

CYCLOCROSS

Magazine

Worlds Preview

GEOFF KABUSH

THE EVOLUTION
OF COURSES

RECOVER
FASTER

HOLY
WEEK

2013 'Cross Bikes

BOULDER BELGIAN

Ben Berden

ISSUE 19





A BELGIAN IN BOULDER

by Chris Bagg

UNVEILING THE RALEIGH - CLEMENT COLORS during a 4th place ride at the 2012 Raleigh Midsummer Night Cyclocross Race in Park City. (Andrew Yee)



Flying into Denver International Airport presents the traveler with a series of contrasts. To the east stretch miles of square farmland, weirdly uniform in their patchwork of greens and browns. To the west stands the Front Range of the Rocky Mountains, also apparently uniform in its jagged skyline, but concealing a geography unconquered by men. At the intersection of these X and Y axes lies Boulder, Colorado, playground of endurance athletes, small patch of liberal ideology in the state's more conservative garden, and seasonal home of Ben Berden, Belgian and professional cyclocrosser by trade.

Berden, 37, appeared on the American cyclocross circuit in 2011, joining a wash of European racers who came to the U.S. to practice traveling for the Louisville World Championships in 2013. Most of them, such as Lars Van Der Haar and Rob Peeters, stayed for CrossVegas or the first two rounds of the USGP in Sun Prairie before beating a retreat to the Czech Republic for the opening races of the World Cup. A few others (Gabby Day, Helen Wyman, Ian Field) stayed stateside for longer stretches, scoring points at the many UCI races available here early in the season. Berden remained for the whole year, crisscrossing the country in search of prize money instead of UCI points ("I had to win to have any money on my team last year, so I raced a lot"), and adding a new color to the already quirky U.S. cyclocross cast of characters. Berden was instantly recognizable on course last year, sporting a jagged teal-and-black, heavy-metal themed skinsuit emblazoned with a forebodingly Euro "Ops-Ale/Stoemper" announcement across its chest. If that weren't enough, Berden's tattoos cover his body; the visible ones decorate his arms and legs like loud arm and leg warmers. But next to the wisecracking Jeremy Powers, the gigantic Ryan Trebon, and the outspoken Tim Johnson, Berden fit right in.

"I've always loved American culture," he tells me. "I like the classic cars, I like motorcycles. I like movies like Pulp Fiction. In Europe you don't see tattoos on cyclists, but here, it's like, 'no problem.'" Berden used to drive a Chevy El Camino in Belgium, which must have turned heads given that continent's mania for pint-size vehicles, and has owned "five or six" motorcycles in sequence, before he had children and ran out of time to ride them. Before races, Berden warms up to Metallica's "Master of Puppets." "I call it 'angry music for old men,'" he jokes.

And, at 37, Berden is old for a professional cyclist. He's been racing at the highest level in the world for almost 20 years, starting his first elite race when he was 19, at the Belgian National Championships in January of 1995. "I grew up riding BMX bikes," he says, "and

I raced them a little when I was a teenager. Then I rode the mountain bike, but you had to be 18 to race mountain bikes, so I started racing 'cross when I was fifteen. You can make some good money riding bikes over there, so I turned professional when I was 19." Despite riding in their ranks, Berden wasn't starstruck by the elites. "I respected Paul Herijgers, who won worlds in Koksijde, because I didn't follow the earlier generations of cyclists. I liked riding my bike, but I wasn't obsessed with cycling."

His first big win came in 1996, at the U23 Belgian National Championships (although he'd made an impression with a bronze medal at Junior World Champs in 1994), but the next big win would take almost seven years, when he won Duinencross in Kalmthout, Belgium, on November 30th, 2002. He established a gap of 15 seconds over superstars like Mario de Clercq and a budding Sven Nys, and the other racers never came after him. "I think they were surprised they never caught me back," he says. "When I was younger you had to go straight from racing juniors to racing elites—there weren't many U23 races then. So I went straight to racing guys like Adri Van Der Poel and Daniele Pontoni, and it was, like, four or five years of getting your ass kicked every week, and then making the top ten, and then maybe getting a win. It took time, because you had to get those points to get on the front row." Berden won two other races that year and one the following year before getting another huge win in the sand, this time at the famous sand dunes in Koksijde, Belgium. That second big win, though, in 2003, brought a whole new level of attention and expectation, since he found himself atop a World Cup podium. It made the zenith of Berden's career, but may have started his decline, too. He received "big bonuses" for winning races like Koksijde, but found himself "always getting second or third." He tended to falter at the close of races, giving up spots late. Sven Nys, who matured during the same years, simply, "Had a much bigger engine than I do." Berden wasn't able to handle the same training load as Nys, who put in four or five hour days six days a week. Berden could only handle two or three days of that level before breaking down. So he picked and chose his moments, took care of himself, and made the most of his opportunities. It made for his most successful period, but he wasn't doing much outside of racing: "Going to bed at nine, never having a beer after races, that sort of thing. I wasn't enjoying life." Wins trickled in and minor podium spots piled up, and he turned to EPO, hoping to land more of those significant bonuses, and returned a positive test at a race in Essen in 2005.

"It's funny," he says. "I was positive at the

race on Saturday, but my test on Sunday was negative, so I don't know...maybe if I'd been more hydrated or something it wouldn't have come up." Berden quickly found himself in front of the sanctioning authorities, and he confessed to taking the drugs of his own accord. "If you open the Internet there are one-thousand stores," he told me. "There's always a market for bad things." Not long after his confession, though, he found himself on the sharp end of a 50,000 Euro fine, and his name appeared in the headlines again, as he went on record saying he should have lied about the drugs, should have claimed they entered his system through a tainted supplement or through someone else's agency, as many riders at the time were doing. "If you lied like that, you wouldn't get fined," he says. "But if you said you did it yourself, they punished you." Berden is still paying the fine today, more than seven years later, but he's come to see his decision to come clean about his doping as a positive one: "For myself I am glad that I said it, and I'm still suffering from that mistake, but I can look people in the eye." I asked him what it was like to race and train while doped, and he laughed. "I got caught so fast, I don't really know," he told me. "I started and then got caught right away at the Essen race."

Berden began his suspension, doing "nothing for seven or eight months. I stayed inside for the first two or three months, because I was worried what people would say to me. And then some friends came and got me out of the house and took me for some beers. Then I got a real job." He delivered mail to make ends meet and to pay the installments of his fine. He realized he missed riding his bike, deeply, and started training again. "It was a good job for that because you're up at 4:30, but you're done at 11:30, so I had the rest of the day to train. I discovered that I loved riding my bike, and I didn't want it to be taken away from me again." When I asked him about the recent storm of doping news swamping cycling, he said, "I haven't paid much attention. I picked up Tyler Hamilton's book and read, like four pages. Then I threw it away. I knew all of that stuff ten years ago. It was a really bad period in my life, but I'm glad it happened. It opened my eyes to what I want in my life, and I'm really happy with my life now."

Berden returned to the sport in 2007, just as his first son was born ("He's named Dean, after James Dean"), finding open arms from his competitors, but a steep climb back to his previous level. A consistent top-ten finisher before his suspension, "Now the best I could do was fifteenth." He scored a few notable results, but his best European results were behind him. In 2009, however, he turned up in the U.S., racing for Champion Systems at CrossVegas. He scored a respectable ninth



CHASING PRIZE MONEY AND DOLLARS in America is a big change from previous life as a Belgian celebrity. At the Sea Otter 2012 cyclocross race. (Tim Westmore)

place, right behind Swiss star Christian Heule and right in front of fan favorite Barry Wicks. The trip made racing in the United States a real possibility for Berden, and he hoped to return soon. Then a car struck him while training in September 2010, leaving him with a serious concussion. “It knocked my socks off,” Berden recalls. “I came down hard on my knee and my head.” He had put a good summer of training behind him, and managed 30 races by the end of February 2011, but the trip to Vegas made him look across the ocean, away from Belgium, to close out his long career. Berden’s time in cycling has been marked by dramatic peaks and valleys, and after the 2010-2011 season he was visited by a stroke of good fortune, and the trip to America, long

just an abstraction, seemed a real possibility.

“I’d always wanted to travel,” Berden says. “When I was younger I loved camping—loved the mountains, loved the ocean.” His love of American culture, too, informed his decision to leave his family for six months out of the year (his second son, Louis Lee, was born in 2009) and race in the States. An old contact at Ridley Bikes, David Alvarez, had decided to set out on his own making custom bikes in Springfield, Oregon, and discussed sponsoring Berden’s season in America. Alvarez named the bike company Stoemper, and brought Berden on board to help launch the brand. The company’s name already nods towards Belgium, and its identity—loud paint schemes, heavy metal—meshed with

Berden’s. Berden flew into Portland, picked up his bicycles, and began an itinerant existence in America, traversing the country, following races with prize money. “We kept it really low budget. We got people to pick me up from the airport, put me up in their homes. I didn’t really have a salary,” he told me. “So if I didn’t win races, I didn’t make any money!” Soon he was a fixture at the USGP of Cyclocross events and other big American races, winning UCI races as far afield as North Carolina. He’s a distinctive-looking racer on the cyclocross course, and American fans warmed to the metalhead Belgian who had chosen their country over Europe. Heavily tattooed, scarily gaunt, Berden has the starved look of a competitive cyclist coupled with a face sandblasted by



BERDEN'S AMERICAN DEBUT was under the bright lights of Cross Vegas 2009. (Joe Sales)

twenty years of living and racing. He doesn't stand up out of his saddle ("I think that's what makes me a good sand racer—I keep the back end of the bike down"), instead grinding other riders down over the course of an hour's race. He runs an old-school single chain ring on his bikes, choosing 42 teeth in the front and "an 11-28 cassette. For 'cross that's all you need." He's a journeyman, a working-man's racer, and he'd seemingly found the place to write the final chapter of his career.

And then, in December, his life came to pieces again. On the eve of the Bend, Oregon, USGP race, his wife sent him a text message that changed everything. "It was a really big surprise. It happened the weekend in Bend, she texted me that she was living with someone else. And that was a really big shock for me. I raced...or tried to race to get the anger out, but I did one lap or two laps and then I stopped. I cried for a little bit, and I got a ticket on Sunday and flew back on Monday. I got really drunk on Sunday, which helped a little bit."

Berden returned to Belgium and tried to put his family in order, but his wife had already moved out of the house and moved in with someone else. They began an efficient divorce process, and Berden was soon racing again. "I raced a lot to try not to think about it—44 times last year!" he says. "The kids are so young, they don't really know what's going on. But I stay in contact with them as much as possible: Skype, cell phones." When Berden is home in Belgium he looks after the two boys, and when he's away, his wife has them. He doesn't speak about the split very much. He stayed home through the 2012 summer, coming back to the States to race: "I did my training in Belgium, but did most of my racing here." He won the inaugural cyclocross event at the Sea Otter bike festival in April, riding for his new sponsor Raleigh-Clement, and then competed in stage races like the Cascade Classic and gravel races like Utah's Crusher in the Tushar. Berden rode back to Oregon from the Crusher with Ryan Trebon, talking about, "Cars, and motorcy-

cles. We really didn't talk about bike racing." Nicole Duke, racing without a contract, won Raleigh's Midsummer Night's race, landing herself a spot on the Raleigh-Clement team alongside Berden. Duke was newly single, and the two began spending time together. "She's like a female version of me," Berden says. "We like music, we like to enjoy life—we have a really good connection." Berden began his season at CrossVegas, making the podium in a motivated-looking third place finish. Then there was a win at the Gateway Cross Cup over the ageless Jonathan Page in St. Louis. He followed that win up with podium finishes in Gloucester, Providence, and Fort Collins before winning again at the Colorado Cross Classic at the end of October.

Berden has already committed to race for Raleigh-Clement again next year, as part of a two-year contract. He told me he would race as long as his results here are in the top ten, but that, "next year is probably my last year." Beyond that he sees himself coaching, beginning a training school in Belgium but

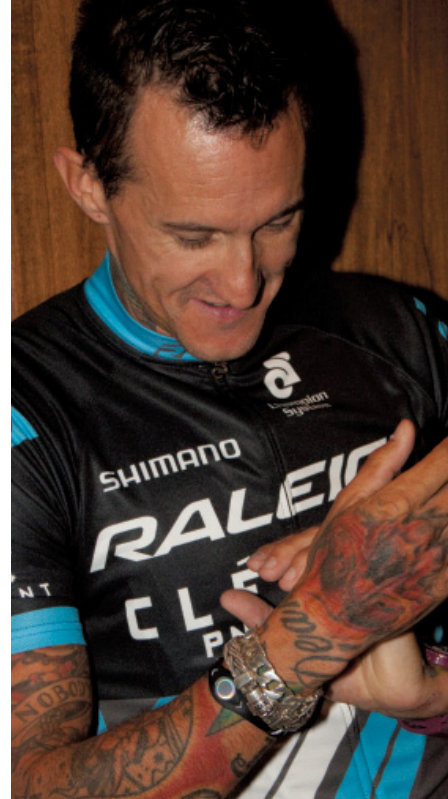


CELEBRATING WITH ELVIS at Cross Vegas 2012; Berden's ink separates him from the average Belgian. (Yee x 2)

still commuting between Europe and the United States. "I think there are things I can teach the younger generation," he told me. "I think there's a lot I can tell them about what not to do. I made a lot of bad decisions when I was younger, so I would tell them not to make impulsive decisions." I asked him if he still has fun racing at this point in his career. "Always. The day that you don't have fun anymore you need to retire, I think. Before, when I got into trouble with doping, I viewed cycling as just my job. Now I'm enjoying racing and I'm enjoying training, but that time, when I was doing the doping stuff because you feel obligated to win, and you feel like you need to win and you want to do better and you find out that the fun part is gone, and after my suspension of two years I found the fun part again. Now I can enjoy my life more, like having a beer on Sunday evening, stuff like that. Ten years ago, that was something that was not possible. I was really boring during that time." I asked him if he found American amateur racing different from the same level in Belgium, and he surprised me, inverting his own opinion on having fun in racing. "In Belgium, there will be 40 racers on the start and in America there's 100. The American position is that they don't train but they race. In Belgium it's the other way around. They will train and train and train and maybe they will do a race. The Americans here have fun doing a race, and having a battle with some other guys, but in Belgium they're more proud of their racing... there's less having fun and more competition."

Still, Berden is deeply competitive, even if he is having fun on the cyclocross course. He implied that some American racers haven't been happy with his appearance in this country and he lamented the lack of sandy courses like his beloved Koksijde. "Bring the Koksijde course to the U.S.," he told me, "and Jeremy Powers gets his ass kicked by a minute and a half." Later in our interview, he replayed his fifth place finish at day two of the Fort Collins USGP: "I'm just thinking about this corner, you gotta go inside-outside, then the next corner, and then there are some spectators yelling at you, but you're so focused on doing your thing, and you're trying to avoid making mistakes, and seeing where people are riding good that you don't really notice them. So, on Sunday, Danny Summerhill was going really strong, and it took everything to follow him. Then Jeremy Powers attacked. I tried to follow him, but then he bunny-hopped those stairs and got a big gap. I tried to come back to him, and I had a really bad lap, three laps after trying to make it across, and Geoff Kabush came past me, and then Chris Jones. Maybe if I'd ridden conservatively I would have been second, but I tried to win that race and that's why I got fifth, but if you don't try, why start?"

In a sport where cyclists stay close to home, Berden is an anomaly. A few of his countrymen make a few trips to the U.S. over the course of a season, but most of the big names never leave an area the size of New Jersey. American 'crossers race a few World Cups (with the exception of Katie Compton, who leads cyclocross' only real double existence in North America and Europe) dutifully hitting



the eight USGP races before prepping for our National Championships. Berden seems to be more of a dreamer, a wanderer, in his love of cars, motorcycles, and travel. He seems more truly American than many of our homegrown racers, in his rootlessness. Still, contradictions abound. He clearly loves his sons deeply and wants to be around them as much as possible. When I asked him about the decision to have children, he was quick to answer, saying "I've always wanted kids—I'm a family man. I love hanging out with them." His older son is already riding bikes all the time, and Berden said, "It can be hard to get him off his bike!" I asked if Berden had encouraged his son to be a bike racer, or if he wanted him to be one. "He can be anything he wants to be," Berden said. "If he wants to be a librarian he can do that." And then, early in our interviews, when I asked him about what drew him to riding bikes in the first place, he said: "I love people, but I really love being alone. That's what I love about my bicycle—you can be alone." Indeed, the biggest win of his career, at Koksijde in 2003, provides a neat (if incomplete) portrait of Berden, riding alone fifteen seconds ahead of his competitors. Like his son's namesake, James Dean, Berden combines too many incongruities to fit neatly into any definition: the tattooed badass who loves hanging out with his sons; the successful clean racer brought down by doping; the divorced husband back in a relationship six months later; the lover of solitary cycling who has chosen for his American home, improbably, a city where you can't walk into a coffee shop without bumping into one of countless professional cyclists. ▽