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Carlo Clerici 38 years on

Tony Rominger's victory in the Vuelta

For Tony Rominger his 41st victory as a cycling professional was not only the best of his career but also the best for Swiss cycling since 1954. That was the year Carlo Clerici won the Giro d'Italia, roughly the equivalent of Rominger's win in the Round Spain race.

For one or two good reasons the 1992 Vuelta is one of the most important events of the sporting year. Along with the summer Olympic Games in Barcelona and the World Exhibition in Seville, it helps celebrate the 500-year jubilee of the discovery of the Americas and of the final departure of the Arabs from the Iberian peninsula. And topographically the Round Spain race is one

of the most demanding, with many experts considering it even more gruelling than the Tour de France. In the last few years Spain has been slowly eclipsing France as the mecca of cycling: Tony Rominger being amongst the growing number of the world's top cyclists to belong to a Spanish team.

Along with Pedro Delgado, Erik Breukink and last year's winner, Melchior Mauri, Rominger has long been one of the main favourites for the Vuelta. But this Swiss cyclist from Canton Zug has seen his triumph deferred time and again. Even in this race which he finally won, a backlog of two minutes in the first timed lap – usually one of Rominger's strong points – and then three falls appeared to knock the stuffing out of his dream of victory. But when it came to the mountains Rominger turned out the strongest, and in the second timed lap he

(Photo: A. J. Geisser).

was well ahead of all his rivals. This gave him the leader's jersey for the first time and spurred him on to final victory.

This triumph is the most important so far for Tony Rominger, and not before time because he turned 31 last March. In 1989 and 1990 he won the multi-stage Tirreno-Adriatico, then the Paris-Nice in 1991 and the Swiss Tour de Romandie in the same year; and victory in the 1989 classic Round Lombardy is also amongst his laurels. But he has never until this year managed to top his rivals in any of the three main season's classics, the Vuelta, the Giro d'Italia and the Tour de France. For Rominger has always seemed beset with health problems, and the word hypochondriac has even been aimed in his direction. All the more astonishing is the way he has succeeded in emerging from the slough of despond and has now had the courage to confront the extreme temperatures of the Spanish summer. Long-year experience certainly played a role here, said Rominger in an interview after his triumphant entry into Madrid – and also perhaps the fact that this year he had been concentrating exclusively on the Vuelta and had taken on the great responsibility of team leader.

Rominger – married with one daughter – started cycling seriously when he was 20. He was a late starter – and this may explain why his breakthrough has come so late in professional life. The Spanish are mad on cycling, so now "el Suizo" has become an accredited star of the sport – and he does not believe by any means that he is anywhere near the end of his career. "I have finally shown that I can hold out for more than a week", boasted Rominger after his latest triumph. The Tour de France 1993 – still at the end of the day the biggest cycling event of them all – could well be his next target.

This would bring Tony Rominger nearer to his chosen domicile – tax-haven Monte Carlo – and to his family, which is more to him than anything. He freely admits that his happy home life is central to any sporting feats he may achieve. For years he has relied on his own doctor and his own manager. And as long as he carries on from one success story to another no one can grudge him that.

René Lenzin

