

# THE WOMEN OF FLANDERS

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Ina Yoko Teutenberg eats at an ungodly rate of speed. One moment there sits a towering pile of fish, chicken, vegetables and rice and when I look up again to ask another question, it's simply gone. The speed of her consumption might be vulgar but, the thing is, you never see it happening. The food just disappears. "You eat very fast, Ina." "Yes, I told you that before," she says. "Remember? I have brothers." Right. Brothers.

Teutenberg grew up on a bike. In an aging black and white photograph she is pictured with these infamous brothers, leg thrown over a towering 10-speed bicycle that is clearly 17 sizes too big for her. "I didn't want to be left behind," she chuckles.

She is the runt of the litter. A scrapper.

Teutenberg was four or five years old when her parents moved the family to a new town where she wasted no time developing a reputation. The story goes like this: Her mother was getting a ride home from a neighbor, who was kind enough to pass the time by playing neighborhood tour guide, pointing things out along the way. When they came across a child playing near the side of the road, the neighbor pointed emphatically and announced, "and THAT is the worst boy in the neighborhood."

To which a startled Mrs. Teutenberg replied, "Actually, that's my daughter."

Teutenberg relates this anecdote with an unmistakable hint of pride, owning the title outright: Ina-Yoko Teutenberg, the worst boy in the neighborhood. I love to hear her tell the story.

I don't make her tell it again tonight though I am tempted. Instead, we have a laugh about her vacuum-cleaner table manners. She stands up with her empty plate and says goodnight.

We're at a fairly classy trucker hotel (really) on the side of the highway in Nazareth, Belgium, just outside of Oudenaarde, and the whole place smells bright and sharp like manure. Specialized staffers call it "nature" and an eloquent lululemon representative refers to the scent as "rural pastoral." Let's call a spade a spade—my bedroom smells like cow shit. So much for opening the window to freshen the place up.

Tomorrow is the women's Tour of Flanders—the Ronde van Vlaanderen voor Vrouwen. Teutenberg has won this race before and the team is looking for a victory in the morning.

The dinner table is noticeably tense and I'm happy for the opportunity to chat casually with a rider so amicable. A consummate professional, Teutenberg can separate herself from the racing until the time is right. She is steely and calm. Having been racing longer than some of her Specialized-lululemon teammates have been alive, she knows how to handle herself,

how to handle me and how to handle tomorrow's race. Very carefully.

## APRIL 1, 2012 - RACE DAY, RONDE VAN VLAANDEREN VOOR VROUWEN. 2 HOURS TO START

In the morning, Teutenberg is transformed. All game face and a little swagger. Set jaw and folded brow. When she gets like this, you have the feeling that you don't want to get in her way. I'm assuming that's the point. The thing is, it's not a production: the woman loves to win the way that wolves love to hunt and then tear flesh from bone. It's hardwired aggression channeled into the turning over of pedals. Teutenberg is an animal.

Today is a Sunday, which is by many counts, a holy day. Today is the Sunday on which we observe the Tour of Flanders, a sacred day among the cyclists, a day of reckoning among racers—a day of judgment.

These roads are peaceful enough when traveled quietly, I know from having passed over them on my own bicycle just the day before. It's a rolling lark through impossibly geometric farmlands: trees planted so precisely that their rows form pleasant symmetries. The Belgians are tidy with their visual space. Sure the cobbled paths rattle straight to your bone marrow when a descent brings you up to speed, but the gray-skied horizon aligns perfectly with converging roads and even the farm







animals seem to stand in formations that insinuate a kind of innate precision. It's a calming, if neurotic, arrangement of the landscape.

The racers will see none of this. Instead, the narrow roads squeeze the peloton down to a desperately thin stream as cobbles bounce riders and bicycles. The abuse is unending—the chaos unimaginable. There will be victims. There will be victors.

### **RACE DAY: 60 MINUTES TO START**

Clara Hughes doesn't want to talk about the cobbles. She doesn't want to talk about the course or the technical challenges or the strategy or her nerves. She doesn't want to talk at all.

In fact, Clara Hughes does not even want to have to listen to other people talk about the cobbles, and as I crouch down next to Evelyn Stevens to have a chat, Hughes makes her desires clear: "I really don't think we should be talking about this right now."

She is referring to Stevens's crash in the previous race, a topic which Stevens, not I, had brought up. Fair enough.

As Stevens begins to explain to Hughes that she'd been comfortable

with the conversation, I move away from the two women and drift back to the team van. Hughes is racing in Europe again for the first time in nearly a decade and Flanders is known for eating even the bravest bike racers. It's a hard way to return, especially for a multi-sport Olympic gold medalist and Canadian national hero like Hughes. Flanders requires a lot of skill, a bit of luck, a huge amount of power and unmatched cunning. Meddling bike reporters notwithstanding, even a seasoned competitor like Hughes has her work cut out for her. And she knows it.

### **RACE DAY: 30 MINUTES TO START**

The plan is to race for Trixi Worrack, but there's a little problem. Trixi's been sick. No matter—in a race like this you put as many toward the front as you can muster and figure it out as it unfolds. Prep continues as soigneurs deliver water bottles to bicycles and rub rock solid legs that are as long as they are strong. Ellen Van Dijk sits calmly in her folding chair as her race radio is secured into place. The team mechanic, Olly, meticulously triple-checks bikes, spinning tires, checking brakes and checking details. The women break energy bars into easy-to-grab chunks that will go directly into

jersey pockets. Food is lined up in the follow car, labeled in bags and bins.

The sky is unexpectedly clear. Evelyn Stevens is laughing. Ina Teutenberg cracks a smile. Clara Hughes leans in close as Directeur Sportif Ronny Lauke puts his hand on her shoulder and gives her a final bit of advice. Fans ask for autographs. A man hands me a yellow paper flag: the Lion of Flanders.

The girls are shuttled up to a stage for the team presentation. Reporters and video crews trail Teutenberg as she makes her way back to the team van. The start line is more than 150 deep in the euro glow of leg sheen and brightly colored kits. Fingernails match bar tape match earrings match socks match SRM computers. If winning is in the details of adornment, there would be clear victors. But it's a little more complicated than that.

### **RACE DAY: START**

Truth be told, neutral roll out looks anything but neutral and there is a crash before it's even over. The mass of riders moves forward in a ruthless application of power—out of town, around a series of curves, out into the vast countryside. Out into the pleasant geometries. Among the clinical lines of patchwork farms, the peloton is an ever

# “WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU LOSE A BIKE RACE? NOT MUCH. YOU REGROUP, MOVE ON, TRAVEL HOME, AND RETURN TO TRAINING.”

contracting and expanding mob of high-speed chaos. Soft curves around hard corners, something has to give. They ride away in a clatter and crush. And then we run.

The car is just a few blocks away and we pile into it like a getaway vehicle. To get to the Oude Kwaremont, we will drive on roads that seem like paths, leveraging illegal turns when necessary. At road blocks, pointing to our press sticker gets us nowhere so we find ways to work around the barricades. A stroke of luck gets us waved through a critical junction and, before we know it, we're on the Oude Kwaremont itself, bumping over cobbles and honking ever so politely at the spectators who are walking and clogging the way ahead.

At the crest, Oude Kwaremont is a circus, complete with a mini marching band, a beer garden, and a steady stream of overhead helicopters. The men's race plays on a large screen in the beer garden. The *Politie* manage the crowd, keeping the crest clear of lingering traffic. And then we wait.

When the women come, there is a rush of cars and motorcycles as the leaders battle the cobbled grade. The sound of the crowd grows and moves like a living thing until we're washed in the honking and screaming and noisemakers. Through the distortion of gas fumes from the lead motorcycle, I can see a stars-and-stripes jersey folded in pain at the front. Behind her, the telltale black-and-white optical print of Specialized-lululemon. Evelyn Stevens is hammering it.

Yesterday on my little lighthearted bicycle ride, this climb didn't seem so bad. Long and gradual. Not so brutal, not so steep, not so treacherous.

Acceptable cobbly-bump factor. Manageable. Now Andrea Dvorak and Stevens are right next to me, passing with their mouths open wide, gasping. Sizzling pace, no air, leg crush, death march. So fast.

This is the break that will make the race, though it's not the one that will ultimately stick. We don't find this out until later, of course. For now it's just so many flying cyclists thrashing against one of many sudden climbs. Clara Hughes comes next—auburn hair flying. Teutenberg is there a few bikes later. Van Dijk is in the mix. Worrack is in the group. And then they're gone.

This is the nature of chasing bike races: patience, anticipation, patience, patience, patience, patience, anxiety, anticipation, excitement, volume, adrenaline, high-speed shutter. This is followed by a brisk jog to the distant car, a rally-car-like transport to the next spot. We experience a fragment of the suffering, filtered through a wall of sound and flanked by yellow flags. We sacrifice the clinically precise experience of watching television race coverage in the pressroom for the chance to smell the fear and see the agony firsthand. It's incomplete and raw. Fragmented and unrefined.

## FINISH

Specialized-lululemon does not win at Flanders. They do not even podium. Van Dijk turns in the highest placing with sixth. It's a disappointing team result, which Teutenberg will admit later. It's certainly not what they were after.

Stevens's break is ultimately swallowed up, Hughes suffers an unfortunate crash, Trixi had not recovered enough to battle her way into the decisive

break and Teutenberg has done a little too much too early (how easy it is to look back and speculate about these things). Van Dijk comes on strong in the finish but up ahead Judith Arndt had already handled Kristin Armstrong with calculated precision to take the victory for the day.

## AFTERMATH

Bike racers disappear like phantoms when the finish line passes underneath them, especially when they haven't won. Back at the cow-shit hotel, riders are holed up in rooms sleeping and recovering or rehashing the cadence of events. Their memories are imperfect, clouded by oxygen debt and muddled with adrenaline. Each has an account, a portion of a larger story. The combination of pieces is the best reality they have to go on: they put them together to try to figure out the lessons within.

What happens when you lose a bike race? Not much. You regroup, move on, travel home, and return to training.

If you're Ina-Yoko Teutenberg, you come back the following week to win the overall (including two individual stages) at the Energiewacht Tour. If you're Specialized-lululemon, you ride the best team time trial in your history en route to helping Teutenberg lock in that overall lead. And, while you're at it, you put Ellen Van Dijk on that podium too—in second.

You come back swinging, because winning is hardwired into your brain. Because attacking is in your nature. Because the Olympics are calling and there's hardware to be had. ]p[

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