

FABIAN CANCELLARA

– Interview by Velvet Garvey, Qatar

The last 12 months have been tumultuous for Fabian Cancellara. He has experienced bitter disappointment after losses due to crashes and injury, only to recover to record-breaking wins. Such is the nature of cycling for the aptly named ‘Spartacus’, who’s powerful and resilient performance has led him to success at Olympic, World Championship and Grand Tour levels.

He is considered to be one of best all-round cyclists of his generation, and in fact, amongst the latest batch of ‘up and comers’ he’s still reigning king. He is arguably the best ‘against the clock’ cyclist in the world; so fast that he was once accused of having engine on his bike (he didn’t!).

From the cobbles of the one-day races to the stages of Le Tour, the 32-year-old tells Velvet Garvey of the intense physical and emotional pressures of being a pro cyclist, and that sometimes, you just need a break.





INTERVIEW: CANCELLARA

How much do you train per year?

I do approximately 25,000 km/year by bike on hills and flat road. This includes around 80 race days, depending on the programme. So for around 200/250 days per year you are away from home and not sleeping in your own bed. We train whether there's rain or no rain, sun or no sun. It's a hard job and sometimes you have difficult moments for example, when you crash.

Tell us about injuries in cycling.

You have to look at the end result of the crashes. You have two types of crashes: minor crashes, which result in bruises and scratches, or major crashes which damage your bone, muscle or ligaments or you

break something. There is a big difference. Bruises are easier to get – we get many of them.

The way that injuries happen is strange. Sometimes you can crash at 60 km/hour and you don't break anything, but sometimes stupid things happen at 5 km/hour and you could break your collarbone or elbow. In cycling it is actually quite common to get injured at that speed because when we ride full gas we are on adrenaline, the body is ready for when you crash and you are concentrating, but when you are not concentrating and you fall like a stone, you damage more of your body. That's what I found out by myself when I crashed. A common injury in cycling is a broken collarbone. I have crashed many times in my career, but I have been really lucky that until last

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

2013 Won his 3rd Paris Roubaix race (2013, 2010, 2006) (set new record of 44.2 km/hour)

2013 Won his 2nd Tour of Flanders (2013, 2010)

2013 Won his 3rd E3 Harelbeke (2013, 2011, 2010)

2012 Won his 7th Swiss National Time Trial Championship

2012 Tour de France: Wore the yellow jersey for 28 days, the most days by a person who has not actually won the race

2012 Won his 2nd Strade Bianche (first rider to win the race twice: 2012, 2008)

2010 Won his 4th UCI Road World Championships (2010, 2009, 2007, 2006)

2008 Named Swiss sportsman of the year

2008 Silver medal at Beijing Olympic Games Road Race

2008 Gold medal at Beijing Olympic Games Time Trial

2008 Won Milan – San-Remo

2001 Won Tour of Rhodes, his first win as a professional

year I had never broken my collarbone. Now that I have, I like to say I'm part of 'The Broken Collarbone Club' because there are so many riders who have broken their collarbones more than once!

When you broke your collarbone during the 2012 Tour of Flanders and you decided to have surgery, how did you decide where to go for the surgery?

To be honest, at the time I couldn't really speak because I was full of painkillers! I was in so much pain that I couldn't have made a choice like that on my own. The decision was made with the team Radioshack Leopard Trek and Andreas Goesele who is our team doctor as well as the owner of the team, Flavio Becca. We

decided that I should fly back to Switzerland and get it operated on straight away. I crashed at 2.00 pm and by 6.00 pm I was already in Switzerland and by 8.00 pm I was in the operating theatre. The day after the operation I felt like I could already move a bit because I was treated so quickly after the injury. Luckily it went really well.

When were you back on your bike?

That took a while – around 3 weeks. There are two considerations when coming back from an injury: the mental state of the athlete and the physical state of the injury. How you feel and how much you want to push might not necessarily be the only consideration. With this injury I wanted to let my body recover 100%.

How is the injury now?

I think it has healed well. The thing is that the muscles around the injury also have to heal, not just the bone itself. It was tender for a long time after my recovery and that held me back mentally a bit. Even now, almost a year later, I still feel that the muscle is still weaker on the right side where I broke it compared to the left side.

Did you follow any rehabilitation programme afterwards?

Yes, I started physiotherapy twice a week. I started with some recovery exercises and then training on the bike as well. I had lost some muscle in my right arm so we started slowly to put some weight on and do some exercises to rebuild the muscles that had been lost.

Would you say that collarbone injury was your worst injury?

Yeah, that was the most major. It was not a simple break. From what I know, it broke in four places. After I had recovered I crashed during the road race at the London Olympics and injured my collarbone again. It didn't break it, it just got more callus. A callus grew big like a little balloon, like an extra bone. It was quite disturbing! I had it for many months. Eventually it became smaller but it took a while. It seems like the damage done by a second crash takes much longer to heal than the initial crash, in the case of a collarbone injury.

After those two bad crashes I stopped riding completely. These two big crashes came at the worst possible moments in my career, when I was at 100%. It's not good but that's life and sport.

As an athlete, do you expect to get injured one day? Is there anything you do to prevent injury?

No, but whether it's going to happen or not is something you don't get to decide; it just happens. Some people can go through their whole life as an athlete without any injuries and yet I have friends who have broken their ribs six or seven times, had four collarbone breaks and a broken elbow.



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What about illness prevention as opposed to injury prevention? How many illnesses do you get a year and how many days training does it cost you?

As an athlete, taking care of my immune system is the most important thing. I am cautious but I still get ill. When we get sick, whether we use medicine like antibiotics is always up to the doctors; they decide. Our doctors are usually very strict when it comes to illness. If a rider had a fever of 40°C, the doctor would not let him start, even if he had taken paracetamol and the fever had gone down. The team doctors say it is better to recover than ride. What counts the most is being at 100% healthy otherwise you won't get anywhere.

We have many rules around the medication we can take so we always get medical advice. We can't always take the next pill that we think will make us healthy so we learn that taking pills to be healthy is not the solution. There are other ways to get healthy.

We work very hard to build our immune system, especially in the winter. We also work on making sure we have enough vitamins and trace elements to perform well.

I have learnt to notice when my body is at its weakest. I have found that a lot of stress can cause me to get sick. Another weak moment for my body is after a race. If you stand around sweaty and don't change quickly you can get sick. After a race is the weakest time for your body and you become susceptible to viruses and bacteria, because your immune system is low. You have to take a shower straight away, make sure your hair is dry and you have to stay warm.

As athletes we have to look at every detail and to pay attention to our body 365 days a year. Even on holidays you have to make sure you don't put on weight. This is not just our sport, it's our lifestyle. And it also affects the lifestyle of my wife and my kids; this type of prevention is important for your whole life.

We are taught to always be aware. For example, if you're at the train station, make sure that you don't sit next to someone with a cough. You have to wash your hands regularly. It is my job to look out for my health.

Do you follow any nutritional strategies?

Yes, I follow a healthy nutrition guide. We have nutritionists. We also get a lot of input from our doctors because they know what is good for us. They find the best nutritional regime for us, the best food



Image: Cancellara races to third place in the individual time trial in stage nine of the 2012 Tour de France from Arc-et-Senans to Besancon in July 2012.



Image: Fabian Cancellara on his way to winning the 254 km-long Paris - Roubaix race in April, 2013.

for recovery, the best food to eat in a particular situation etc. Our doctors are not just there to give out tablets – they are there to help us with our performance so we can win races.

What is a good team doctor for you? What role does he have in your daily athletic activity?

For me the doctor is the most diversely functioning person we have. He is involved in our condition, in our health, in our mental state, in our emergency cases, in our complication cases and in our personal situations. The doctor is one of the best people to guide us. The doctor is there for many different things. That is important for me – having someone who is with you at the start of the race, who is with you at the doping control or who can clean your bruises when you are injured. The biggest part of a doctor's job is to look after athlete health, but this alone is not everything. It is a huge job.

Many people argue that a team doctor should not be too close to the riders. Do you agree?

I personally need a doctor who is close to me, but other riders don't. The doctors must find out for themselves who needs their support and who doesn't. This is important because if a doctor is constantly going up to an athlete but that athlete doesn't like the contact, you can make him angry. In my opinion it is an important relationship, not because of the doctor patient confidentiality but because when I talk with the doctor, I feel that I can talk about anything. It is just

something about that relationship that makes you open yourself up more.

How do you see the role of the team doctor within the team? Do you think he is under a lot of pressure?

Yes, he is under a lot of pressure. He must make the call whether to put a rider on the start line. When we perform, the pressure is on him because the fitness of the riders is up to him. When someone is injured in cycling they need time to recover and the doctors are there to give you that time. But there is always pressure for them to get the rider back on the bike as soon as possible. But doctors are usually quite good about rider health. For example if you have lost 4 kg after an illness they will not make you race. They will make sure you do what you need to get back to fitness, whether it's just regaining the weight that you lost or going to a training camp. These are the kinds of decisions they face. But in the end, the riders have to pedal by themselves. No one is going to push us to the finish line. It is a hard sport, even when it looks easy.

How have you seen the development of the physiotherapist in a cycling team?

Traditionally we have always had a soigneur. He usually does the massage but also does odd jobs for the team. For example he might organise our meals, do the race preparation, bring your suitcases to your room, he might even clean your helmet. He is the person



Image left: Cancellara carries his bike across the finish line during the 6th and penultimate stage of the Tour of Germany in June 2003. Cancellara's bike broke down 100 m from the finish, forcing him to finish on foot, and take 9th place. Image by Michael Kappeler/AFP/Getty Images

Image right: Cancellara competing in the prologue and individual time-trial run around Rotterdam during the 2010 Tour de France. Image by Pascal Pavani/AFP/Getty Images

Image right down: Cancellara celebrates winning the 2013 Paris - Roubaix.



who runs around all day from 7.00 am till 10.00 pm. But sometimes you need special treatments. A soigneur is a good 'all in one' but it is very hard to find someone who will do all this work and is also an expert masseur. These days it's not easy to find someone in this role because they have to have studied for many years to get not just a chiropractic or physiotherapy licence, but a soigneur licence as well. Can you imagine finding a good physio who will also then prepare your equipment? It wouldn't work. That is why this is an area that is changing – it's just not possible that everyone can do everything. When I started professional cycling we did not pay so much attention to small things like brake positions, bike fitting, track testing and equipment. Now this is all being taken into account. Physiotherapy in cycling is getting more and more sophisticated. Recently we invited an osteopath from Italy to join the team for the classic races in spring. We rely on him in the case of injury but also to maintain our body alignment and stability etc. Physiotherapy in cycling is focussing more and more on the little details of the body. It is also becoming apparent that there is a difference between a masseur and a physiotherapist.

What is the ideal team doctor for you? What would he do what skills would he have?

In our team we have about 27 different riders and everyone has a different opinion but in my opinion we have the best doctors. I am able to spend a lot of time with them and that is what I need; that is what counts. I prefer to have a person who is more than just the doctor. A person has to be sympathetic and nice. If he

is not then I can't get close. I want to be able to get on well with him and that he is personable. But of course on the other hand he has to have many professional skills. I appreciate these skills but for me, a doctor's personality is really important, not just what he can do professionally. For me, the personality counts first and then after that, if he's good at his job then that's good for me. I have had doctors who are not bad people but I just don't get along with them and that's fine. I don't have to get along with all of them but I think you need to have one or two who are close to you. As an athlete I think it is important to have people around you who know you well, and you know them. I think it's easier to work together if you are comfortable with each other on a personal level.



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You say that after the Olympics in August 2012 you stopped riding and went home. How did it feel to be injured, and how did you pick yourself up again?

I think that this is something that is missing in sport. In my situation I wasn't alone because I was with my family. I was also in contact with my doctors regularly and because of this the doctors immediately recognised that I had a problem outside of my physical injury. They could see that perhaps I needed to recover my mental health as well. I can't say that I pushed for this kind of recovery but now that I have taken the break I can see that it was quite obvious that I needed to take a break and take it easy and to relieve some of the stress I felt.

You have to get over the bad things that happen but first you have to realise what happened, how it happened and then you have to take time to recover from that event and switch on again. Sometimes it is easy and sometimes it is not. Some days I trained alone and I felt off. I had to restart – I just had to do it. It can help to not think about it too much. When you have a season like I did with two crashes at the most important events of the year when you are in good condition you feel like you have lost something. Mentally, it is not easy to recover from this so I just had to take the time to be with my family and my friends, to enjoy life and to just be a normal person rather than an athlete. The best recovery is to go back to basics, take a break, rest and see life from a different perspective. This can make your recovery easier rather than just constantly thinking about your life as a bike rider.

Velvet Garvey

