

causality and competence

Cycling is, by nature, a precarious balancing act. It exists at all levels of the sport. From one's first time riding a bike without training wheels to the sport's biggest stage, everyone is just trying to stay on their bike in some way.

Stage 5 of the 2022 Tour de France is the perfect microcosm of cycling's many balancing acts as a whole. It has been circled on the calendars of every team, commentator, and fan since it was announced—not as a day that the Tour would be won, but as one that it could be lost. Informally dubbed the “Paris-Roubaix” stage, it featured several iconic cobbled sectors. A somewhat divisive inclusion in the race, general classification riders openly feared how the cobbles would impact their remaining 16 stages. Other riders saw opportunity. Simon Clarke of Israel Premier Tech seized opportunity.

Today was, first and foremost, the biggest win of Simon Clarke's career. At 35 years old he was without a team for the 2022 season. Yesterday his palmares were not blank; he won two stages of La Vuelta and the KOM jersey in 2012. He is a respected rider in the bunch, but still last year, after the folding of Qhubeka NextHash, he was without a team at what appeared to be the end of his career. When the 2021 season had ended, Clarke returned to Australia, a world away from Wallers-Arenberg and trained. Eventually he caught a lifeline and was the very last rider signed to Israel-Premier Tech's 2022 roster. After today, you can say that for the relegation-threatened team he was also a lifeline.

Days like stage 5 where the winner could very easily have not been on the roster remind us of how precarious cycling is. But the precarity goes deeper than that. Like everything in life, cycling can be boiled down into choices. These decisions can be made with the best intentions and still lack competence. That was certainly on full display today. Israel-Premier Tech looks incredibly competent right now for deciding to sign Simon Clarke with their last roster spot. ASO appears incompetent for designing such a chaotic route that a loose hay bale has threatened the remaining 76% of their biggest event. And, as a result of the aforementioned hay bale, Jumbo Visma appears to have made the decision that, instead of Primož Roglič, Jonas Vingegaard is their best hope to beat Tadej Pogačar.

The best way to make sense of stage 5 is to work through the groups in the order that they finished. In the front of the race was the breakaway of the day made up of Simon Clarke, Taco van der Hoorn, Edvald Boasson Hagen, Neilson Powless, and Magnus Cort. Over the long day, on utterly unforgiving roads, they formed a cohesive group with the attacks starting only 1200 meters from the finish line. By this point Cort, who's been a fixture in every day's breakaway since stage 2, had fallen out of

contention and was clearly exhausted from setting up Powless to contest the win and, gaps permitting, even the yellow jersey.

With the flamme rouge in sight, it looked like Powless was also starting to slip from the lead group. In reality, he was just gearing up for a final charge to the line and maybe even the yellow jersey. As soon as he was up to speed and clear of them, the trio of Boasson Hagen, van der Hoorn, and Clarke began chasing him down. Powless' time in the lead lasted until roughly 450 meters to go when Boasson Hagen led the charge past him. The attacks kept flying. Next it was van der Hoorn's chance to grab another spectacular win from the break but his sprint from 250 meters to go will only be remembered as the lead out to Clarke's biggest win. Devoid of all the context I've given so far—the last minute contract, the surprise inclusion in the Tour de France team, the eleven cobbled sectors on the day—Simon Clarke's win was still spectacular. After all that, a bike throw. It took minutes to realize that his tire crossed the line first, and in that time, there was still even more drama rolling towards the finish.

Jumbo Visma has made plenty of headlines with Wout van Aert trying for green while having Primož Roglič and Jonas Vingegaard as *co-leaders* in their hunt to finally wear yellow, well, more yellow than they normally do, in Paris. At the beginning of the day Wout sat in the lead for both yellow and green while Primož and Jonas were still both very much in contention for the overall. Given ASO's inability to ensure that external obstacles won't enter their courses, that decision appears to have been made. Exiting the fifth cobble sector, Vingegaard suffered a mechanical that first saw him swap bikes with first with teammate Nathan Van Hooydonck, then Steven Kruijswijk, and finally to his own spare but the chase back proved so difficult that eventually Wout van Aert had to drop back to assist—risking his own tenure in the yellow jersey to Nielson Powless ahead.

With 30 kilometers to go Jumbo's stressful situation threatened to become an outright disaster. A motorbike clipped a hay bale putting it right at the exit of a roundabout. Which, in turn, caused Roglič to suffer yet another heartbreaking crash. To make this meltdown even worse the man they most feared, Tadej Pogačar, was on the attack with classics specialist Jasper Stuyven. At this moment Jumbo Visma made a decision. Wout van Aert utilized his spectacular form to pull the group containing Vingegaard to a 21 second GC deficit to Pogačar by the end of the stage. The most notable casualty of this spectacular van Aert performance—Primož Roglič, who now sits 2:17 behind his compatriot in the general classification. By sheer grit, Wout van Aert remains in yellow for the time being.

There's a noticeable difference between how UAE Team Emirates and Jumbo Visma race (beyond the whole multiple-leaders approach). With rather equivalent leaders, UAE has been successful by only trying to control the race when they

absolutely must. Jumbo takes the other approach and seems to try to dominate every possible facet of the race from the outset. The gap between these strategies is filled with precarious decisions that could have gone either way and—as a result of some combination of circumstance, luck, cunning, or merit—their outcomes are now our reality. It's only with hindsight that we can call these decisions competent or not.