



The boys open up at Euro Cross Camp. (Phillips)

IT'S NOT ABOUT CYCLOCROSS

WORDS & PHOTOS:
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... suffering has been stronger than all other teaching, and has taught me to understand.... I have been bent and broken, but—I hope—into a better shape.

Charles Dickens, Great Expectations

Lining Up Before the Start

Each rider packed two bikes, six wheels and a few loose ends, with hopes of improvement, success, and the occasional brush with greatness. Some knew what path they wished to pursue in life, others hoped this trip would be their means of clarification.

Three large vans, two team cars, 36 bikes, five mechanics, one soigneur, a head chef, a director and 18 riders were stowed away into the traditional Belgian home of Noel Dejonckheere, U23 development program director, current European operations director for team BMC and a former pro himself. Notwithstanding the heavily-badged sponsor vehicles outside and the large windows into the kitchen rich with

activity, this brick home blends perfectly into the suburbs of Izegem, Belgium, which sits 60 miles west of Brussels. The house, which boasts 24 beds, offers a simple, dormitory-style living, with all the amenities a rider requires, and nothing he doesn't. Beds, desks, shelves, Internet and the occasional television provide the rider with a home away from home during his stay abroad.

I took a year abroad in Germany during my junior year of college to better my German language skills, but also to spend two weeks in Belgium during peak 'cross season. For me, the pilgrimage to Belgium meant taking six trains, overnighing in a youth hostel and a long disorienting walk from the Zolder train station to the poorly named Zolder World Cup eight kilo-

meters away before I found my spot at the Euro Cross Camp. My year abroad, as well as my skills of persuasion with both the Euro Cross Camp and *Cyclocross Magazine*, allowed me to live my dream of attending Euro Cross Camp – although my experience would be vicarious, as a reporter. My goals were to absorb as much as possible, live by the same schedule as the riders and learn as much as I could about what makes them so fast.

The camp's daily functions revealed the wealth of the staff's experience. Returning for its seventh year, Euro Cross Camp provides a level of professionalism usually unknown in the States. The staff, excluding American camp director Geoff Proctor, was born in West-Flanders. They know the races, and they know the country. The camp's history shows six previous years of marked success, with names such as Ryan Trebon, Jeremy Powers, Barry Wicks, Jamey Driscoll, Bjorn Selander and Danny Summerhill all moving through the ranks. Whether they found their success in cyclocross or another discipline, they would certainly credit their time at the camp as an experience that helped build their careers.

Racing at the highest level in Europe to gain international experience and prepare for the

World Cyclocross Championships at the end of January is the central idea driving Geoff Proctor. Beginning in the winter of 2003, Proctor hoped to fill a void left by an American season culminating at Nationals and a World Championship several weeks later. The camp is held during the last two weeks in December, over the holiday period in Belgium. These two weeks, called the "kerstperiode" in Flemish, involve race after race throughout the week. The downtime in the United States' cyclocross scene after Nationals presents a unique opportunity for America's best to race at a level yet to be seen on domestic soil. New developments in international cyclocross, namely the decision to hold the World Championships in Louisville, Kentucky, changes little about the camp's aspirations. As Proctor states, "Obviously, with the announcement of 2013 Worlds being held in the U.S., that gives our riders shape and target to the camp mission. Certainly part of the camp's purpose is to look at performance broadly, to say, 'hey, we're really coming along as a nation.' In 10 years, how far have we come?"

A look at this year's roster shows the camp to be a single gender affair. Every rider is male, and it is easy to scream inequality before digging deeper to uncover more about the camp's history. I asked Proctor if any female riders had attended in the past, and why none were present during this camp. "The first year of the camp, I took two of our best Elite women and it was awesome. Gina Hall won a race in the Netherlands and D'Aluisio was finishing right up there. Since then, most of the U.S. women have secured their own setups in Europe." The dates of the camp also yield few opportunities for female riders to even race. In the nine possible

races available for the men, only two fielded an Elite Women's category, and a Junior Women's category doesn't even exist. As of next year, all C1 category races will be required to field an Elite Women's category, but will still be without a Junior Women's race, meaning females under 18 years old would have to either take on the Elites, or assimilate into the Junior Men's race. Proctor is hopeful that more opportunities will soon exist for the development of women's cyclocross. Until the European schedule is diversified, American women at the camp this season would have done far more sitting than racing.

The First Set of Barriers

Camp participants must fly over to Brussels, Belgium, to begin their 'cross odyssey. The travel is the first large obstacle they encounter—it can change their projection of the entire stay in Europe. Riders make the journey alone and must bring with them the full array of equipment they need to race. Arguments with airline employees, delayed flights and lost luggage are common experiences before they even roll onto the starting grid. Riders from 11 different states flew overseas this year. Both Jeff Bahnson and Brian Matter's bikes didn't get to Belgium on time, and they had to wait just to get racing. Danny Summerhill sat for eight hours on the Tarmac in the Netherlands while storms cleared and planes de-iced.

Traveling abroad, riders must jump hurdles long before entering the racecourse. Once into the hands of camp staff however, living abroad is significantly easier. Each room begins to fill up, and the fight to stay awake while adjusting to the time difference yields varied results for the riders. Some fare better than

others. As Josh Berry, a U23 rider from Portland, Oregon, explained, he changed his patterns to simulate the Belgian time zone weeks prior to his journey while still in the states.

The support and structure the camp provides is one of its biggest selling points. Of course, Americans can race in Europe without the camp, but the inclusive support the riders receive is hard to find in this discipline. It's not only that the camp has a well-trained staff on hand, but their personalities, and the enjoyment they take away from their jobs, provide a special atmosphere. Two permanent members of the camp's staff, Chris De Vos (Fox), the head soigneur, and Els Deleare, the head chef, give the riders many opportunities for discussion—and entertainment.

Both know cycling well from a life lived within the sport, and both took the time to discuss different aspects of cycling during the camp. For the past ten years they've worked with American talent, and they know which qualities a rider needs to find success. While sitting at the table next to Fox during a rest day lunch, Els suggested, "Riders have to start to come here when they are 15 or 16 and keep coming. They have to learn to ride their bikes here. I don't have an explanation, some people are just born with it!"

Fox added a few colorful comments about Euro riders being smarter as well, looking in the direction of a group of campers watching *America's Next Top Model* on Belgian television. Fox had a different schedule each day, but was always present during the camp, and Els would arrive in the mornings, stay until dinner was finished, then head back to her own home. They each got to know the riders individually, depending on how social the rider is. Junior David Kessler was one of a few young riders eager to have conversations with staff members, always open and social during the camp's downtimes. Kessler is a rider Els mentioned she would never forget, because of his friendliness and the amount of time he spent in the kitchen and common room area.

After the first few days of introductions between riders, camaraderie took over and the camp's built-in peer network developed. Each rider shared a small set of chores around the house with one or two fellow riders, and through this friendships developed. The staff members take great care to remove other stressors from the racers' lives and allow them to focus on their main goals—racing and recovering. Mechanics worked on bikes in the evenings, when the riders could ask about particular aspects of functionality or preference. Both breakfast and lunch were the riders' responsibility, but a great selection of food was at their disposal. Els, who takes great care in cooking fine meals, always prepares dinner, with a menu changing each night from spaghetti and meatballs to soup, pasta, rice pudding and several other dishes.

The rider most familiar with the camp's



The Euro Cross Camp offers young riders like Josh Berry the full Pro experience in Europe (Phillips).

schedule was Danny Summerhill. After attending the camp for the past five seasons, Summerhill knows the subtleties of spending Christmas and New Year's away from family and friends back home. On New Year's Eve he "Tweeted" about being in bed before ten in the evening for the fifth consecutive year. Along with every young camp rider, Summerhill must think about the present along with the future of his racing career. All riders traveled to Europe for the two weeks of racing, but also for how they felt it would benefit their racing in the future. The blend of living in the present and thinking for the future is a complicated one in cyclocross. Young riders must choose which discipline they will make their focus, as many professionals have before them. Often, because of financial reasons, 'cross is put on the back burner, while road or MTB takes center stage. Since all but the two Elite riders at the camp had yet to make this decision, I asked Summerhill about it. "As far as the future goes, the idea of racing at the highest level in both disciplines, 'cross and road, would be my ultimate goal and aspiration. With that said, I will take these next three seasons I have left as a U23 to try and grasp what I would like to specialize in," he said. "Only time will tell what the future has in store for me."

Pushing Through the Mud

Driving to races in vans plastered with

the U23 Development Program's sponsors' names to arrive to tents already in place and mechanics already at work provided the pro Euro race backdrop for the campers. It can be daunting to line up in front of a different crowd, on foreign soil, but the riders seemed to handle it well. For the four races that I accompanied the team, we set up camp beside the Fidea team's armada, which exuded a level of professionalism—a spot Proctor has fought hard for over the past six years. Between three

logistics of 18 riders, staying for other races wasn't feasible, nor was it productive for their recovery.

In Diegem, I had the opportunity of filling a vacant spot for one of the two pit crews. Minutes prior to the race we ran between thousands of fans and over sections of course with bikes, wheels and tools to grab a stall amongst the other teams. Diegem was particularly tricky because there were only two pressure washers to deal with layer of thick, viscous mud which held your shoes firmly to the ground. Rapid bike changes



I burst into the riders' showers, pushing past two frightened Juniors as mud covered the floor and peeled off my shoes.

vans and a team car, the riders warmed up and chatted under the tents. The routine was sign-in, pre-ride the course, warm-up, then race.

Race days began with Proctor and Fox going over the day's plan and writing out an hour-by-hour schedule, including which vehicles would transfer each group of racers. The Juniors were always the first to leave, along with mechanics. After, the others were woken to eat breakfast and prepare for their departure. Once at the venue, riders followed their normal routine, raced and got back to the vans to return to Izegem. With the

were needed, but in such deep mud, quick movements were nearly impossible. Riders looked more concerned with finding forward momentum through the muck than who was in front of them. During the U23 race, the line to the pressure washers was so long that I was instructed to run back to the team trucks, grab a bucket and brush, and find water. I burst into the riders' showers, pushing past two frightened Juniors as mud covered the floor, and peeled off my shoes.

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"Pain is temporary. Quitting lasts forever." Reminders and schedules are clear to maximize learning and race performance. (Phillips)

9:00 breakfast + up
10-11:00 TRAINING
14-17:00 Movie?
17:00 Meeting
18:00 DINNER

FRIDAY 1/27/11
BAAL
JES (1) U23 (4) ELITE (2)
EICHMANN Summerhill MATTER
TRIVELLO McDonald SWELLS
BERRY
BATHMAN Dombrowski

SATURDAY 2/27/11
ST. NIKLAS
U23 (6) ELITE (3)
BERRY WELLS
SUMMERHILL MATTER
LIVEMON LINDBERGH
FISHER
DOMBROWSKI
KESLER

ST. MICHELSGESTEL
U23 (7) ELITE (1)
EICHMANN Summerhill LINDBERGH
SPINKS
LEHMANN BERRY
KESLER Schmetz
LIVEMON
TOWNSEND
FISHER
DOMBROWSKI
bringing all baggage to Germany after race

SUNDAY AIRPORT
PROCTOR
MATTER
BATHMAN
WATKINS
TRIVELLO

SATURDAY airport
McDonald



From top: The all-important dining room table; Proctor and Fox keep things moving smoothly behind the scenes; Robin Eckmann scores second in Baal. (Phillips)

The Juniors watched in horror as I filled the showers with mud and went running back to the pits. The "do whatever it takes" attitude necessary while working the pits in Diegem is one of my most memorable moments from the camp.

Exhausted after their effort to race in the power-sucking mud, the riders rode back to the vans to change and headed home. There they could shower, eat and catch the Elite race on Belgian television. The rest of the staff marched on, working the next two races in the cold and rain.

The Group Comes Together

After everyone returned to Izegem for the evening, a meeting was held to discuss the day, as well as what was in store for the next race. It's not only racing that is needed to gain experience, but feedback as well. Riders sat around the main table and common room area while Proctor gave his first thoughts on the day before opening up the discussion to the riders. Many took the opportunity to explain different methods of bike handling, training tools and race day situations. Each meeting was designed to make the next race go more smoothly.

Riders also took time during meetings to joke and build each other back up from a difficult day. Troy Wells was the usual man behind everyone's laughter, and his relationship with the younger riders was one of a mentor. On a rest day while Fox was away from his computer, Wells had ev-

eryone laughing as he changed the background photo on Fox's computer to a portrait of himself. None of the riders could look up from the table without grinning as Fox opened his laptop to discover Wells' prank. Because of the difficulty of European racing, mentally rebuilding themselves after each race was crucial. To race in Europe is to suffer in Europe, and riders often find it more challenging mentally than physically. As Proctor postulated, "Cyclocross is about finding the right mix of three qualities: talent, opportunity and self-belief/self-determination. With just the right balance, you're in a position to achieve something great." When one of these three were missing, the meetings became a very effective method of flushing out what was at fault.

For me, evenings were a time to reflect on the goals of the camp and the riders it hosted. What is it that these riders take away from such an experience? The atmosphere was always upbeat, but also one of fatigue. While riders spoke, I usually tried to summon a piece of literature from my collegiate life to help define the ethos of the camp for myself, a habit I developed while riding and racing as a student of English literature at Montana State University. After so many hours of both, I began to see one in the other.

At the end of the last meeting all of the riders shared, Proctor rallied, explaining the need for the difficulty abroad and the needed resilience. "If you aspire to Pro-level cyclocross, then you can't

have two or three balls in the air. Cyclocross has to be it. Like boxing, you've got to take your hits, you've got to be willing to get your face beaten in."

It was after these lines that I recalled a quote from the master author of European suffering, Charles Dickens. It's in his words, the preface to this article, that I can encapsulate almost all of what I've learned while staying with Euro Cross Camp. Racing abroad and leaving the comfort zone of normality makes you stronger afterwards. It is in this methodology that I find the camp's greatest strength, as well as its greatest hurdle for riders. If you want a reality check, then Belgium is waiting for you. As Proctor tells the riders early on, "There's nothing vicarious about the Cross Camp experience. It's all real, all the time."

The Last Lap

The camp provides an opportunity for developing riders that was previously non-existent. While Europe still holds the grounds for racing at the highest level, young riders will continue to set aside a holiday vacation each year and embrace the challenges of their development as racers abroad. As all eyes are set to focus on the U.S. cyclocross scene in 2013, American riders will feel a new sense of urgency. With that in mind, Euro Cross Camp will continue to provide a development program designed to flesh out the best talent America has to offer. □

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