

winning isn't promised

Being the first to do anything is hard. While glorious, it's terrifying and unforgiving to be a trailblazer. The only space you're given is upwards, and there's no easy way for humans to fly. Once you start blazing the trail, you have to break through, people start counting on you, pinning their hopes to your back like race numbers.

Tuesday was not Biniam Girmay's first time making headlines in the cycling world. This was not his first professional win. He did not come out of nowhere to shock the world and become the first Black African to win a Grand Tour stage. It could be said that Girmay took among the most difficult routes possible. That route includes not just biographical details, but also the journey within the Giro and before.

Including his first place in Tuesday's half-flat half-hilly chaotic stage, Biniam Girmay had top-fived in a staggering sixty percent of the Giro stages he was in contention for. Due to his remarkable combination of consistency and incredible talent Girmay sat just three points behind Arnaud Démare in the contest for the lead in the points classification or *maglia ciclamino*. While his Giro may be finished because of a freak eye injury during the podium ceremony you still can't help but call his ten days of racing a triumph.

This win was hoped for, and even expected, long before the final sprint in Jesi. Girmay may have been on some radars previously, but he grabbed the world's attention with his second place at the 2021 Under-23 World Championships over a cobbly, unforgiving, race route. He has a knack for holding steady till the end despite difficult roads. In 2022 he picked up right where he left off: a win in Trofeo Alcúdia - Port d'Alcúdia, three top-tens in Paris - Nice, tenth in Milano - Torino, twelfth in Milano-Sanremo, fifth in E3 Saxo Bank Classic, and then, *finally*, a David-and-Goliath win in the Gent-Wevelgem classic, ahead of a resurgent Christophe Laporte and a dominant Jumbo Visma. The Eritrean's momentum was palpable, infectious. Just as Biniam Girmay broke into the upper echelon of cycling we were reminded all too abruptly of the magnitude of the barrier he had broken through. Gent-Wevelgem is one in a rapid-fire series of classics that builds up to the Ronde van Vlaanderen and Paris-Roubaix. But Bini, as he is called by his teammates, did not line up for what were very arguably, the two biggest one day races on the calendar. Instead he would be home in Eritrea, seeing his family and training at altitude for his next target, the Giro d'Italia. When asked why he wasn't going to contest Ronde van Vlaanderen and/or Paris-Roubaix despite obviously being in incredible form, Girmay simply replied that there would be time to race them in the future but that it was now time he returned to his wife and baby after three long months away. It's been well documented that separation from loved ones is not an Eritrean cyclist's only barrier to racing in Europe. Athletes are often denied visas due to fears that they will abscond from their native country, where military service is mandatory and human rights abuses are common.

Regardless of the politics, seeing Girmay's form before stage 10 it's hard to disagree with his decision. He arrived in Hungary looking refreshed and ready to go with his name listed as one of the big favorites to seize the *maglia rosa* leader's jersey on the first day. His competition on that list? Only one of the brightest stars of the modern peloton, a man with a family pedigree that's a who's who of the sport from 1960 onward, someone who grew up a supernova of watts and wins—Mathieu van der Poel. Other than that Girmay main competitors included the usual cadre of former world champions, multiple grand tour stage winners, and otherwise world class athletes.

On that day he didn't win. Girmay came second to van der Poel in a thrilling stage that served as a prelude to what has been a fantastic race so far. Instead Girmay was rewarded with the young rider's classification, the *maglia bianca*. In the next six stages he mustered two fourths and fifths each. The *maglia ciclamino* has been won before without winning a stage, but given the heaviness of wild expectations this could still be easily twisted into a failure by some nay-sayers. If you've been following Girmay on social media you could see what truly sets him apart from normal winners, that subtle thing that makes you feel like you're watching a true star, indeed what makes many of cycling's stars so, well starlike: his tranquil sense of self-belief.

It's hard to not get enthralled by Biniam's relaxed self-assurance. It's maybe his most impressive trait. It never even approaches cockiness; there is just this steady belief that he is exactly on the path he needs to be. The belief is shared by his team. One can see that in the post-win interview with Intermarché's sports director Valerio Piva. Piva's main source of nerves during the final three kilometers? That he couldn't see what was going on for himself. Even outside of the team's Giro squad, there is a broader organization-wide belief in Bini. After his win at Gent-Wevelgem they immediately extended his contract until 2026. They announced it with a clever pun: Bini, vidi, vici.

Given his positions as both a Trailblazer *and* a Talent it would be easy and understandable for Biniam Girmay to feel like the weight of the world on his shoulders. The world of cycling fandom can be rabid once young riders show up and actually win. Consider the meme-like skepticism and social media banter toward Remco Evenepoel. Why had he not performed better in a grand tour? What was wrong with him? Obviously being from cycling-obsessed Belgium didn't help, but now that he's won a monument, it's okay for a while.

Returning to Girmay, you can say that he has avoided some of these pitfalls and criticisms by virtue of being from a place that has only recently started putting riders in the World Tour. This thought is still a bit of a cop-out. Cycling has been popular in Eritrea for decades, but the often Eurocentric cycling world has only just begun to pay attention. This is perhaps why, even more unfairly, he is accounted as representing the hopes of a country and continent that travels even further to support him. By all accounts Eritrea is also a country captured by the magic of Girmay. As a Black man, he

is an outlier in the peloton. Biniam's presence alone always brings up conversations of hope for a more integrated sport in the future. He gracefully handles the often repetitive questions about how he feels it progressing with a genuine enthusiasm and hope.

In the present, he is also a very talented rider who is learning with each passing race. Stage 8 saw Bini fall victim to what we at *derailleur* call Group 2 syndrome: After a long day in the hills of Napoli, Girmay (and others) seemed to begin to ease up, wary of expending energy ahead of a sprint against Mathieu van der Poel. One could argue that this change in pace, this mutual wariness, sabotaged the group's effort to chase down the quartet out front of Jorge Arcas, Davide Gabburo, Harm Vanhoucke, and eventual winner Thomas De Gendt. Girmay, meanwhile, easily wrapped up the sprint for fifth place.

Stage 10 was a different story but it was not without its own hiccups. Bini was in an excellent position in the finale. On the final categorized climb of the day, the Monsano, a selective front group made up of Mathieu van der Poel, the GC contenders, elite climbers, the stray domestique, and, somewhat surprisingly given the company, an isolated Arnaud Démare clinging onto the back had formed. In this group was not only Girmay, but also his teammates Lorenzo Rota, Jan Hirt, and Domenico Pozzovivo. Roughly halfway down the final descent of the day into Jesi with just 6.5km to go, Girmay's day was very nearly derailed when he was the only rider to take an incorrect right turn. He didn't visibly panic, he simply caught his error quickly and rejoined the group in the middle. While he was briefly caught out, a hungry Simon Yates, Giulio Ciccone, and Davide Formolo surged off the front. Most troubling of all: Girmay's main rival for the day, van der Poel, was with them. Almost immediately Rota and Hirt were on the front chasing the escapees down. The footage cut to the rear of the group, Pozzovivo was in the back. It didn't matter. Girmay ushered his teammates into a position to reel things back in as much as they could. Sensing victory, van der Poel attacked the escape group and got away. Girmay, still determined, charged to the front of the thinned out front group before it entered town, trying to bring his newfound rival back. With 3.8 kilometers to go Mathieu relented and began to rest for the sprint into town. As soon as he did, Richard Carapaz attacked, bringing all the GC contenders with him. Everything got stitched up. After roughly two more kilometers Hugh Carthy attacked and got a small gap. But Jan Hirt had worked his way forward and brought the group together yet again. Van der Poel and Girmay looked like they were held together with magnets – never more than a few inches allowed between them – floating in each other's spheres of influence. In the three days since his missed opportunity in Naples you can see that he's already learned some lessons in grand tour sprinting. Pozzovivo, one of Intermarché's GC men, a climber coming off a hellish day on the Blockhaus, gave Girmay (and van der Poel) a leadout in the final rise up to the line. In a surge of power, Girmay got the jump on van der Poel, securing a position that van der Poel has repeatedly beaten other elite riders from. In general, one does not want to ever lead

Mathieu van der Poel out – Tadej Pogačar adhered to this rule so well it ruined his chances at the Ronde van Vlaanderen. But this time he didn't come around and win with his dominant kick. After 160ish meters of sprinting nearly neck and neck, van der Poel relented, pulled up from the sprint, clearly spent, and Girmay looked back at him, seeing that he'd gotten the room to win. Once he realized he *finally* had it in the bag he turned his head back to the line and raised his arms in some combination of victory and relief. After five nearlies he'd accomplished what we all hoped and expected. He had won a stage in the Giro d'Italia on debut. He knew it.

While looking back to see where he was compared to his competitors, Girmay saw that one of the most dominant riders in the current peloton, a man who in this analysis could be read as a metaphor for pedigree, for so many eras of cycling history, was giving him a thumbs up. I know it's a small gesture, a thumbs up, a good job. But when I see pictures of that finish I can't help but feel like van der Poel is an avatar for us fans and the sport as a whole. Afterwards the internet was awash with unmitigated happiness that Girmay had realized his potential and promise and broken the color barrier in yet another aspect of road racing. In that moment you had one of the stars of the sport saying what we all wanted to: hell yes.