

PAIN AND GAIN

After a big crash in 2010, Jens learns the value of small victories.



In the 2010 Tour de France, my team had Andy Schleck in yellow for Stage 16, which started on a huge climb. We knew the race was going to fall to pieces right away – and sure enough, after just 12 kilometres at full gas, only one teammate (Stuart O’Grady) managed to stay in the front group with Andy. I was in a group about 20 seconds back, and as we sprinted over the crest, I remember thinking, *We’re gonna be okay. The pack is going to come back together on the descent.* And it did, for a lot of people.

Just not for me.

About one kilometre down, my front wheel exploded – a big bang! I had just enough time to think, *Damn, this is going to hurt!* And it did. The next thing I remember is getting up from the road and feeling pain everywhere. I picked up my bike, and the frame was broken. The front wheel was broken. My rear derailleur was smashed off. While I was looking at all of that, I realized there was a growing red puddle underneath me. Blood was spilling out of a hole in my elbow and running down my arm onto my hand, and finally dripping from my fingertips onto the road. It was unreal! I remember thinking for a second that it looked like some cheap horror movie.

All this time, riders and cars were flying past me. I called on the radio to tell my team I needed a new bike. Then I remembered that we’d sent our second car ahead of the race to wait at the bottom of the next climb; we hadn’t wanted to take the chance it would be caught behind all the riders who were going to get dropped on the early climb. Our team director, Bjarne Riis, was

in the first car, right behind Andy and the yellow jersey. So there would be no car to help me.

An ambulance stopped, and a doctor came over and asked if I was okay. I thought: *Are you kidding me? I’m bleeding all over the road, and have pain everywhere, and my bike is smashed!* “Yes,” I said. “I’m okay.” After checking me over, the doctor started bandaging my elbow. By now all the riders had gone past, and the broom wagon had stopped for me. The driver asked if I wanted to get in. I’d had to abandon the previous year’s Tour after a crash, because I got taken away on a backboard in a helicopter. As long as that didn’t happen, I wasn’t going to quit. All I needed was a bike.

The only possible help was a neutral service car that was carrying a tiny kid’s bike, with toe-clip pedals. It had been used in a youth programme that let children ride on the street before the race started, to get them excited about the sport. I grabbed the bright yellow bike and pulled the seatpost up as far as possible (it was still about five centimetres too low). I squeezed my feet into the toe clips, and took off.

Rolling down the mountain, I found the 50x14 gearing far too easy, so the most I could do was try to hunker into an aero position and coast as fast as possible. I pedalled on the flats as well as I could, but everything was really awkward. After about 20km, I saw a police officer blocking the road in front of me. He was holding my spare bike, which the team had dropped off for me as soon as they could. Relieved, I jumped onto the fresh bike – but now it felt way too large, and my knees started hurting.

And of course, I went straight into another climb. But I could see Robbie McEwen ahead of me, so I focused on catching him. As I passed, he squeezed out a little smile and said, “You look like sh*t.”

“‘YOU LOOK LIKE SH*T, JENS.’ IT MADE ME SO HAPPY.”

Next, I spotted Mark Cavendish with a couple of his teammates; and after a descent and on another climb, I caught them. Cav said, “You look like

sh*t, Jens.” It made me so happy.

There were only four stages left, and dropping out would have killed me. I caught another group and passed them on the climb. When they all came whizzing past on the descent (now with Cav), I jumped on, and they let me sit in without doing any work. After about 80km, we caught the *gruppetto*. I swear I was about to raise my arms the way you do when winning a race. Never had I been happier to be stuck in the *gruppetto*, which normally is a part of the race I never want to see, let alone be a part of. But on this day, it was like coming home. It was awesome. ☘