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SWISS CROSS

by Chris Bagg

It takes me a few hours to locate Marcel Russenberger's home in Bend, because over the phone he'd told me he lives on "Yuma Pillar Road," a place that, according to the Internet, doesn't exist in Oregon. Poring over maps of the high desert town turned up Umatilla Circle, however, and having no other recourse—Russenburger doesn't often answer his phone, and his voicemail is always full—I guessed and went for it.

Umatilla Circle, when I find it, is the kind of neighborhood with far more cars than houses, no grass, and no discernible traffic pattern. Addresses appear on utilitarian green highway signs pounded into the ground. I find Russenberger's house easily once in the neighborhood, since he's affixed a weathered piece of printer paper over his street number, the paper stating simply, in hand-lettered writing, "Marcel." Two garages flank the walkway to the house, decorated equally in bicycles, bicycle pieces and stag antlers. The door stands open, and when I call out "Hello? Marcel?" a lightly accented voice floats down from upstairs, telling me it will be down in a minute.

The house is all bike. I walk out onto the back porch, where two female mannequin heads guard the steps down onto the back yard. One head wears a yellow Mavic cycling cap, while the other sports a yellow Campagnolo one. They stare at each other across the gap in the railing, like gargoyles.

"Ah, you've found the girls," says Russenberger, coming out onto the porch. "We just had a party out here last week and I set up a ramp from up here down into the canal. Paul Curley rode his bike down into it and rode back and forth in the canal. Can I get you something to drink?" Russenberger is medium-sized, with wiry gray hair and a large nose. I would guess he's in his late 50s. I accept a glass of water and suddenly realize I don't have a question prepared. I'm out in Bend chasing a story on the history of Swiss cyclocross, and my editor has sent me to find Russenberger, but I don't know anything about him. We stare at each other for a few uncomfortable seconds, and then he says "I'll start by showing you my medals."

He takes a large circular frame off the wall and lays it flat on the dining room table, a rough-hewn number that reflects the room's rustic A-Frame nature. Spanning the middle of the frame, like three gigantic belt buckles, sit three large medals that each say "Tour de France," followed by a date in the mid-'80s.

"You rode the Tour three times?" I ask, a bit incredulous.

"I finished three times," he says. "I rode the Tour, well, I can't remember how many times. We all did then. I rode all the

Left: *Andri Frischknecht, son of Thomas and grandson of Peter, hoping to define the next generation of Swiss cyclocross (courtesy Thomas Frischknecht).*

races: Spain, Italy, Roubaix. That's my fifth place World Championship medal."

At the top of the frame, surrounded by medals with Swiss flag ribbons (Russenberger won countless Swiss Junior Championships), is a medal hung under a white ribbon, the unmistakable rainbow stripes of the World Championships running down its center. I look over at Russenberger for a moment, trying to compose any question other than the one that comes out of my mouth.

"What are you doing here in Bend, again?"

There's an abiding myth in cyclocross circles that Switzerland, in the 1970s and 1980s, was "what Belgium is today": the center of the cyclocross world in terms of money, talent, success and influence. There's certainly plenty of evidence for the comparison. Today we have Ridley's "We Are Belgium," New Belgium, Belgian Knee Warmers and many others, all cashing in on the connection of Belgium, bicycles and a reputation for success and toughness. Then there was Tom Ritchey and his SwissCross bicycle, along with the American apostles of Swiss cyclocross: Tim Rutledge, Paul Curley, Steve Tilford, men who raced in Switzerland and then came home to spread the gospel of 'cross as they had learned it in the cow pastures of that alpine country. In terms of success at the highest level, the Swiss dominated the end of the 1970s, capturing 12 of 18 podium spots at Worlds between 1974 and 1979, much as Belgium owns the World Championships of the last decade. Albert Zweifel was the Sven Nys of his day, winning all the time at all kinds of races, and Peter Frischknecht played the part of Klaas Vantournout, faithful bridesmaid, often in second or third behind Zweifel, winning silver at the World Championships a heartbreaking three times in a row. And then riders like Marcel made up the next tier of cyclocross, winning here and there but always in the mix, a professional journeyman like Bart Aernouts. Money flowed into Swiss cyclocross from sponsors excited by the country's success in a sport that was seizing the European imagination, and riders received appearance fees, travel stipends and deep prize money, just as racers at the Superprestige and GvA series do today in Belgium.

But looking more closely at the results of Worlds tells a slightly different story. First of all, Belgium had another period of dominance that predated the Swiss run of victory. Erick de Vlaeminck won Worlds seven out of eight years (and six in a row) between 1966 and 1973 before handing over the top step to countryman Albert van Damme in 1974 and brother Roger de Vlaeminck (of Paris-Roubaix fame) in 1975. Before the elder de Vlaeminck, Rolf Wolfshohl of Germany and Renato Longo of Italy shared the title over seven seasons, and before them, three Frenchmen took the first 10 World Championships. All told, only six men took the first *24* editions of Worlds, a decidedly undemocratic stretch of competition that mirrors the domestic women's scene here in the U.S. these days: Katie Compton, and everybody else. Switzerland took its run on the back of Albert Zweifel as champion and Peter Frischknecht as runner-up, but it's really only Zweifel, and not Switzerland, who dominated the sport for a decade (five wins, three silvers, and two bronzes). The story of World Championship cyclocross before 1990 is a story of a small handful of men, not the story of national cohesion.



***Above:** Albert Zweifel, five-time cyclocross world champion (courtesy Swiss Cycling Federation).*

The past 15 years, on the other hand, as Belgium has claimed 30 of 42 spots, shows a nation committing as many resources as possible to its beloved sport. Six different Belgians have taken the race's top step, and several more have landed on the second or third. It's the kind of depth that's truly unprecedented, the sort of success you feel could have happened in Switzerland, since it's the country many in our sport describe as the place where 'cross "came of age," and the home of the "Swiss-Style Course," a term tossed around whenever cyclocross courses are hard, hilly, muddy or jungly. It's the question I realize I'm there to ask Russenberger, as he shows me picture after picture of him running just off of Albert Zweifel's shoulder, or the podium from a race where he beat Zweifel, the pride from that long ago day still clear on his face: *What happened?*

"I'd say Liboton happened," says Tim Rutledge over the background hubbub at Interbike this past fall, referring to Roland Liboton, the Belgian racer who wrested the world title from Zweifel in 1980 and then won three years running from 1982 to 1984. "He was this gorgeous playboy guy, winning the World Championship multiple times, and when he took over from Zweifel that was your shift to Belgian cyclocross." Rutledge, like Curley, made the pilgrimage to Switzerland in the 1980s, along with other mythological figures of American cyclocross: Steve Tilford, Don Myrah, Davis Phinney—racers who dominated stateside and found themselves fighting to stay on the lead lap in the Old World. Today, Rutledge drives the 'cross side of Redline Bicycles, designing and marketing the line, and Switzerland still influences his attitudes about the sport. "You know Ridley and their 'We Are Belgium?'" he asks. "Well back then *Swiss* was everything!"

Rutledge is garrulous and excitable; when he speaks he gestures at you with his eyes, then pauses to let his rhetoric settle upon you. Following his speech, with its parentheticals and digressions, can be confusing—but a wealth of information lies therein. "After Zweifel it came back to Belgium. The Swiss had [the championship] one more time with Runkel (Dieter Runkel, who won the World Championships when Switzerland hosted the race, in Essenbach), but that course was so technical, and of course the lever! That's the story, I still to this day call them Runkel levers because we know what he did with that lever on that course, that really radical downhill course—I don't know if you ever heard—they put these boards into the hillside and you caught that board to not slide down that hill. Imagine that! But since then the Belgians kind of took it over." He's talking about top-mount brake levers, which Dieter Runkel deployed to great effect in winning the 1995 Worlds. Runkel had drilled out mountain bike levers and remounted them on his handlebars, an idea Rutledge recognized as visionary and brought back to America. "The Swiss were really influential to all of us who went over in the 1980s. Bike Shop Gerber, in Oerlikon *was* cyclocross. It was the center of the sport. We put those top-mount levers on the cover of our catalog," he told me. "But that ended up being a huge problem because everybody wanted them and we didn't have them ready."

Those brake levers undoubtedly came into 'cross through mountain biking, and although they recaptured the gold for Switzerland that year, mountain biking has to be mentioned alongside Roland Liboton as one of the proverbial coffin nails for Swiss cyclocross. Rutledge and Russenberger both cite the sport as drawing interest away from 'cross. "You have to say that mountain biking came in and that

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took a lot away from it, too," Rutledge says. "But I don't think they have the basic groundswell for it the way we have, here. You don't have three or four-hundred riders at a Swiss 'cross race. Back then there would be 70 to 80 Elites at a race, and amateur participation was even higher. Now there will only be 35 and 40 riders at their National Championships! The Swiss had it and were really passionate about it, and what saddens me is that that's gone away."

In 1985, Paul Curley was a dominant racer in the domestic cycling scene, winning road and cyclocross races across New England. By the time I started road racing in 2005, he held the office of local eccentric, racing with a disc wheel cover and a helmet mirror, astride a retro-looking Big Bird-yellow bicycle. Although I thought him cocky at first, I soon learned to respect Curley and his tail-gunning tactics. As I slavered along at the front of races, Curley spun at the rear for an hour, and then inexplicably found his way to the finish line in the top 10 or higher, while the pack swallowed me and my blown legs. Twenty-six years ago, however, Curley just won road races outright, and he'd "be disappointed if I didn't lap a cyclocross field. The races were usually only 10 to 20 guys, anyway."

During a crit in the fall of 1985, a sarcastic—or, given the outcome, inspired—race promoter named Bill Gulich put up a prime of 50 Swiss francs at one of his Massachusetts Bay Road Club races, figuring Curley would win it. Gulich had spent time in Steinmaur, Switzerland, bragging to the locals there about the hotshot American 'cross racer. Curley won the prime and "in two weeks I was in Steinmaur. Everything just kind of came together. I had a place to stay in Switzerland, the time to go and money in my pocket. I'd raced Worlds before, in 1983 and 1985, but never spent a whole season there." He stayed the entire winter, waiting around to race a ski marathon in March. "It was a great series of races," he remembers, "15 or 16 of them. Really high-end racing. The courses were hilly, muddy, almost un-rideable, really. Always out in a cow pasture or corn field. Messy and slow. If there was any pavement, it was uphill." For Curley, used to the fringe subculture of American 'cross, Switzerland revealed what the sport could become. Ten thousand people attended races in the heyday of Swiss cyclocross, and the organizers paid racers 30 or 40 deep. At a Cantonal race that fall ("Kinda like a state championships race;" Switzerland is divided into 26 "cantons") Curley nabbed the holeshot but immediately began giving up spots. Towards the end of the first lap he was somewhere near the back of the race, trying to move back up, but every time he passed someone that racer would step off the course, unwilling to get officially beaten by an American. "The trade-off of racing there rather than here was not winning races any more," he remembers. "But there was actually money to be made."



***Left:** Thomas Frischknecht winning the 2008 Steinmaur International, a historic race previously won by Albert Zweifel and Marcel Russenberger (courtesy Thomas Frischknecht).*

Curley trained with Uli Müller and Erwin Leonhardt between races, putting in "about 40 miles of road riding in the morning and 90 minutes of off-road training in the afternoons." He lived a little less than two hours from Zurich and learned how to set up his shoes and pedals because "the whole sport was different. They had these special plates in their shoes, and guys who could get their shoes into the pedals in one revolution really benefited." Towards the end of his first season in Switzerland, racing in one of the handicap races popular at the time, where he got a few minutes head start, Curley finished 10th, right behind budding Swiss superstar Pascal Richard. And along the way he met Russenberger, fostering a friendship that would cross 25 years. "Marcel was the only guy who would socialize with foreigners," Curley recalls. "He would try out his English on me in the locker rooms at races, and then invite me along to events in France." Curley returned to Switzerland for four more seasons, once as U.S. national champion after winning what he described as a muddy, slippery race on a Swiss-like course in Nutley, New Jersey, in 1985, and found his status much improved: champions received more start money, so he "would only beat 5 or 10 guys, but was still making money." But then Clark Natwick took the title back from Curley in 1986 and 1987, and Worlds in 1988 marked the New England racer's last season abroad. Switzerland would also disappear from the upper levels of European 'cross after that year, as Pascal Richard and Beat Breu graced the podium in first and third. No one could guess, of course, that the Swiss would not win anything at Worlds for seven more years, and then make the podium only three more times up to the present day.

If there was a man who had the best chance of continuing Switzerland's great run of the 1980s, it would be Thomas Frischknecht, son of the great, four-times-silver-at-worlds-to-Albert-Zweifel Peter Frischknecht. Thomas won his first Superprestige race in Rome in 1989. Only 19 years old, Thomas rode with Adri van der Poel ("He was the hero, the big name of the day. I was so happy to just be riding with him," said Thomas) through the whole race and then managed to beat Van der Poel in the closing meters. The race gave Thomas his first major victory and presaged a smooth handoff from Pascal Richard, who won the 1988 World Championship for the Swiss. Despite a long and successful career, however, Thomas never attained the level of success of those earlier heroes. The mountain bike had seized alpine Switzerland's imagination, and the younger Frischknecht tried to race both disciplines. He managed another second place at Worlds for the family in 1997, but his greatest successes came on the mountain, as he took World Championships in cross country (1996) and marathon mountain bike (2003 and 2005). That divided focus, taking place in a decade when courses were accelerating, favoring the lowland countries in Northern Europe, may have stolen Switzerland's next Zweifel, but who's to say?

"I have no regret," Frischknecht says of his decision to focus on mountain biking. "I made the right choice. The whole thing probably would have gone downhill either way. I just didn't put cyclocross as my first priority. But at least I was part of it for 20 years." Frischknecht acknowledges that his decision may have played a part in 'cross' diminution in Switzerland, saying,

"I look at the kids who are 15, 16. There really isn't an idol in cyclocross for them to look up to, while in mountain biking there's Christoph Sauser, Ralph Näf. There's just no momentum. Also, when you ask them if they'd like to train and race during the summer mountain biking or in November, December when it's cold and muddy ... well, that's just not a decision."

But to say Frischknecht is responsible would be to overstate his influence. A kind of politics crept into the sport, pitting its traditional guardians against a generation that saw cyclocross evolving. As mountain biking made inroads into cyclocross' popularity, race promoters declined to invite those early off-road professionals to 'cross races, as they had been willing to do by paying appearance money to the heroes of the road world to attract them to their races. "They viewed the mountain bikers as the enemy, really," says Frischknecht. Race organizers also remained leery of changing the traditional Swiss-style courses, which featured massive changes in altitude (one of Russenberger's photos shows him navigating a run-up that necessitated a rope ladder) and plenty of mud. "On the old courses we would run through lots of knee-deep mud with our bikes on our shoulders," remembers Frischknecht.

Frischknecht has hope for a renewal of his country's love affair with cyclocross, but remains guarded. "I would say the fire burns on a very small flame," he says. Little sparks certainly flourish here and there, in particular a few of the racers on Frischknecht's Scott-Swisspower team, which he has managed since his retirement. Marcel Wildhaber, the country's best hope for a World Championship podium spot, has decided to focus exclusively on cyclocross and already rides near the front at World Cup and GvA Trofee races. At Plzen this year, the 26 year old finished in 13th, three spots behind America's next great hope, 28-year-old Jeremy Powers.

In another auspicious sign, Ritchey, the company Frischknecht raced for throughout his career, has re-released the SwissCross, the bicycle Tom Ritchey designed and built for Thomas in the mid-'90s. "It was lighter and stiffer than all the other bikes then," Frischknecht recalls. "It was a huge success in Europe. This was the 1990s, so carbon bikes weren't very good yet. I don't think the new bike will be at the front of World Cup races, but it's a very fast, comfortable, stylish bike."

Sean Coffey, who I talked to at Ritchey, cited Frischknecht as the bike's original inspiration, mentioning the company's "long history in the sport of cyclocross." Released in the summer of 2011, glowing in the simple red and white colors of Switzerland, the bike seems old-fashioned and prescient at the same time. Cyclocross, more than any other cycling discipline, embraces and rebuffs the advances of technology. For every carbon superbike released, a local artisan turns out a responsive and stable racing machine made out of steel. Ritchey's SwissCross melds the two competing directions, mating an old-school steel frame with the Ritchey WCS carbon fork [*SwissCross reviewed, page 24*].

If everything old is new again, maybe Marcel Wildhaber will be the human embodiment of that rebirth, bearing Russenberger's first name and Thomas Frischknecht's racing pedigree. And if Wildhaber doesn't fulfill his promise, or if he goes back to mountain biking, there's always the hope of Frischknecht's son Andri, who at 17 has already won Junior MTB and cyclocross races around the mountainous country, the third generation of Swiss 'cross.

It's hours after I showed up, and we're standing over Marcel's dining room table, still looking through photo albums. Marcel is like an automatic library of cycling history that just happens to be a main character of the repository. I get no sense that he's trying to impress me, or that he's wistful about his career, which ended almost 20 years ago. We're simply walking through the archives of his memory, the pictures starting points for stories:

"See, there's me again, right behind Zweifel ... that was a good battle.

"That was a good win, the hills in France. Marseille. Beautiful.

"See my shoes? Those were good shoes, better than what we have today because you could actually run in them.

"There's Liboton, he was a good friend of mine, too.

"That's Frankie McCormack. You know he stayed with me when he came over as a Junior?

"Here's me beating Roger de Vlaeminck; I didn't think I was going to catch him, he was so far ahead in the last corner, but I caught him on the line."

A few times he answers my questions with non-answers, the kind that make me feel foolish for asking. We get into a discussion of his road racing, and I ask him if he was a good time trialist, climber, sprinter or all-rounder. "All-rounder," he answers quickly. Seeing an opening to talk about 'cross I press on, asking if he thought that's why he was a good cyclocross racer.

"Yeah, sure," he says. "But more it was just that I raced cyclocross from an early age, you know? You do something for a long time, you get better." He's not being short with me, just stating a truth. It makes for an odd interview, since I don't think he's trying to push any kind of identity or agenda—he's just sharing his past in a sport he loves. When I ask him if he misses racing, he's similarly forthright and uncomplicated, saying that he doesn't, but that he's still connected to bike races, because he likes to go and watch. But finally, almost two hours into the interview, he gives me a little analysis:

"After Zweifel, it kind of flattened out in Switzerland. Because when I raced, all the road pros still raced cyclocross: Sean Kelly, [Bernard] Hinault. And we, the cyclocross guys, grew big next to them. The spectator came to see the road pros more than the cyclocross guys, but that made the 'cross guys really popular. That's when 10,000 people came to see the races, to see Eddy Merckx, or Francesco Moser or Roger de Vlaeminck. But then there became more money on the road, and the road guys didn't have to run around in the mud any more. And we [Swiss] didn't win any more. The spectator was spoiled after Zweifel! If the Belgian beat you they didn't like that, and they started to stay away."

I ask him about mountain biking, and he agrees with me, saying that it's easier for young Swiss riders to take up mountain biking, because it's easier to do it in a group. "Cyclocross is so individual," he says. "You can't do both anymore. Everything is specialized."

The specialization argument rings true for Christian Heule, Switzerland's present-day cyclocross star. At 36, he's close to the end of his career and now races in the U.S. for national powerhouse Cannondale-Cyclocrossworld. Heule's from Steinmaur, the same town Paul Curley called home during his time in Switzerland. The town hosts the oldest cyclocross race in the country, the Steinmaur International. Steinmaur came up so many times in my reporting it eventually seemed impossible for any important Swiss racer to come from any other town. Heule grew up minutes away from Albert Zweifel's home, and Peter Frischknecht lived less than a half-an-hour away. Heule remembers other riders such as Thomas Frischknecht, Roger Honegger and Andreas Büsser racing in the area as he was growing up: "A huge group of top riders from around my area. Switzerland then was like Belgium is now. At Worlds there would be five riders in the top 10, or maybe top eight!" Heule started racing 'cross when he was 15 and took to the sport quickly, placing 11th at the 1998 U23 World Championships before promptly leaving the sport for five seasons.

"I had a chance from a road pro team, so I raced on the road for five years. But then the offers I had from the team weren't what I needed, so I focused on cyclocross." Heule won his seventh National Championship last January, beating riders almost a decade younger, displaying his own abilities but also the shallow depth of Swiss cyclocross. And away from Switzerland he's never attained the kind of success Zweifel achieved, or even the Frischknechts.

Heule points to a lack of concerted support for the sport in his country, identifying only one

major sponsor, EKZ, a national electric utility, as a resource for riders and race directors.

"After the World Championships in Eschenbach, lots of the big riders stopped, retired. There was just a gap between those guys and the riders behind, those riders were just ... too big then, no one could fill up those holes. If there aren't that many big races any more then the country loses interest in the sport." Heule remembers "35 to 40 races in a season, big races, with good start money and many international races. It was easier for the big guys to get start money. We'd have 10 to 15,000 spectators at a race, but now there's just no money to promote, and we can't take any steps forward."

"At the moment it's a small cyclocross community in Switzerland. It's like a family," Christian Rocha tells me. Rocha just organized the inaugural Süpercross Baden this past September, hoping to set Switzerland on a path to its former glory. He sees mountain biking as the primary culprit, with its draw of Olympic hardware. Baden, by all accounts, succeeded wildly in its first edition, drawing Zdeněk Štybar (who won), journeyman Francis Mourey and native Lukas Flückiger. That last name might be Switzerland's next great 'cross hope, despite his success on the mountain bike. Rocha rattles off a list of other Swiss MTB greats beyond Flückiger, citing "Nino Schurter, Florian Vogel, Ralph Näf and Christoph Sauser. We would absolutely be a top nation in cyclocross if they didn't race on the mountain." Flückiger bested Heule for the 'cross National Championship in 2010, and comes up again and again as the next top Swiss rider, so long as he focuses on cyclocross. "A lot of mountain bike riders do four or five 'cross races a year," says Rocha. "But then never Worlds. That's a big problem." Flückiger appears no different, dabbling in 'cross, racing the country's National Championships, but declining to pursue the sport full-time. And why would he? With the money and notoriety he's gained on the mountain bike, doing so would be analogous to Tiger Woods giving up golf to focus on croquet.

Süpercross Baden, though, proves that there's still a desire for top-level, media-covered races in Switzerland. It only took Rocha three years to go from convincing his friends to buy 'cross bikes to putting on the race. "I already had a 'cross bike for a long time. Then another friend bought a 'cross bike. Some weeks after we were six guys with cyclocross bikes," says Rocha.

The group created a small course on the Baldegg, a modest mountain outside the city, riding around in the snow. "The idea for Süpercross Baden was born," Rocha tells me. That he worked for the Swiss National Cycling Federation made things easier for the group, but finding sponsors beyond EKZ was still difficult. Rocha and his partners focused on bringing professional racers to Baden, and they managed to get some media coverage and more support. The race succeeded, but maybe by altering the national flavor of cyclocross. 'Cross courses like the ones Russenberger and Curley raced on, or the one Dieter Runkel won on in 1995 in Eschenbach, courses so steep and muddy and technical they helped usher in the age of the mountain bike and hasten their own disappearance, were the hallmark of Swiss cyclocross. "That's just how Switzerland is," Heule tells me. "The topography of Switzerland is climbs and hills and forests. A cyclocross course in Switzerland would be a very hard mountain bike course in Holland or Belgium. It's much more like time trialing, because you can't ride together as you would on a less technical course."

Rocha and his partners declined to put on a traditional Swiss-style course at Baden, choosing instead to "go with the times. The UCI, based in Switzerland, years ago realized that it's more exciting to have tactical races." It's a sentiment echoed by Tim Rutledge, describing the shift in cyclocross hegemony from Switzerland to Belgium: "The UCI wanted faster, flatter races, more tactical, so the Swiss-style courses began to fade away."



It's getting late in Bend as Marcel and I continue to talk about his life in cyclocross. I'd raced Marathon Mountain Bike Nationals earlier that day, and I'm flagging. I'm getting ready to leave when he asks me if I'd like to watch the 1985 World Championships.

"Like, on TV?" I ask him, stupefied. I'm used to televised cyclocross only as a luxury of the Internet era.

"Of course," he says, and we go upstairs and sit down in front of his TV, which resides, inexplicably, on the staircase landing. Hundreds of VHS tapes line shelves along the narrow landing, and I see some truly bad movies among them. Marcel struggles with the DVD player for a few minutes and then we're watching a fuzzy English broadcast of the 1985 Worlds, in Munich, Germany. When Tim Rutledge referenced the "ice and snow" at this race, I see he's not exaggerating. The course looks like a bobsled run. The start/finish was on the north side of a stadium track and appears to be the only snow-free part of the course. That was a cold comfort, however, as riders came around the oval, went into the shadows on the south side of the stadium and hit a huge sheet of ice. "It was treacherous," Marcel tells me, and you can see the best cyclocross riders of their day nursing their bikes through the corner, cutting all the way to the eighth lane to keep the bikes upright. Klaus-Peter Thaler manages to ride more of the course than his competitors, steadily pulling away from a group that includes Roland Liboton, Adri van der Poel and Claudy Michely. Suddenly Marcel leans forward and says "There's me."

A young, dark-jerseyed Russenberger is riding back towards the front of the race, leading the Dutch rider Rein Groenendaal. The English commentators spend almost as much time remarking upon Russenberger's incredible ride as they do talking about Thaler's clockwork race up front. With about two-and-a-half laps to go, Russenberger and Groenendaal make contact with the front group after a series of stairs. Thaler instantly attacks, Liboton drops his chain, and the race, like so many other 'cross races that seem tactical and ponderous, splits apart. Thaler never has more than a few seconds, but he survives the insanely steep descents and icy chicanes. The racers finish singly, and Russenberger is fifth, a mere 24 seconds back.

Later, I discover that Paul Curley raced that day in the amateur event, the first rider to be lapped by Mike Kluge, who would go on to be 1992 Elite world champion. Future champion (1988) Pascal Richard, who only beat Curley by one spot at that handicap race, was also in the amateur field, finishing 25th. Neither Albert Zweifel nor Peter Frischknecht, in the twilight of their careers, raced in Munich, but a young American named Steve Tilford managed



***Above:** Marcel Russenberger, here helping "Ambeer" cool off, loves to stay involved with local 'cross (Brian Nelson).*

the best American result of the day as 36th amateur. It's the kind of race with so many connections to this story that it's tempting to read some kind of athletic tea leaves in it, but it's no more resonant than the 1988 edition in Hagendörf, Switzerland, which featured Curley, Myrah, Christian Heule's boyhood hero Roger Honegger, 1995 world champion Dieter Runkel, and Radomír Šimůnek Sr. in the amateur race, and four Swiss racers in the top seven in the Elite race (Richard, the winner; Beat Breu; Zweifel; and Hans Rüdi-Rüchi). 1988 was the last, powerful gasp of Switzerland's cyclocross dominance, and at that point Marcel was out of the sport, dabbling in mountain bike racing in Switzerland and the U.S..

Sports statistics, which knit this story together, only make sense after enough time elapses to see patterns, and it's months after I leave Marcel's rustic home in Bend that I see the connections between those races in the 1980s and today's. Switzerland's love affair with cyclocross faded more than 20 years ago, through no fault of the sport itself. In a country used to championships, Belgium's organized depth stripped away all but the foul-weather Swiss cyclocross fans, while a new device, the mountain bike, proved much more suited to Switzerland's terrain than road frames with brazed-on cantilever posts. Ironically, the country Switzerland most resembles today in terms of cyclocross is the United States of the 1980s. The community is passionate but small, and racers need to emigrate to find the level of competition adequate for improvement. Switzerland's top racer, Heule, competes in the United States, and Switzerland's best young racers Valentin Scherz, Anthony Grand, Lukas Müller, Lukas Winterberg and Eric Brüngger come to us to hone their cyclocross skills, just as young Paul Curley, Tim Rutledge, Steve Tilford and Don Myrah did in reverse 30 years ago. Heule is in the twilight of his career, and his time in the U.S. is more of a professional move than a developmental one—like David Beckham playing soccer for the Los Angeles Galaxy instead of Manchester United or Real Madrid—but it says something about the sport's development that emigrating to America is a viable move for the seven-time national champion. At the Louisville USGP in mid-November, an injured Heule finished well back in the Elite field, in 21st, narrowly beating his young countrymen Winterberg and Müller, in 22nd and 25th, respectively. For the three dominant Americans at the front of the field named Powers, Trebon and Johnson, finishes in the 20s would be disastrous. For the two young Swiss racers, however, finishing in the front half of such a strong field whispers the possibilities that await them, given they remain focused on cyclocross in their mountainous nation.

For the moment, though, in Marcel's eccentric home in Bend, Oregon, a desert half a world away from his alpine homeland, Switzerland is still atop international cyclocross, housed in Russenberger's photo albums and memorabilia. Tires are still barely 28mm wide and shifters are strictly bar-end, given the perfectly preserved equipment hanging in his barn. Like so many former stars of the cycling world, Russenberger is simultaneously distant and proximal to his sport, having hung up his skinsuits to play handyman in a corner of America, but still teaching a new generation of racers his Swiss-precise dismounting and shouldering techniques. On my way out to the car I pass a trailer in Marcel's driveway and notice that it's full of 'cross barriers, and then a few weeks after that I catch a picture of him from a local race, emptying a bright yellow watering can upon a passing Team Beer rider. ⌂