the stuff of legend whether he won or not. He was viewed as a major underdog and the media played it up with voracity.

The 1989 race finished in an unusual manner. The final day of Le Tour is historically reserved for a flat and predictable stage for the sprinters, letting the overall winner and his team enjoy the spoils after a

grueling three weeks. But 1989 was different. A 24-kilometer (15 miles) individual time trial (or 'race against the clock') took place from Versailles to Paris. Fignon's 50-second lead was deemed safe, as LeMond would have to make up more than two seconds per kilometer. For Fignon to lose would be like a golfer double-bogeying the final hole while his competitor shot a hole-in-one.

Now 29 months removed from near death, with 60 shot-gun pellets in his body, LeMond began his preparation for the final time trial. Using unfamiliar technological ingenuity at the time, he strapped on an elongated aerodynamic helmet and skinsuit.

He placed on extended aero bars on his bike so he could stretch out into a tuck position for less wind resistance. His back wheel was a disk with no spokes. He would even consider abandoning water, which added more weight, assuming that any drinking in the short stage could cost precious seconds. He attempted to take every possible technological edge provided by his sponsors – Bottecchia bikes, Giro helmets, Mavic wheels and components, and Time shoes and pedals.

Fignon was confident about his ability to hold off the American.

"I am too strong in the mind and in the legs," Fignon said. "LeMond thinks he can win, but it's impossible."

Starting second to last, one spot and two minutes in front of the uber-confident Fignon, LeMond shot off the start ramp looking like a spaceman in a skier's tuck, his yellow neon-colored helmet and skinsuit blazing through the French suburbs en route toward the Eiffel Tower. Commentators and the throng of international journalists took note as the big screens at the finish line projected the image of LeMond streaking through the streets. A noticeable buzz began to be heard in the crowd.

Then came Fignon in the start house. He had no helmet, only his long blonde ponytail. He had no aerobars, rather just the standard drop-down 'bull horns'. By his brazen appearance, there was a sense he thought he would soon be enjoying a crowning promenade into his hometown of Paris.

As the time checks passed, LeMond's splits were fast. And as he approached Paris, LeMond's cadence and speeds got even faster. It was evident, he was feeding off the information coming from race radio that he was gaining ground on Fignon. By the final 500 meters, LeMond was storming down the Champs Elysees Boulevard toward the finish with demonic fury.

LeMond finished and within 30 meters had stopped and turned around. The media mob was flooding toward him, their cameras clicking. Curse words were heard in maybe ten different languages as the gendarmes began to form a circle around LeMond.

Cameras, as well as eyes, began to ricochet between the time clock on the finish banner and LeMond. Beyond the finish banner, Fignon remained a speck against the Arc d'Triomphe, silhouetted through the dank summer haze. This was a drama not seen before (or since) on the final day of the Tour de France. The crowd on the Champs-Élysées began to draw to a hush, a weird vibe for 300,000 spectators.

The clock continued to move, ticking from 47 to 48 and then 50 seconds since LeMond crossed the line. Fignon was barreling toward the finish, his bespectacled face grimacing as his long ponytail flayed behind, but he was still 80 meters out.

LeMond, still straddling his bike, water bottle in one hand, grabbed his head, sweat coursing down his cheeks, his jaw dropping while hundreds of cameras moved toward him. A TV motorbike tried to position against the mob scene as the scrum match intensified.

Fignon finished and within 20 meters collapsed to the pave. He seemed more in disbelief than exhausted. He placed his head in his hands and assumed a cradle position. LeMond was still grabbing his head in disbelief. Yet, he was upright and smiling.

The crowd took on a weird mix of whistles (boos in Europe) and cheers. It was difficult to assess whether the cheers were for LeMond or Fignon. Perhaps they were for both. Either way, it was an one of the greatest moments in the history of the sport. In the aftermath of the race, LeMond would eventually see Fignon and embrace him. LeMond's hug seemed more to console Fignon than to say 'hey, mate, that was a great race.'"

LeMond's eight-second win remains the shortest winning margin in the 100-plus years of the Tour de France. He would go on to win the 1990 Tour de France and place 7th overall in 1991. Fignon would ironically place 6th overall in 1991 Tour de France, one place ahead of LeMond. He went on to win one stage in 1992 before retiring in 1993.

In 1992, at a party after the Tour DuPont (LeMond's last big win), I asked Fignon about the 1989 Tour de France.

"I must be honest. I do not see Greg defeating me that day," Fignon told me in broken English. "He is a friend. A hero for the sport. A hero for his country. He came back from the dead."

LeMond and Fignon remained lifelong friends. Fignon died in 2010 following a long battle with cancer. LeMond said Fignon was an incredibly "talented bike rider" and a worthy adversary which made the 1989 that more epic.

As for LeMond, 30 years later he is recognized as one of history's best-ever cyclists. He inspired a whole generation of world-class American cyclists that included Julich.

"Greg LeMond was one of my heroes for sure," Julich says. "I looked up to Greg my entire career and appreciate what he and the rest of the Americans of his generation did for the future of American cycling. Watching him win the Tour by beating Hinault in 1986 was amazing, but watching him come back from his accident in 1989 and winning on a small team was probably the most inspiring. It would have to be considered one of the biggest comebacks in sports history."

*By Steve Brunner, July 23rd, 2019.*

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