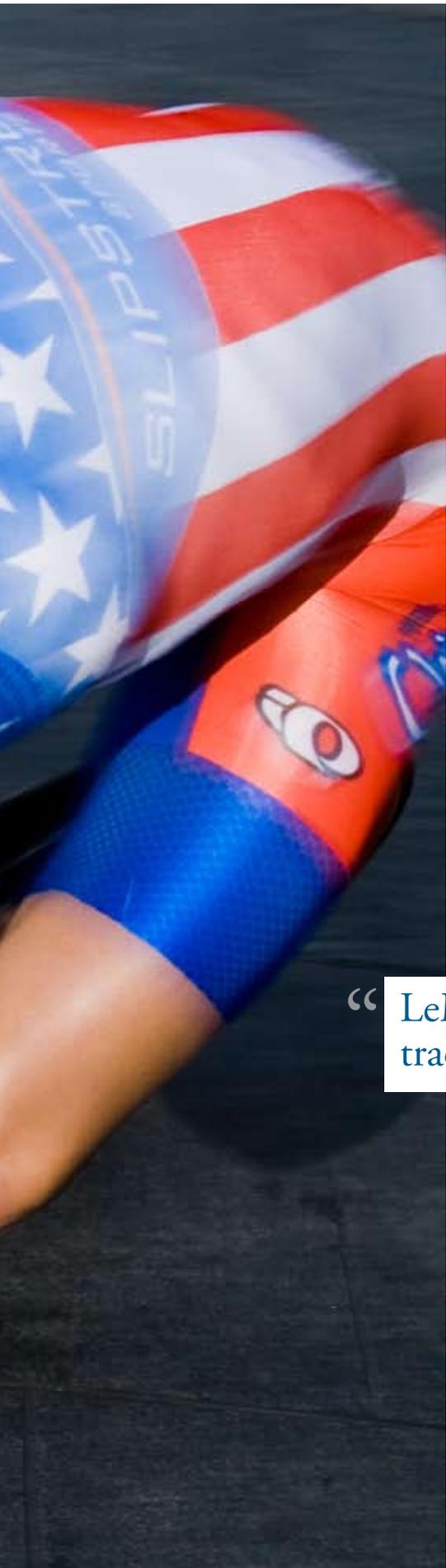




US National Time-Trial Champion David Zabriskie (above) is one of the leaders of the Argyle Armada. Photo by Mark Johnson.



THE

# Argyle Armada

## SAILS FOR FRANCE



Story and photos by Mark Johnson

Cycling fans can divide the history of America's Tour de France into two epochs—the era of LeMond, who won three Tours, and the age of Armstrong, who won seven. Heading into the 2008 Tour, which starts July 5 in Brest, France, a third and equally dramatic American era may be upon us—the age of the Argyle invasion. In March 2008, Tour de France organizers ASO extended a Tour invite to the upstart US Slipstream-Chipotle team. Calling the Argyle Armada (as the team is known because of its distinctly patterned jerseys) to battle in the world's most prestigious cycling event is both a confirmation of the four-year-old team's rise to the top of the cycling firmament and a way for the Tour organizers to show that they see the future in Slipstream-Chipotle's clean riding policies.

The signature image of the first American Tour de France era is Greg LeMond streaking down the Champs-Élysées during the final time-trial stage of the 1989 Tour. With his then-radical aero bars and wind-slicing teardrop helmet, LeMond was a yellow bullet exploding the tradition-bound ways of European cycling. The Minnesotan's embrace of wind-tunnel data and American downhill-skiing technology helped him shatter a seemingly insurmountable 58-second deficit to Laurent Fignon in the final stage time trial. While the French star stuck to tradition and bulldozed both wind and his general classification position with his wide-armed cowhorn bars and helmetless, ponytailed head, LeMond sliced through the sultry Paris air at 34.52

“ LeMond was a yellow bullet exploding the tradition-bound ways of European cycling. ”

miles per hour and took the Tour by eight seconds over a crushed Fignon. LeMond's New World willingness to choose facts over tradition and empirical data over received wisdom ushered in a ground shift in pro cycling.

Where LeMond left, Lance Armstrong took off. The seven-time Tour winner married LeMond's openness to new technology with clinically meticulous training and a corporate-style team organization. With Armstrong's teams—first US Postal then Discovery—Armstrong abandoned the traditional European team structure in which a loose confederation of riders congeals around a handful of team stars and hopefully rallies around whoever happens to be riding best. (Or not, as LeMond discovered when his ostensible support team rider Bernard Hinault turned against him in the 1986 Tour de France). With Armstrong, nothing was left to chance or the vagaries of fitness or team politics. There was one leader, Lance. Like an effective CEO, Armstrong was exhaustively prepared and expected his underlings to be the same. Riders who rose to the system's excruciating

expectations were handsomely rewarded. Those who didn't found the nearest door. Such a metrics-driven organization was unprecedented in European cycling, but it worked, delivering Armstrong seven Tour wins in as many years.

With the US Slipstream-Chipotle team's invitation to the 2008 Tour de France, a third US-Tour de France epoch is dawning. This one also promises to use science, technology, and corporate-style behavioral expectations to confront an age-old cycling tradition—doping.

Led by Tour de France veteran and former Armstrong team rider Jonathan Vaughters, Slipstream-Chipotle began as a development squad for young US riders in 2003. Vaughters started the team with \$50,000 of his own money with the vision of creating a US team that would someday race in the Tour de France. In 2008 Slipstream-Chipotle stepped up to the top level of international pro cycling when a budget infusion from New York investor Doug Ellis allowed Vaughters to sign star riders like Paris-Roubaix and Tour de France stage winners Magnus Backstedt from Sweden, David Millar from the UK and Utah's David Zabriskie.

So far, it seems ASO's bet on the upstart US team will be spot on. Vaughters' squad has been on the attack since placing fourth in the season-opening Tour of Qatar in January. In February, David Millar took second, Christian Vandeveld third, and the team won the overall team competition at the Amgen Tour of California. In early April, Vandeveld won a stage and took second overall in France's Circuit de la Sarthe stage race.

The following week, Slipstream-Chipotle's 24-year old Dutchman Martijn Maaskant shook Euro cycling by taking home both a 12th place at the Tour of Flanders and a fourth at Paris-Roubaix, France's infamously cobbled “Hell of the North.” Both these wildly prestigious, century-old races are as much a test of rider savvy as fitness. (Maaskant's average output during the six hour Paris-Roubaix was 272 watts, and his maximum output was a crank-snapping 1292 watts. More importantly, the youngster showed great wisdom in marshalling out his wattage at the exact moments required to stay at the front of the 248-rider field as it thundered though 28 sections and 38 miles of cobbled farm roads not much wider than a golf cart path.) The fact that Slipstream-Chipotle was able to deliver such a tender rider to the front of these 160-mile monuments of European cycling—and the fact that in Roubaix Maaskant rode away from last year's winner Stuart O'Grady and this year's Tour of Flanders winner Stijn Devolder—suggests the young American team will be a force in France come July.

In addition to helping the team secure an invite to the Tour de France, such impressive results along with the

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## Vaughters has a larger vision: he wants to nurture the next generation of great American cyclists, while also ushering in a new era of pro cycling free from the specter of doping.



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team's anti-doping stance has brought on big public attention. Along with loads of press in cycling publications, the team has been covered by the International Herald-Tribune, the LA Times, the New York Times, the Times of London, and even Information Week. In November 2007 *Sports Illustrated* nominated Vaughters for its prestigious Sportsman of the Year Award because the magazine felt his no-excuses approach to doping problems was a model for all pro sports. And Doug Ellis mentions that while in the past the team's Web site saw visitations from US fans and "hard core Julian Dean fans from New Zealand," after the team's results in Belgium and Roubaix, Slipstreamsports.com is "getting steadier hits from the Low Countries. Old World, old fashioned cycling fans." The Roubaix and Flanders results "give our team a lot of credibility that the team is for real," says Ellis.

Reached at his home in Colorado, Slipstream-Chipotle director Vaughters downplayed the team's general classification chances at the Tour de France but was confident about the team's ability to win stages and animate the race. Thanks to an 18-mile individual time trial and two moderately mountainous stages during the first seven days of the Tour,

"We've got a really good shot at taking the yellow jersey toward the end of the first week with Dave Zabriskie and David Millar," notes Vaughters.

Zabriskie, 28, came from cycling powerhouse CSC and is the current US National time trial champion and the only American to have won stages in the Tours of Spain, France, and Italy. He also has the fastest ever Tour stage, when on stage 1 of the 2004 Tour Zabriskie's 35.84 mph average time trial speed bested the record previously set by Greg LeMond during his 1989 Tour-winning time trial on the Champs-Élysées. Millar, 30, holds the British national time trial championship and has won four Tour de France stages. With these two time-trialing aces on board with a host of climbing-ready domestiques to

support them, Vaughters has reason to be confident about the team's chances of carrying the Maillot Jaune during the first week of July.

As for the team's overall chances, Vaughters thinks Illinois-born Christian Vande Velde could crack the top 10 in the general classification. "We'll find out," Vaughters lets on with the guarded optimism of a director who knows how to manage expectations. Vandevelde, 31, is an experienced Tour de France domestique who supported two of Lance Armstrong's winning Tour efforts. "Maybe it works, maybe it doesn't," says Vaughters of Vande Velde's chances of placing near the top when the Tour concludes in Paris on July 27. "But we are going to be an attacking team. We'll be going for stages... We are more like a Three Musketeers team," says Vaughters, a tactician who clearly relishes the fact that pro cycling—especially over a 20-day stage race—is a big rolling chess game. And he's especially delighted by the prospect of taking an aggressive, opportunistic roll as an unproven American team in the 2008 Tour de France.

Along with Vande Velde, Zabriskie, and Millar, Slipstream-Chipotle's ability to animate the 2008 Tour is increased thanks to the acquisition of seasoned Grand Tour riders like Frenchman Christophe Laurent, who came from the top French squad Credit Agricole; Swedish national champ and Tour stage winner Magnus Backstedt; New Zealand national champion and sprinter Julian Dean; and Durango, Colorado's Tom Danielson, who rode for Armstrong's Discovery Channel team and placed sixth overall in the 2006 Tour of Spain.

Asked how he selects the nine riders out of a team of 25 who will throw down on July 5 in Brest, Vaughters admits to a subjective process that factors in current year race results and his own longer-term development objectives for younger riders. He is "looking at race results for the whole season... and looking to develop guys for later."

Vaughters said 2001 under-23 world champion Danny Pate is one rider he is likely to start grooming for future greatness in this year's Tour. Now 28, the Colorado Springs-born Pate is known on the US domestic circuit for his fearless attacking. Pate is not afraid to spend a day alone off the front, and he fits into

**BREAKING NEWS:** At the Tour de Georgia this April, Trent Lowe took over the top spot in the General Classification after stage five, and finished second after stage six. He was awarded the GE Best Young Rider Award; and Tyler Farrar finished second in the running for the Georgia Power Sprint Jersey. Team Slipstream-Chipotle won the stage four Team Time Trial and finished fifth in the final team standings. At the Giro d'Italia the Argyle Armada also won the Team Time Trial.

Top: David Zabriskie (left) and Danny Pate (right).  
Bottom: Jonathan Vaughters

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Vaughters's notion of the team as a band of storming musketeers. Yet, it's one thing to attack in a 90-minute domestic criterium or five-day US stage race; how will young riders like Pate adjust to the three-week Tour de France? Vaughters says he will advise his first-time Tour riders, like Pate, to focus on the daily stages and not the immensity of the entire Tour. "I'll tell them to take it day by day... Tomorrow's 120 miles. You can ride 120 miles. That's the only way to do it as a young rider."

Vaughters, who is also CEO of Slipstream Sports, the organization that owns the team, was able to bolster his support for young riders when Ellis cold called Vaughters in 2006 and asked how he could become involved with the team. Ellis first fell for cycling while living in Spain, where he saw LeMond beat Fignon in the 1989 Tour. "I turned on Eurosport while I was in Madrid and I was thrilled to see LeMond," Ellis recalls. Two decades later, Ellis has his own team in the same race, and says "it feels great. It's the culmination of a dream."

Getting an invite to the Tour de France might seem to be the culmination of a dream, but Vaughters has a larger vision: he wants to nurture the next generation of great American cyclists, while also ushering in a new era of pro cycling free from the specter of doping. "It's great to see the project going forward," Vaughters reflects of the team's evolution into a top-level Tour team. "But until cycling is out of its hole and cycling is more established in the US, I'm not going to really feel satisfied. It's not time to celebrate yet."

The hole Vaughters refers to is the nightmare of the 2006 and 2007 Tours of France, along with Operation Puerto, a Madrid-based blood doping investigation that implicated 58 riders and sent sponsors scurrying. In 2006 race favorites Jan Ullrich and Ivan Basso were thrown out of the Tour for doping even before the race started. And race winner Floyd Landis was stripped of his yellow jersey after the race for testing positive for testosterone. In 2007, things got worse. In May of that year perennial sprint winner Erik Zabel admitted to using EPO in the 1997 Tour, which lead CSC manager and Tour de France winner Bjarne Riis to also admit he doped throughout his Tour de France career, including the 1996 Tour he won.

Once racing started in July things really went pear shaped when race leader Michael Rasmussen was fired by his team and removed from the Tour with the yellow jersey still on his back due to missing doping controls. On the same day, French team Cofidis pulled out of the Tour because one of its riders tested positive,

and the day before that stage winner Alexander Vinokourov was found to have doped blood, also causing his entire Astana team to withdraw.

Before all this muck started raining upon the Tour de France, Vaughters had quietly been taking strong measures to ensure that as it grew up, his team would not be party to cycling's doping traditions. The team partnered with the Agency for Cycling Ethics (ACE), an independent organization that tests each Slipstream - Chipotle rider every 14 days. That is 700 tests a year, or 20 times more frequently than is required by cycling's governing body, the UCI. In the interest of transparency, Slipstream-Chipotle will also share its drug testing results with sponsors and legitimate journalists. The fact that Slipstream-Chipotle started and bankrolled one of the most aggressive and technologically advanced drug testing programs helped attract the interest of the ASO, which was desperately smarting after two years of drug-marred Tours. Tour director Christian Prudhomme said that he invited the unproven Slipstream-Chipotle to the Tour because they are an American team whose anti-doping measures "suit us."

Slipstream-Chipotle's testing is unique—and it marks the team's role as the vanguard of the third generation of science-driven Americans in the Tour de France in that, rather than testing for individual drugs, the testing establishes baseline biological markers for each rider—blood composition and hormone levels. ACE can quickly identify any variance from this baseline without needing to identify a specific doping product. By watching for variances from a baseline, the testing eliminates the cat-and-mouse game in which athletes and their doctors constantly search for new performance-enhancing drugs before tests have been invented to identify them. To use an analogy: by watching for changes in baseline biological markers, the testing agency does not have to look for the needle in a haystack, but instead only has to identify changes to the overall height of the haystack.

Ellis points out that while the team "does not lord its anti-doping stance over others," taking a conclusive stance against doping was "a real necessity." Several top international cycling teams have lost their sponsors over the last few years: T-Mobile, Liberty Seguros, Adi-

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das, Phonak and ONCE have all abandoned the sport because they got burned by doping scandals with their sponsored teams. While Slipstream-Chipotle is looking for a title sponsor, Ellis points out that the team's unprecedented clean rider stance—the baseline testing program costs upwards of half a million dollars a year—put them “ahead of the story when everything went wrong in 2006 and 2007.” And that, according to Ellis, is “a message we need to use for sponsors to give them confidence that their investments won't go off the rails.”

Both Ellis and Vaughters are proud of the fact that the team is America's with a capital A. Vaughters expresses a deep commitment to nurturing the current and next generations of American riders. He is dedicated to ensuring that at least half of the team's riders are from the United States, and Slipstream-Chipotle's young rider development squad currently sponsors 17-year old cycling phenomenon and recent Olympic team invitee Taylor Phinney, son of Olympic medalists Connie Carpenter and Davis Phinney.

Ellis also sees the commercial benefit to sponsors who back a quasi-nationalistic American team. “If people get emotionally connected to us—and we think they will,” says Ellis, “they will tune in and watch.” Ellis also points out that while 13 of the team's 25 riders are Americans, “24 of the 25 riders are English speaking. They can deliver an interview in English.” And that is a real benefit to American and multinational sponsors who want to reach the world's widespread English-speaking populations. “We are the predominant American team and with that we bring access to the American market,” Ellis observes. “That's something that will resonate with a sponsor.”

The team is certainly resonating with the worldwide press and the fans who are charmed by the young team's moxy in races so far this year. In fact, Ellis and Vaughters have been approached by wealthy people, who, like Ellis, want to get closer to the sport they love. While these individuals might not have a brand that they want to publicize, they want the experiences that come with having behind-the-rope access and team car rides at races like the Giro and Tour de France. Toward this end, Slipstream-Chipotle started a Founders Club program so individuals can invest in the team and gain all the VIP-access privileges extended to big sponsors.

With all this attention, is Vaughters apprehensive about leading his team into its first Tour de France? “Apprehensive?” he responds. “No. Not really. As long as we execute going into it we'll do fine. Being apprehensive is wasted energy.” ♦

Left: David Millar (left) and Christian Vande Velde (right). Right: David Millar

