

VareseNews

“Shadowing” and alliances; this is how Basso challenges Contador

Pubblicato: Lunedì 5 Luglio 2010

by Lorenzo Franzetti* – The days of waiting and discussion, that normally precede the start of the “Grande Boucle”, have begun. For three days, until Saturday, Rotterdam will be the world capital of cycling; the Tour de France is setting off in Holland. According to tradition, *le Gran départ* is an important occasion for the world of cycling, that concentrates more than 70% of its business around the French stage race. Millions of euros are changing hands, in negotiations already for next season; companies and investments, riders and teams, the media, well-known and not so well-known managers, all are at the start of the most important cycling event of the season. And what about the race? Are we going to witness Alberto Contador’s third Tour? Ivan Basso has promised a hard battle and great performance. But will the Varese cyclist really be able to beat the apparently clear superiority of his Spanish rival?

Today, cycling leaves little to the imagination, at least behind the scenes. Professional cyclists make increasing use of technological and scientific (and legal, of course) instruments to improve their performance. Seen from the side of the road, cycling is still a great sport, but the romanticism disappears when an athlete has to analyse his performance in such depth in order to improve.

Today, technology provides cyclists with very sophisticated instruments, power meters that can monitor every part of their performance. And, generally speaking, these instruments are the same for everyone. There’s not much difference between the instruments used by Alberto Contador and those used by Ivan Basso (in the photo, in Verona – RCS Press Office). Every race and every training session is recorded and analysed graphically and scientifically: aside from tactical choices and conditions of health, it is not difficult for every cyclist to discover the performance level of his opponents.

And so, today, we can make a “scientific” comparison of two athletes: Alberto Contador and Ivan Basso. The Varese cyclist knows that, uphill, his power varies between 420 and 440 watts, an average of 6.4 watts/kg (Ivan’s ideal weight is 69 kg). In contrast, his Spanish rival can put out as much as 480 watts, or 6.7 watts/kg. But this data is from last year, and there’s a lot of uncertainty about the data from this season’s races.

But how can Ivan Basso so calmly claim to be able to win the Tour? When a cyclist talks about “good feelings”, is he making it up, is it “pre-tactics”, or has he got something concrete on which to base his comments? The answer is simple: the winner of the 2010 Giro d’Italia has scientific data to back him up. And how did he get this

data? With the help of two “spies”. Spies? Yes, two, greatly-trusted team-mates, the Pole, Sylvester Szmydt, and the Czech, Roman Kreuziger. In June, these two cyclists competed in two important, different races. Szmydt took part in the “Critérium du Dauphiné”, in France; his precise task was to “shadow” Alberto Contador (in the photo, wearing the jersey of the race leader – from www.astana.lu), and on the more important slopes, he almost kept up with the Spaniard. The Czech, Kreuziger, had the task of “spying” on the other great rival, Lance Armstrong, in the Tour of Switzerland. And so, the comparison of the scientific data recorded was very easy, and, fortunately for Basso, very comforting.

Of course, the Tour de France cannot be reduced to a simple comparison of graphs and pedal strokes per minute, but this aspect has become very important in modern cycling; and all the more so for Ivan Basso, who, psychologically, needs the constant reassurance of the numbers. This is how he tackles this sport; besides, everyone needs certainties, and the Varese cyclist looks for, and often finds them, in the power meters. But this does not mean that the Tour de France’s results have already been written.

Unforeseen events, imagination, tactical choices, and luck: fortunately for us fans, these elements still count in the world of cycling. And this Tour could still reward us with unexpected turns of events, thanks to a very interesting, tough route, from the very start. The cyclists will have to tackle a number of fearsome paved roads (the forest of Arenberg), which were made famous by the Paris- Roubaix, then climb the Alps, then tackle the Pyrenees (with a double climb up the Col du Tourmalet) and a final time-trial (over 50 km, on the penultimate day).

So, is Contador stronger? Yes. But in a great stage race, alliances can also make the difference; the Spaniard has none, and Ivan Basso has always had a great feeling with Lance Armstrong. Rival No. 4 is Andy Schleck, and No. 5, Cadel Evans. What about the others? Souls in search of glory, whose hopes of wearing the yellow jersey in Paris are limited.

** Department head of the magazine “Ciclismo”*

Redazione VareseNews

redazione@varesenews.it