

FDJ'S PRE-PR TESTING PR STUNT

No cobble unturned

Richard Abraham

Riding over the cobbles of Paris-Roubaix, the last thing you want is extra electronic baggage. It just gets in the way. Or worse, it pings off with the vibrations, sending you nervously scrambling for the brake levers and a safe, dignified exit route. Once you've picked up the pieces, you then have to somehow get going again from a standing start.

So when the French FDJ team went for a cobble reconnaissance mission in late November, what were they doing with their extravagant collection of sensors and wires, which looked like they'd been plucked from the messy props cupboard on the set of a low-budget sci-fi film?

"We were there to test the vibrations," explains Fred Grappe, doctor in biomechanics and performance coach to FDJ. "There were two different systems for testing; one on the frame of the bike and one on the hands of the rider."

Strapped up and plugged in for the tests was Johan Le Bon, himself no stranger to the rough stuff. He was FDJ's best rider in the 2013 Paris-Roubaix (26th) and one week later he won a piglet for being best Breton in Brittany's own dirt-road race, the Tro Bro Leon. Alongside six other FDJ rouleurs,

"l'homme cobaye" (human guinea-pig) did 10 return trips up and down the particularly jarring *secteur pavé* at Carrefour de l'Arbre, trialling four different pressures in four different tyres made by FDJ's sponsor Schwalbe.

"Cycling today is like F1, there is increasing emphasis on improving training and materials, and improving the system of rider plus machine," said Grappe, who conducted the tests with scientists from the University of Reims.

How to spend the off-season, FDJ style



"Just like F1." Really?

"There is an increasing emphasis on improving materials and the system of rider plus machine"



A rider's wrist is carefully checked for excessive wear

WISH LIST

Dear Brian Christmas...

Flying round the world on a one-horse open sleigh probably isn't on new UCI president Brian Cookson's to-do list. But if it was, what would a selection of stakeholders in professional cycle racing like him to leave in their Christmas stocking?

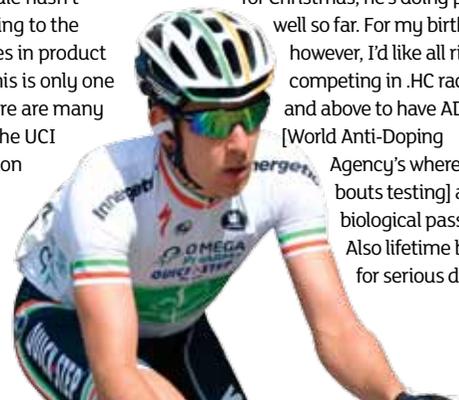
Rod Ellingworth, performance manager at Team Sky

"There are a lot of bike riders who leave under-23, go into the WorldTour and it's just too big a jump. I think [the sport needs] something to ensure that development teams are working properly as development teams."



Dirk Van den Berk, R&D manager for Ridley Bikes

"I want to bring down the current 6.8kg minimum weight limit for a road bike. This rule hasn't changed according to the latest possibilities in product development. This is only one example but there are many more. We want the UCI to allow innovation and review this with the bike industry on a regular basis."



Matt Brammeier, Irish road race champion who joins Synergy-Baku in 2014

"It would be rude to ask for anything for Christmas, he's doing pretty well so far. For my birthday, however, I'd like all riders competing in .HC races and above to have ADAMS [World Anti-Doping Agency's whereabouts testing] and biological passports. Also lifetime bans for serious dopers."



The team enjoy a little bump n' grind



Sensors detect every vibration

Cobbled together

"Manufacturers used to just give teams the equipment, and that was that. Now I try to make the team understand that it is important not just to 'take, take, take,' but to test and make sure that the materials are optimum for the riders."

Of course, a bit of extra homework on the *pavé* probably

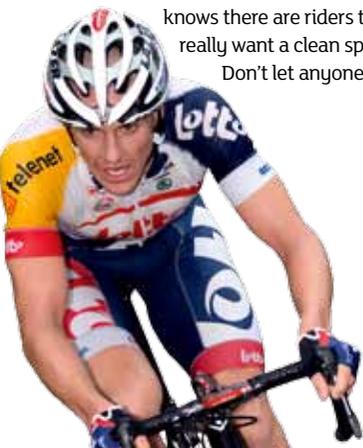
won't hurt the riders or the manufacturers, especially with Paris-Roubaix in four months' time and a second trip scheduled for when the cold, hard granite of north-eastern France turns to a desiccated, dusty mayhem; namely, during the Tour de France in July.

But when speed over the cobbles arguably comes down to race experience and 'feel' rather than predictions and number-crunching, will strapping a rider up to a series of sensors and making them ride up and down the Carrefour de l'Arbre actually make FDJ go any faster? Well, whatever the outcome, it certainly got people talking. And 24 hours later the French national lottery announced that it would continue to sponsor the team until 2016.

This was a PR exercise, no doubt; we just have to decide if the PR stands for public relations or Paris-Roubaix.

Adam Hansen, rider for Lotto-Belisol

"I'd like to make sure that he knows there are riders that really want a clean sport. Don't let anyone off."



Nikki Harris, British cyclo-cross champion for Young Telenet-Fidea

"I'd like equal prize money with the men at all cyclo-cross World Cups. That would be perfect."



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