

My favorite part of stage racing is what it does to the basic meaning of a “finish line”. Of course everyone stops riding when they reach the marked end of the stage, but it’s their personal finish lines that make the race worth watching. Who will go for the sprint points today? Who wants to try to gain time on GC? Who’s going for the stage today? Who wants to lose time on GC to be able to make the break and win a stage later on? Sometimes, when we watch cycling we’re not seeing the much anticipated raw tests of power and torque, but rather we’re watching real people grapple, often in real time, with what they can do in a given moment versus what they’ve dreamt of accomplishing in the sport for years. In other words, we’re watching those finish lines change.

To be a little more tangible: Koen Bouwman of Jumbo Visma won Stage 7 and took the lead in the mountains classification of the 2022 Giro d’Italia. It was a career day for him that didn’t come easy by any stretch. He started his day gunning for a chaotic break and was strong enough to get into it. On the crest of every climb he was right there using his kick to take as many mountain points as possible. Then, halfway up the final climb, La Sellata, he was out the back of the group. The cameras were off him, focused on the three remaining riders: Bauke Mollema, Davide Formolo, and Bouwman’s Jumbo Visma teammate Tom Dumoulin. Bouwman could’ve made that moment his finish line—he was firmly in the lead for the *maglia azzurra* and had already had a strong day out. But instead, Bouwman found something left inside of him and clawed his way back and won the maximum points possible on the final classified climb. He remained in the group for the rest of the stage, following the attacks of the other riders before launching his own, thus achieving the biggest win of his career by all objective standards and measures.

But this piece isn’t *really* about Koen Bouwman’s win, however fantastic it was. As Bouwman crossed the line with his arm raised and a smile you couldn’t help feel deep down you could see his defeated breakaway companions in the background by a few meters. A few dozen meters behind them was Tom Dumoulin, celebrating so hard for the man he’d helped, he had to catch his bars to keep from falling over. This piece is about him.

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Tom Dumoulin captures the conflicting world of road cycling better than most. In 2017, at the age of 26, he won the Giro d’Italia GC and two stages, Dutch ITT Championship, the BinkBank Tour, and the World ITT and TTT titles for good measure. Conventional cycling wisdom said that he was entering his prime. From then on it was supposed to be Tom Dumoulin’s world to dominate. He hasn’t won a race on the road since stage 14 of that 2017 Giro.

Once a rider wins a grand tour, once he gets even one such massive result, it takes years for the expectation for more to fade. They are expected to go on to dominate for years to come, to be in contention every time they touch the start line, to be a force of nature that only goes out on its own terms. While this may seem like business as usual to us cycling fans, in reality, it's dehumanizing. Watching a race makes it easy to forget that we're watching human beings compete. Their helmets and sunglasses make their heads look completely alien, their proportions seem a bit off compared to everyone you see on the street, they hunch over these finely tuned machines made of exotic materials. Like a UFO, they fly past you ethereally no matter the terrain. They go up absurd inclines at speeds that don't quite fit in our day to day idea of *possible*. The only time they ever seem like an even remotely similar species is when they're suffering—regularly having some of the most difficult moments of their lives beamed all over the world for us to watch.

It doesn't look difficult to ride a bike, there's literally an idiom about how you never forget how to, but the skill in cycling is covert. When you are strong it's impossible to tell how you feel, and when you crack it's replayed endlessly for us to empathize with. In some respects, Tom Dumoulin breaks this pattern – his heart's *always* on his sleeve.

The unfair fact about Tom Dumoulin is that his greatest moments often come paired with some of the worst things to ever happen to him. His most discussed win, that 2017 Giro, contained a moment where he was ill on the side of the road, an incident that was broadcast shamelessly on global television. It was more than bad for his GC hopes, it was flat out embarrassing on a personal level. When the riders are little aliens zooming around the European countryside doing superhuman things it's easy to gawk and take it in as a spectacle. It's fantastic fiction concealing a darker reality. That day, Dumoulin immediately got back on his bike, mitigated the damage to his time gap, and then went on to win the entire race in the final days. He had ascended to the top. The next year he got second in his Giro title defense—only losing out to an all time performance by one of the winningest Grand Tour riders ever, Chris Froome. To cope, he then got second in the Tour de France as well, coupled with two more silver medals in the World ITT and TTT championships. He was still, by any stretch of the imagination, dominant. In the 2019 Giro he suffered one of the more grisly injuries in cycling, he emerged from a crash in the final kilometers with a gash from a chainring that led to his withdrawal during the next day. This frustration set in motion his Sunweb exit and his eventual joining of Jumbo Visma and, more generally, a rise to different heights. His finish line began to shift.

Controversially, I think this is where Dumoulin became a truly transcendent rider—much more so than the times when it felt like he was in contention to win any Grand Tour he showed up to. Imagine going from being one of a sport's expected champions to sacrificing your own measurable success for a teammate you just met,

not to mention a former rival. Thus, Tom Dumoulin worked his way back from a horrifying injury and became one of the best domestiques in the world. In the midst of a global pandemic he gave his all for his teammate Primož Roglič to win the 2020 Tour de France, and, on the infamous stage 20, Dumoulin still managed an incredible second place. That Tour sums up this current iteration of the “Butterfly of Maastricht” so well; he still excels, buries himself into a time trial, climbs with a steady, metronomic, ability, but now he does these things with a visible love and dedication for his teammates. On La Planche des Belles Filles, Dumoulin performed his way into the hot seat and thus the view of everyone just in time for us to very visibly watch his heart break for Primož Roglič. After this, even though the attempt was ill-fated, he immediately suited up for a Vuelta he wasn’t ready for, just to help Roglič achieve some absolution.

Despite these admirable heroics, it was in the next year where Tom Dumoulin had what is, to me, one of his most incredible moments: He took a break. Tom Dumoulin publicly came out and said he wasn’t mentally well. For someone to be the heir apparent, the pinnacle of steadiness and raw strength, and then to say that the sport was hurting him is incredibly brave. To most fans, riding a bike at that level is something they would kill to do more of, but Tom broke that illusion, and he did it vulnerably and publicly. He was seen later that year watching the 2021 Amstel Gold Race as a spectator, smiling and holding his phone up to record the peloton flying by like he was one of us. After his hiatus he came back and won the Dutch ITT championship and silver in the Olympic time trial, only losing to his teammate Roglič and smiling for and at both of their redemptions on the podium.

To come back to the 2022 Giro, Tom Dumoulin showed that he is still that same guy, that selfless teammate. On stage 4 he didn’t have a great day. He said so himself. The commentators said so. People said the writing was on the wall when he drifted off the back early in the Etna climb and finished 8:20 down in the GC standings. Dumoulin’s Giro was finished from an outside perspective. But who’s finish line is that?

Three days later Tom Dumoulin was allowed in the break with his teammate Koen Bouwman thanks to that ‘ruinous’ time gap from stage 4. He worked for Bouwman all day, taking pulls to keep the break away from the peloton while using his experience to stay close enough that they weren’t threatening enough to be chased down. On the La Sellata climb he countered Davide Formolo’s potentially winning attack while Bouwman resiliently worked his way back to the lead group. Once he was back on, Tom was right there on the front taking turns allowing his teammate to rest for the finale.

On the flat before the final uphill sprint Dumoulin began to lose touch with the group—obviously spent from his long day of labor. Whenever Mollema and Formolo would surge to get away, Dumoulin would, in turn, drop and lose 20ish seconds only to work his way back to the front in that steady, almost peaceful, style of his. This

transpired *multiple times*. The final acceleration wasn't from Bauke Mollema or Davide Formolo, but from Koen Bouwman himself. And this was the one time that Tom didn't work his way back. This time, he was busy celebrating. If you can watch the stage finish again, do it. I've probably done it ten times while writing this and in the moment where Koen gets that winning separation Tom has this smile on his face that screams "he did it". At first I wasn't sure if I was projecting some poetic interpretation onto him. Maybe he was just taking a deep breath or giving a sigh of relief. But the more I look at it the more I know: it's a genuine smile.

Really, all of this makes sense when you look at Tom's career. The only constant in all his ups and downs has been his love for and from his teammates. When he went to hoist his trophy after winning the 2017 Giro, he broke precedent and the entire team celebrated onstage with him. In the 2019 Giro when he suffered that knee injury, they all banded around him and brought him to the line, consoling him after. Stage 20 of the 2020 Tour saw him work his way back into world class shape only to have him set aside that joy and console Roglič first. After stepping away to ensure that he was himself again or maybe who he wanted to be all along, he again got back into shape and won the silver medal at the Olympics. The first thing he did after? Immediately congratulate the only person to beat him, a fellow-traveler also seeking vindication from a deeply trying season.

Ironically, we should perhaps take caution here, for assuming that Tom Dumoulin is this purely altruistic paragon of a super domestique dehumanizes him, albeit in the opposite way that expecting a grand champion does. Perhaps the best way to view Tom Dumoulin might be as someone who makes the decision to do what he can for those who need him, even if that's himself. Or as someone whose finish line on stage 7 was about 100 meters earlier than Koen's on his biggest day. Someone who breaks the mold and reminds us of the human beneath the figure we admire. Someone who cheers for others so hard that he reminds us how difficult it is to even stay on a bike. In more ways than one.