

José-Manuel FUENTE ("in memoriam").

At the 6th issue of that wonderful cycling magazine that is "Rouleur", Graham Fife writes an article about the Puy de Dôme, the French mountain that has witnessed so many battles on their slopes at the Tour de France.

It is obvious that Mr. Fife depicts the ones that impressed him the most. Reading his article, I could not help but remembering myself when I was thirteen years old, in 1973, in le Tour that Luis Ocaña won, Merckx not taking part that year. I will describe what took place that afternoon on the slopes of the Puy de Dôme, as it has clearly remained in my memory and my heart since then.

It is curious how there are certain moments in our lives that get a stronghold in our brain. There must be some biochemical explanation of that fact, probably you see something that touches you, that moves you to tears, joy, pity, disappointment, rage, or whatever another deep human deep. Those unlucky men who were Luis Ocaña and José-Manuel Fuente fought to the limits of their suffering capacity during that afternoon climbing that mountain, and their battle got engraved in my memory. There were two other men fighting, but in fact they played a minor role: Bernard Thevenet, the French cyclist that two years later ended Merckx's reign over le Tour, and Lucien Van Impe, the small Belgian climber that got the polka-dot jersey several years and finally got his own Tour several years later.

Just two words to explain to you who were the main actor of this dramatic play.

Luis Ocaña was a rootless man; he had been born in a poor, small village in a deprived area of Spain, Cuenca, the son of a peasant who did not have his own land and immigrated to France looking for better prospects for himself and his family. He established there and Luis took to cycling trying to improve his future, as so many young men in his area. He got a mentor and moved through the ranks of French cycling until becoming pro. He was ambitious and brave, even though unlucky from the very beginning: at his first Tour he hurt badly in a crash before climbing the Ballon d'Alsace, and his Fagor fellow riders pushed him to the top, two of them at every side, his elbows and knees badly injured and bleeding all the climb. He could not depart the next day.

In 1972 he almost defeated Eddy Merckx at the Alps, with a suicidal attack from the beginning of the stage. Eddy had a bad day and nobody helped him, so he lost 8 minutes to Luis, but he did not surrender: the next morning attacked "almost immediately after the signature control" (so it is described in the chronicles of those days), all his team madly giving long pulls and Luis' team, Bic, all the stage trying to limit the losses, which were about one minute at the arrival. A TT then came, at which Luis just lost eleven seconds to Eddy.

Luis seemed to be going to fight to death for his victory, until bad luck crossed again at his path: descending the Col de Menté a storm made the road a slippery crystal. In a hairpin bend one cyclist crashed heavily, and Luis after him. He immediately got to his feet and tried to get on his bike again, but then Joop Zoetemelk charged from behind, unable to control his bike, and hit Luis so hard in his back that he was left in pain on the wet road, a helicopter taking him to a hospital in Pau.

Next stage Eddy did not wear the leader jersey out of respect for Luis bad luck.

Even though Luis won 1973 Tour, he was never successful in his private life: he failed as a business man and went bankrupt a few years later; his wife left him and he finally decided to put an end to his life shooting one of his hunting rifles into his mouth.

Then comes the next hero of my history, José-Manuel Fuente, perhaps one of the bravest and more courageous climbers of his days. He also came from a poor family in the north of Spain, Asturias. He was reckless from his very first days as a cyclist, sometimes putting a paper in his back saying: "the one who holds my wheel will be second at the top of the mountain".

He started racing in modest Spanish teams until becoming a member of an iconic squad, the Kas of the 70s, with his blue and yellow jerseys. Even then kept fit during winters taking gas bottles to heat other people's houses, which was not easy, taking into account that in those days hardly any house in Spain had a lifter, so he had to put the gas bottle on his back or shoulders, about twenty kilos each, and climb upstairs until the flat. He told that the job did not only allow him to earn some money, it also kept his legs strong.

He soon showed his unending climbing and attacking capabilities at the Giro, sometimes defeating Merckx, such as at the Blockhaus and at the Stelvio, wearing the pink jersey, but always unable to hold it as Eddy was far better at TT and at the flat stages. Curiously enough, he won the stage at the Tour the 1972 day during which Luis crashed at Menté, so it passed almost unnoticed; but he then won the next stage.

And in 1973, without Merckx, the race seemed more opened, in fact it became a fight between the powerful Kas and the not so powerful Bic, until that stage at the Puy de Dôme came.

A few cyclists .Ocaña, Fuente, Thevenet, Van Impe, Zoetemelk, perhaps a few more-started to climb together, the crowd cheering and applauding Thevenet, the local hero, who was behind Fuente at the GQ, amidst an annihilating heat. But Fuente did not want the stage: he wanted the Tour, so he attacked with four kms to the top, charging madly from the right of the road, and so releasing a huge store of energy too soon. I remember the very precise moment at which he attacks, all of them standing on their pedals, as depicted in black and white at *Le miroir* or *L'équipe*, the two magazines of those days.

For a while he opened a gap, but then, unable to hold the pace, first Ocaña and Van Impe, then Thevenet approached; they all fought until exhaustion to the top. I do not think Fuente sat on his saddle again in the whole climb, but he was surpassed and lost his second place to Thevenet. I also remember a dramatic picture of Fuente, sweating and bent over himself, vomiting, just after crossing the finish line, held by soigneurs of his team.

Well, Fuente's history also ended tragically: he never recovered his climbing ability and started to lose time, to suffer tremendous *defaillances* at mountain stages, never completely recovering. He changed teams to Bianchi, where Felice Gimondi thought Fuente would help him to defeat Merckx some day, but it soon became clear that he was seriously ill: the drugs that he had been taking during his racing career produced irreversible kidney failure, so he gave up cycling and devoted his life to his small bike

shop in his home village, later becoming dependent upon haemodialysis to clean his blood of the toxins that his kidneys could not cope with.

A few years ago he got a kidney transplant, but suffered from graft rejection and a generalized infection killed him.

It may not be a moving or exemplar history, narrating the hard lives of two unfortunate men who did not have much luck or enjoyment during his days, but it is moving for me: I dreamed of being Fuente attacking at the slopes of Puy de Dôme on climbing at my thirteen years, with my 15-kg bike, no gears, Jaizkibel mountain pass, now known as Classica San Sebastian is sometimes decided on its slopes. And on reading Graham Fife's article I have wanted to share my memories of that hot July afternoon, shared with my twin brother in front of a small, black and white TV screen, our hearts beating with excitement as we were proud Fuente's supporters, just to end sad and defeated when he was surpassed and almost collapsed on crossing the finish line, another victim of the cruel slopes of the Puy de Dôme.

As this history had been omitted at Fife's article, I have wanted to share it with you, still fresh in my heart and in my memory, another hot July afternoon.

Angel García-Forcada
Valdepeñas, Spain, 19.07.09

PS. I want to dedicate this article to:

- Alberto Contador, another brilliant Spanish climber, that has won today in Verbier. He has got the yellow jersey that Fuente so stubbornly fought for.
- José-Manuel Fuente and José-Manuel Santiesteban, another member of that glorious Kas squad, who died after crashing during that year's Giro. Next day his team mates rode and cried on their bikes, while the Italian tifosi encouraged him shouting "coraggio" (courage).
- The British cyclists that crossed the channel to France trying to become pros during the 60s and 70s, living humbly in flats without heating and living from their savings, prizes obtained at the races and mending tubs. They teach me that Nietzsche's (the German philosopher) sentence, is true: "if you have a "why", you may bear almost any "how". I have remembered that sentence many times during this year, so difficult for me at a personal level, as some of you know.
- My twin brother, currently an orthopaedic surgeon, unable to ride his bike for a few years and uncertain about his possibilities in the future due to a chronic pubic problem.