

Reporting For Duty

by Phil Macdonald

Call him ‘a joey’, ‘a gopher’ or ‘a jack-of-all-trades dogsbody’. Phil Macdonald explains what it really means to be a soigneur.

I knew what a soigneur was. I’d seen them at the Tour. They had tans as good as any rider and they wore Oakleys and shorts because the bike races I watched always seemed to be sunny. Soigneurs watched the drama of the race unfold and heard the tales of combat from the warriors themselves on the massage table. ‘Swanning’ was glamorous and anything so glamorous couldn’t be that difficult.

It was at Tour of the Reservoir in 2015, my first race for Team Wiggins on a freezing April weekend of throat-slashing wind and burning sleet, that I questioned this view. That evening, prior to the opening stage, I spoke with our team manager about the role. Job description? There wasn’t one. “I won’t lie,” he said, “it’s a shit job.”

Fast forward two seasons and I find myself in Glasgow a couple of days prior to stage 1 of the 2016 Tour of Britain. I know more or less what to expect having worked the same event last season. Days will be long – like filling the first bidon of 50-odd around 6:30am, and wiping the oil off the day’s final set of tired legs some time, God willing, before 9pm. There will be driving aplenty, some of it frightening and not strictly speaking legal. There will be the kind of friction that occurs when sleep-deprived men toil into the darkness, delaying the filling up of empty stomachs and the anaesthetising effects of the hotel bar. And because on this team we have a legend riding possibly his final road race on these shores, there will be fans wherever we park our vehicles. Tons of them.

The Start

Even without Brad in the race, getting to and from the start, feed and finish of a stage is a bit of a battle. The frenzy of attention he creates just adds to the carnage of the team parking area. Back in the day parking areas could easily accommodate the race convoy – and then came Death Stars and vehicles for media representatives, personalised washing machines and official pillow bearers. Getting to the start early and marking your territory is key.

If you’ve hung around team buses at the start of a race you’ll have noticed a good deal of hands in pockets. Filling and shaking bidons and doing other soigneur duties in view of an audience just doesn’t look pro, hence getting everything done before leaving the hotel.

'Everything' in this case means filling and cramming bidons into cool boxes, cutting and wrapping the rice cakes you made the previous day, preparing musettes for the feed, making sandwiches for the staff lunch, not to mention ensuring that the camper is clean for the riders and that any damp laundry from the night before is dried and left at breakfast for the riders to pick up. Make at least a mental note of whatever you're running out of in terms of bottled water, sandwich fillings and other food – it won't replenish itself and you won't be surprised to learn that it's the swanny's job to do the shopping too!

Some time around sign-on, bottles go on bikes. What the riders want in terms of start bottles isn't quite like ordering from Starbucks, but no doubt it will get there. The old school were content with water, maybe even some coke. Today's riders request some combination of water, hydro tabs and 'X', or 'mix', or 'energy', which all refers to the same stuff. If you've seen pro team bidons marked up with an X on the lid, now you know why. At least one rider is likely to be awkward and ask to start with a protein shake, but as you make it, grudgingly, think in horror of the likelihood that in a few years time you'll be preparing the athletic equivalent of a double-shot, skinny organic fair trade latte with essence of cinnamon.

During this time riders will be getting ready inside the motorhome, music thumping – the louder and more inappropriate the better, it seems. Apart from a very brief, very brisk leg-rubbing with shiny, sinus-clearing embrocation, your job as swanny is to get out of the way and let them get on with it. However matey you may be, this is their time. The warriors are preparing for battle, and your own race is about to begin.

The Sky Effect

You'll be familiar with the effect that Team Sky has had on the professional peloton. From the Death Star superbus to the turbo warm-downs, where Team Sky lead others follow. This has filtered down to the minutiae of soigneur work, too. No longer are our riders awarded with that much-prized elixir at the finish – a mini Coke. Instead, we give them a watered-down pineapple juice to aid hydration and start the recovery process. Rice cakes, also pioneered by Sky, have become a staple in the musettes of even the lowliest of conti teams. Unlike the desiccated, mouth-adhesive rice crackers you may be thinking of, rice cakes are cooked, flavoured and wrapped daily by the ever-depleted swannie. Likewise, hand sanitiser gel is now purchased in quantities one might bathe in. Riders have their own pillows. Marginal gains for some, marginal pains in the arse for others. There's no doubt that the Sky Effect is raising everyone's game. Still, I take comfort in the fact that the old school continues to loom large. In the words of one British Cycling DS: "They want rice cakes, do they? Tell them to win some stages first, then we'll talk about fucking rice cakes."

The Feed

From now on your sat nav is not to be trusted. Roads will be closed and this applies to soigneur vehicles too. Leave the start area for the feed after the race has gone if you have plenty of time to get there. Otherwise get away before the race leaves, or risk closed roads, lengthy deviations, hungry riders and an evening of shame and revilement. Feed zones are invariably located in hostile, 3G-free locations, and soigneurs are the last people to know what's going on in the race. "How much has the break got?" Umm, I've no idea. But to answer your next question, I've got six bottles here for six riders, and until I see all six pass by you can't have one. Unless you're offering some sort of swap deal involving that bottle of Leffe in your hand, in which case let's talk...

Phil Macdonald on duty for Team Wiggins
Photograph by Dan Monaghan





So you've parked up (on the left) and are preparing to feed (on the right). Hopefully it's an uphill, draggy road, meaning slow riders and a safe feed, although this isn't always the case, especially in the flatlands of Holland and Belgium. Put aside all thoughts of having your own shoulder yanked out of joint and take a deep breath, for no matter how many times you've done it, it still gets your heart pumping. Bottles or musettes at the ready, here comes the bunch...

The bottle feed:

Risks: glenohumeral dislocation, wrath of rider
DO: dry the bottle to avoid slippage
DO: hold bottle by the lid at shoulder height to give the rider a good amount of grab room
DON'T: point any attached gels in the direction of the oncoming rider, which will result in a splat, a wasted gel, and ultimately as the swannie it will be your job to scrub sticky caffeine electrolyte from your rider's mitts and jersey. Regardless of any tactical numptiness on the rider's part, they will blame you for their loss. Take it on the chin.

The musette feed:

Bag feeds are easier for the swannie to deliver. Tie a knot in the strap as a stopper in case it slips through the rider's fingers. Fill with two bottles, a baby Coke, a selection of gels, bars and rice cakes. If in doubt, copy what Sky do. By stage 3 of a stage race your riders will be crying out for 'morale food' – a Snickers, Mars bar or other such nutritionally dubious confectionery. Be strong – no morale food until halfway through the stage race!

Risks: A musette loaded with momentum and a whizzing chainset is not a pretty combination. It may not have been your fault, but from the first echo of carbon scraping on tarmac to the whimpers your rider makes as you peel the bedsheets from their seeping wounds the following day, it will feel like it was.

"All we are saying, is give us some crap." If the feed doesn't go to plan, the riders can always come back to the car; the DS and mechanic, however, cannot stop at Sainsbury's. In the morning you'll have lovingly prepared a delicious, not to mention nutritious baguette or wrap for lunch. Be prepared to have this thrown back in your face

(metaphorically speaking) if you have not also provided what one Wiggins DS describes as "some crap". A post-career reward for a former professional cyclist is the license to eat all manner of "crap", and a team car devoid of Haribo, crisps, chocolate bars and cans of pop is a dark and unhappy place. If your staff lunch is not a recipe for diabetes, have a rethink and start again.

More Than A Bike Race

Most of the riders I work with are young – U23 – and especially when racing abroad you're conscious that the most important of all your duties by far is to return your riders home safely. This season our riders have donated various bits of skin to stretches of tarmac throughout the continent and I had a broken hand to deal with at U23 Paris-Roubaix. Standard stuff, treatment of which falls to – you guessed it – the soigneur! For the rider it's race over, and despite the frustration there is always next time.

Sadly for one rider this season there would be no next time. Gijs Verdick rode for a Dutch team, Cyclingteam Jo Piels, who were staying at the same hotel as us in Poland during the Carpathian Couriers U23 race. Around midnight after the penultimate stage Gijs suffered a heart attack in his room and after a desperate two hours of chest compressions given by our mechanic, he was taken away by ambulance, breathing by himself but critical. Over the next few days he suffered another heart attack and brain damage, but our mechanic's heroic intervention allowed Gijs the time to be returned home to die peacefully, surrounded by his family.

In the end, people matter. Caught up in the stress of a bike race it's easy to kid yourself that a missed feed or a slow bike change are events of life-changing significance, when after all, it's just a bike race. Rest in peace, Gijs. Team Wiggins will always be on your wheel.

The Finish

Once the riders are through the feed it's full throttle to the finish, a white-knuckle experience to rival any rollercoaster. Once there we make space for the riders to get clean and changed, prepare recovery shakes and take post-race drinks to the finish line. Unless one of the riders has made the podium, the main focus for everyone at the finish is to get out of there as fast as possible, because despite the race being over, the real work for both swanny and mechanic will begin at the next hotel.

The Evening Shift

Massage may be only one job among many, but there's no escaping the fact that it takes up the most time. You might switch the rice cooker on and sort out the cool boxes, too, but it is 'rubs' that fill the gap between check-in and a very belated dinner. We're spoiled at the Tour of Britain with relatively nice hotels and spacious rooms. In most races this is not the case, and you generally need a thorough restructure just to fit your massage table into the room. Single beds will be piled one on top of the other, chairs balanced precariously on top of tables. It's not unusual to see massages done in hotel corridors for this very reason.

Some like it hard, some more gentle, some riders are vocal and others more quiet (and before you ask, yes we are still talking about massage). Aside from any effects on the muscles themselves, I suspect that the most beneficial part of 'rubs' is the time and space they allow a rider to relax. As one rider said to me, amid the stress, physical exertion and general chaos of a stage race, massage, "is good for the head".

It is during massage that you learn what actually happened during the race. How savage it was before the break finally went, how sketchy the descent was, whose fault the crash was. Especially if the rider has had a bad day, you as the swannie are there to pick them up – part leg-rubber, part sounding board, part agony aunt. Somewhere between two and three hours later your rubbing duties are complete and if you've eaten before 9pm you can count it as a good day.

#swannielife

For every sun-drenched road race there are several dozen more held in cold and pissing rain. Stripping away any pretence of glamour, what is a swannie, really? A glorified sandwich maker, bottle filler and driver. If you can slap some oil on legs and hold a conversation about farting then you have the complete skill set. It's not a hard job to do (although harder to do well) and it's not exactly well paid. In many ways, my first team manager was right – on paper, it is a shit job. The point, and perhaps the reason I and many others continue to do it, is because it isn't just a job. At the risk of sounding very clichéd, it's more of a lifestyle. Through swanny-ing, I've been fortunate enough to visit some fabulous places, not only headline-grabbers like Dubai but also some lovely areas of the UK. I've driven cars and stayed in hotels I will never be able to afford. I've shared golf buggies with legends of the sport and had victory champagne sprayed in my face. I've experienced how it feels to be a small but vital cog in the machinery of a team. Soigneur is not the French term for jack-of-all-trades dogsbody, but simply means 'carer', and I suspect that most of us do the job to live out our own dreams through the riders we work with. Where we failed, we hope desperately for them to succeed. It's a shit job that I feel very privileged to do.

As I write this I'm putting a list together of stuff to take to the Tour of Abu Dhabi, the final race of the season and a low-stress affair by all accounts. It's been a busy season for me and I'm looking forward to some desert sun and a return to normal life afterwards, meaning reasonable sleeping hours and weekends off. I don't think it will be too long, though, before I'm eagerly anticipating early season racing and such delights as the Chorley GP in March, which this year was a bitterly cold, torrential downpour of a race. I must be nuts. Frankly, you have to be.

When Phil is not working as a soigneur he runs his own sports therapy clinic, based at the Climbing Hangar, Liverpool, where he specialises in rock climbing and of course cycling injuries.

See his website for more:
www.sportstherapyliverpool.co.uk

Above: Photograph by Phil Macdonald

Below: Photograph by Trevor Gornall

