

welcome to the Jungels

Days like Stage 9 of the 2022 Tour de France are some of my favourites in Grand Tour racing. Yes, I love the days where almost every type of leader's jersey seems to be up for grabs, when the eventual stage winner comes out of a haggard reduced bunch sprint after working together to stay away over, when an inconceivable weather event rocks up and imposes a higher will on the race. But the finale of Stage 9 was a welcome break to all the madness, one where the sport boils down into a competition between two people on two wheels each.

In the broader scope of this year's Tour de France, not much happened. The *maillot pois* for the king of the mountains was the only jersey that changed hands going from EF's much-loved Dane Magnus Cort to a deserving Cofidis' Simon Geschke. Tadej Pogačar and Jonas Vingegaard launched away from the group of favourites with only a few kilometers remaining and widened their gap to the rest by another three seconds, further cementing the duo's dominance in the race so far.

Watching the race from home one can be forgiven for missing that final attack by Pogačar in his *maillot jaune*. I only found out while writing this that it was Pogačar who instigated the move and not Vingegaard. However, we missed that move for a reason and that reason was Bob Jungels and Thibaut Pinot.

By numbers alone cycling is much better at producing "losers" than "winners". Even in stage racing with its sub-prizes for mountain and sprint points, young rider's and general classifications, and the often nebulously defined "combativity" award there are way more riders who "lose" than "win" on any given day. Yes, obviously there is something to be said of the noble domestiques who rarely have any intention of winning, but on paper they still do not win by the sport's metrics. Of the 165 riders who started stage 9, if every jersey changed hands, someone won without taking a jersey, and someone else won the combativity award) there would only be a total of six winners on the day. Only 3.63% of the peloton would have experienced any sort of "objective" win.

While cycling may not churn out many winners by the numbers, it reigns supreme at setting them up to be, [to borrow a term from Kate](#), moral winners in the future. Cycling is a difficult sport where you must literally overcome mountains that have frustrated entire empires and the roads built by them. This adversity is the event itself. We attach ourselves to riders not because we see ourselves in their talent, but because we see ourselves in their struggles. With the age of social media we no longer must relate to a rider on even that abstract of a level. We're given a window into their lives and personhood off the bike as well and this, too, is what makes us cheer when they

win. The day's protagonists, Bob Jungels and Thibaut Pinot, are in a particularly interesting situation: both are moral winners.

Both riders found themselves in a sizable early breakaway and proceeded to work with the group to stay away from the peloton and contest the stage win. With 64 kilometers left to go, Jungels began setting a fierce pace on the Col de la Croix, eventually splitting the group. Simon Geschke was able to attack out of the chasing group to summit the climb first and ensure his reign in the *maillot pois* would begin at the end of the day, but the chasing group could never quite catch Bob Jungels. This is how the race remained up until 17 kilometers to go when Thibaut Pinot decided it was time to strike out on his own on the Pas de Morgins. His attack got him away from Jungels' remaining chasers and then it was just the two of them, Pinot chasing Jungels. About this scenario, I felt conflicted.

Like I wrote earlier, cycling has a penchant for setting riders up to become moral winners in the future. Just last year Jungels was not at the Tour, nor his national championships, nor the Olympics. He wasn't racing at all. Instead he elected to undergo iliac artery surgery for the endofibrosis holding him back and causing every pedal stroke to hurt more than it already normally would on a hard day racing. Pinot has not had it any easier, [as documented earlier within these pages](#), his racing life has featured more ups and downs than the mountain stages he steals our hearts on. While both men have experienced more than their fair share of trials and tribulations in the sport, they are still fantastic and beloved bike riders.

In writing this I realized that there are some interesting similarities between our two protagonists. They have each won a monument (Jungels won Liège Bastogne Liège in 2018, and Pinot won Il Lombardia the same year). Both are Grand Tour stage winners, and each man's home countries (Luxembourg and France) saw them as their next hope to win a Grand Tour overall. These passing similarities are all the more surprising when you actually watch them race. Jungels is aerodynamic and steady, Pinot has panache and verve. Watching Jungels feels like you're watching a bike race in 2022, Pinot feels like a bit more of a throwback to 1982. And there I was, watching both, torn.

While this sport is exceptionally adept at forming moral winners, what do we do when we feel that we have to choose between them? Who did I want to win? Who deserves this vindication most? I know I'm in no place to choose as a fan, but we've all been hardwired to pick a side immediately. Rog vs. Pog, Van der Poel vs. Van Aert, chocolate vs. vanilla. Then I asked the question that matters most: Why do I have to? Cycling gives us all the ability to take in the spectacle and make sense, process, and project onto it later. I'll tell you what I did over those last 17 kilometers. I just took in the race as shown to me and asked myself "Can he do it?". I don't even know who "he"

was, I like to think both of them were “he” simultaneously. In the end, Bob Jungels did it. He marked his long way back with an objective triumph and achieved his first stage win at Le Tour. But Thibaut Pinot, who ended up fourth on the day, but with the combativity prize, is no loser. He has reminded us once more why we all love him.

Indeed, even the most “straightforward” days of the Tour can make us sit and think for hours.