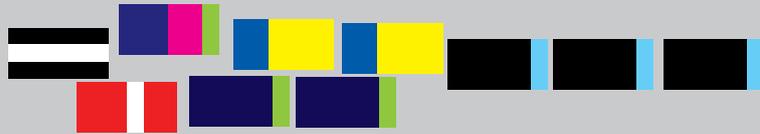


HOW TO WIN A BIKE RACE

Victory doesn't always go to the rider with the strongest legs. *Cyclist* looks at how strategy, gamesmanship and gall can all affect the eventual outcome

Words **FELIX LOWE** Illustrations **ROB MILTON**



Nicolas Roche is recalling the audacious move his old Tinkoff-Saxo team sprung in the 2013 Tour de France: 'Many times you dream of such a thing, but it rarely comes together like that.' On stage 13, the peloton was split into small groups by the strong crosswinds of the Loire, and yellow jersey-holder Chris Froome of Team Sky was left stranded without support and eventually lost more than a minute to rival Alberto Contador after his Tinkoff-Saxo squad managed to pull off a rare team breakaway.

'We'd been told the wind had eased and so the peloton was not prepared for it,' says Roche. The initial damage had been done by the Omega Pharma team of eventual stage winner Mark Cavendish, dividing the peloton with more than 100km remaining. Sprinters and GC men were distanced. Other teams sniffed blood. When the gusts returned, Froome suddenly appeared vulnerable. With 35km remaining, all the ingredients were

there for the Tinkoff-Saxo team to execute its master plan.

'There was another split and I saw that teams were caught out,' Roche, now riding alongside Froome at Team Sky, tells *Cyclist*. 'I had a chat with Michael [Rogers]. He was up for it. We stuck really close. Then Michael said, "Go!" and that was that. It was a huge team effort. It doesn't happen often that you have a break of a dozen riders with six from one team, but the circumstances were just perfect.'

Such a scenario rarely plays out precisely because it's unusual that everything falls into place so well. Had stage 13 of that Tour been a one-day Classic, Saxo's strategy would have been considered highly flawed – Contador finished only seventh – but as part of a three-week narrative, it unexpectedly became the most compelling stage of the entire race.

Tactically, teams approach the one-day Classics and multi-day Tours differently, but one thing that the Tinkoff-Saxo move of stage 13 showed is that, regardless of the type of event, racing is often a numbers game. The

Above: Nearing the end of a mountaintop finish, the team leader may only have the help of one or two domestiques. Soon they'll be on their own

Previous pages: As the run-in to the final sprint unfolds, dicing for position is paramount. Ground is hard-fought and defended by the lead out trains that shepherd their teams' sprinters to the line

team with the most riders in play gives itself the best chance of winning.

Look at last year's Paris-Roubaix. The 2014 event was won by Omega Pharma-Quick-Step's Niki Terpstra, but had he failed in his attempt, he had two other team-mates in the final break of 11 riders, including the four-time winner Tom Boonen.

In a similar vein, Leopard-Trek used strength in numbers to devastating effect on stage 18 of the 2011 Tour de France. It was a long 200km mountain stage, finishing at the top of the Galibier, and team leader Andy Schleck staged a daring breakaway with 60km still to go. Fortunately, the team had the foresight to place riders in breaks further up the road, who were used to pace Schleck away from the chasing bunch until the Luxembourg could eventually solo to victory at the mountaintop finish. It was a move concocted in the Leopard-Trek team bus that very morning.

In the same year, at Paris-Roubaix, Leopard-Trek were this time victims of strength-in-numbers tactics at the hands of Garmin-Cervélo. Fabian Cancellara, who had won at Roubaix the previous year in 2010, was again favourite to win for Leopard-Trek, but Garmin used its strongest rider, Thor Hushovd, to shadow his every move, while sending Johan Vansummeren up the road on what looked like a futile breakaway. Cancellara, unwilling to tow Hushovd all the way to the finish, eventually gave up racing altogether, leaving the Belgian Vansummeren to take the biggest win of his career.

'Garmin may not be the most successful team – nor do they have the best riders – but they've pulled a few rabbits out of their hats with great tactics,' says BBC and Eurosport commentator Rob Hatch.

As well as Vansummeren's Paris-Roubaix victory, Garmin can boast tactical wins for Ryder Hesjedal at the 2012 Giro d'Italia and Dan Martin at the 2013 Liège-Bastogne-Liège.

'I really liked how Garmin kept Martin fresh while using Hesjedal to agitate, break clear and then maintain the pace in Liège. Not ◀

'Despite not having the best riders, Garmin have pulled a few rabbits out of their hats with great tactics'

◻ especially complicated, but well executed – as the most effective performances generally are,’ says Cosmo ‘Cyclocosm’ Catalano, whose *How The Race Was Won* videos have become online staples for fans.

So, it might seem that race wins are concocted by the team managers who can best use the resources at their disposal, and who simply yell instructions down the team radios. But it’s not always that simple.

Grand masters

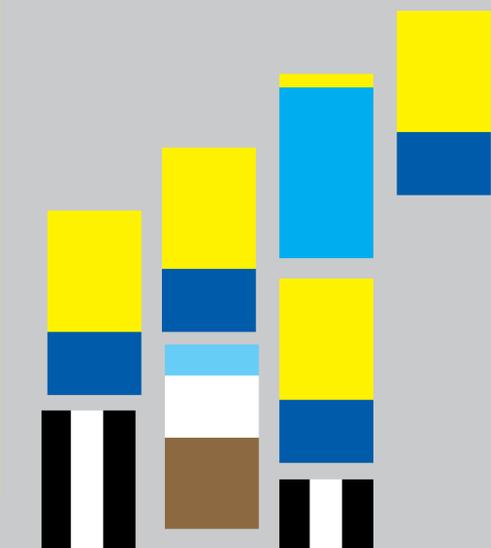
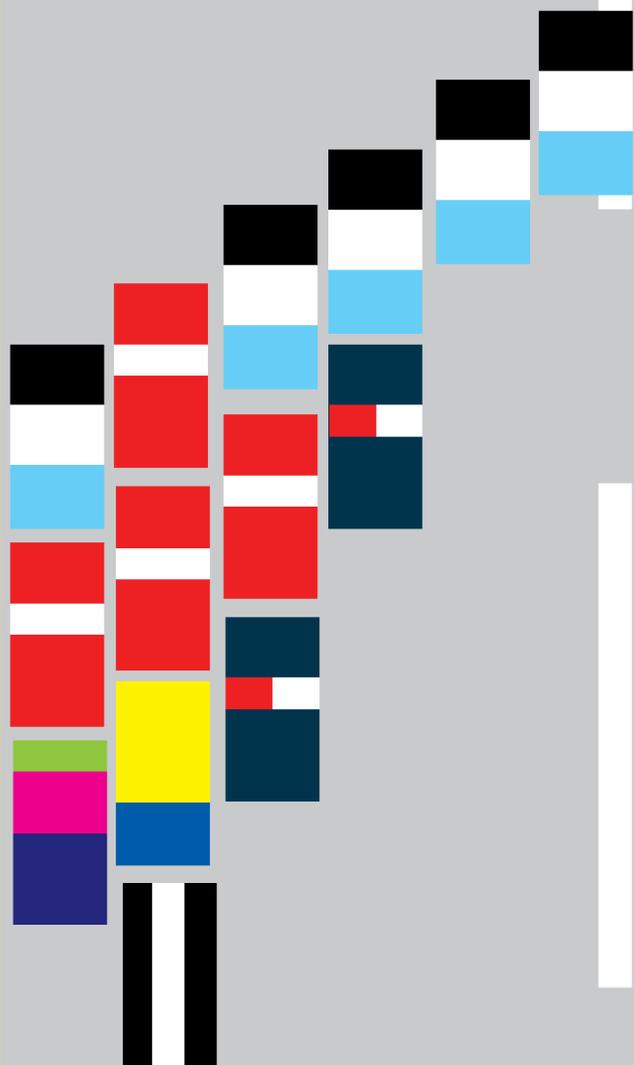
‘Riders have to make a lot of snap decisions themselves. There’s only so much that a DS can actually do, even with radios,’ says former British rider Tom Southam, now *directeur sportif* at Australian Pro-Continental outfit Drapac Professional Cycling, who race primarily in Europe Tour events where radios are banned. Radio’s detractors argue that earpieces reduce riders to the mere playthings of their masters – pawns in a game of cycling chess where the man behind the steering wheel of the team car is, well, queen.

Like Southam, Catalano disagrees: ‘There’s only so much they can do squinting at a tiny TV and yelling into the radio. The comparisons to chess and poker or even playing video games are way off the mark.’

The truth is that there’s more ad-libbing in a bike race than in a whole series of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. If a rider is physically incapable then even the Danish directives of someone as vocal as Tinkoff-Saxo team manager Bjarne Riis will go unanswered.

‘We’re not robots simply carrying out instructions from the team car,’ says Roche. ‘Sometimes moves work, sometimes they don’t. It’s really hard to pull off a plan – but that’s the human element of cycling, what keeps it unpredictable and a joy for everyone involved in the sport.’

That sporting directors play a substantial role is undeniable, argues Catalano, ‘but it’s more in knowing their riders’ abilities, putting them in positions where they’ll work best, and concisely getting them the race information they need to hear.’ Riis may be hailed as a strategic colossus, but Catalano struggles to recall ‘any ◻



Strong winds can shake up the structure of the peloton as riders seek shelter at the hip of the rider in front, instead of behind, causing echelons to form

moments where, by force of personal genius, he barked a series of brilliant orders that won the day’.

Dangerous moves

Sometimes the best a *directeur sportif* can do is to take a gamble on a kamikaze tactic and hope that it works out for the best. When Charly Wegelius (now DS at Cannondale-Garmin) was an amateur at Jean-René Bernaudeau’s Vendée-U development squad, he recalls that the finale of a key race featured a steep descent culminating in a sharp turn ahead of a ramp to the finish. On a recce, Bernaudeau ordered his riders not to brake before the turn. One crashed, but the others learned how to do it. Come the race, they used the tactic to secure the win.

More mainstream an example is Contador’s game-changing stage 17 victory in the 2012 Vuelta. Attacking an isolated Joaquim Rodriguez on a transitional hilly stage when he least

Roche. Flexibility and adaptability reign supreme. ‘Sometimes you try things with permission and sometimes with instinct,’ he says. For while strategies provide structure, it’s reacting to circumstances that makes the difference. ‘Sticking to a plan doesn’t mean adhering to a very strict schedule,’ explains Southam.

‘From my point of view,’ Catalano chips in, ‘the best strategies are almost always simple – “Let’s get Simon Gerrans to the finish in the lead group” – and most of the tactical adjustments that do happen are in response to how things play out.’ It’s apt that Catalano should mention Gerrans, because the Australian’s strategy segues quite nicely to another key aspect of tactics: fair play.

It’s just not cricket

Orica-GreenEdge’s Simon Gerrans split opinion after sandbagging Fabian Cancellara down the Poggio before out-sprinting the Swiss powerhouse

to respond. While it’s not against the rules, it is frowned upon by riders and fans alike, and is generally deemed to be against the ‘spirit’ of the sport.

In the 1990 Tour, Italian pro Claudio Chiappucci violated cycling’s unwritten rules by attacking eventual winner Greg LeMond when the American had punctured. And who can forget the ‘Chaingate’ incident in 2010 when Alberto Contador capitalised on Andy Schleck’s misfortune. Schleck was wearing yellow when he slipped his chain during an ascent of Port de Balès, and rather than wait, Contador attacked and made it to the line 39 seconds ahead of his rival. It was a breach of etiquette and all the more significant when Contador went on to win the Tour by a margin of 39 seconds (although he was later stripped of the title for a doping offence).

‘There was a big fuss when Nairo Quintana attacked during the neutralised descent of the Stelvio in the [2014] Giro, but everyone’s forgotten it now. Generally, it’s the bunch that calls it. There’s no way of regulating fair play, which is one of the main appeals of the sport,’ says Roche, whose father, Stephen, famously attacked yellow jersey Jean-François Bernard in the feed zone as part of a plan with Charly Mottet during his victorious 1987 Tour.

Breaking away

It’s this same whimsical notion of fair play that calls a truce while the *maillot jaune* stops for a pee. These ‘nature breaks’ usually occur en masse within the peloton, and often coincide with the pack reaching consensus over the composition of a breakaway.

Forming a break can happen in the blink of an eye in the opening kilometre. During key stages, however, it can be a political, fraught affair – the result of a series of hard, sustained and often foiled efforts with 200km still left to ride. Why? Because the stage win is rarely the objective for a break, even if, confusingly, breaking away offers the only realistic chance of success for 80 per cent of the pack.

Cycling is all about saving energy. A rider ahead allows his team-mates ◻

Strategies give structure, but it’s reacting to circumstances that makes the difference

expected it, Contador used numerous Saxo domestiques placed in the break – plus called on his friendship with old Astana team-mate Paolo Tiralongo – en route to seizing the *maillot rojo* from the shoulders of his shell-shocked compatriot. Although Contador admitted this ‘kamikaze’ attack was ‘absolute madness’, DS Bradley McGee had actually identified the exact spot for the Spaniard to launch his attack. Watched retrospectively, the stage is a strategic tour de force – right down to Tinkoff-Saxo team-mate Jesús Hernández deadweighting a forlorn Rodriguez up the final climb.

Granted, textbook assaults of such beauty don’t always come off. ‘Races rarely go according to plan and sometimes you have to resort to plan D. This could be something thought up in the car, by the road captain or a rider on his own,’ says

to win Milan-San Remo in 2012. Sure, sitting on Cancellara’s wheel and leaving his rival to do all the work before nipping past in the last few metres was sneaky, but the wily opportunist combined patience, timing, a bit of bluff and a cool head to beat clearly the stronger rider.

Similarly, Norwegian rider Thor Hushovd was hounded for supposedly not respecting his rainbow jersey when he refused to attack Cancellara at the 2011 Paris-Roubaix. Garmin’s team manager Jonathan Vaughters even said sorry to Cancellara’s Leopard-Trek manager, yet Brian Nygaard admitted there was no need for Garmin to apologise.

Wheelsucking may be seen as ungentlemanly, but it’s effective, and is generally considered a legitimate tactic by most riders. An altogether more contentious issue is attacking a rival when they are not in a position



to rest – they don't have to lead the chase because if the break stays away they already have a stake in the finale, offering security in a sport that breeds unpredictability. The exception is for weaker, wildcard teams, for whom having a rider in the break is often more about giving their sponsors some airtime rather than a genuine attempt at a race win. Whatever the reasons, having riders up the road – even ones from rival teams – tends to suit the vast majority of the pack. The hard bit for the chasing peloton is controlling that breakaway.

A standard chase involves one or two teams combining with five or six riders on the front sharing the load. Reel in the break early and the threat of counter attacks comes into play; too late and your sprinter will be left fighting for scraps. Great Britain's successful policing of the peloton during the World Championships in Copenhagen in 2011 is the template

here, paving the way as it did for Mark Cavendish's historic win. 'We put a plan together and it's been three years in the making,' said Cavendish after a victory so complete it inspired the book *Project Rainbow*.

To the viewer it may look as if, once the breakaway has formed, the peloton merely has to cruise along at a steady pace for a couple of hours, before reeling in the break in time for the final bunch sprint. But according to Nicolas Roche, those couple of hours can be the most taxing of the race. 'Riding in a big bunch is very stressful,' he says. 'It's all about tactics, positioning, conserving energy and protecting your team-mates.' Teams are constantly looking ahead to flashpoints – sprints, climbs, tight corners – and will jostle for position to protect their assets while disrupting rivals.

On flat stages, the idea is to arrive in the final 10km with your sprinter

When a breakaway forms, teams with the most to lose will deploy their strong riders on the front to limit any time loss. It's up to the riders in the break to decide how much to work together to gain an advantage

in prime position, and this is why so many teams now aim to develop strong lead out trains. In the final few kilometres, a powerful rider keeps the speed high to discourage any solo breakaways from rival teams. When he burns out, a team-mate takes over and the pace lifts again, and so on until the final 50-100 metres when the sprinters go head to head.

A successful lead out train requires strength in numbers, but it is also a battle of attrition where staying at the front can come down to opportunism and a certain amount of bullying.

While being in awe of more illustrious colleagues is entirely understandable, smaller teams can find it stifling. 'It took me a good three days of reminding the guys that they had every right to be riding at the front before they committed to it,' says Tom Southam when recalling this year's Tour Down Under, the season's Australian curtain raiser.

Southam's words didn't fall on deaf ears. On the last day of the race, Drapac's Belgian sprinter Wouter Wippert triumphed in the streets of Adelaide. Victory didn't surprise his DS: 'We had a game plan to try and win that stage from as early as November,' Southam says. A crash involving Marcel Kittel helped, but 'little things like keeping focused and making sure Wouter could save energy at every opportunity' also helped. As with all the best plans, it was simple and relied on riders pre-empting scenarios and adapting accordingly.

There is no set blueprint for how to win a race, but as Southam says, 'If we don't get the result and my riders have done all I've asked them, I have to be accountable for poor tactics.' 🌸
Felix Lowe is tactically masterful on a bike. He just doesn't ride very fast

WHEN IT ALL GOES WRONG

Three high-profile cases of tactics turning sour

Team GB's 2012 Olympic Road Race

Trying to control the race from the start, Team GB were never far from the front, but they simply wore themselves out and come the final decisive move the team had no response. Great British hope Mark Cavendish crossed the line in a lowly 29th position.

Brailsford's 2014 Tour de France

When your team includes the defending champion, it's easy to see why you'd back that horse all the way to the line. But it's no good if the horse doesn't make the line, as Dave Brailsford found in last year's TdF when Chris Froome's abandonment left Sky with no plan B.

World Championships, Tuscany, 2013

At 272km long, and in heavy rain, this race was a brute. Two Spaniards, Joaquim Rodriguez and Alejandro Valverde, and Portuguese Rui Costa were vying for the win, but the Spaniards failed to work together and Costa took the rainbow bands.