

# Rethinking the Polka Dot Jersey

Cycling fans are used to seeing spectacular performances in the high mountains – by both overall race contenders and breakaway privateer climbers. Whenever the road tilts upwards, the climbing specialists – the “mountain goats” – move to the front, hunting for valuable points that could lead to the prestigious “King of the Mountains” title (KOM, or QOM in women’s racing) – that comes with personal accolades and valuable sponsor publicity. The red polka dot jersey that signifies the King of the Mountains in the Tour de France has often been a pivotal subtext to the overall race, especially when talented climbers who are also legitimate overall contenders fight for the jersey in the high mountains.

Prior to the mid-1990s, the mountain points competition was generally won or contested by the top overall contenders – who picked up points by scalping peaks while hunting for the yellow jersey. For example, Eddy Merckx won the competition twice during his dominant years. Lucien van Impe won the Tour in 1976 and the mountains jersey on six other occasions. Lucho Herrera won the mountains jersey in all three grand tours and the overall victory in the 1987 Vuelta. Andy Hampsten won pink and green in the 1988 Giro. Tony Rominger won the Tour’s polka dot jersey in 1993 while challenging Miguel Indurain, and had already won the Vuelta twice at that point, and he added a Giro in 1995.

But beginning around the mid-1990s, a strategy specifically geared to winning the polka dot jersey was mastered by the Frenchman Richard Virenque – who went on to collect it on no less than seven occasions from 1994 to 2004. Virenque’s approach was formulaic; after ignoring early small climbs, he would make a huge breakaway push on high mountain stages later in the race. Occasionally, as in 1994 or 2004, Virenque actually took a stage win while hunting mountain points, but after his 2nd place overall in 1997, he drifted down the overall standings, despite making every effort to secure the polka dot competition.

This type of KOM strategy quickly took root in the peloton, and eventually became the modus operandi for virtually every “KOM” winner since Virenque. In the modern era, only Tadej Pogacar’s 2020 Tour and Chris Froome’s 2015 Tour and 2018 Giro combined GC and mountains jersey wins really break that mold.

The script for virtually every medium-to-high mountain stage in grand tours has stagnated in recent years. While the strongest riders use their teams to keep the pace high, KOM hunters go out on the attack and get their points, but typically bomb out on the final big climbs. This has made the KOM competition a bit boring in recent grand tours, and confusing for new fans of the sport when they see the KOM leader so far down in the general standings. Recent polka-dot winners like Rafal Majka and Anthony Charteau – or a long line of “one-hit-wonders” with wins in the Giro’s and Vuelta’s competitions, like Julian Arredondo or Nicolas Edet – don’t really do justice to the spirit of the jersey.

(In addition, the KOM competition has been tainted on several occasions when the winner later got popped for doping. Bernard Kohl in the ‘08 and Franco Pelizzotti in the ‘09 Tour was written off for those years, with no winner being awarded. KOM winners Emanuele Sella (‘08), Stefano Pirazzi (‘12), and Matteo Rabottini (‘13) were all popped for doping after their Giro wins but kept their titles.)

In many shorter stage races, there often aren’t enough mountain routes to really make the KOM much of a competition – and it becomes more like a specialized bonus sprints competition. And in the grand tours, where mountain stages often do play a decisive role in the final race outcome, the KOM competition often does little to shake up the standings or shape the tactics of the real contenders. This is because the race favorites usually keep their powder dry for a final push on the last big mountains.

With more and more early KOM wannabes clogging the race on early climbs, and with the polka dot jersey often spending most of all of the race on the shoulders of riders who are strategically targeting sprints in the foothills rather than actually being among the best climbers, it seems like it’s time to reconsider and

reinvent the KOM competition. A few changes could liven up the competition and potentially crank up the excitement while increasing the broadcast value of the sport.

After some nudging from our friend Mike Fahy in Switzerland, *The Outer Line* examined a few options that might help to inject more enthusiasm and creativity back into the KOM contest.

- Option 1: KOM times during specifically timed “KOM Zones” would be measured on the Category 2 through *hors catégorie* (HC) ranked climbs only. This would remove the smaller hills – or “bumps” as the critics might call them – where many of today’s “King of the Foothills” competitors try to accumulate minor points, to build up as big a buffer as possible before reaching the real mountains.
- Option 2: Timed KOM segments would only include stage finishing climbs. This would force pure climbing specialists to compete more fiercely with overall GC contenders on the handful of major climbs and uphill finishing drags.
- Option 3: KOM times would be a summation of the total climbing time for all of the ranked climbs on what is traditionally defined as “mountain” stages of the race. This could force the early KOM specialists to rethink and try new breakaway strategies to gain a toe-hold on the jersey, knowing that the true climbers will likely rise to the top at the most critical moments of the overall race.
- Option 4: A “hybrid” scoring model that awards traditional points but has special bonus points for fastest timed segments. Standardized points could be assigned similar to the current KOM ranking system for the various categorized climbs, with special KOM timed zones where riders can gain bonus points. This could combine the features many fans find recognizable in today’s competition while providing general classification contenders and enterprising teams a new route to the mountain’s jersey.

While some of these systems might be more complicated for announcers to explain, a time-based system would actually be easy for the audience to understand and could shake these competitions out of their rut. This might not have been possible 20 or even 10 years ago, but today the technology to enable any of these options is easily available, adaptable, and trustworthy. Every bike in major stage races is fitted with a timing/geolocation chip transponder that is keyed to riders’ race numbers. (When riders switch bikes due to mechanicals, these are usually fitted with a duplicate transponder, or the race commissaires do a visual check at the finish to confirm the rider’s place.)

Of course, there is always the possibility of unintended consequences. Riders in the 2000 Giro’s experimental KOM competition discovered this, to their dismay. In that edition, where Stefano Garzelli won the overall, Jose “Chepe” Gonzalez was hunting for his third green jersey win. However, instead of points on the climbs, the riders were using transponders (and were also visually timed by commissaires) that would award the green jersey on the basis of the lowest elapsed time across a selection of the Giro’s climbs.

As riders throughout the race fell out of contention for the new green jersey “trophy” format, team mechanics began removing the transponders as dead weight. By the time of the final stage climb up to Sestriere, only 23 of the remaining 127 riders were still fitted with transponders, and – according to the trophy’s rules – they were the only legitimate participants because the commissaires hadn’t been positioned on that climb. Despite Gonzalez verifiably riding the segment faster than then-race leader Francesco Casagrande (an estimated dozen or so riders were faster, based on [video evidence](#)), Casagrande was awarded green by virtue of his higher overall general classification placing, even though he lost major time in that mountain time trial and ceded the GC to Garzelli. The Giro abandoned that experiment a year later.

However, with the technology available today, we think it’s time to bring back something similar for the major stage races – an easy-to-understand format for new generations of fans that decisively rewards the

best climbers. For all its high-tech equipment, pro cycling is structurally limited by many of its traditions. The mountains jersey is a prime example – a staple competition that has always been positioned as a kind of race-within-the-race. The KOM is overdue for a refresh, considering how much the sport and technology have changed, and how the current mountains points format can actually dilute the racing.

Adopting a new, more precise, and more detailed methodology for actually pinpointing the best climber – rather than the best uphill sprint specialist – could inject a whole new level of excitement and intrigue. It could disrupt the formulaic tactics of the modern grand tours and open the racing to more daring exploits, nuanced and balanced attacks, and more interesting storytelling that could help lead to improved broadcast ratings.

*Written by Joe Harris & Steve Maxwell, April 14, 2021*