

T H E Y E A R O F
EDDY MERCKX



T H E

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E D D Y

MERCKX



J O H N Y V A N S E V E N A N T

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PREFACE	7
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PART I: 1969 CHRONOLOGICAL

● DRIESSENS AND THE TEAM	10
● EDDY MERCKX ON DRIESSENS	18
● PARIS-NICE	22
● EDDY MERCKX ON ANQUETIL AT PARIS-NICE	30
● MILAN-SAN REMO	32
● EDDY MERCKX ON MILAN-SAN REMO	40
● THE TOUR OF FLANDERS	42
● EDDY MERCKX ON THE TOUR OF FLANDERS	54
● EDDY MERCKX ON PARIS-ROUBAIX	58
● LIÈGE-BASTOGNE-LIÈGE	60
● EDDY MERCKX ON LIÈGE-BASTOGNE-LIÈGE	72
● THE GIRO D'ITALIA	76
● CLAUDINE ON THE POSITIVE DOPING TEST	100
● EDDY MERCKX ON THE GIRO	104
● THE TOUR DE FRANCE	110
● CLAUDINE ON THE TOUR DE FRANCE	140
● EDDY MERCKX ON THE TOUR PROLOGUE IN ROUBAIX	144
● EDDY MERCKX ON THE TEAM TIME TRIAL AT SINT-PIETERS-WOLUWE	146
● EDDY MERCKX ON THE STAGE TO MAASTRICHT	148
● EDDY MERCKX ON THE STAGE TO NANCY	150
● EDDY MERCKX ON THE STAGE TO THE BALLON D'ALSACE	152
● EDDY MERCKX ON THE TIME TRIAL AT DIVONNE-LES-BAINS	154
● EDDY MERCKX ON THE STAGE TO CHAMONIX	156
● EDDY MERCKX ON THE STAGE TO BRIANÇON	158
● EDDY MERCKX ON THE STAGE TO DIGNE	160
● EDDY MERCKX ON THE WASP STING IN THE STAGE TO REVEL	164
● EDDY MERCKX ON THE STAGE TO MOURENX	166
● EDDY MERCKX ON THE FINAL TIME TRIAL TO VINCENNES	172
● RIK VAN LOOY	178
● EDDY MERCKX ON RIK VAN LOOY	182
● PATRICK SERCU	186
● EDDY MERCKX ON THE SHIFTS WITHIN HIS TEAM	194
● THE CRASH IN BLOIS	196
● EDDY MERCKX ON BLOIS	204

THE 42 ROAD RACE VICTORIES IN '69	211
---	-----

PART 2: THE EYEWITNESSES

● MICHEL AND MICHELINE MERCKX	214
● ROGER DE VLAEMINCK	224
● FRANS VERBEECK	240
● WALTER GODEFROOT	248
● WILLY VEKEMANS	258
● ROGER SWERTS	268
● GUIDO REYBROUCK	276
● MARTIN VAN DEN BOSSCHE	286
● ROGER PINGEON	300
● RAYMOND POULIDOR	304
● FELICE GIMONDI	308
● RINUS WAGTMANS	314
● JAN JANSSEN	328
● LUCIEN VAN IMPE	340
● WILLY VAN NESTE	352
● ERIC LEMAN	360
● BARRY HOBAN	370
● JOS SPRUYT	380
● FRANS MINTJENS	390
● JAAK DE BOEVER	400
● JULIEN STEVENS	404
● HERMAN VANSRINGEL	414
ROAD RACE RESULTS IN '69	428
EPILOGUE	430
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	431



PREFACE

I was never as strong as I was in 1969. It was my peak season, with many highlights such as my first Tour win and my victories in the classics. But there were also two lows: my unjustified exclusion from the Tour of Italy in Savona and my crash during the derny meeting in Blois. Savona was the greatest injustice of my entire career. That is why in the Tour de France I wanted to strike whenever I could, every day. I wanted to prove that Savona was a disgrace. I won the Tour with a lead of almost 18 minutes, even though I went for a doping check-up every day. My first Tour victory that year is therefore the highlight of my career. It is my biggest and most beautiful win. Winning the Tour as a Belgian, thirty years after Sylvère Maes, was a childhood dream come true. As a child I played my own Tour de France. I dreamed about Charly Gaul's and Jacques Anquetil's performances and suddenly you become one of those guys. The yellow jersey is something magical and suddenly you are wearing it. Ah, I still get goosebumps when I think back on my entering the Vincennes cycle track. All those people chanting my name. That is the most beautiful thing you can ever experience. It moves you deeply. It's simply incredible. It's something you will never ever forget. The Tour de France is no doubt the most beautiful race in all of cycling.

But '69 was a year of ups and downs: in September I crashed in Blois, while my pacemaker Fernand Wambst died. After that crash I was never able to dominate the Tour like in 1969. In Blois I only narrowly escaped death, so I am thankful that I am still alive. It could just as well have ended for me then. I would not even have known my daughter Sabrina, because she wasn't born yet. Nor my son Axel. That after Blois my climbing skills weren't so great anymore because my pelvis got damaged was only a small price to pay. I am happy to have been able to enjoy life instead.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Eddy Merckx', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

69

CHRONOLOGICAL





UCO GALLERY

SECRETARIAT

KOERSDIRECTEUR

Hot Volvo

1V.669

TELLEM
GAZELLE

DRIESSENS AND THE TEAM

On Tuesday night the 28th of January 1969 Lomme Driessens, the new manager of the team that includes Eddy Merckx, is beaming with pride in the waiting room of Brussels' North Station. He has gathered up the sixteen Belgian Faema riders, all of whom are about to embark on the overnight train to Milan. Their journey will take them to Laignueglia, their training base for the foreseeable future. The travellers from Belgium will be joined by seven further riders, all from Italy, to get in shape and gel into a team. Some of the riders have brought their wives along. Mechanic Charles Terryn makes a few last-minute adjustments to some of the riders' bikes. Team Manager Driessens is on cloud nine. In a voice shining with triumph already, he told a journalist: 'Eddy will be the high point of my career.' A newspaper draws the following conclusion: 'He predicts that, with Eddy Merckx, he will once again be allowed to join the feasting table of the "all-time greats" in cycling.' After Fausto Coppi and Rik Van Looy, Merckx is the third top cyclist to be managed by Driessens. Only a few months before, he found himself without a sponsor as Smiths, the brand name of his previous team, pulled the plug. Lomme has no doubt that he will be the first Belgian team manager since Sylvère Maes, who won the Tour in July 1939. In the year 1969 Merckx has his sights set on a Tour win. Driessens makes the rounds, telling everybody he comes across that he has assembled a super-strong team that simply cannot be beaten. In the end, Driessens' boasts mean that the relationship with his number one cyclist turns completely sour. In 1972 Merckx replaces him with Robert Lelangue, an excellent organiser who, in stark contrast with Driessens, never tries to score points through the achievements of his leading man.

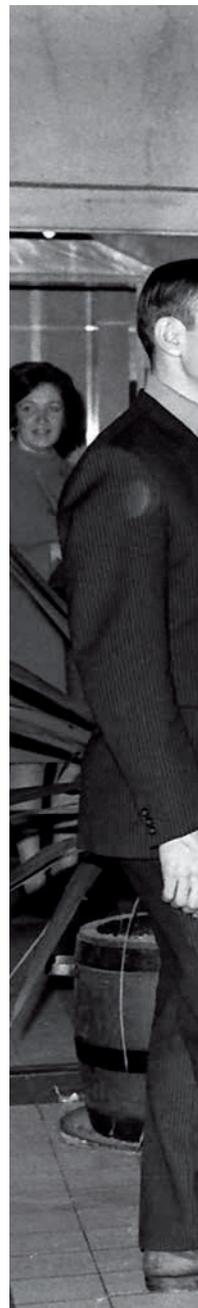
DRIESSENS - PERSONA NON GRATA

As early as the end of August 1968 the papers report that Eddy Merckx wants to appoint Lomme Driessens as team manager. Faema, his sponsor, doesn't

seem keen. Indeed, it is even reported that this Italian coffee machine manufacturer for the professional market is considering disbanding the team. It is said that Driessens' way of working was 'not in line with the vision and the policy' of the

owners of Faema, father and son Valente, and also clashed with the views of team manager Vincenzo Giacotto. Journalist Robert Janssens can well imagine it. He is one of the few cycling journalists still alive to have experienced Merckx' entire career, first as a correspondent for *Volksgazet*, then reporting for *Het Laatste Nieuws*: 'Of course, they were familiar with him. After all, he worked for Faema as a team director with Rik Van Looy (between 1956 and 1962, *Ed.*). And let's not forget that the Valentés, and Giacotto too, were true gentlemen. Giacotto for example, in his role as manager, would never attend a race without wearing a tie. He also showed his class in his dealings with people. He was the prototype of the sophisticated Italian. I have to say that this didn't particularly apply to Driessens. He was noisy, even a bit of a troublemaker, which must have gone against the grain.' In *Sport '68* journalist and Merckx connoisseur Louis Cliteur comes up with yet another reason: 'As far as the Faema board was concerned, Driessens was persona non grata. Rightly or wrongly, he was held partly responsible for Rik Van Looy's departure from the Faema team.'

During the world cycling championships in Imola press hounds find out from 'a source within Merckx' intimate circle' that Eddy would like to see Driessens manage the team. Merckx was





MERCKX' NEW
TEAM MANAGER
LOMME DRIESENS

“

**I now have to
turn Eddy into an
improved version
of Coppi.**

even said to have written a letter to his Italian employer. The source cited feels it is likely that Faema will go along with the request, as Merckx' contract states that he is entitled to appoint his own team director. It is felt that he would like to 'appoint Driessens, who has plenty of' experience, as his team leader with a view to taking part in the Tour, his main target for '69.'

A WINK AND A NOD

In his autobiography, entitled *Guillaume Driessens zegt alles!*, Driessens reveals all, including who put him forward as team manager: Jean Van Buggenhout, who managed Eddy Merckx at the time. Nevertheless, Driessens admits that after

The Belgian Faema riders and a very happy manager Driessens at the North Station in Brussels before they travel to Italy on the night train.

the resounding Giro victory of '68, he had tried to get to know the champion better: 'Towards the end of the 1968 season I had got closer to Eddy and started to know him better. How do you do that? Shake his hand, wink at him, make a joke. One day Jean Van Buggenhout asked me: "Guillaume, are we adults or what? That little game and all those goings-on behind the scenes have been going on for long enough. If I offer you a job working with Eddy next year, you won't turn it down, will you? I'll bring that *in order*", Jean said in his juicy Brussels dialect.'



Eddy Merckx with his wife Claudine and mechanic Charles Terryn just before the Faema team's departure to the training camp in Italy.

‘Only a few days later we flew to Milan. Not only did the proposal have to be approved by Signor Valente, but the most important OK had to come from the general manager of the team, who was also in charge of public relations: Giacotto. He already had his own Faema team manager, the Italian and former also-ran Marino Vigna (Vigna does retain his job as team manager and works alongside Driessens, especially in Italian races, *ed.*). I wasn't at the meeting, I was waiting in the lobby of the hotel in Milan

where the meeting was held. Jean Van Buggenhout and Eddy himself put me forward as a manager and supported my application. The meeting didn't take long and “Van Bugg”, as Jean was usually referred to in conversation, had already stuck his grey head around the door of the meeting room to give me a sign that everything was *in order*.’

Cycling reporter Robert Janssens is not surprised that Driessens did everything he could to become Merckx's team manager. Driessens would do everything it took, including flattery, to worm his way in to get to the highest echelons: ‘Throughout his life Lomme never stopped boasting that he started off as

a *soigneur* for Fausto Coppi. Please note, only to look after Coppi when he came to Belgium. But Lomme built an entire story around this. In the end, it sounded like he was the making of Coppi. He was so focused on the great riders that the next logical step would be to take Merckx under his wing. He probably thought: I'll praise him to high heaven and then I can sneak in with him. *Hey*, Driessens wasn't exactly stupid. Don't ever think that. He probably also begged Van Buggenhout to give him the job of team manager. And you can say a lot of things about Driessens, but the least you can say is that he could be very persuasive,’ Janssens laughs.



Driessens' discontinued Smith team reinforces Merckx' Faema team with Frans Brands, Julien Stevens, Georges Vandenberghe and Valère Vansweevelt.

LOOKING AFTER VAN BUGGENHOUTS STAR RIDER

Janssens can see quite a few reasons why manager Jean Van Buggenhout was keen on Driessens to take on the role of manager for Merckx: 'Faema had a Belgian team manager as early as '68, the likeable and outstanding Yvo Molenaers, an ex-rider from Limburg. It must have crossed Van Buggenhout's mind that Yvo did not have the necessary gravitas to coach a champion such as Eddy. After all, Van Buggenhout had known for a long time – even before others realised it – that with Merckx he had a potential star rider. He needed someone to screen off his protégé. When Merckx turned big in '69 the result was a press onslaught, much more so than had happened to any rider before. For example, he was approached by media who had never sent journalists to a cycling course. Journalists who didn't even know that a bike has two wheels, so to speak. They only turned up because

of Merckx. So, Driessens was keeping Merckx away from the press, which to a certain extent was a necessity. But he went about it in a very selective way. What I mean is that his friends from the press, his *kameroeden*, were given access to Merckx and the others were not. Merckx has a huge sense of justice and felt this was wrong. He was unhappy about it.'

'Van Buggenhout had confidence in Driessens as he had known him well for a number of years. Driessens was a 'Brusselaar' and Van Buggenhout was also born and bred in Brussels. And when it comes to Merckx everything begins and ends with Brussels. The lot! (*laughs*) Eddy always surrounded himself with people from Brussels. To give him his due, Driessens was said to be a good team leader. He had worked with strong riders before. He had already shown that he was familiar with the world of cycling and that from time to time he was even capable of tactical thinking. He was held in some respect by the riders and the larger teams so that, if



Gans de ploeg
Toute l'équipe

FAEMA

rijdt op velos
roule sur vélos

EDDY MERCKX

constructeur :

Etn **KESSELS** N.V.

OOSTENDE - Torhoutstwg. 349 - Tel. (059) 71863
Hoofdhuis (059) 78858
AALST - Geraardsbergsestr. 73 - Tel. (053) 25398
GENT - Rode Lijvekenstr. 26 - Tel. (09) 258502



FAEMA

In prima fila da sinistra:

Lino Farisato
Patrick Sercu
Pietro Di Caterina
Valère Van Sweevelt
Guido De Rosso
Eddy Merckx
Tino Conti
Guido Reybrouck
Julien Stevens

In seconda fila da sinistra:

Frans Brands
Luciano Soave
Adelio Re
Victor Van Schil
Pietro Scandelli
Julien De Loch
François Mintjens
Herman Vrijders

In terza fila da sinistra:

Georges Vandenberghe
Englebert Opdebeeck
Roger Swerts
Martin Van Den Bossche
Josef Spruyt
Francesco Desaymonet
Bernard Vandekerckhoven

From 1969 the Faema team is officially a Belgian team with extra Belgian helpers for the classics and the Tour.

necessary, he could negotiate with some authority. When spouting his commentaries he was prone to exaggeration and people laughed at him from time to time, but he did have something to say. You also have to remember that Van Buggenhout was not always able to attend the race in person to support Merckx and that, in view of his rider's young age, he felt that help from someone more experienced would not go amiss. Van Buggenhout may have felt that Eddy would have reached the top even quicker with Driessens' assistance.'

NO RED CARPET FOR EDDY

'Van Buggenhout was aware for 1969 Merckx had his sights set on winning the Tour. That was his main goal. He was a very intelligent human being and he knew the cycling sport through and through. He was well aware of what it was like to ride the Tour de France as he was steeped in the world of cycling. He knew what his opponents were worth. Also, Van Buggenhout was well enough informed to know that they would not roll out the red carpet for Eddy. That the Gimondis, the Pingeons, the Poulidors and the Janssens were not going to say: "Mister Merckx, you're the best, just go

off and ride." Van Buggenhout knew without a doubt that coalitions would be forged, not least of all because very often he had a hand in them', laughs Janssens.

Driessens brings a few big names with him from his now-defunct Smiths team: Belgian champion Julien Stevens, the winner of Liège-Bastogne-Liège; Valère Vanswevelt, holder of the yellow jersey in the Tour of '68; Georges Vandenberghe as well as the eighth finisher in the Tour of '65: Frans Brands. Nevertheless, Merckx's Belgian teammates from '68 continue to form the backbone of the new team: Vic Van Schil, Martin Van den Bossche, Roger Swerts, Jos Spruyt, Guido Reybrouck

and, to a lesser extent, Julien De Locht. The experienced Bernard Van de Kerckhove provides further reinforcement to the team, as do youngsters Frans Mintjens, Englebert Opdebeeck and Herman Vrijders. The 1968 runner-up in the Giro, Vittorio Adorni, has joined Team Scic. This World Road Racing champion from Imola takes a few Italian Faema riders with him, including Luciano Armani.

BELGIANS PREFERRED TO ITALIANS

From then on Team Faema would be registered as Belgian as two thirds of the riders have the Belgian nationality. In 1969 the Tour organisers no longer work with country teams as such, but they do stick a national label on the sponsored teams that take part. Thus, if Merckx wants to be surrounded by mostly Belgian teammates at the starting line, it stands to reason that the team should be a Belgian one. Robert Janssens sees further reasons why Merckx wanted more Belgian helpers: 'First and foremost, Merckx is a real belgophile (*laughs*). He would have felt far more at ease surrounded by compatriots. Also, the team rubbed along much better if it was mostly Belgian. In those days Italian riders did not perform as well in the Tour as they did in the Giro. Eddy's Belgian teammates would slog their guts out for him to the point of exhaustion, if that was required. But as to the Italians... Johan De Muynck once told me: "For Italian riders, the only thing that counts is the Giro. And if they've done well in the Giro, they've had a good season and they're off to the beach to sun themselves and eat *pateekes* (petits fours)." Also, don't forget that over here, in Belgium and Northern France, Eddy wanted to build his career in the classics. And apart from the Gimondis and the Mosers later on,

none of those Italians was raring to have a go at winning the Omloop Het Volk. He was much better off with Belgians. He also felt it was important to keep in touch with his teammates from time to time, not just on racing days. Eddy wanted to establish a connection with his team and deepen it.'

EDDY IS OUR NUMBER ONE!

Driessens, giving a commentary to the press, is keen to have it known that he is now in charge of a powerful team that is a match for the 'red guard' overseen by Rik Van Looy. He stresses the importance of group discipline and throws down the gauntlet to Patrick Sercu, who also has road racing ambitions: 'Don't you ever forget that Eddy is our number one!' Even when he refers to his *chouchou* Valère Vansweevelt, keen and eager as always, he puts his foot down: 'I expect Valère as well to acknowledge Eddy Merckx as head of the team.' Despite all this, Vansweevelt is quoted in the press stating that he would like to win Milan-San Remo. During the season, the ambitious Limburg-born cyclist clashed with Merckx on several occasions, prompting his departure from the team.

Journalist Robert Janssens is not surprised in any way that Driessens emphasises Merckx's ability to lead the team: 'As far as Driessens was concerned, there was only one *'coureur'* who counted in the overall scheme of things. It could have been Van Looy or Merckx, Maertens or De Vlaeminck. And the others, they were only there to make up the numbers. He was always entirely focused on his leading man and perhaps one or two acolytes. What he was really good at: weighing up the value of a rider. Oh yes, to build a team around Merckx, you really had to know what you had to work with. You

had to have a good bunch of riders who were willing to sacrifice everything for Eddy, as that was his principle. You are riding for Merckx and then everything is focused on Eddy.'

EDDY WILL BE MY GREATEST ACHIEVEMENT

Even before the cycling season kicks off, Driessens is walking around in a state of euphoria. Most of his sentences start off with 'I' and he is keen to highlight his own contribution. Louis Van Roy of *Het Nieuwsblad* even spots that Lomme is undergoing a personality change: 'Compared to a few years ago, Guillaume is turning into his old self. His self-confidence is growing bigger and bigger every day. He has a premonition that with Eddy, he will once again be invited to dine at the table of the "cycling greats". No more sadness, but an exuberant optimism as he is once again a dynamic mover and shaker in the very highest realm of cycling. Lomme talks about 'giving it all you've got'. Emotion shining through in his voice, he recently told us: "Eddy will be the high point of my career."'

The 20 October issue of *Sport '68* shows that Driessens' euphoria is boundless. An article, signed GUILLAUME DRIESSENS, carries a headline that shines the light on the man himself: I NOW HAVE TO TURN EDDY INTO A BETTER VERSION OF COPPI. At the time, Driessens' contract as Eddy's team manager had only just come through. He hotfoots it to Milan to take on his new job. Driessens is in seventh heaven. 'Obviously, I was so excited to embark on my first trip for my new champion. And so I made my way to Milan, pretty pronto, to take on the job I felt I had been born to do. I felt it would take me two seasons to turn Eddy Merckx into



an even bigger and almost untouchable icon of cycling than even Fausto Coppi. Yes, I know that a great responsibility is resting on my shoulders. I want to introduce Eddy Merckx to the cycling community as an improved version of Coppi, only because I am convinced, now more than ever, that Eddy is the whole package.'

Driessens is quoted after Merckx has won one of the prestigious time trials, the Grand Prix of Lugano, ahead of Felice Gimondi. Eddy beats the Italian rider for the second time in his career. The first

occasion was the Tour of Catalonia. In the newspaper article, Driessens takes a stab at Gimondi: 'Didn't you know that Gimondi tried to minimize that he was beaten in the time trial of the Tour of Catalonia? It was drizzly. The narrow roads were slippery. The corners were difficult to negotiate unless you were a true dare-devil. To get to the point, Eddy would not have beaten him from an athletic point of view. But, he was willing to take more risks. Eddy is not one to be trifled with. He puts everyone in their proper place once and for all.'

EDDY DOES WHATEVER I ASK HIM TO DO

Throughout his career, Eddy Merckx has never criticised his opponents. Neither has he ever boasted about his own achievements. Driessens used Merckx's victories to promote himself. After all, Driessens was churning out the words, eagerly lapped up by the newspapers, but now and again he was quite condescending towards his leading man. An interview in *Sport '69* on the occasion of Paris-Nice really takes the biscuit: 'Eddy and I are very close. He listens

**On team director Driessens' left:
Merckx' reputed manager
Jean Van Buggenhout.**

to me. I whisper into his ear and he does as I say. Take the climb of Mont Faron for example. He could have caught up with Janssen quite easily. I told him to just let the Dutchman go ahead so he would be able to cope easily with the last few kilometres. He followed my advice.'

Robert Janssens can well understand Driessens' euphoric stage of mind. 'Tell me about a team manager who would not be on cloud nine, having Merckx in his team?' Driessens was always over the moon when shaking hands at the highest echelons of cycling. Also, and especially, when it came to his own achievements... he was always a bit over-enthusiastic. He pushed it out a little too far. Every win by any of his riders was down to him, or that's the impression you got', Janssens says with a laugh. 'That's Driessens for you. I always thought he had an outstanding, forceful personality. He gave a bit of colour to the proceedings, but his imagination did tend to run away with him.' (laughs)

EDDY WIPED HIS FEET ON LOMME

Robert Janssens acknowledges that at this stage in the game, a character clash was inevitable. Humility was Merckx' middle name whereas Driessens has elevated boasting into an art form. 'These two are complete opposites. Just look at their characters. Driessens and Merckx, they're fire and water! Merckx would rather deal with people who were quiet and modest. You couldn't really say that Driessens fell into that category. And before long, Merckx stopped listening to his manager's advice. Oh yes, Eddy was an early bloomer, so to speak. He was very quick to pick things up, astute and clever and could 'read' the road like no-one else. And so, once the travel arrangements had

been made and the team had 'gelled', all was fine. No-one, certainly not post-1969, would have been brave enough to tell Merckx how to ride a race. I feel that Merckx, even a few years before he parted ways with his manager, had taken a certain distance from Driessens. Eddy was pushing through decisions that Driessens was not happy with and really, almost completely ignored whatever Lomme had to say.'

Dries Claes, who used to be a specialist medical adviser to Van Looy, comes up with another explanation as to why Merckx did not really need a team of advisers around him: 'What was special about Merckx was that he was very quick on the uptake.' Cycling journalist Robert Janssens agrees wholeheartedly: 'Right from the start, he knew exactly what was going on. You'd discuss a particular race with him and he would say: "did you see that...?" You'd probably say "no, didn't quite catch it" but Eddy had it down pat. He is one of those people with eyes at the back of their heads. He very quickly got to grips with the world of cycling. From the top of his particular mountain, it probably was easier for him than for others to have a general overview of the peloton.'

LELANGUE CLAIMED NONE OF MERCKX'S VICTORIES

After three years, Merckx tells Driessens to pack his bags. His replacement is the 'quiet man' Robert Lelangue, who is an excellent fixer and organiser for his leading team man, with discretion in spades. Robert Janssens: 'He was after Lelangue, as he was another *Brusselaar*'. Eddy has remained mates with Lelangue up to this day. He was a good organiser, who liked to remain in the

background. *D'you know*, I've never heard that Lelangue pretended it was thanks to him that Merckx won a race. He was a stylish gent and suited Eddy far better. Lelangue was someone who always stayed in the background. Afterwards he was employed as a the "pilot" – they don't say "chauffeur" in France – to drive the Tour management around. First driving for Jacques Goddet and then for Jean-Marie Leblanc. And they don't hire idiots. I won't deny that Driessens must have done good things for Eddy, but people like Lelangue and Giacotto suited his character much better than the tempestuous Driessens, who wanted to poke his nose into everything, down to the soup made by Eddy's wife Claudine.'

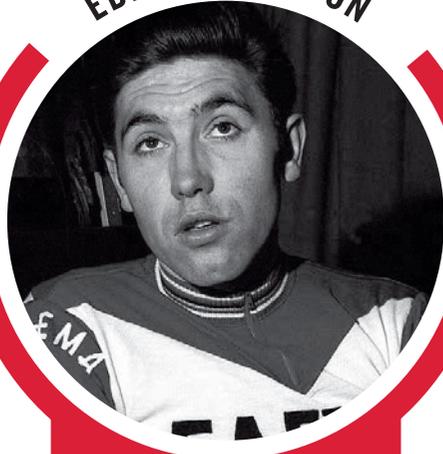
BOUNDLESS ADMIRATION

When Eddy Merckx hangs up his bike in 1978, Driessens comes across as sad in a newspaper interview: 'Merckx says that I spent three years doing nothing for him. That hurts. I had huge admiration for Merckx. I still do. That is here to stay, you know. I admire him so much as his temperament was always to be on the attack.'

Robert Janssens understands Driessens' regret that he couldn't stay with Merckx: 'You can well believe that. A pompous so-and-so like Driessens; to hear him talk, you'd think that the man himself won about half of Merckx' races. I'm convinced that he was a huge admirer of Merckx, but who wouldn't be? I think that he felt really hurt, much more so than when he was dropped by other riders. Driessens had a very ambitious personality. He would have preferred to carry on winning races, he himself, with Merckx as an intermediary,' laughs Janssens.



EDDY MERCKX ON



HIS TEAM
MANAGER

LOMME
DRIESSENS

“

I wasn't very keen on him and my wife even less!

Team director Driessens goes on stage with Merckx, who has won his first yellow jersey after the team time trial in Sint-Pieters-Woluwe.

In 1969 the legendary 'Lomme' Driessens is appointed team manager for Eddy Merckx. He replaces the modest Yvo Molenaers, the rider from Limburg. Driessens had already worked as a soigneur for the championissimo, the one and only Fausto Coppi, whenever he was racing in Belgium. He also spent years managing Rik Van Looy, the Emperor of Herentals, with differing sponsors including Faema. In 1968 Driessens is overseeing the Smiths team, but at the end of the season the sponsor throws in the towel. Merckx' manager, Jean Van Buggenhout, immediately offers 'Lomme' the job of Faema team manager. The late BRT radio journalist Jan Wauters felt that Merckx and the flamboyant Guillaume Driessens would never 'click': 'After the race, Driessens told all and sundry that it was all down to his tactical plan. He made off with all the honour and glory, so to speak, typical of Lomme. Driessens had a rather inflated ego, but I didn't mind very much, although Merckx couldn't bear it. He did not get on with that type of person, Eddy didn't like boasting and showing off. Driessens lived on that.' During the 1968 Giro 'Lomme' realises that Merckx will be the first post-war Belgian Tour winner and more than anything, he wants to be by his side when that happens. Driessens starts to sing Merckx' praises. After the renowned snow race at the Tre Cime di Lavaredo, he is unstoppable: 'He is a very special rider and is a whole class above the best of his competitors. It could well be that Merckx is the last of the great riders. And if he were to take part in the Tour, he'd win on one leg.' In his memoirs *Guillaume Driessens zegt alles!* (Guillaume Driessens reveals all) Lomme tells us that, from that moment on, he is actively trying to get closer to Merckx: 'Towards the end of the 1968 season I had got to know Eddy Merckx more intimately. How do you achieve that? With a handshake, a wink and a joke...' Merckx does not remember Lomme trying to get closer to him like that.

No, I don't remember that he tried to get closer to me. I do recall that he contacted me through Van Buggenhout, my manager at the time. 1968 was the last year for his Smiths team. Driessens was out of work. He had lost his brand. And this is why Van Buggenhout said to me: 'After all, Driessens is a cycling personality. There's no way he can be without a team.' And that's how he joined our

équipe. All thanks to Van Buggenhout; if it had been down to me, he would *never ever* have set foot in the door.

You have a quiet personality, he always kicked up a fuss. It looks like your characters were completely unsuited?

You could say that again.



‘In any case, I wasn’t happy with Driessens.’

Was it only his personality that bothered you?

Towards the end of the 1967 Tour of Italy, when Driessens managed the Romeo-Smiths team, my friend and soigneur Guillaume Michiels overheard a phone call with Staels, the boss of the Romeo enterprise. I wasn’t feeling too good at the time and Driessens was heard to say: ‘Merckx could just be a lot of hot air, and so on, etcetera.’ I said to Jean Van Buggenhout: ‘at the ’67 Giro he feathered

his own nest, but at my expense.’ Van Buggenhout replied that Driessens had changed. I’d been cheated, hadn’t I? But *hey*, it all happened so quickly. He came to my home and saw my wife, Claudine. And when the phone rang, he said: ‘I’m going to answer that call!’ ‘What?’ my wife responded, ‘it’s my home and I will answer the phone!’ He also told her that he would make the soup that day, as ‘I am better at making soup than you are!’ It was done in an instant! He would answer the phone! *(laughs in a sneering way)*

I read in the papers that Van Buggenhout had to put a bit of pressure on the Faema bosses to make Driessens team leader. Do you know anything about this?

I don’t really know all the ins and outs. Marino Vigna, the Italian, already had the role of team manager. He was a good lad. Perhaps Van Buggenhout was able to influence Faema through Fiorenzo Magni, who was also involved in setting up the team.