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The man they call "Spartacus"

The four-time world time-trial champion Fabian Cancellara has got 2011 off to a flying start with a biography, four podium finishes and a new cycling team. A profile of a star name in one-day cycling races. By Alain Wey

Fabian Cancellara's cycling performance is reaching perfection and the cyclist has made a very strong start to the year, winning the E3 Harelbeke in Belgium, finishing second in the Milan to San Remo road race, third in the Tour of Flanders (Belgium) and second in the Paris to Roubaix race. The four-time world champion in time trial is clearly on a roll, although he has not reproduced his 2010 achievement of winning the Tour of Flanders as well as the Paris to Roubaix race. A member of the Luxembourg Leopard-Trek team since the start of the year, the Olympic champion has a colossal physique (1m 86 and 80 kg) that has earned him the nickname "Spartacus". Fourteenth in the UCI world rankings, the native of Berne was voted winner of the "Vélo d'or" in 2010 by the French publication "Vélo Magazine". In many respects, a champion has to contend with severe criticism as well as plenty of adulation. This perhaps applies to cycling in particular where the spectre of doping is omnipresent. Fabian Cancellara has repeatedly come under suspicion (after his gold medal in Beijing in 2008 and his classic double in 2010) but has always emerged clean.

The taste of victory

Born on 18 March 1981, Fabian Cancellara grew up in the Bernese countryside in Wohlen. He began racing and winning competitions at the age of 12. His father Donato, an Italian immigrant, and his mother, Rosa, would take him to cycling competitions in Switzerland every Sunday, setting off at dawn to get to Basel, Fislisbach, Siglistorf, Schleithem, Lucerne, Hochdorf, Fully and Bussigny. Cancellara raced all over the country, almost always finishing first. He revealed: "My idol was the Spaniard Miguel Indurain", the five-time winner of the Tour de France. In 1997, he began an apprenticeship as an electrician and trained every evening in all weathers. At the time, his father was

his manager and trainer with the support of the Ciclo International Ostermundigen (canton of Berne) team. In spring 1998, he tried a time-trial cycle for the first time and became junior world champion that October. The following year, he rode for the Italian team Mapei, one of the most successful at the time, whose colours were worn by Tony Rominger from Zug. He reluctantly had to give up his apprenticeship owing to the travel involved in racing. This proved a wise decision as in 2000 he won the silver medal in the time trial at the under-23 world championships. He was officially part of the Mapei team from that September and trained in northern Italy in Castellanza. He was touted as the new Miguel Indurain. From 2003, he rode for the Italian team Fassa Bortolo, where his teammate Roberto Petito, amazed at the width of the Swiss rider's shoulders, gave him the nickname "Spartacus".

In the limelight

Fabian Cancellara took part in his first Tour de France at the age of 23 where his immediate win over favourite Lance Armstrong during the prologue stage thrust the unknown Swiss into the limelight. In 2005, he won bronze at the time-trial world championships. His time in Italy came to an end and he joined the Danish team CSC. The tailored training he received helped him to become a specialist in one-day races and to improve his performance as a time-trial cyclist. He acquired new cycling techniques with each change of team: the work on team structure at Mapei, intelligent season planning at Fassa Bortolo, and preparation for specific races and maintenance of motivation levels at CSC and Saxobank (2006-2010). Finally, he

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was victorious at the Vélodrome de Roubaix in April 2006. The native of Berne won the Paris to Roubaix race, known as the "Queen of the Classics" or the "Hell of the North". That autumn, he became world time-trial champion and, in his private life, he married Stefanie, who gave birth to his daughter Giuliana in October.

Gold medal at the Olympics

The 2008 season marked a turning point. By winning the Tirreno - Adriatico stage race and Milan - San Remo (the longest of the classics), Cancellara clearly demonstrated the calibre of competition he was capable of winning. That August, he won the Olympic gold medal in the time-trial event in Beijing: "I was hungry for it. I was like a tiger. I trained like a man possessed. I really wanted that title."*** That October, he was suspected of doping but was cleared two weeks later. The Bernese athlete can undergo between 50 and 60 anti-doping tests a year and has to send details of all his movements to the anti-doping authorities, which can turn up at his home in Ittigen unannounced.

The suspicions of cheating grow each time Cancellara wins. In April 2010, he pulled off the double, winning the Tour of Flanders and the Paris - Roubaix race with stretches alone of 14 km and 49 km, respectively. That May, critics in the sports press claimed that Cancellara had only won the two races thanks to an electric device. Nothing was proven and it finally emerged that he had used a revolutionary new pedal and gear system authorised by the UCI. The Bernese cyclist again won the prologue stages of the Tour de Suisse and Tour de France, during which he wore the yellow jersey for six days.

In the autumn, he set a record in Australia with a fourth victory in the world time-trial championships. He exclaimed: "I want to make history, that's what motivates me."***

A new departure

Fabian Cancellara left Saxobank at the end of 2010 to join the newly formed Luxembourg team, Leopard-Trek, which incorporated some of the Danish team, including the brothers Andy and Fränk Schleck. Cancellara said: "It's a great opportunity for me to work with lots of the members of my former team who are friends. It also gives me the chance to

make the most of my experience. I made great progress with Saxobank, but I needed a fresh start and things are going well at the moment." Fabian Cancellara sidesteps the question when asked about his childhood dream of winning the Tour de France. He says: "It's a dream but not a goal. I keep it deep within." His main ambition for 2011 is now to be the best on the big stage at the world championships in Copenhagen in September. He says: "I don't know yet whether I'll focus on the time trial or the road race, which I haven't won yet." His talent, work ethic and complete dedication to his family and country make "Spartacus" an exceptional cyclist. As for the final classic missing from his list of achievements, "Liège - Bastogne - Liège", Fabian Cancellara vows: "One day, I'll try to break the hour record on the course."

*The classics are the most prestigious one-day races. The five greatest are known as the "five monuments": Milan - San Remo (since 1907), Paris - Roubaix (1896), Liège - Bastogne - Liège (1892), the Tour of Flanders (1913) and the Tour of Lombardy (1905).

** "Fabian Cancellaras Welt. Die Geschichte eines Radrennfahrers", by Benjamin Steffen and Christof Gertsch, Verlag Neue Zürcher Zeitung, Zurich, 2011.

DESTINED FOR GREATNESS

■ World time-trial champion in 2006, 2007, 2009 and 2010. Gold medal winner in the time trial at the Beijing Olympic Games in 2008.

■ The classics. Paris - Roubaix: winner in 2006 and 2010, 2nd in 2008 and 2011. Milan - San Remo: winner in 2008, 2nd in 2011. Tour of Flanders: winner in 2010, 3rd in 2011.

■ Tour de France: prologue stage in 2004, prologue stage

and 4th stage in 2007, 20th stage in 2008, 1st stage in 2009, prologue stage and 19th stage in 2010. Having taken part in the Tour six times, he has worn the yellow jersey for 21 days. Although this is a record for a Swiss cyclist, Cancellara has never finished higher than 64th in the overall rankings.

■ Tour de Suisse: prologue stage and 9th stage of the

Tour de Suisse in 2007, 7th and 9th stages in 2008, 9th stage and winner in the overall rankings in 2009, prologue stage in 2010.

■ Other competitions: winner of the Tour of Denmark in 2006, Tirreno - Adriatico in 2008, Tour of Oman in 2010, and the Grand Prix E3 in 2010 and 2011.

