



Image_Jonathan Devich

levi's vuelta

It's was a long season for Astana's Levi Leipheimer. With his overall victory in the Amgen Tour of California, bronze in the Beijing Olympics, to 2 stage wins and second overall in the general classification at the Vuelta d' España, he racked up podium time from one side of the globe to the other. With his feet up and relaxing back in California, Leipheimer took the time to reflect on his most recent races: the Vuelta where the team dominated, to his disappointment at the World Championships when he thought a medal in the time trial was within reach. He gives an insight on the headline news of his retired teammate coming back with the intention of winning his eighth Tour de France. Next year's Astana training camp is going to be very interesting.

How confident did you feel coming into the Vuelta? I would define my state of mind as relaxed. I was taking it as it comes and I've always had my best races when I'm like that. We knew that Alberto was the guy no matter what. We wanted him to win. I got the medal in Beijing and won a race beforehand so I was relaxed and ready.

Do you thrive better under pressure or does it matter? I've had really good races when I've had pressure and I've had good races when I'm relaxed. I think it's always better to be relaxed. I've been listening to a relaxing CD called Liquid Fitness and it has helped me relax. It helps me get going in the right direction. You need to tell yourself to relax. I always try to tell myself to physically relax, one muscle and then another. I even do it during a race when there is a downhill.

Does the Astana employ sport psychologists? It's funny, but a lot of the staff, soigneurs, mechanics, and doctors take it upon themselves to be the psychologists, especially with this team. They try to keep everyone's moral up. It's kind of like having 20 sports psychologists. It's one thing that this team does really well.

How was Alberto Contador's form going into the Vuelta? His English is as good as my Spanish, so we can't communicate that well. But it was easy to tell that he had that pressure on his shoulders and he was feeling it. He was a little stressed throughout the race. I think that is typical.

He's 25 and on the verge of making history (to win all three Grand Tours) and it's his home tour. How can you not have any kind of pressure? It took a lot from the team to stay focused. We had the whole Lance thing come out during the race and there was the pressure of leading the race. It was a lot to deal with.

You had the advantage of going into the Vuelta without the attention from the media. Now that's gone. Will the attention now affect you in any way or is it business as usual for you? I've already been third in the Tour, third in the Vuelta and won some other races, so I don't know if it has changed that much because of the Vuelta. Maybe the fact that we were really close on time changed it a little bit. If we go to the Tour next year, and I tell you it is a long time before we go to the Tour so I don't even know what is going to happen or who is going to be on the team, I will definitely try to do my best as always. I'm just a much a favorite as before this year's Vuelta.

Your first stage win was the time trial. Was it one of those days that you knew you felt good? I won a race before the Vuelta and was feeling good. I knew it was a good time trial for me. I had seen the course. I won't say that it was a special day like last year's Tour time trial win, but it was a good day and I rode to my maximum.

The penultimate stage of the Vuelta, the time trial, you won as well. It's said that the strongest rider wins

that stage. Do you feel that was the case with you? On that day I was the strongest rider, and maybe you could say that on the last few days I was the strongest rider. Overall Alberto was the best rider. He won the race on the L'Angliru with all the pressure. He deserves to win and I don't have any regrets about being the strongest rider and not winning the race. That would really suck. It hasn't even crossed my mind. I feel that I was the strongest rider on that time trial and was motivated to win.

The deciding stage seemed to be stage 13 up the L' Angliru (Contador took the stage and the lead). Take us through that stage. It was one of those days that really stands out. The entire team stepped up and took control of the race and ripped it apart. The last stage of Paris-Nice when Alberto won the race, that was a day we did that. The Tour of California on the stage to San José was one of those days. On the L'Angliru we took control from the beginning and the guys rode the entire day at the front and had the peloton hurting. On the penultimate climb we were already using our lowest gears, 34x28. (Sergio) Paulinho went up that incredibly fast. We had to tell him to slow down. And then there was only 20 to 25 guys left at the top. We ripped down the descent. Rubiera and Klöden brought it to the steep part. By then it was 10 to 12 guys left. I did a kilometer or two on the steep part and then it was just Alberto and Valverde. It was a special day to take control of the race and see everyone else hang on. It doesn't happen too often.

It seemed that was the strategy of the day or was it something that was formulated on the road? If you look at the Vuelta it was going to be these stages and we had the favorite. We set a goal of having Alberto win that day and win the Vuelta. We kept Alberto in control the 2 weeks before because he was really anxious to get going and attack. We told him, 'Calm down. You need to think about the L'Angliru.' We got him to save as much energy that day. In contrast if you look at the Giro this year the team and Alberto were just hanging on and trying to pull off the win on the coattails of everyone else. We didn't have the team to control the race and no one was at their best, including Alberto. To come to the Vuelta and have the strongest team where everyone is at their best and take control is a lot of fun.

[IMAGE_01] Stage 5's individual time trial where Levi won the day over Sylvain Chavanel by 12 seconds and 49 seconds over Contador. The win put Levi in the leader's jersey for a moment. He took it back after stage 8 and then lost it after stage 9. Egoi Martinez held it until Contador's victory on stage 13.

[IMAGE_02] Stage 13 was the day that Contador took the lead besting Alejandro Valverde Belmonte by 42 seconds and Carlos Sastre by 1 minute, 32 seconds. It wouldn't have happened without Levi who came in 1 minute, 5 seconds behind Contador.

[IMAGE_03] Team Astana controlled the tempo from stage 13 on and though it seemed that Contador's fate as champion was sealed, Levi made some serious noise on stage 20's individual time trial winning the day. He took 31 seconds out of second place finisher Contador and Valverde and just north of 1 minute out of Sastre.

[IMAGE_04] The final day's celebration with second place overall Leipheimer celebrating with teammate and GC winner Alberto Contador, and third place finisher Carlos Sastre.

Stage 14 Contador took another stage win. However Ezequiel Mosquera (Xacobeo Galicia) was hoping to be given the stage win for his work. Are the days of 'gift' wins over? No I think it has more to do with the circumstances. I didn't think he deserved to be given the stage. I know Alberto didn't think so because he attacked. Johan didn't think that way. I know Ezequiel thought that. It was the day after L' Angliru, Caisse d'Epargne wanted to win the stage with Valverde and took control of the stage right away. We didn't have to do any work all day. The entire team sat on all day. They let the break get away and kept it at 2-1/2 minutes. We hit that final climb and the attacks started going and Mosquera attacked and dropped Valverde. He was racing like anyone else, but had it been Valverde instead of Mosquera there I think that would, not that we would we give him anything because he could blow us away in the sprint anyways, but in that situation you would give him the stage as his team did all the work all day and it saved our team from doing any work. It's give and take. You give something away, but you get something back. I don't think we would have gotten anything back from Ezequiel. They could have made a deal like give us the stage and they would work for a day or two to keep the race under control, but that offer never came up.

Sastre was hovering on the fringes of the GC. Was the strategy to isolate him? I think the fact that we were able to isolate him, and I'm just being honest, CSC wasn't very strong at the Vuelta. He was a little bit on his own anyway. Of course he wasn't as good as he was at the Tour, but still pretty good to get third. I think he was great. Here we have the winner of the Tour de France in third place behind us. That is obviously a good thing after the year we've had.



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