



ROBERTO CONTI

GREGARIO

A VETERAN OF 17 GIRI, ROBERTO CONTI AND ONCE DEFINED AS "THE ESSENCE OF A GREGARIO". WE CATCH UP WITH ONE OF THE RACE'S GREAT UNSUNG HEROES

On the face of it, Imola's giant Mulino Rosso hotel isn't much to look at. It stands some 500 metres off the A14 motorway, and there is nothing much to distinguish it from dozens of others here around. It's notable mainly because, in order to reach it, you must first pass a giant (about two metres in diameter) roadside marble. It resides on the lawns in front of the next door but one building, the headquarters of Mercatone Uno. That, in case you're wondering, is the giant supermarket chain which once sponsored a very fine cycling team.

The marble is a paean to Marco Pantani, arguably the greatest sportsman this part of Italy has ever produced. Inside it we see him clad in a Mercatone Uno sponsored version of the fabled maglia rosa, hands on the drops in trademark fashion. The picture was taken in 1998, but the marble reminds Italians - not that they need reminding - of what Pantani once meant here.

In and around the hotel lobby area there are signed photographs - for the most part very

big ones - of champion cyclists. Pantani, a Giro / Tour double winner and the closest thing to sporting divinity in these parts, obviously takes pride of place. There are others, however, and even a cursory glance informs you that you're sat amidst a gallery of Giro d'Italia winners. As business hotels go this place is just about par for the course, but as a reminder of cycling's place in Italian hearts and minds it's absolutely sensational.

Amidst this pantheon, there's a picture of a guy crossing the finish line looking, frankly, not a little embarrassed. To the uninitiated he's difficult to identify, hardly surprising given that he won precisely two professional bike races in 18 long, hard years. Roberto Conti never wore the pink jersey (or the yellow one, or the one with the rainbows) and nor did he win so much as a stage at the race he grew up dreaming of conquering. He never scaled the heights as did Pantani, but rather toiled - for the most part anonymously - on his behalf on the behalf of others. His fame, such as it was, was strictly of the 15 minute variety.

The picture shows him winning atop Alpe D'Huez at the 1994 Tour, though in many respects the photo is illusory, a red herring. It doesn't tell us anything about Roberto Conti, though the look on his face gives the impression that he's surprised it might happen to him. By the following morning he'd regained his rightful position in the pecking order, and the truth is that, unlike the vast majority of Alpe d'Huez winners, he was never a big star. Why, then, have we traipsed 400 kilometres through a blizzard to see him?

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To truly understand Italy's endless love affair with racing, you need first appreciate something of the romance and symbolism associated with it. Italians revere their champions just as we all do, but they very well understand else that very few are chosen. The fact is that the overwhelming majority of bike riders aren't winners, and that informs a unique cycling culture. The perception of cycling is different here, for all sorts of reasons. Fundamentally though it has its roots in the profound admiration Italians have for those who suffer not for personal glory, but for that of another. Nowhere on Planet Cycling is the loyalty and altruism of the genuine gregario more appreciated, and nobody embodies the condition quite like Roberto Conti.

"I did 17 giri d'Italia, and I think only Miro Panizza did more," says Conti. "I rode for Marco Pantani, Moreno Argentin and a host of others. I had the highest highs and the lowest lows, but in reality I associate them more with helping others than with, say, the Tour de France stage. It was a great satisfaction to finish on Alpe d'Huez, but it's not how I define my career..."

The fact that he rode so many giri (and, for the record, 11 Tours de France) is illustrative, but only to a degree. The real clue to his popularity is to be found in his assertion that winning the queen stage of the Tour isn't representative of his cycling career. Ironically enough, it's one of the two giri he failed to finish that gives us a true indication of his worth.

"They made me abandon on the penultimate stage in 1996. I was working for Pavel Tonkov, and he managed to win that Giro, but I had 🚫"

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bronchitis and I was on my knees pretty much the whole time. It transpired I'd been riding the Giro with mononucleosis. I couldn't touch the bike for six months, and to be honest it'll probably cost me a year or two of my life. Oh well, niente da fare..."

Born in the Romagnolo hinterlands in 1964, Conti's is a classic Italian cycling story. He took up cycling because a neighbour was keen, but also because it was the only sport available to him.



"IN THE EARLY 1970s you played football or raced a bike," he reflects. "There was no football club in my village, and so that was that. I loved the Giro, but also the idea of cycling. It was my sport, yes, but it was also my way of learning about people and places I would never otherwise have heard of. So for me it meant discovery, and adventure."

A brilliant climber, he won the white jersey for best young rider at the 1987 Giro, his second. Many reckoned his would be a career spent at the top table, but he's honest enough to admit that he never considered outright leadership an option. He maintains that he was never good enough against the watch to seriously threaten the podium, and that his strength in the hills compromised by his shortcomings on the flat.

That's not to say there weren't offers. There were, but Conti's greatness as a gregario was underpinned by the fact that he was (and remains) totally devoid of conceit. He was a gregario by instinct and inclination, but also through choice. For him cycling wasn't about winning per se, but rather it was the way he expressed himself. He did that by helping others, because he's naturally predisposed to give. That, he tells us, is just the way he was made.

"I had a lot of shortcomings as a cyclist, but on a good day in the mountains I could ride with the best five or six," he says. "I'm not going to pretend I could have beaten the real champions, but I could do a good job protecting for my captain. I loved that, and I feel privileged to have worked for people like Pantani and Moreno Argentin. I couldn't have cared less about whether I finished fifth or 50th, because my job was to help them..."

The glory of the Alpe d'Huez stage, ostensibly a blip, is in point of fact entirely symptomatic. His leader, the Russian Tonkov, had abandoned two days earlier, and Conti simply assumed his responsibility to represent the team at the front of the race. His win was beautiful and romantic, and it helped him to a sixth-place finish on GC. Had he not been detailed to assist the ailing Tonkov it might have been better still, but it's by the by. The

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point is that even winning on the Alpe was predicated on a profound sense of duty. That's what made him the best in the business, and that's why he stayed in the professional peloton until he was almost 40. Like all the legendary gregari who preceded him, he informed his work with the generosity of his spirit. Had he not, had he had a fraction of the ego of the greats whom he served, his would have been a much shorter career. What comes around...

He reckons that between 1986 and 2003 he fetched and carried for 700,000 kilometres. The Tour provided his day in the sun, but it's the Giro which join the dots of his career.

"I love the Tour, and Italians love the Tour," he says. "We appreciate the quality of it, the ambition of it and above all the grandeur of it. If I think about my cycling life though, it was always the Giro. It was what we watched as kids, what old men in bars talked about, what



fired our imagination and our dreams. Italians watch the Tour, but we live the Giro. That's the difference for me."

Logically, therefore, it's through the Giro that he joins the dots of his career. It's his country's great sporting metaphor, and its peaks and troughs perfectly mirror his own. For the racing cyclist the Giro is an odyssey figuratively as well bodily, and Conti's story is a perfect example. In 1992 team orders cost him a stage win, and later the pink jersey, and it was around then that he declined a very good offer to ride in Spain. It was later, however, that he began truly to understand the music of the race.

"The Giro has a very big heart, but it doesn't give it up easily. You have to earn it, but if you do it will reward you tenfold. When I think of the defining moments of my career, the first thing that comes to mind is descending the Gavia in a blizzard in 1988. For a 23-year-old it was horrific, a calvary, but I'm eternally grateful for having been there that day."



IN 1998 HE WAS an integral - and at times magnificent - part of Pantani's annus mirabilis. It remains the defining moment of his career, but it very nearly happened. He'd been 31 when the mononucleosis had written off the 1996 season, and many assumed it would be the end of him as a cyclist. When Mercatone Uno invested in Pantani's brilliance it was il Pirata himself who came calling. A deeply insecure individual, he demanded absolute fidelity and knew precisely where to look. What followed, as they say, is history.

"The genuine gregario is instinctively loyal, and instinctively gives his utmost regardless," he says. "By the same token it's incumbent on his leader to respect the fact, and also to win not just for himself but for the entire team. In that sense Marco was a great leader.

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Regardless of his shyness, and of the struggles he had with himself later on, on the bike he was a great man and a great leader. Nothing will ever come close to the joy his winning in 1998 gave me."

The Giro giveth, the Giro taketh away. When DS Silvio Martinelli prevaricated over selecting the 1999 Giro team, Conti unilaterally absented himself from the selection process. It was the only Giro he would miss, but it would mutate into a catastrophe when maglia rosa Pantani was positive at Madonna di Campiglio.

"I was 35 when Martinelli fired me, but what annoyed me was the fact that he wasn't man enough to do it to my face. Instead he sent me a letter, which was pretty miserable after what we'd achieved together..."

Conti isn't given to recrimination, but nor did his professional pride allow him to take it lying down. He resolved to stop when he saw fit, and to leave the sport with his dignity intact. He won the Giro di Romagna, his local semi-classic, and would ride with distinction for four more seasons.

"Loyalty cuts both ways," he says. "I was no Pantani, and I was certainly no Miguel Indurain. I think I was good at what I did though, and I don't think anybody within cycling could question my integrity or professionalism."

The Giro is becoming less parochial, its peloton by extension less Italian. That's not

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necessarily a bad thing, but it makes it highly improbable there will be another stalwart like Roberto Conti. In leaving we put it to him that the evolution of the sport suggests that the great gregari of yore might eventually disappear altogether.

"I don't think so," he says. "It may be that nobody will ride 17 giri again, but being a gregario is a vocation. It's a calling to help others, and so for as as there is cycling there will be gregari..."

The gregario remains a hugely powerful image in Italian cycling. The symbolism surrounding him is immense, and people here understand the nobility implicit in his struggle. It's been argued that the Giro is Italy's great sporting allegory, and it's the gregario, not the champion, who best exemplifies his country's journey through the decades.

Notwithstanding the fanfare and drama of the fight for pink, it's through him that the true