

## What Can Stop Team Sky at the 2019 Tour? (Hint: It's Not the route)

Since the 2019 Tour de France route was unveiled last week, speculation of who will benefit from the time trial-light course has been rampant. Two major narratives have emerged since the release of the course details. The first is that ASO has designed a course with minimal time trials and a preference for shorter, punchier climbs to benefit homegrown contenders like Romain Bardet and Thibaut Pinot. The second is that the arbiter of the race, Christian Prudhomme and ASO, are tired of watching Team Sky send out their formidable armada of world class riders to sit on the front of the peloton for three weeks with a pace that inevitably and methodically asphyxiates the competition.

ASO, the centerpiece of the French cycling establishment, would certainly prefer a French winner of the national tour, and it is no secret that Sky's stranglehold on the Tour since 2012 has stolen some of the race's iconic luster. However, the assertion that ASO is tipping the scales in an attempt to foil the British squad has some major flaws.

The first major flaw in this argument is that if the French organization truly wanted to put the brakes on Sky's dominance, they surely wouldn't have included a 27km team time trial on the second stage. While Sky has never won a TTT at the Tour, the event has seen them solidify their GC leads whenever the event has been included in the route (2013, 2015, and 2018). Their collective team strength has seen them put time into their GC rivals, forcing them into the unenviable position of chasing the world's best stage race team with a deficit.

In theory, the event allows lesser time trialists like Bardet and Pinot to hide behind the collective strength of their teams and attempt to limit their losses. However, it is tailor-made to accentuate the team with the budget to afford the world's biggest engines, and makes it difficult for superior time trialist with weak teams, like Tom Dumoulin, to get an edge on the Sky leaders.

The second flaw in the theory is that, realistically, an anti-Sky route simply does not exist. When Chris Froome is on form, he is the best climber and time trialist in the world. To add to the team's wide swath of dominance, at last year's edition his teammate Geraint Thomas proved himself to be the strongest climber, while missing out on victory during the stage 20 time trial by a mere second. And even if their two veteran riders find themselves on the wrong side of their best performances come July, the team still has the young Colombian climbing sensation Egan Bernal. In short, Sky will likely show up to the 2019 Tour with riders that can potentially win over any and all terrain.

**Is an Anti-Sky Route Possible?** While there are riders that can challenge the Sky triumvirate of Thomas, Froome and Bernal in their specific respective disciplines, nobody can match them as a combined force. If ASO substituted an individual time trial in place of the team time trial, hybrid time trialing/climbers like Tom Dumoulin could challenge Sky, but strong climbers with dubious TT pedigree like Quintana, Bardet and Pinot would hemorrhage time to Thomas and Froome before the race got to the mountains.

If ASO eliminated time trials from the route altogether, Thomas, Bernal, and Froome could outclimb the competition in the high mountains. Thomas won back-to-back mountain stages in the 2018 Tour, and looked like the strongest rider nearly every time the race tilted skyward. Even though age looks to be slowing him down, Froome would ritually slaughter every so-called climber on the opening mountain stage early in his reign, and his mountain ambush to win the 2018 Giro d'Italia on stage 19 proved he can still deliver knockout blows on the most demanding mountain stages. Bernal awed during the 2018 Tour with his ability to set a blistering tempo for an absurd amount of time up Alpe d'Huez, which prompted many pundits to anoint him the star of the future. Bernal wrestled team leadership away from his older

teammates in 2019 would be a drastic departure from Sky's familiar blueprint, but it wouldn't be entirely shocking.

Since Sky's top talent has proven to be the best at climbing and time trialing, while being competent in descending, tactical nous, dealing with the 'chaos' of the new, shorter mountain stages and winding roads of the rolling 'trap' stages, what route could ASO possibly serve up that could set them at a disadvantage?

**Looming Issues in 2019** Even though Sky can't be thwarted by a specific route, they do have a few major questions marks looming in 2019. The defending Tour champion, Thomas, has spoken about inter-team tensions that arose during the race. For example, prior to the stage 3 team time trial, team directors informed Thomas that the team would not wait up if he flatted. This decision was made despite assurances that he would be a 'protected' rider going into the race. While he went on to win, these issues will arise once again at the 2019 Tour. While having two leaders can present an obvious advantage, it also doubles the odds of an ill-timed flat or mechanical derailing the team's plans. For example, if Froome flats early on and Thomas is the closest rider, will he offer his bike to Froome as he did on stage 19 of the 2016 Tour, or will he ride on as Froome is left to wait for a spare from the team car? It is difficult to imagine a defending champion deferring leadership to a teammate, which means Sky will likely have to deal with the accommodating two full leaders from stage one.

The second major obstacle is the age of their top two riders. Froome will be 34 and Thomas 33 when the pair line up for the 2019 Tour. Winning a tour at this age is incredibly rare, with grand tour performances dropping off drastically after the age of 32 (Cadel Evans became the oldest rider to take a Tour title in the modern era when he won in 2011 at the age of 34). Also, once a 'senior' rider loses a Grand Tour, they almost never return to their winning form.

As Froome and Thomas find themselves on the back side of their careers, Sky has the luxury of an insurance policy in Bernal. However, a nasty crash at the San Sebastian put him out of action for a few months, and his return at the late-season Il Lombardia saw him distanced on the final climb by Pinot and Vincenzo Nibali. If Bernal is looking to assume a leadership mantle at Sky, getting dropped by the likes of Nibali and Pinot isn't a great sign. In addition to the questions of his ability to return to his Tour de France form, young Colombian stars have a history of burning bright at extremely young ages, only to plateau and struggle to improve the final few percentage points (e.g. Quintana, Uran, Henao). A similar development trajectory for Bernal would throw a wrench in Sky's plans.

The 2019 Tour de France, while featuring limited time trial kilometers and a few punchy climbs, should play right into a Sky team at full strength. However, keep an eye out for increased team tensions and age considerations to potentially trip up Sky when the 2019 Tour finally gets underway.

*by Spencer Martin, November 8, 2018*