

Nibali Wins the 2014 Tour de France: the Sicilian Shark Conquers Paris

Paul Minervini (July 27, 2014)



'The shark of Messina', has won the Tour de France after a commanding performance. He is the 7th Italian to win the title after Bottecchia, Bartali, Coppi, Nencini, Gimondi and Pantani.

Vincenzo Nibali, nicknamed 'The shark of Messina', has won the Tour de France 16 years after Marco Pantani won the race in 1998 and has now joined an elite group of cyclists comprising Jacques Anquetil, Eddy Merckx, Bernard Hinault, Felice Gimondi (only other Italian) and Alberto Contador to have won all 3 grand tours (Vuelta a Espana 2010, Giro d'Italia 2013, Tour de France 2014). This year's Tour de France has seen race favorites Chris Froome and Alberto Contador both pull out after crashes, leaving Vincenzo Nibali to dominate the race in a manner not seen for many years.

As a keen cyclist of Italian origin who has been to watch the final week of the Tour de France in 2011 and 2013, my reaction to this year's tour victory by Nibali is much less exuberant than what I would have expected. Many years of disappointment fueled by my cycling heroes being found to be drug cheats culminating in the Lance Armstrong conviction, has left me not so willing to believe



everything that I see and indeed has driven me to question "superhuman" performances such as Nibali's this year.

So how good really was Nibali's performance? Let's look at some statistics. Not since Lance Armstrong won 6 stages (3 in Time trials) in 2004 and 4 stages in 2002 have we seen the winner claim 4 or more stages in a Tour de France. And those results, we now know, were achieved through the use of performance enhancing drugs. The last winner of the Tour de France to win by more than 7 minutes and 37 seconds (Nibali's winning margin this year) was again drug cheat Lance Armstrong in 1999. In Nibali's favor though, we have to remember that the two main contenders of this Tour, Chris Froome and Alberto Contador were not at the finish line, which could help explain the magnitude of his winning margin.

I have been fortunate enough to ride some of the legendary climbs of the Tour such as Alpe d'Huez, Col de Galibier, Col de Telegraphe and Mont Ventoux and what this gives is a perspective on what incredible athletes professional cyclists are. To do what they do, day in day out, for 3 weeks at the speeds that they do is nothing short of remarkable. Is it purely physiology, talent and determination that defines the best professional cyclists or is it something more? History has told us that in recent times there has been something more, however, this is not necessarily the case for Nibali. An exceptional cycling talent from early in his career where he placed in the Junior and U23 World Championships, he has grown and matured as a cyclist winning the 2010 Vuelta a Espana and 2013 Giro d'Italia.

Nibali's destruction of the field on Hautacam, as impressive as it was, was only the 26th fastest time up this famous climb, which is well off the times which were attained in the late nineties during the height of the doping era. This may back up the idea that Nibali is a truly gifted athlete, who has made his way into the cycling Pantheon with exceptional talent, hard work and determination.

Watching him on the podium as winner of the Tour de France 2014 is a proud moment for Italian cycling and one that we hope will remain unchanged in future years.

My hope is that what we have seen is the real deal as cycling cannot afford another scandal similar to the Armstrong debacle. I want to believe that today, with Nibali's victory, we're not only celebrating a young Italian talent, but also and especially the rebirth of cycling as a clean, honest and credible sport.

And I am proud that this new hope has the face of a young Sicilian carrying the Italian flag.

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