



Precision and preparation

WHY ARE THE SWISS SO FAST AT MOUNTAIN BIKE RACING? ON THE BACK OF TEAM MATE ARIANE KLEINHANS' WIN IN HER NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIPS IN MAY, JAMES WONDERS, JUST A LITTLE.

LIKE FINE CHOCOLATE AND precision time keeping, the Swiss seem to know how to get another thing right: being fast at mountain biking. Spend some time watching a UCI XCO World Cup Mountainbiking and you can't help but notice that the headline acts are usually dominated by a Swiss

and French combination, with perhaps the odd Czech rider in the mix.

Having spent a fair amount of training time in Switzerland this past month, and having raced a number of World Cups and World Championships over the years, I thought I'd offer some personal insights into why I think

the Swiss are just so fast at riding bikes.

At Team Spur, I'm privileged enough to be teammates with Ariane Kleinhans, the current Swiss National Marathon Champion. She has years of experience at the pinnacle of the sport; multiple ABSA Cape Epic wins in both the mixed and

ladies categories, as well as a recent 4th place finish at World Marathon Championships in Laissiac, France. Spending time with her, I have noticed some differences between us that offer valuable anecdotal evidence into 'Swiss-thinking' or the mentality behind the question.

Growing up in KwaZulu-Natal,



2016 Swiss champ ariane shows off her medal with the men's winner, epic legend cris huber.



I was raised in a middle-class white family which could be considered fairly normal. I was fortunate enough to have the privilege of access to all the opportunity I needed, including the kickstart into the world of professional cycling.

I would consider myself a fairly 'normal South African' and working closely with Ariane this year has been fascinating – the daily and weekly habits she employs in preparation for big events have been an education for me, offering further useful insights into why the Swiss are so fast.

Ariane is a meticulous planner – she will know exactly what race

she will be doing in two-months, how she will get there and what training sessions she will have that week, making it apparent to me early on that thorough preparation is as important as execution on the day – they go hand in hand. She is also perfectly precise – sessions are normally done to the minute, target wattage and heat-rate conscientiously checked during and post efforts, and all of the 'extras' around quality, effective training – diet, sleep, travel – are given their due focus and attention to ensure best possible outcomes. Cycling, in recent years, has become extraordinarily technical – training has become intensely scientific, equipment has advanced exponentially and racing has become globalised, leading to an ever increasing number of variables that need to be managed constantly. This suits the precision planner – an extra session here and there, the right nutrients in your diet while catching flights and hiring cars and after a few weeks on the road, you're a different athlete.

But what is happening at a fundamental level in Switzerland that makes the Swiss riders so

fast? Well, a simple trip to a Swiss National Cup Race can provide many of the answers. Upon arrival at the venue, cast your eyes around and you will invariably be struck by the grandeur of the setting – endless valleys with jagged cliff lines and valleys with forests all provide an ideal training ground for bike riders. As you head to collect your number at the race venue, you also notice a endless stream of kids of an extraordinarily young age playing on the 'pacours' – a simple circuit set up in the middle of registration where kids as young as six ride round a penned-off area containing a number of obstacles, ranging from simple to mind-bogglingly challenging. During your warm up, it is clear that cars are noticeably more respectful, having to, by law, reduce speeds to a mere 30km/h in small towns with hefty unavoidable fines for those who don't, making it a lot more feasible to train outdoors without fear on the roads. Contrast that with South African road safety and one of the highest accident death rates in the world and you begin to understand the picture a bit more clearly.

Finally, you line up on the grid and notice the depth of the competition around you. Nino Schurter, Julien Absalon and José Antonio Hermida are all here, all in their own rights respected gladiators from other countries having come to test themselves in a country centrally located in Europe to effectively gauge form – here it is not about the wattage or output, it's about developing the killer instinct needed to perform on the day, amidst hundreds of others. The field is deep across all categories, clearly demonstrating the national

sporting status that cycling enjoys in Switzerland.

As the gun goes, it's a calculated scramble. Miss the hole shot and it is fine – adjust from mistakes quickly and strive for perfection constantly, throughout every corner and in every pedal stroke. Make too many mistakes, and riders stream past like sardines headed for warmer waters. It's about comparing and contrasting your absolute best effort constantly against an incredibly high standard, and decoding the lessons of improvement.

So in my observed experience, I would summarise along these lines; the Nino Schurters of this world are bred through early-year interest in what could be described as a mainstream national sport, development programmes that start below the age of 10, a Swiss-style mentality of precision and accuracy, an abundance of terrain and competition at all levels, and a tenacious commitment to 'getting things right'. In contrast, my personal approach prior to a more in-depth introspection was a lot more *lazziare fair* – I'm typically more of a reactive responder than a proactive planner. The lessons are rich and clear, and provide a direct and honest look into simple yet harsh lessons to improve to become world class. [ride](#)

Till next time,

James