



BRUNO REVERBERI

# MAN ON A WIRE

BRUNO REVERBERI'S GIRO D'ITALIA LOVE AFFAIR BEGAN 31 YEARS AGO, BUT SHOWS NO SIGN OF WANING. WE CATCH UP WITH ITALIAN CYCLING'S GREATEST SURVIVOR

When evoking the giants of the Giro d'Italia, there are three principle groups to factor in. One begins, logically enough, with the riders, and specifically with those synonymous with the pink jersey. Over the past three decades, for example, Bernard Hinault, Miguel Indurain, Marco Pantani and Alberto Contador have all contributed to the legend of the maglia rosa.

Of course without the creative and administrative talents of the race directors, there would be no Giro. In that sense Vincenzo Torriani, almost 50 years at the helm, was a colossus of the race. Carmine Castellano, his urbane successor, provided a safe pair of hands, before the turbulent years of Antonio Zomegnan's tenure ushered in the current era.

Perhaps even more influential are the great team owners, managers and direttore sportivi. It could be argued that the riders are (in relative terms at least) expendable, but without their guile, drive and entrepreneurial savvy, the sport of professional cycling simply wouldn't exist. Davide Boifava remains an iconic figure within the sport here, whilst Giancarlo Ferretti was hugely influential. Of the current crop, Andronni's Gianni Savio has become almost ubiquitous. Streetwise, charismatic and extrovert, his presence never fails to light up the Giro...

At the 1982 Giro, crafted by Torriani and won magnificently by Hinault, 60 per cent of the peloton was home-grown. Moreover, of the 18 teams were present, no less than 13 were Italian. The smallest of them, Termolan, was a new outfit run by a starry-eyed 40-year-old named Bruno Reverberi. As regards budget, experience and influence, they were out of their depth, but quietly and methodically this Reverberi shepherded them round. It was a very tough Giro that year, and just 110 completed it. That six of them were in Bruno Reverberi's charge represented a significant – though in truth largely unheralded – achievement. That almost to a man they were young neo-pros earning but a fraction of Hinault's salary, bordered on the miraculous.

Whilst bike racing methodology remains fundamentally the same, the Giro is a mirror on the times. It goes without saying that, 31 years on, cycling is a very different sport. The alchemist Torriani died in 1996, the class of '82 are long since retired, the sponsors either bankrupt or done with cycling.

Equally the mythical Italian team bosses, those for whom the Giro was the highlight of the season, are no more. Some have been pensioned off, but more still are behind the wheel of the great ammiraglia in the sky.

In a quiet corner of Emilia-Romagna, however, the last of them remains steadfast. As thoroughly and unfussily as ever he is readying himself – and his young, all Italian team – for a 31st Giro d'Italia. In a world increasingly dominated by huge salaries and bigger egos, Bruno Reverberi's Bardiani Valvole-CSF INOX team still has the lowest wage bill, the smallest roster, the fewest staff. He's never won a Giro d'Italia, in truth never looked remotely likely so to do, and has never once had a cycling superstar in his employ. Whilst the big mouths and hotshots are long gone, however, carried away by Italian cycling's tsunami, he remains steadfast. He alone will have an all-Italian team at the Giro and, as ever, it will be better for their presence. They will honour the race, just as they always do, but more importantly they will honour the past and present of Italian cycling...

Why, though, is Reverberi the last man standing? How is it that in a Giro peloton of 200 riders, his team will likely account for almost a quarter of its Italian constituents? The Giro, by its very nature inclusive, has become a truly multinational, multicultural affair. How has he prevailed, and can he continue to thrive in a world which seems increasingly to be at variance with his own?

"It's probably true that I'm the last of them, but there's no secret per se. People seem to assume we're still here despite our representing a traditional set of values," he says. "For me the opposite is true; we're still here because we haven't changed, and because we're true to our origins and to the sport itself. We refuse to enter the World Tour merry-go-round, refuse to chase success by spending money we don't have, refuse absolutely the idea that you need to speculate to accumulate.

"This is a family business. Roberto, my son, manages the day-to-day stuff now, but I'm still involved and I still love it. It might seem archaic, but we still run the thing along old-school Italian cycling lines. Our entire budget probably wouldn't pay Contador's wages for a year, but we're still here, and we owe nobody a penny. We're completely debt-free, and our 🍷



riders will never have to worry about being paid..."

Reverberi accepts that cycling has come a long way since he set out all those years ago, but not that all change is by definition for the better. Back then he'd twelve riders on the books (because he only needed nine at any given time), with a mechanic, a medic and a soigneur. That was the model, and the Giro was comprised largely of Italian teams riding Italian races. His cost base was low, and you spread the financial risk by having multiple sponsors. They weren't - and still aren't - paying over the odds, but nor is the future of the team dependent on one huge corporate backer. He's adamant that, more than ever in this most testing of times, it's the right approach.



"MOST OF THE Italian teams have gone now, but most have been undone by their own vanity and naked ambition," he says. "They assumed they needed to be in the World Tour, and for that they needed massive budgets. You don't, and nor did you ever. What you need in cycling is what you always needed. You need to deliver the sponsors what you promise, to remain solvent and to have a totally transparent anti-doping attitude. There's no way we'd ever engage an ex-doper, regardless of whether or not he claims to be reformed. Of course there are always offers, but they are a disaster for the image of the team and for the sponsors. We can't police the riders 24/7, but we have a duty to make them understand that it's not acceptable under any circumstances..."

Whilst the World Tour teams have a minimum 25 riders, Bardiani retain 17, one above the minimum requirement for Pro Continental status. The difference, of course, is that the big guns invariably have two teams on the road at any given time. In relative

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terms, however, the overheads these days are astronomical. They have an army of ancillary staff, but many of the World Tour races still don't fire the public imagination. Whilst Reverberi would like to be able to promise sponsors and riders alike that they'll be in all of them, he's not prepared to risk it all on being there.

"Ours is a small team, with a budget of €2 million. Don't confuse small with inefficient though, because we're absolutely compact and absolutely focussed," he says. "The riders want for nothing, and there is a genuine sense of unity here. I don't actually need seventeen riders, because only nine are ever racing at any given time. I sometimes think it's regulation for regulation's sake. I maintain that the World Tour business model doesn't stack up in the current climate. Sky can do it, and teams like BMC and Omega, which are basically millionaire's hobbies. Astana and Katusha are state-funded, but beyond that it's totally top-heavy, and it's terribly damaging for the grass roots of the sport."

All of which leads us back to the Giro. It remains the lifeblood of the team, but with only four wild cards available, Reverberi walks a tightrope each year to be there. Bardiani have been performing this high wire act since the Pro Tour's inception in 2005, but for all their excellence and innate understanding

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of cycling, they remain a hostage to fortune. Bruno and Roberto Reverberi know the game inside out, but a Giro no-show is unthinkable. Fail to get there and the sponsors are likely to bail out, but spend too much to facilitate it and you risk drowning in debt.

Bruno's team for 2013 is a case in point. For eight years he had Domenico Pozzovivo on the books. Pozzovivo was always a punchy, daring little climber, but essentially a nearly man. That all changed last May when he finally delivered on the biggest stage of all. He won a beautiful Giro stage at Lago Laceno, and the vultures immediately started to circle. Aged 30 now, he had a big decision to make. On the one hand he'd his loyalty to Reverberi and to the Bardiani "family" which made him the cyclist he has become. On the other was the fact that AG2R were offering a fourfold increase in salary, and a cast-iron guarantee that he'd be able to choose between the Giro and the Tour. The



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Pozzovivo saga is nothing new, but in leaving he became the latest in a very long list.

“Down the years I’ve had the same issue to deal with dozens of times,” he reflects. “Essentially it’s a calculation you have to make, but it’s basically intuitive. I could have gone to the sponsors and said, “Look, if we pay this amount he’ll stay.” It may be that that they would have paid it, but by definition you’re upping the stakes. If he then got injured, or ill, they wouldn’t get a return on their investment, and so that’s a big risk for me and for them. That’s the conundrum; you want to win, and your sponsors want to win. Your instinct is to do everything you can to make it happen, but there are no guarantees in cycling. Experience tells me that you can’t risk it all on one rider...”

It often seems that Bardiani is a kind of cycling finishing school, and the impression is reinforced by the fact that none amongst this years’ crop is over 25. They arrive barely formed, but by the time they move on to the World Tour circus they generally have a pretty decent understand of the job. It’s their raw talent, therefore, that distinguishes the wheat from the chaff. Reverberi’s mightn’t be the loudest voice in cycling, but he knows very well how to exploit cycling potential.



HIS MODUS OPERANDI keeps the costs under control, but by the same token only results guarantee a Giro start. That’s why it’s so imperative he keeps unearthing the gems. Pozzovivo’s departure, and that of Gianluca Brambilla, mean opportunities for new young guns and more responsibility for the more established riders. The likes of Sacha Modolo, who’s already beaten Cavendish this term, become even more critical.

“The fact is that the Giro is the most important race for any Italian team. A lot of what we do, therefore, is geared towards being

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there. Of course we can’t hope to win it with a budget like ours, but we understand that if we’re to survive we have to make an impression in May. Once we know we’ll be present the trick is to construct a team which will give us the best chance of being successful, and to commit to it totally. That’s the magic of the Giro and that’s why, after all these years, I keep coming back. They say it’s the most beautiful race in the world, but for us it’s more than that. It’s simply the race.”

As you immerse yourself in the race this year, bear in mind that success at the Giro is relative. We’re unlikely to see Bruno Reverberi’s “Green Team” scrapping it out for GC, but keep an eye on them anyway. You can be sure that, notwithstanding their size, they will be perfectly formed. There will be shortcuts, no scandals, no half measures and no media histrionics. While others will approach the Giro with varying degrees of conviction, Bruno Reverberi will bring along 31 years of cycling intelligence. He will bring along the culture, values and history of the Italian sport, and a team absolutely committed to the race that most matters.

The Giro d’Italia - and indeed all of bike racing - has a great deal to thank him for... 