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THE EVOLUTION OF

RYAN TREBON

THE 'CROSS EVENTS YOU DON'T WANT TO MISS



“Ryan could just ride away from fields. He has great one-minute power so he could just get away, establish a gap and then hold it for the rest of the race. He’s had to learn, since then, to be smarter, more strategic. He can’t just rely on his strength to win races.”



a Portrait

by Chris Bagg

of the Cyclist as a Young Man



Four laps into a nine-lap, ninety-mile road race, Ryan Trebon blows a snot rocket on me. “Oh, sorry, man, that was supposed to go down, not out,” he apologizes, not recognizing me as the guy who interviewed him a month before for this magazine. I’m not offended—by the mucous or the non-recognition. A month ago I was wearing jeans, a hooded sweat-shirt and a beard. Today I’m wearing tight, bright red Lycra. The beard is gone. Trebon, on the other hand, looks as gigantic and polished as ever. He literally towers over me. As we ride along next to each other, my head is about level with his armpit despite that I stand only three inches shorter than him off the bike. He has that quality endemic to great athletes: He seems to play bigger than his listed size. His abilities, too, dwarf the competition at this local Category 1-2 race in Central Oregon. He makes a few testing attacks (one of which I cover, putting myself into serious danger of getting dropped) and then tries to buy a water bottle from me a lap after the snot-rocket.

“Hey man, you got a water bottle? I’ve got five bucks in my jersey pocket. I’ll buy one from you, for real.”

I demur, even though the price is in my favor. I tell him I’ll have one for him at the next feed zone, but I miss my hand-up and have nothing for him. He shrugs and then nimbly finds his way into the breakaway a few miles later. Just like that, he’s gone.

Trebon, 31, was born in Loma Linda, California, in 1982, but his military family upbringing covered such a mish-mash of states and regions that his actual provenance is cloudy at best. “We moved around so much in high school,” he says. “But I don’t really think it affected me—I didn’t know any different.” He started racing bikes somewhere in those four years, giving me what I soon came to recognize as a Trebonian answer: “We just liked riding bikes, so we started racing too.” He played a few other sports, but brushed off my questions about his participation.

“I didn’t play any of them that seriously.” Two years of college followed high school, but he didn’t finish. “That’s just not the way I learn,” he says. Bikes, however, had graduated from simply fun to a possible occupation, and soon he was camped out with three other aspiring cyclists, paying about \$250 a month in rent and living the recognizable dream of the dirtbag athlete. “I wasn’t making a lot,” he says, “but I wasn’t paying a lot, either.” He raced on the mountain bike exclusively in those years, hitting the NORBA circuit as well as races in Florida, Georgia, California and North Carolina. His first full season as a professional was in 2002, when he logged pedestrian 84th, DNF, 71st, 52nd and 33rd place finishes, respectively, at the five NORBA races. He began racing some cyclocross races in the fall of that year, went to his first U23 National Championships and picked up third place behind champion Adam Craig and soon-to-be best friend and teammate Barry Wicks. “Something changed after that year,” he tells me. “I started training more, training harder, and the next year I was 9th at Schweitzer Mountain in ’03, got on the U23 MTB Worlds team and was 15th there. That seemed to be a turning point—I went from being, you know, in the 30s to being on the podium.”

Brad Ross, longtime promoter of the ‘Cross Crusade series in Portland, Ore., remembers inviting “this fast guy from North Carolina” to a UCI ‘cross race in the early 2000s, one of Trebon’s first at that level for his new sport. “That was before mandated start lists and stuff like that,” Ross says, “and someone told us to invite Ryan. He came out and took third alongside guys like Tim Johnson and Todd Wells, who was the defending national champion at that point. We thought he was the real deal after that.” Trebon graduated from the U23 field for the 2003

TREBON RELAXED AT HOME IN BEND, OR (Left and Right) (Brian Nelson 2x).



Cyclocross Nationals and placed third behind Jonathan Page and Todd Wells, beginning a streak of national championship podiums that is unbroken today, almost a decade later.

“He was pretty unbeatable between 2004 and 2007,” Jim Lehman, Trebon’s coach, tells me. “That was before Jeremy Powers came along and really upped his game. Ryan could just ride away from fields. He has great one-minute power so he could just get away, establish a gap, and then hold it for the rest of the race. He’s had to learn, since then, to be smarter, more strategic. He can’t just rely on his strength to win races.”

During those years Trebon raced for Kona, his longtime sponsor, joining Barry Wicks to form The Twin Towers, two very tall cyclists dressed in purple and orange who were more likely than not beating everyone around them. “They asked Barry if they should add me, actually,” Trebon recalls. “The choice was paying him more money or putting me on the team. Barry was like, ‘Hire the guy!’” Trebon won two more silver medals at Nationals (2004 and 2005) and his first gold (2006), but then suffered a horrible crash at the Kansas City Championships in 2007 while leading the race. The DNF from that year is the one blight on his otherwise perfect record at the biggest domestic race of the year. His salaries at Kona went up steadily from \$10,000 for that first year to \$36,000 plus bonuses and prize money in 2007.

During those years, though, Trebon also built a reputation for moodiness and meltdowns. “If he had one thing go wrong,” Brad Ross recalls, “he would pack it in.” Even his coach admits to the blowups, although Lehman tempers the admission with the observation that Trebon’s explosions always resulted from equipment failures: “He’s really not as soft as people say he is. If Ryan is going to lose, he doesn’t want it to be because something is wrong with his bike. He’d rather it’d be because he wasn’t good enough on the day.”

Sue Butler, longtime friend and professional cyclocross and mountain bike racer, concurs. “We would always tease Ryan if we were racing against him in a co-ed mountain bike race, like the BC Singletrack race. We’d say, ‘We’re gonna beat you because you’ll be throwing your bike off a cliff somewhere.’” I’d felt the signature Trebon aggression myself once, following a race in Fort Collins, Colo., in 2010 during which he’d had a mechanical and dropped through the field quickly. I approached him to see if I could ask him a few questions about his race. “You can ask me two questions,” he responded in a measured, barely-under-control tone of voice. I asked my questions and fled.

Trebon’s reaction to his crash at the 2007 National Championships in Kansas City reflects his laissez-faire attitude about anything other than mechanical issues. A rider far down in the field crossed some course tape at full speed and brought Trebon—also flying—to a dead

stop. You can find the video on YouTube easily, and it stands with Todd Wells’ horrific 2010 bunny hop disaster as a crash that’s hard to watch. Trebon comes off the bike and stretches supine across the course, holding his midsection and rolling back and forth, unable to move from the field, even as other riders have to circumnavigate his body. He suffered back injuries that made the rest of the season difficult, and he shortened his European campaign. “It was nagging and annoying, but I try not to dwell on things,” he told me. He then analyzed the incident with another phrase I would come to hear a lot from him: “Shit happens.”



“I remember I saw Ryan at the 2010 World Championships in the Czech Republic,” says Brad Ross. “Europeans don’t cheer for anyone except their countrymen—and certainly not for people far back in the field. It was a nasty, icy day. It really didn’t suit Ryan, and here he comes, having a bad race, up to a hill that’s got, like, 60,000 silent people on it, and I’m hollering in his ear, ‘C’mon, Ryan get up that hill!’ Stuff like that, and he flips me off in the middle of the race! He apologized later, saying he just wanted to ride his bike around at that point.”

If there is a low period to a career that’s been remarkably consistent, it would be between 2008 and 2010. That’s certainly arguable since Trebon won his second national championship in 2008 (in Kansas City,

“...he was like that racer who’s always training too much, finally gets injured, takes some time off, comes back stronger, and sees how important resting can be. They finally get it.”



on a different course than the one he was hit on), and he continued to see envious results everywhere he pinned a race number on. He suffered, perhaps, from the high expectations of the previous four seasons when he had been very hard to beat. Instead of winning everything, he was now merely getting on the podium at everything with wins sprinkled among the top finishes. He seemed overshadowed by riders like Tim Johnson, who won Nationals in 2009, and a rapidly maturing Jeremy Powers, who might have broken Trebon’s string of firsts and seconds if it hadn’t been for a crash late in that championship race. Powers, with his ebullient, outgoing personality, was a more apt celebrity in the YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter world than Trebon with his Ent-like demeanor, and popular

sentiment shifted toward Powers. Tim Johnson, too, was dominant in those years, riding on the Cannondale/Cyclocrossworld.com team powerhouse that pitted himself, Powers and a very effective Jamey Driscoll against Trebon. Barry Wicks rarely provided Trebon the kind of support Johnson received from Powers and Driscoll, and Trebon often looked isolated on the ‘cross course. In heavy, muddy affairs, his strength came to the fore, but in most other races, the Cannondale crew played tag team against him. Critics suggested his best years were behind him, or that his meltdowns had finally caught up with him. “He would never point out his record, though, or respond to people questioning his results,” says Lehman. “That’s just not his personality—it’s not what makes him tick.”

Off the course, Trebon and the sponsor that had become synonymous with his success, Kona, began to grow apart. The arrival of Dusty LaBarr at Kona, a mechanic who would become Trebon’s business partner and close friend, gave Trebon a sounding board, and it turned out they looked at the cycling world the same way. “We both hate dirty bikes,” Trebon says before going on to explain that they both want things taken care of well in advance of racing. Bikes should be clean; wheels should be glued; there should be enough of everything to keep a professional cycling team rolling smoothly. At Kona in the latter part of the decade, Trebon found himself fighting for the kind of support one would expect for a rider of his caliber. Bikes arrived late or not at all, and tires showed up just in time to be glued for races two days later. “He felt like he had to fight for every pedal,” Lehman recalls.

“We had a marketing director that just didn’t seem to get it—didn’t seem to get racing and what we could do for the company,” Trebon says. “Dusty and I began thinking that we could do something on our own and have success.” At the end of 2010, Trebon raced Nationals for the last time in a Kona kit, taking yet another silver medal behind a resurgent Todd Wells, but profiting again from a Jeremy Powers mishap. Between the surprise of Wells’ victory and the crowd’s disappointment of Powers missing out again, it was easy to miss Trebon soloing along in second place, a rider of unmistakable quality, but one who was certainly outside the limelight. While the rest of us had written him off, he had already planned the next act of a steadily maturing career.

LTS stands for “LaBarr and Trebon Sports,” an abbreviation I didn’t catch until researching this story, at which point LTS/Felt no longer existed as a racing team. LaBarr and Trebon struck out on their own from Kona in early 2011, eager to put together the kind of program they’d envisioned, but hadn’t experienced, at their previous employer. Felt joined as a title sponsor, and Clement came along with tires. The two found equipment support in Zipp and SRAM, purchased a Dodge Sprinter and designed a menacing black-and-yellow kit that seemed more in keeping with Trebon’s personality than the festive orange and purple of Kona. “We decided not to pay ourselves until it was over,” Trebon recalls, “because we wanted to make sure we got to all the races we’d told our sponsors we’d get to. At the end of the year, we split what was left over and ended up each taking home \$17,000.” Although he was never accustomed to making huge money, that figure was a drastic

THE INFAMOUS CRASH at the 2007 Kansas City Nats (left, Andrew Yee). **RIVALS, NOW TEAMMATES,** Sprint for the win at the Rad Racing GP (above, Joe Sales).





STARTING 2012 WITH A WIN at the 2012 Raleigh Midsummer's Night CX race, Park City, Utah. (Left and Right, Andrew Yee 2x).

pay cut from his contract at Kona, and he was forced to sell his house in Bend, Ore., in order to keep racing. Then his rental burned down, killing his dog. He and his long-term girlfriend broke up. "It was a hard year for him last year," Brad Ross says. "He quit the Kona thing, and I helped him try to find new sponsors, but it was a little too late. He lost his house, his dog...his girlfriend. It seemed like he was trying really, really hard to make it work last year, he and Dusty, thinking they would get something right away, and they just didn't."

His personal life might have looked shaky in 2011, but Trebon

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roared into last year's season, taking fifth at a CrossVegas edition peppered with Euro stars. He then proceeded to win round one of the U.S. Gran Prix of Cyclocross, the States' biggest and most prestigious 'cross series. He beat Bart Wellens, a former cyclocross world champion, and he finished in front of Jeremy Powers and Rob Peeters, one of the Belgian riders on the Telenet-Fidea team. Proving the win wasn't a fluke, Trebon finished on the podium eleven times in his next eleven races, standing on the top step five times.

"I think that first race, round one of the USGP in Wisconsin, shows how much he's matured as a racer," recounts Jim Lehman. "Rather than just trying to stomp away from the field, he made the early selection, followed some wheels, waited to make the definitive move of the race, and

was able to win from that position. Once he did it, though, he was able to let go of some of his established habits—he was like that racer who's always training too much, finally gets injured, takes some time off, comes back stronger, and sees how important resting can be. They finally get it. I think some of that insight happened for him in Wisconsin (Nationals)

last year." When I asked Lehman what advice he's always telling Trebon, the words leapt quickly from him: "Be patient."

And then, like a bad curse, Trebon did get injured, crashing during his warmup on a windy day in Louisville while contesting round six of the USGP of Cyclocross. Trebon had finished second the day before to Jeremy Powers after the two distanced the field in another edition of their two-man battle for the top of American 'cross. He'd done something to his knee, and few people expected him to start. But he went to the starting line anyway and managed to finish in 10th. "For him to go the start line and put up a fight changed people's perception of him," Lehman says. "Part of him relishes those opportunities to show people that he can do things they think he can't do, but injuring himself and then coming



back and racing that day was [personally] huge for him too.”

Trebon went seven more weeks without racing, perhaps envisioning his nightmare season—getting injured, not being able to fulfill his obligations to his sponsors, losing even more money—coming true. Then, one week before Nationals, on the last two days of the year, he went to Chicago and beat Powers two days in a row at the New Year’s Resolution races. “That was a big confidence booster for him to come back and beat Jeremy those two days,” says Lehman. “I think he learned that you can get injured, alter the season a bit, come back and not call it a wash.”

Then came Nationals in Madison and one of the best U.S. championship races in recent memory, featuring a five-man lead group of Trebon, Powers, Tim Johnson, Zach McDonald and Jonathan Page. Trebon kept his streak of first- or second-place finishes alive, winning from unfamiliar circumstances for him. “I thought I could have been in, like, sixth during that last lap,” Trebon remembers, considering the finishing strength of the other riders around him. I interviewed him at the finish line that day, and he was animated, even jovial, smiling as I talked to him. “I’m really happy with second place today—that was the best I could do.”

I sat down twice with Trebon this spring, once on an unseasonably warm day in Bend in early April and again for dinner at the end of June. In April we met for coffee, and he arrived on a dirt bike. He ordered a double espresso, and we sat down to talk. Interviewing Ryan Trebon, I soon discovered, made for an improvisatory art. He answers questions so quickly and so shortly that a prospective interlocutor soon finds himself out of questions. In April, I was there to interview him about rider salaries in cyclocross for a piece (Issue 17’s “Is There Money in ‘Cross?”), and I learned not long into the interview that Ryan Trebon “doesn’t give a shit” about money. He repeated that phrase often in an off-the-cuff manner that made him even more believable. He’d just signed with Stu Thorne’s Cannondale/Cyclocrossworld.com team, the most successful cyclocross team in the United States, and I was trying to pry the amount of his new salary out of him. “I can’t tell you what it is,” he said. “But I can tell you I’m making more than I ever thought I’d be making. It’s nice, though, to be valued so highly. But it’s just money. I don’t give a shit. I couldn’t ask for more.”

I asked him, eventually, what he does give a shit about. “Winning races,” he said, “and being myself, being the most genuine person I can be.”

“Last year with his own program was big for him, even if it was hard,” Brad Ross says. “Because he finally saw how hard Kona worked for him, even if he didn’t have the stuff he needed when he needed it—he saw the business side of things. So when Stu came along he knew that he could do all those business things himself, but he wouldn’t have to do all that work anymore. When you’re younger, it takes a little more patience, and patience is not one of his strong suits.”

“We were a little naïve in terms of money,” Trebon says of his year as one-half of LTS/Felt. “But things went pretty well for the year. We learned how to handle ourselves and what goes into running a program. We learned which sponsors were really supportive of us, the ones who were actually interested in you as a person, not just a racer.”

Now Trebon can relax as the 2012 season nears. Stu Thorne hired on LaBarr to Cannondale/Cyclocrossworld.com to work as Trebon’s mechanic, his money worries are ostensibly behind him, and Thorne is notoriously type-A about getting bikes prepared for races. I asked everyone interviewed in this story how they thought Trebon has changed over the course of time that they’ve known him, and the answers were almost perfectly congruent.

“Maturity,” Jim Lehman says. “He always brushes it off. As an athlete and a person, maturity and perspective. He’s really decided that this is what he wants to do: race his bike for a living. He was getting disenchanted with the hassles of Kona, not knowing if he was going to have tires and bikes. Now he doesn’t have to fight for every set of pedals. He’s

got Dusty wrenching for him—he’s able to relax more and just focus on the racing.”

“He’s changed a lot,” Jeremy Powers says, emphasizing the “a lot.” “I mean, he can still be hard, but he’s been more outgoing, down to earth, since he got off Kona. Much more laid back. Before I wouldn’t say he was Darth Vader, but it could be close.”

“He’s changed in the last four years,” says Brad Ross. “I think this Kona thing got to him—they weren’t committed to winning—but he’s really hunkered down and tried to win. He’s always been very funny, but funny negative, like complaining, joking about how things aren’t ever going his way. That’s all gone, the negative stuff. He’s never complaining anymore. So I guess he’s not really as funny anymore.”

Talking with Trebon, I got the sense of a man mostly convinced of his transformation. He says all the right things about racing for his team no matter what it is and just trying to be himself, and to all appearances, he’s telling the truth. It seems that he doesn’t want to go back to the way things were before when he wasn’t sure if racing his bike was what he wanted to do. I asked him a few times if he’d thought about life after racing, and he always demurred, saying he’d rather just focus on the present, keep riding his bike. He truly seems not to have thought about the eventuality.

Early in our second interview, I asked him how things were going, and he launched into a description of how busy he was: He’d raced in Colorado a few weeks before (winning the XCT #3 race in Ute Valley, no less), then returned to Bend to get ready for the Mountain Bike Nationals in Sun Valley, Idaho. After that he was headed to Utah for two races. LaBarr wasn’t slated to show up to help out with bikes, so he was busy putting decals on wheels and taking care of other technical details. Then he paused for a few seconds.

“Actually, man, I’m not that busy. It just seems like I am because I’ve just been screwing around all spring, and now I’m a little busy.”

“What’s ‘screwing around?’” I asked him.

“Oh, hanging out with chicks!” he said, laughing.

It’s these moments with Trebon that give you pause—they’re like hearing a different version of an old song, one where you can finally hear the words. For a second he wasn’t the successful, somewhat complicated, somewhat reticent bike racer I’d been sent to interview—he was just another (very skinny and very tall) guy sitting in a bar talking about chicks.

Jeremy Powers offered another one of these moments to me, talking about what he’d learned from Trebon. “I took notes from all those guys since they’re all older than I am. We’d be at the start of a race, and there’d Ryan be, just chilling out on his bike. Cool and collected. That was really helpful for me—it let me know that I didn’t have to be running around like crazy before a race. I learned a lot from that, like he was saying, ‘Yeah, I’m nervous—it’s a race. But it’s fine, it’s normal. I’m a grown-up.’” △

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