



GAINING TRACTION

A Pyrenean route recce in May gave the FDJ.fr team, and in particular their climber Thibaut Pinot, time to assess their strengths and weaknesses before the Tour de France

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Midday has only just passed when seven tiny silhouettes, back-lit by lingering snow, begin dropping down the west side of the Col du Tourmalet above our heads. Like bluebirds, they swoop gracefully past the bar at Le Bastan, 1,750 metres above sea level, and around a left-hand bend where the land begins to fall in thick green pleats down towards Barèges.

It's late May. Across the Med, Nacer Bouhanni is winning stages and celebrating his grand tour breakthrough at the Giro d'Italia. Meanwhile, here in the Pyrenees, a group of his FDJ team-mates prepare for the Tour de France. Yesterday, they rode stage 17 from Saint-Gaudens to Pla d'Adet, today they have defied a road block and snow drifts to crest the summit of the Tourmalet. The final climb of stage 18 and

of the 2014 Tour, the potential race decider, Hautacam, now awaits.

The whoosh of their carbon-rimmed wheels draws our gaze down the mountain with them. Each bike makes a subtly different sound effect and draws a subtly different trajectory. We notice that Arthur Vichot, the French national road race champion, has a descending technique that mirrors his personality – bullish, bordering on cocky. Around 200 metres behind Vichot, his best friend and training companion of 10 years, Thibaut Pinot seems stiff, upright by comparison. Vichot slices through the inside of bends. Pinot arcs around the outside.

That, at least, is the impression. But then sometimes the eye sees what it wants to see. Pinot, of course, became pro cycling's most infamously poor descender in the matter of minutes, a mere knuckle of hairpins, on the ▶



road off the Port de Pailhères in the first Pyrenean stage of last year's Tour de France. The revelation of the previous year's Grande Boucle, the prodigy touted as a future Tour winner in *L'Équipe* on the morning after that 2012 race, Pinot felt his body suddenly knot into panic when tarmac began unravelling under his tyres. He lost over two minutes in 18 downhill kilometres, all hope of contending for even a top-10 finish overall, and all heart.

So as he skitters down the Tourmalet 10 months later, we're not quite sure whether we're imagining things. All we know is that the memory of the Port de Pailhères has been difficult for the 24-year-old to outrun – harder than the psychological and technical issues which had been causing him problems on descents for several years. If he can ever block it out, fans and media are invariably ready with their reminders. Today is no different: when the team vehicles pull into a car-park in Luz-Saint-Sauveur and the riders dismount for a drink and directions to the foot of Hautacam, Nicolas Geay of France Télévision beckons Pinot over for an interview. As journalists usually do, Geay leaves his most important – and most loaded – question until last: how did you find the descent?

You can almost see Pinot's features tense, his muscles constrict like they did on the Port de Pailhères last year. But he feigns nonchalance: "Ah, it's not too bad," he says.



THAT EVENING, OVER dinner, one of the team coaches, Fred Grappe, advises us not to broach the 'D' word in the interview we have scheduled with Pinot the following afternoon. "He'll shut down if you start talking about descending," Grappe warns. Grappe's colleague and Pinot's brother,



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Julien, has already told us much the same thing. His opinion and Grappe's have altered slightly over the past few months: at the 2013 Tour, Julien blamed lingering mental trauma from a crash when his brother was 15, whereas now he is more inclined to talk about a build-up of pressure over several months before last year's race. This *engrenage* – the accumulation and escalation of stress over several months – had frayed Thibaut's nerves before they snapped on the Port de Pailhères. Grappe agrees: he likens top sportsmen to finely tuned instruments which can suddenly, spectacularly break down at the merest interference – "the equivalent of a grain of sand finding its way into a car engine".

Above FDJ's core of young riders like to joke around with each other, occasionally to the annoyance of their DS

In Pinot's case, Grappe believes, the backlog of mental strain, a couple of steep downhill ramps, a sense of slipping control and his panic at seeing Froome et al disappear over the horizon were enough to cause a catastrophic malfunction.

Grappe, incidentally, has some interesting theories about cumulative mental fatigue in cyclists. As soon as he arrived at FDJ in 2000, he began asking riders to score their mood and sensations on a scale of 1 to 10 on a daily basis; negative trends in these numbers, he says, were the earliest and best indicators of fatigue that would eventually impair a rider's performances. "Blood tests will give you good feedback but much too late. By the time you see anything, the rider is fatigued and you're in trouble." He now looks around at other teams and sees recurring patterns of riders enjoying fantastically full and successful seasons, then seeming to wilt the following year. The reason in a lot of cases, he suspects, could be undiagnosed and untreated fatigue.



Left Team coach Fred Grappe attributes Pinot's problems at the 2013 Tour to a build-up of mental stress

It followed that Pinot's mental and physical freshness would be of paramount importance ahead of the 2014 Tour. The rider himself now acknowledges that, in the spring and early summer of 2013, invisible stresses were devouring his energy reserves. "I really felt under a lot of pressure," he tells us after lunch in the team's hotel in Argelès-Gazost the next afternoon. "Now I'm a lot calmer because I know there will be a sprinter in the team and not everything rests on my shoulders. Last year I really felt that the team's whole Tour depended on me. Then there was the press and their expectations, although I wasn't too aware of that at the time. But the time I spent answering journalists' questions before and after stages was definitely costing me mental energy. I'd never felt anything like that level of pressure before. It's no wonder really that I found it hard to cope."

Ironically, his troubles a year ago have helped to remove that burden. "The media aren't as interested in me now, so that helps," he says. A gutsy seventh place overall at the Vuelta last September went largely unheralded in France, despite reassuring Pinot. But there are still certain fragilities: sometimes fickle sleep patterns (one reason why Pinot has never trained for an extended period at altitude), and a fear of getting ill before races that has occasionally turned into a self-fulfilling prophesy.

Equally, though, there are also clear signs of growing maturity. As of a few months ago he has two phones – one for friends and family, the other for business, which he is at liberty to ignore when "off duty". His brother says that Thibaut unwinds as he always has – in the fresh air of his native Vosges mountains, often with a fishing rod in hand. He has also learned to read and ▶

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ARTHUR VICHOT

COBBLES? YOU MUST BE JOKING!

For all his pedigree as a directeur sportif – having won Tours de France with three different riders in the 1970s and 1980s – Cyrille Guimard does occasionally get things wrong. At the beginning of David Millar's career, for example, the then Cofidis boss predicted that Millar might one day win the Tour. Guimard also later tipped Andy Schleck to be the dominant stage-racer of his generation.

The doyen of French directeurs' latest gaffe, it seems, was suggesting that the 2013 French national champion, Arthur Vichot, might one day shine in the cobbled Classics. The thought had crossed our minds, too, but couldn't have got shorter shrift from Vichot when we put it to him in the Pyrenees in May.

In fact, he almost laughed us out of the room. "The cobbled Classics? Me? You must be joking."

We noted that, like Guimard, we frankly didn't see any reason why a rider with his attributes – a rouleur's physique plus the power of a puncheur-finisseur – couldn't excel in those races.

But again, Vichot's expression was one of pure bemusement. "Ah, no," he said. "They're crazy up there. I've never done those races but I know that if you're not in the top 20 at certain times, you've lost. I see myself as a puncheur, the kind of guy who will go well in the Ardennes, the Tour of the Basque Country, circuit races like Quebec and Montreal and national championships. But on the cobbles? Never."

So that's Cyrille Guimard – and Procycling – told.

Right Rather than bet everything on Tour de France success, Pinot looking beyond the hype to other races

react to criticism from fans on social media with a cooler head and a lot more distance. As Julien says, their rants are no different from Thibaut's armchair outbursts at the players of his favourite football team, Paris Saint Germain.

While their underpinnings were mostly mental, Pinot did also acknowledge – belatedly – that his descending woes might also benefit from some technical tweaks. A former downhill mountain-biker turned descending guru, the Spaniard Oscar Saiz, contacted the Pinots via *ProCycling* and met them at last year's Vuelta. Unfortunately Saiz's already-established ties with Giant-Shimano ended up ruling out a collaboration. Julien says that was a pity but that a chance encounter with a cyclo-tourist when Thibaut was training on the Côte d'Azur after last year's Tour proved an

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THIBAUT PINOT

GIRO AND TOUR IN 2015?

Thibaut Pinot didn't watch a lot of this year's Giro d'Italia but he saw enough to cement an idea that began to take shape last winter: in 2015, with his team's blessing, he intends to target the general classification at the Giro before focusing on stage-wins or the King of the Mountains jersey at the Tour.

Pierre Rolland's all-action performance and fourth place overall in Italy, in particular, have filled Pinot with confidence. “When I look at this year's GC and see Aru third, Rolland fourth and Majka fifth, I think ‘I'm at their level,’” he said in an interview with French website *Velochrono* in June. The Frenchman had already told *ProCycling* in May that he would even consider skipping a Tour de France, if he felt that racing for victory in Italy would jeopardise his form at the Tour.

Most likely, he will stick to his original plan of focusing on general classification at the 2015 Giro and lesser objectives at the Tour, then revert to a Tour-only schedule in 2016. With the Olympic Road Race in Rio due to take place on a hilly, climber-friendly circuit, Pinot is well aware that selection for the French team in Brazil will hinge on a strong showing in the Grande Boucle.



unlikely epiphany. “He came past Thibaut on a descent, they got chatting and this guy pointed out some things that have really helped him.” Pinot then gained further insight and confidence from a day's apprenticeship behind the wheel of a rally car, and his appearance in the Trophée

Andros ice rally at L'Alpe d'Huez, of all places, just before Christmas.

His team-mates, Vichot and Jérémy Roy, seemed certain in May that we'd see no repeat of 2013. They could help to insure against it by cocooning Pinot in blue FDJ jerseys over the top of every summit – both say that riders dive-bombing past him are one of the main causes of his anxieties. But they also played down the need for any special measures. “He only has problems on descents in races when other riders are buzzing around him. But it's a mental thing. If everything's going well, you're more serene, you make better decisions, your muscles are more relaxed and you're better on the bike,” Vichot observed.



WHEN HE'S GOING up, we know Pinot has few difficulties. A brief, unexplained bout of tendonitis hampered him early in the season – also jeopardising a training block designed to give him more ‘punch’ in the mountains – but it's obvious in May that his legs are starting to sing once more. On the lush lower slopes of the climb to Hautacam, we watch him rocket up through hairpins at over 30kph in the slipstream of the France 2 crew's hire car. Behind him, after barely two uphill kilometres, riders are scattered like confetti all over the base of the mountain. Before too much longer, though, the team's climber, Kenny Elissonde, has scrambled up a steep ramp and onto Pinot's wheel. For kilometre after kilometre, they go wheel to wheel, barely exchanging a glance. Pinot is rangy, elegant, while the diminutive Elissonde teeters on the nose of his saddle, fighting the bike. One day, maybe, they will battle like this on a mountain in the Tour ▶



de France. This year, only Pinot will ride the Tour: Elissonde, who won on the Angliru in last year's Vuelta, is still considered too young and raw, at 22, for professional cycling's ultimate test.

Their half-hour mano a mano over, Elissonde and Pinot finally reach the summit side-by-side and pull over beside a sign listing winners of Tour stages on Hautacam. Bjarne Riis's and Leonardo Piepoli's names have been crossed out in black marker. The next rider to slide into view is Arnold Jeannesson, followed a minute or two later by Vitiato. Having collected a jacket for the descent and some food, Pinot's attention is now fully fixed on his friend, panting up the last incline.

"Oh, you're sad, so sad!" he jeers. "You're a disgrace to the French national champion's jersey!" Vichot's response is expletive-laden and completely unprintable.

They're a frisky, precocious bunch – it's tempting to say the cycling equivalent of Liverpool Football Club's 'Spice Boys' of the mid-1990s. We're reminded of this the next day, first when one of the team's elder statesmen, Jérémy Roy, airs a minor gripe about brake callipers which is drowned out by catcalls and the mocking invitation to "Train on your own!" The next example comes halfway through a somewhat

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disjointed time trial training session in the valley between Argelès-Gazost and Lourdes. Directeur sportif Yvon Madiot swings his team car into a lay-by and waves at his riders to do likewise. There follows an animated pep-talk, of which only snatches are audible from our respectfully distant position 20 metres away. We do clearly make out the words, "lack of respect" and "lack of focus" and a flamenco of frustrated hand gestures. The ride eventually resumes in a much more orderly fashion – but without Jeannesson and Vichot, who return to the team hotel in Argelès. Later, that pair and Madiot will disappear to a room beside the hotel lobby to clear the air.

Julien Pinot touches on the incident later, smiling, but also concedes that the team's young guns sometimes need a firm hand. He has already told us that his brother's leadership qualities might have developed more quickly had he turned pro in a team with two more forceful talismans than Sandy Casar and Pierrick Fédrigo, both notorious shrinking violets. In the absence

Above Elissonde and Pinot go head-to-head during training in the Pyrenees

Below right DS Yvon Madiot occasionally finds his young charges lacking in old-school discipline

of more experienced, authoritarian figures, the fire and ambition of youth are the dominant ingredients in the FDJ mix. Which, as Roy says, might be more of a blessing than a curse: "We really can't criticise Thiabut's generation for being impatient when maybe that was French riders' problem for years – they weren't in enough of a hurry."

The question of how far these youngsters' hunger will take them, and how quickly, is of course difficult to answer. Having been hailed as the man who could end France's 29-year Tour drought, Pinot himself seemed pessimistic in May – or perhaps realistic – about the likelihood of ever scaling the same heights as Froome, Contador and ▶



Nibali. “I think that between fifth and eighth place is my rightful position, where I should be aiming this year at least. And I don’t think I’m going to improve a huge amount in the mountains. In time trials, placement, leadership and experience, yes, but Froome and Contador seem a long way off...”

For Elissonde, from the height of his 169 centimetres, the grand tour firmament looks even further away. It’s a struggle, say the FDJ management, just to find races with enough mountains, and enough difficult mountains, to exalt his talents. Vichot is a puncheur-finisseur, Démare a sprinter, so they won’t win the Tour. Neither, mind you, will you find many real experts who believe that the other two Frenchman often billed as Bernard Hinault’s successor, Giant-Shimano’s Warren Barguil and AG2R’s Romain Bardet, have what it takes, either.

What we do know for sure is that the next few years will be exciting times for FDJ. One consequence of French teams’ purge on doping after the Festina scandal and the resulting *cyclisme à deux vitesses*, two-speed cycling, was the leanest period, results-wise,

Right Elissonde and Pinot give FDJ great possibilities in the high mountains but neither is a true podium threat

in their history. Another, though, was that they began to plunder the marginal gains that later became a Team Sky trademark.

FDJ now have three coaches – which will become a requirement for all teams under the UCI’s mooted reform of professional cycling in 2017. They also employ a mental coach, Dennis Troch, a former professional footballer and manager. Until quite recently, they lagged way behind the likes of Sky and Garmin in terms of technical development, but are now consciously dictating to and interacting with equipment suppliers in much the same way as these other pioneering outfits.

When we tell him that Dave Brailsford is a long term admirer, he smiles coyly. “I don’t speak good English...”



Bottom Time trialling is a discipline that the team (if not always the riders) are taking more seriously in 2014

Pinot tells us in May that these are all compelling arguments to renew his contract with FDJ when it expires at the end of 2014. When we tell him that Dave Brailsford is a long-term admirer, he smiles coyly. “I don’t speak good English...”

Thibaut Pinot indeed still has plenty to learn. The 2014 Tour de France will give us some idea of how far he’s come in the most challenging, chastening year of his cycling career – and how far he’s still got to go. 🇫🇷

