

Conquering L'Alpe d'Huez  
By Bruce Hildenbrand  
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The dream of every climber is to win the Tour stage at Alpe d'Huez. It represents the unofficial climber's championship and almost always plays a pivotal role in the overall outcome of the race. In 2003, Lance Armstrong's margin of victory over Jan Ulrich was carved out on the storied slopes of the Alpe. With an individual time trial up it's legendary 21-hairpin bends scheduled for the 2004 edition of the le Gran Boucle many believe this could be the most crucial test in Lance's quest to become the first rider to win six Tours. And, to add even further drama, the race organizers have dedicated the 2004 stage to the memory of the late Marco Pantani, who tamed the slopes twice in 1995 and in 1997 when he set the unofficial record of 36 minutes for the 3600 foot ascent.

Lance has won here once before, in 2001, but he was preceded in that feat by another American, former Motorola teammate, Andy Hampsten. Hampsten's Tour career hasn't been as successful as his Texas teammate, but with two fourth place overall finishes he was clearly a contender and was capable of big things as he proved on Alpe d'Huez in 1992.

But, the story of Andy's incredible triumph really began the day before when the racers faced a stage of epic proportions, a 150-mile trek through the heart of the Alps crossing six major passes and amassing a mind-boggling 22,000 feet of climbing on the way to Sestriere. The wheat and the chaff went their separate ways on that legendary day and with four passes and 16,000 feet of climbing on the way to Alpe d'Huez the next day undoubtedly some of the wheat would become chaff!

It wasn't clear what category Andy was in after the 150-mile sufferfest across the Alps. "I had completely run out of steam and limped up to Sestriere on my own and got 5th place on the stage. Sitting on the finish line, because I didn't make it very far past the finish line, I was so tired I was thinking 'Oh my God what have I done. I completely tattered myself. Tomorrow is another mountain stage [Alpe d'Huez], maybe I should have tried to save something because I don't have anything to show for it. Here I am in 5th place.'"

Luckily, the self pity didn't last long. "Even before I go my message and started relaxing I felt pretty good about the next day mostly because I made the key break on a huge day. I was thinking 'its pretty steep after the village [on the second to last climb, Croix de Fer] maybe I will try to get into a good break there.' Usually, my tactic was to wait until the final climb and try to take off but, I really wanted to win. I knew everyone was super tired. I knew to look for a good opportunity from a fair ways out," remembers Hampsten.

And, almost true to plan, things started happening on the third of the day's four climbs. "Coming up the Croix de Fer the Banesto team [working for race leader Miguel Indurain] was doing a really hard tempo. We were

probably down to maybe 30-40 riders. People just hanging on. It wasn't like I was in big trouble but, it was a pretty serious tempo. And, an attack went. I thought 'you know whoever attacks now is pretty strong because I am certainly feeling the climb and I know everyone else is.' I was thinking 'I wanted to attack, this could mess me up' But, I thought 'no, just watch'.

"Two people went and I saw Banesto couldn't bring it back. So, I went. I remember thinking 'this is a bit too early for me'. Then instantly the thought to cover that silliness was if you are going to win you have to be completely open to the situation. Things are going and the legs were saying 'go!'. There were five of us, Jan Nevens, Eric Boyer, Franco Vona, Jesus Montoya and me."

"There were switchbacks so we knew we got away cleanly. Tactically, I knew I wasn't close enough to Indurain to make him be too worried about me. He wouldn't tell his guys to chase me down right away because in the middle of the Croix de Fer climb there is a nice false flat. I thought 'it won't happen' but there could be a miracle and we might actually work together on that false flat which would just be crazy cool because a group can go a lot faster than one or two riders doing the pulling with people sitting on."

"And sure enough everyone worked really well. No one went nuts but we definitely accelerated away from the pack. The gap went up to two minutes or more before we hit the steep part of the climb. And there, it almost all came apart. Eric Boyer was attacking. He wasn't significantly stronger than the rest of us, I think he was just extremely excited. I was thinking 'this is my golden opportunity. If he starts attacking everyone else gets demoralized. I am not going to drag them all to the finish. We are not even going to get to the base of Alpe d'Huez as a breakaway.'"

"I think it is really rare that a good break goes on a huge mountain stage. Everyone is nervous, everyone is greedy. Usually in a break, people are sitting on and making problems. So, I had to decide how to handle all of this. Boyer is French. He's just excited out of his skin. Of course, he wants to win. Of course, he's not strong enough to drop us all. I don't know if he is just trying to get attention or what. I make a big scene with him just so he's startled enough and then we got in a big shouting match."

"I ridiculed him which, of course, is a horrible thing to do to anyone but, in a bike race I needed to do it that day just to show him, one, it is silly for him to attack so soon because the rest of us aren't going to fade away. And two, to show the three other riders in the break that I am willing to sort of take over and show my hand and not try to force everyone to work together but show that there is some cohesiveness. He was angry and was sulking a bit, but everyone's legs did the talking. We rode up it really hard but not trying to drop each other."

"We did a nice descent, relaying a little bit. No one was killing themselves but we were all taking really hard pulls trying to slingshot

off each other and get down as fast as we could."

"The crucial part was that there would be a long headwind section in the valley leading up to the base of Alpe d'Huez. And there was. It was 15 to 20 kms, dead flat, anything goes. If someone starts sitting on, and that's the time to sit on, it becomes an anchor. We have over three minutes now but, this is where we can lose a lot of time. But, everyone worked. People would sit on a little bit and catch their breath or have something to eat or talk to their director but there were always four or five people working."

"We hit the base of Alpe d'Huez with 3-1/2 minutes advantage which for me was fantastic because I was moving up on general classification. So, I was thinking about GC but, I was also thinking 'don't just tow these guys to get seconds on general classification when winning the stage is going to mean a lot."

"Going into the base of it, I had already shown everyone that I was willing to take command of the race, take the responsibility. I was thinking 'if I am really clever and start pretending that I am not feeling well so I can sit on, I don't know if they are going to buy it because my reputation amongst the five of us is maybe bigger than everyone else's.' Franco Vona had been second the day before so we all knew he was on super form. Boyer was obviously showing he's going to do anything to win. And Jesus Montoya and Jan Nevens if they are having a really good day they believe they can win, too. So I think everyone believed in their chances."

"I didn't like climbs that started really steeply. Sometimes, even though I was a climber, I needed some minutes after the flats or a descent to get the climbing legs back. The first 2 kilometers of Alpe d'Huez are really steep. You can definitely burn your pistons right at the beginning of it. So I thought 'I don't want anyone to attack. Last time someone did I made a big scene about it. They know I am nervous/excited/motivated/focused on the stage. What can I do?'"

"I thought 'well, though it's stupid, I have already shown my hand early so to just play that same hand and not so much intimidate the other riders, I am going to take over the pace. Even though they are going to have an advantage sitting on my wheel, and I am a bit of a sitting duck, if I can do it, by the second half of the climb, there is an upside, psychologically, to setting the pace on the front on a climb in that riders start doubting themselves. Because, at first, they start thinking 'I am just going to sit on Hampsten. We are not going fast but it flattens out now and then I will have a bit of an advantage. I am sitting on his wheel. He is wasting more energy than I am.' But, after 20 minutes of that if I am still looking really good, they are going to start doubting themselves."

"Sure enough, Boyer wants to lead the climb. I don't let him. He wants to ride ahead of me. I don't even let him ride next to me. I am halfwheeling him like a geek, like the biggest idiot. He knows what I am doing. The other riders like Vona, who obviously is in great form,

must just be loving it. It's like 'great these guys are battling it out like a couple of idiots. I'll let them do it.' So I kept pretty steady pressure on the pedals. I didn't want to slow down. There was no reason for me to let a pause or an attack happen. I just wanted to do a hard, steady tempo."

"Kuiper came up next to me and wanted to talk to me. I was feeling pretty good. He told me I looked super trying to get me all psyched up. I said 'Hennie, what do you think I should do?' He said, 'normally I would tell you something different but, today, I think you should just keep really steady pressure until the last 3-5kms of the race then just start turning it up. With 2kms to go just go all out.' And that is exactly what I was thinking of doing. I felt really good that we both thought the same thing. A pretty simple-minded tactic."

"I wanted the pressure to keep increasing. I didn't really think I was going to start jamming until the last 5kms. But, with 7kms to go, I opened it up. We went around a corner and it got a little bit steeper. Normally I would shift down but, instead, I kept it in the same gear, same cadence, and upped the power."

"Boyer cracked a little bit. I was working hard. Vona didn't crack but I had a length or two on him. I thought 'OK. Don't jump. Don't get too excited. Just keep the same pressure and make Vona fight for every inch of those two lengths. He'll come back. Make him really, really work for it.' He didn't come back."

"In the next couple of kms I probably only opened up 10 or 15 seconds on him [Vona]. He was pretty smart. He knew if I got too excited or cramped or bonked or just faded a little bit, he had me in his sights and he could get me. At the same time, I was allowing myself to go harder and harder as the "kilometer to go" banners came down. At 5km to go, I said 'now you can do your attack.' I already had the gap I didn't have to do anything dramatic. I dropped it down a gear, at least psychologically."

"I was so excited but, I was trying to absorb all the emotion in me and in the crowd and use that energy to carry me down the road. But, I was also aware that it would have been so easy to just jump out of my own skin and stomp on the pedals and probably bonk or get a cramp."

"It was so difficult on Alpe d'Huez to differentiate between the emotions, the incredible energy jumping out of the crowd and just wondering how hard I was going because I couldn't hear myself breath. I knew my heart was pounding, I could feel it. I knew my legs were screaming. Nothing was lagging behind anything else. Everything hurt. Every muscle in my body was aching and screaming but, to a racer that is a really good thing. Usually you hear a racer say 'you know, I wasn't going hard but my legs didn't have it.' There is always something that gives. Its kind of rare and not many athletes admit it. They are fit and on form when everything hurts at the same level."

"But, with 3km to go, it almost came to an end. Some kid jumped out.

I am sure he was just going to hit me on the butt or something but, it looked like he was going to jump and stiff arm his hand into my wheel or something. And, I, embarrassingly enough, pushed him away because I didn't want that. That's all bad on my part."

"With 1 km to go I knew I had it. I knew I was winning the stage I had always dreamt of winning. I had never won a stage in the Tour de France which, at that point, wasn't so much 'oh gee, I haven't won one.' It was 'oh my gosh, this is the race I have concentrated on every year. I train for it year round and I haven't even won a stage much less come close to winning the whole race.' So, it was really wonderful for me to come across the line having had a really good day, made the right tactical choice. I had the foresight and ambition to go in the break a fair ways out, probably two hours to go. And having it all come together. It was a really, really sweet victory."

What does the first American to win on the Alpe think about the 2004 edition of the Tour? "I hope it's a more open race. I expect it to be. I think hitting the mountains before a time trial for someone like Tyler is a huge advantage. He hasn't crushed climbers in a flat time trial yet so if he is in a breakaway with them they have as much incentive as he does to work in a breakaway. I think in the mountain stages there will be more people realizing they have great opportunities. They are not just sulking that they got crushed by Tyler or Lance or Ulrich in an earlier time trial. They'll start going for it."

"Normally, when the climbers get into the mountains they are just licking their wounds over the time trial. They are thinking, 'that guy crushed me and there is another one so I am going to double my deficit.' There just won't be that mentality when they first hit the mountains. It will be exciting."

And who does he think will be standing on the podium? "I would give Lance a 60-70% chance. There's Ulrich and Hamilton, who I'll put as favorites. Not equal to Lance but, they are definite favorites racing for the win from the beginning looking for opportunities. I just have to think that the directors are smart enough not to fall into the old trap of, if US Postal wouldn't chase down breakaways of low risk, Telekom would. They just have to realize it is a one horse race."