

For the first week of a grand tour there's an expected and widely accepted cadence to the road stages. On the long flat days, the smaller, and often the only willing, teams are allowed to get in a breakaway for sponsor exposure but are almost always caught by the sprinters' teams. The first mountain tests are tightly monitored by the teams targeting the general classification's *maglia rosa* to keep the time gaps between contenders under control. The hilly stages too; only breakaway specialists and climbers who don't pose a perceived threat to the main contenders' rosey dreams are allowed to escape and contend for the day. Even the time trials have a generally expected order. Sometimes it feels like there's a script for every type of stage. To be clear I'm not complaining at all. I love those early stages of a grand tour—the "script" is full of tension and drama, but they really are just the opening act.

Stage 14 meant that the Giro d'Italia was exactly two-thirds through and that the generally agreed upon script was no more. Despite every GC team's best efforts small gaps had formed between their leaders. The day started with young Giro debutant Juan Pedro López in pink having worn the jersey for the past 11 days. While not considered a threat to be wearing it the final day, he was still in the lead and, thus (and sadly) had to be dropped. Those still close enough to the overall lead, namely Richard Carapaz, João Almeida, Jai Hindley, Guillaume Martin, Mikel Landa, and Domenico Pozzovivo (Romain Bardet would drop out from stomach troubles) were trying to control the race and put their rivals into difficulty while protecting their own position in the standings. For the former-GC hopefuls who have lost time in the overall – riders such as Simon Yates, Vincenzo Nibali, Hugh Carthy, and Wilco Kelderman – the time to attack for a consolation win or to get back in the fight for the overall was rapidly running out. On top of these groups there were still those who came to hunt stages: Mathieu van der Poel, Bauke Mollema, Alejandro Valverde, etc. At this point in the Giro, no matter their roles, the actors start improvising at the highest possible level.

Even before the race started it was clear that stage 14 would be insane. The comparatively short 147 kilometer parcours started mostly flat with a few rises before entering the hilly Turin circuit. The riders would then have to do two loops of the circuit containing the Superga and brutally steep Colle Della Maddalena climbs before descending into the finish line.

As the neutral start ended the attacks began. Mathieu van der Poel, with his standard impetuosity, was the first to go off the front and got up to 20 seconds of separation – but after 15km not even he could make the gap stick. It took another 40 or so kilometers of constant back-and-forth for any group to get away from the peloton and, after a few late bridgings, a 12 man group had formed. At this point there were just 92 kilometers remaining in the day and none of them were peaceful. Nobody in the breakaway was a threat for the GC and, crucially, most of the teams were represented. The pace to establish the breakaway had left the less gradient-inclined riders dropping out the back of the peloton. It would've been easy for the teams to decide to relax and

let the breakaway go on to contest for the win. One could assume that stage 15, a mountain day with 4000 meters of climbing, would almost certainly shake up the GC through a more passive race of attrition immediately followed by a rest day. (Ultimately, that would not happen but more on this later.)

With 80 undulating kilometers remaining, Bora-Hansgrohe did not want to wait. They massed at the front of the peloton and, through a tremendous collective effort, tore apart the last semblances of an already depleted main group. Their all hands on deck plan was cycling in its purest form—an effort by an entire team to give one individual guy, Jai Hindley, a chance—it was also flat out nuts. The dark green jerseys swarmed just in time to take on the Superga climb. They drilled it for as long as they could, shedding their domestiques once they were spent, and kept the pace hard on the descent towards the Colle Della Maddalena where the splits in the main group really started to take hold. By the end of this attack Almeida, Valverde, Carthy, and Martin had all been distanced with only Almeida – ever the dangler – able to make his way back to even being somewhat in range of the select group.

Despite distancing some rivals, Bora-Hansgrohe was not even remotely done bossing the race. Their former co-leaders Wilco Kelderman and Emanuel Buchmann took strong pulls as they approached what would prove to be the truly backbreaking climb of the day: the Colle Della Maddalena. The green machine kept pushing on the 20% slopes of the Maddalena and back over the finish line in Torino with Kelderman having to end his strong turn with just under one lap to go.

By this point in the race, the lead group had thinned out to contain López, Carapaz, Hindley, Landa, and a surprisingly vintage-looking Nibali. Just 10 seconds off their rear wheels was Almeida pacing a group of Yates, Pozzovivo, Buchmann, and Pello Bilbao back towards the race leaders. As Kelderman finished for the day his teammate, and now absolute leader, Jai Hindley went on the attack to keep trying to thin out the literal handful of riders alongside him. It was this push that saw Juan Pedro López's surprising leadership of the Giro begin to come undone. He was slipping off the back and was clearly fighting just to stay attached to the group. For 11 days and 10 stages López had fought to keep the maglia rosa on his shoulders in a run reminiscent of João Almeida's in 2020. But now, in the race's denouement, it seemed like the writing was on the wall. Also reminiscent of that particular Giro was former podium-placer Jai Hindley tearing it up on the front of an elite group in contention for pink.

Hindley's attack seemed to put López near difficulty, yet it did not fully remove him. Seeing an opportunity, it was Ineos' Richard Carapaz who attempted to go clear of his competitors with 30 kilometers left but, at least in this try, couldn't get away. Richard Carapaz bode his time for two kilometers of grueling Superga slopes before he again saw a chance to slip into the maglia rosa for the first time since 2019. When the Colombian launched, he quickly gained a gap of nearly 30 seconds from the lead group causing them to scramble to bring him back.

This rapacious chase of Carapaz is what ultimately ended López's tenure as the pink *patron*. It brought to close a fantastic run for a young cyclist not afraid to leave his mark on the race. While often joked about online as "El Patron" Juan Pedro López brought a passion and joy to wearing the maglia rosa that was infectious. He assumed totally the role of leader: he controlled all the nature breaks, he threw a bottle at Sam Oomen and then promptly made up with him, he fought to and succeeded in keeping his slim lead over João Almeida on Blockhaus. Juanpe, as he is known, did the race proud. Maybe in the coming years we'll be watching him come back older, wiser, and stronger competing to wear pink at the end of stage 21. For now we're lucky to have been able to enjoy his reign.

With López falling out of contention the race was officially on for more than just the stage win but also the new GC leader. Richard Carapaz's 26 seconds over João Almeida had him in the virtual lead but there were still the last vestiges of the Superga, the entirety of the Colle Della Maddalena, and 28 kilometers between them and the finish line. The chasing group worked together to reel Carapaz back until the lower slopes of the Colle Della Maddalena where, surprisingly, a 37-year-old Vincenzo Nibali attacked. The only rider able to stay with him for the moment was Jai Hindley and, slightly blurred by the motorbike camera's depth of field, Simon Yates. Hindley was able to keep the momentum going and counterattack Nibali, in turn becoming the first rider to reestablish contact with the escaped Carapaz. By the time the Colle Della Maddalena had been conquered for the final time the lead group was made up of Carapaz, Hindley, Nibali, and Yates. Roughly 30 seconds behind them was a dangling João Almeida.

Coming into the stage, the general classification time gap between Carapaz and Almeida was non-existent and, as long as López was distanced by at least 12 seconds, whoever crossed the line first would wear the maglia rosa at day's end. Watching João Almeida ride is a strange experience. He is very talented. He is also what I will call a Dangler. There's a general pattern to it where he will be in a lead group of elite climbers and be seemingly unable to go with an attack. Normally, this is where riders fade from contention, but not the young Portuguese. Instead, he dangles what almost feels like a set distance off the back of that group but can never quite seem to work his way back. It's a remarkable show of resilience that has served him well. His losses are never these massive hemorrhages of time, and his time trial is good enough that, in theory, he could with the right grand tour route. Only time will tell if he can parlay this skillset and force of will into winning a grand tour or even a stage of one. For now, as he did on mountain stages previously, he dangled.

As the lead quartet began their final descent into Turin the situation was clear for what felt like the first time all day. Richard Carapaz would be in the maglia rosa if he could hold off Almeida and not lose eight seconds to Jai Hindley. Hindley had to gain eight seconds on Carapaz if he wanted the pink jersey for himself but was, for now, second overall. Nibali had started the day down 3:04 to Lopez and was seemingly back

in GC contention in his final year of racing. Given the manner that Vincenzo Nibali has built his palmares, memorable and daring attacks on descents to win the 2015 Milano-Sanremo and 2017 Il Lombardia, it was well possible that he could risk it again and go for another classic win. The final member of the group, Simon Yates, is the only one to have won a stage at this year's race with an impressive ride in the stage 2 Budapest time trial.

That win felt like a turning point for the former Vuelta winner who had relied on his climbing chops to win for years. He showed a much improved time trial that was supposed to be the edge on his rivals, namely Carapaz, and help him finally get the Giro victory he so spectacularly lost to Chris Froome's third week in the 2018 edition. Then, in stage 4, Yates suffered a crash that left him with an injured knee and dashed hopes. It's come out since that he considered abandoning the race before stage 14. It's safe to say he's glad he didn't.

After the Colle Della Maddalena descent was one last little kick for bonus seconds. With 3.6 kilometers to go, Simon seized his moment of redemption and consolation and accelerated away from Carapaz, Hindley, and Nibali—unchased by virtue of the time lost earlier in yet another trying edition of the Giro d'Italia. He came to the line looking behind him to ensure that he wasn't about to get caught, to have the rug pulled out from under him again. When it was confirmed that his win was safe he put his arms in the air for only a second. He rolled through the line calmly and utterly spent. Maybe this year he will be on the giving end of a spectacular week three resurgence. It's impossible for me, you, or even the riders to know. For now we just get to watch them improvise.