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A new chapter in his life

Fabian Cancellara is facing his last season as a professional cyclist. His career has been successful but he has long accepted that it will remain unfinished.



BENJAMIN STEFFEN

Fabian Cancellara has a sense of symbolism. He enjoys being centre stage and likes playing to the crowd. On the way to an important victory he once held up his good-luck charm to the TV cameras, cycling to the line with the Swiss flag in his hand. But it is this image that stands out: Cancellara in a hotel room, his head on the pillow, his eyes closed as if asleep, and between his head and the pillow the yellow jersey worn by the leader of the Tour de France – Cancellara and the Tour, an expression of unity. They will meet for a final time in July as he is retiring at the end of the season.

It was a while ago when he imagined what retirement from professional cycling would be like. Cancellara decided around a year ago to call it a day at the end of 2016. He said he was looking forward to spending not just one weekend at home but instead several weekends in a row. His departure was a long way off at that point. But Cancellara needed this crutch of knowing when he would give up – otherwise he would have been too distracted by the constant questions from others but equally from himself about how long he intended to carry on cycling.

Fabian Cancellara on home turf – the Tour de Suisse prologue in Rotkreuz in June 2015

Simply staying at home

Above all, he needed a good reason for retirement and therefore reflected on where he had been recently – at training camps in Gran Canaria and Mallorca, with sponsors in Geneva and Barcelona, at a birthday party in St. Moritz and at a race in Qatar. He was constantly travelling. He had led this life for years and when he continually found himself saying how much he enjoyed simply staying at home, he asked himself why he didn't do just that, why had he constantly taken it upon himself for years to gear his body up for racing, this body which enjoyed indulging in good food so much.

Why was that? Because he did not know any different. Because his body was made for cycling and winning races. His path was an easy one as he was predestined for it from a young age when Cancellara received 200 Swiss francs for victories and sometimes put a hundred-franc note in his wallet to buy himself a sandwich for his break on Monday. His first racing bike had leather straps on the pedals and was a gift from his father. He had emigrated to Switzerland from southern Italy in 1965. He later worked as a ventilation mechanic while his mother, who was from eastern Switzerland, had a job at Migros. This was a working-class family who got up at 5 a.m. on Sundays to drive to some race or other in Switzerland. His mother, father and sister, weekend after weekend. Yes, Fabian Cancellara does not know any different. He came from this life and outgrew it.

In his generation Cancellara has become the highest earning Swiss person in an individual sport behind Roger Federer. He has enjoyed the

successful career that many predicted he would but via a different path. Cancellara was portrayed as a future winner of the Tour de France, the leading race in world cycling. He, of course, contributed to this portrayal. When he took part in his first Tour in 2004 and immediately pulled on the leader's jersey, he said: "I want to win the races I like one day – the Tour de Suisse, Paris–Roubaix and the Tour de France." People have long defined him based on these aspirations and indeed also how he would approach retirement years later. He faced the perpetual questions from others but equally from himself about how long he wanted to carry on with his Tour victory ambitions. However, after winning the Tour de Suisse in 2009 and the Paris–Roubaix, the legendary cobblestone classic, twice in 2006 and 2010, Cancellara faced a defining decision. It was the familiar pattern. He needed clarity for himself, his career as well as for his life and peace of mind, so he abandoned his dreams of winning the Tour. He would have needed to change too much for this project. A powerful cyclist, he would have had to lose weight to hold pace with the best in the mountains. He would have had to train at altitude more often and dedicate even more of his life to sport and less to his family. And when people asked him whether he thought it was possible to win the tour without doping he said "yes", but did not want to enter dangerous ground, "no, thank you". He preferred to celebrate other victories "than see my family, friends and myself faced with even more questions about doping". Cancellara had learned to avoid this contentious issue. He had faced repeated

doping accusations himself but without any evidence of wrongdoing.

Cancellara wore the leader's jersey on the Tour for 29 days in total, more than any other Swiss cyclist and more than Ferdy Kübler and Hugo Koblet, who won the race in the 1950s. And yet in deciding not to pursue the Tour victory, Cancellara accepted his career would be incomplete. It does not matter what Cancellara achieves in 2016, what he wins or misses out on. He can no longer achieve anything that he has not already achieved. It may be a matter of proving that he has not become prone to crashing in his later years as a sportsman because he has frequently fallen in recent years. He may be able to reinvigorate himself but no longer reinvent himself.

Symbolic Berne

He is preparing, for the last time, for the classics in spring which he has won several times – the Tour of Flanders and Paris–Roubaix. He will take part in the Tour de Suisse and start the Tour de France in the hope of reaching the last week when cycling's greatest event stops off in Berne. He will once again see it as a symbolic image – the Tour leading him home upon his departure from the sport. The Tour means a lot to him, as do Berne and Switzerland. He was never torn be-

Fabian Cancellara was born on 18 March 1981 in Wohlen bei Bern. He is one of the world's most successful cyclists and has achieved the most victories amongst present-day Swiss cyclists by some margin. Cancellara was world champion four times in the individual time trials and won bronze three times in the discipline at the World Championships. In 2008, he won the gold medal in the time trial and silver in the road race at the Beijing Olympics. The father of two has also won various one-day races and three tours, including the Tour de Suisse in 2009.



In the time trial he has won the world championships four times and Olympic gold once. The 35-year-old is now looking forward to more relaxing times.

tween feeling Swiss or Italian. There was no forced sense of identification with the land of his father who never even spoke Italian with his son. And despite travelling so much, he always knew that he belongs in Berne.

When far away in Rio de Janeiro at the Olympic Games, he will again wonder whether retirement is the right decision or whether he is still young and strong as he was in his prime. He is hoping to win Olympic gold in the time trial. Perhaps it is good that the decision to retire was taken some time ago. Otherwise an Olympic gold would have left him pondering again. Those close to him know very well that Cancellara also fears retirement as it will mean suddenly having lots of freedom but not having the same importance as when he was in a field of cyclists.

He is looking forward to weekends at home. But what has it been like at home lately with his wife and his two daughters away and Cancellara left alone with the cats? It has felt strange to him, he has felt lost. When his career ends, the elite sportsman will enter a new chapter in his life.

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