

The Return of LUCAS EUSER

STORY AND PHOTOS BY MARK JOHNSON



A year ago Lucas Euser had life dialed. The 27-year-old Napa Valley cyclist had a pro contract with one of the most desired teams on the UCI ProTour, Garmin-Transitions.

The slightly built rider's Clark Kent glasses give him an erudite air befitting his Cal Poly San Luis Obispo diploma, and he spent his days training for and racing monuments like the Tour of Romandie, Liège-Bastogne-Liège and Flèche Wallone.

A climbing specialist, Euser was set on proving himself to the Garmin brass and getting the nod for the grand tours—Spain, Italy, even France. Those were the events for him, unforgiving multi-week races of attrition. He was living full time in Girona, Spain, an astonishingly picturesque Catalan town of cobbled lanes, toothsome restaurants and quiet lanes leading to soaring

Pyrenean climbs. A typical day in the life of Lucas? Eat, stretch, roll out at 10 a.m. for six or so hours of riding across the Spanish countryside. Dialed.

Then, while pounding out an interval on May 14, 2009, a car on the outskirts of Girona pulled in front of Euser. Both his knee and career were pulverized. Euser couldn't ride, and at the end of the year his contract wasn't renewed.

He repaired to California to rehabilitate. Then in November, his girlfriend was riding down a Denver bike lane when a truck pulled in front of her. The blow dissected her vertebral artery, a spinal cord injury Euser says doctors usually only see "on a dead or paralyzed person." Somehow she survived.

Twice traumatized by car/bike accidents, Euser wrestled with a return to the profession he had dreamed of since first picking up

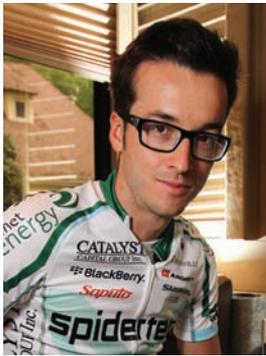
a mountain bike in high school. "That was the next struggle," he reflects. "You've got months and months of thinking, do I even want to go through all this again?"

But he did. He began with some testing with his coach at U.C. Davis. "My numbers looked like a cat four—a mediocre cat four." The fact that his engine was in ruins again caused him to waiver. No team. No fitness. His partner nearly killed by cycling. "It was tough. But at some point, I don't know what it was, the switch went on and I realized, 'Yeah, I gotta commit to this.'"

By February of this year, he was putting in 12 hours a week on the bike—a fraction of the 30-plus hours needed to race at the pro level. "It was clearly pain tolerance," Euser explains of his inability to put in big miles. "I had to really deal with the fact that I just couldn't do what I used to do."

In the meantime, Steve Bauer, an 11-time Tour de France contestant, 1984 Olympic silver medalist and teammate of Bernard Hinault and Greg LeMond on the storied La Vie Claire team, offered Euser a contract with the domestic Canadian SpiderTech team. Bauer saw some sort of potential in the 125-pound, five-foot-six rider, even though Euser's knee could not handle more than three days of training in a row. "But I was doing three days relatively hard in the gym," Euser recalls, "which was encouraging."

After building up from two- to three- and then five-hour rides, in March Euser completed Southern California's three-day San Dimas Stage Race. It was his first race since his fateful injury in Girona. His knee still groused and ached going uphill, but he was making progress. "It was really, really rough," Euser recalls of his return to racing. "It was mentally good to be in a bike race again. It had been so much time at home rehabbing." Though San Dimas is a relatively small domestic event, finishing a pro race on an amateur's training schedule was testament to both Euser's will to suc- **p.44/→**



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p. 42/→ cceed and his latent talent.

Two months later, Euser found himself at the place he left a year earlier in Spain, lining up with the greats—this time at the May 2010 Amgen Tour of California. The event had extended SpiderTech—a manufacturer of kinesiology tapes Euser coincidentally used in his rehab before signing with the squad—a spot at the eight-day race.

But more than a bike race, the Amgen Tour of California represented a test of Euser’s potential to return to ProTour-level European cycling, the place he feels most comfortable. “I want it back,” Euser says of the unmercifully difficult racing he left in Europe. After watching his Girona life smashed against the fender of a car and a year of rehabilitation and reflection, “I now realize how important it is and how many people are trying to get there. Now I’m trying to get back. I’m in that race—there are two races going on.”

After nailing his first Tour of California stage, Euser said, “from a fracture perspective, my knee is 100 percent. From a rehab perspective and a fitness perspective I’m at about 90 percent. There are some things that I used to be able to do that I can’t quite do.” One is seated pedaling on steep climbs. On one of the day’s mossy climbs, Euser recalled, “it was so wet and slippery I couldn’t even stand up. My rear wheel would just spin so I had to stay seated. And one of my biggest hurdles right now is getting over steep stuff while seated.”

Three days later, Euser faced a bigger test: the 135.5-mile Big Bear Lake stage. After crossing seven summits totaling more than 12,000 feet of climbing, the bespectacled rider finished with the same time as stage winner Peter Sagan of Liquigas-Doimo. Euser’s six hours and seven minutes of racing was confirmation—he could again hang with the world’s top riders on a day as tough as any grand tour stage.

Big Bear was the sort of racing Euser likes. Seventeen riders abandoned and 11 finished

outside the time cut on a day Euser described as a “long, hard grueling race where halfway through you’ve already separated yourself from a lot of guys that don’t have the mental capability to get through it.” Hanging with grand tour stage winners like Zabriske and eventual Amgen Tour of California winner Michael Rogers gave Euser renewed confidence. “I see myself in the next months and year staying up with them even better, and actually being able to contest the finish.” Euser ultimately secured an 18th place overall on the final General Classification.

Considering that a year earlier he didn’t know if he’d ever ride again—and that two months before he could barely eke out the training hours of a weekend warrior—Euser’s Tour of California was a wild success.

Asked if it was satisfying to race well in front of Jonathan Vaughters, the Garmin-Transitions director who did not renew his contract in 2010, Euser says the gratification he got from the race was purely personal, not outwardly vindictive. While he was initially resentful toward the team for not renewing his contract, with time those feelings faded.

He points out that pro cycling is a business, and that since he was no longer an asset to Garmin-Transitions, he understands their decision. “If you can’t throw a 90-mile-an-hour fastball as a pitcher, you are out, back to the minor leagues,” Euser analogizes. “With an injury like this I was a liability. With the market for cycling talent the way it was, I don’t blame them.” But now, he observes, “I’ve reappeared and I want to be back.”

If anything, Euser says he’s learned to appreciate what he had in Girona. “My perspective on the sport and life in general changed.” While on Garmin-Transitions’ payroll, Euser admits, “I started taking things for granted and started nitpicking. I was living in Girona. I was a professional cyclist on one of the biggest teams in the world, and I was getting paid to do it. There was really little to complain about; but I found stuff to complain about. Once it was taken away I

realized that was a really good setup I had.”

Now that he’s working up a ladder he hopes will put him back in Europe—either with SpiderTech as it grows into an international squad or with a European team—Euser points out that his riding on the Tour of California’s toughest stages pushed him up a rung on the scale of peer credibility.

Tour of California riders on the level of a Lance Armstrong, George Hincapie or Mark Cavendish are all about winning, but they are also about self-preservation. If a potentially weak rider gets in front of them, the possibility of that rider faltering or crashing becomes a statistical problem for the superstars—a risk to be quickly managed out of the complex algorithm that is pro cycling. Anyone who dares to take an unearned position in front of these kings of the road gets unceremoniously ushered to the rear.

“I got a little bit of respect by the end of the race,” Euser reflects of his California credibility reconstruction. “I had guys let me in line when early in the race they questioned whether I should be riding in front of them. Eventually guys realized, ‘OK, he’s been there day in and day out; it’s OK if he rides in front of me now, I can trust him now.’”

“I feel really comfortable here. I almost feel back at home. I feel confident. When I am around professional European racers I am more familiar with their riding styles than I am with the domestic peloton because I’ve been out of it so long. It’s really comforting to be around them. It’s an honor to race with them, for sure.”

While his top-20 finish may have rebuilt Euser’s own confidence, he harbors no illusions that one solid performance equals a ticket back to a pro contract in Europe. “It’s still a highly competitive market out there. Just because I am top-20 does not mean contract offers are going to be flying everywhere. It just means I have potential.

“I still have a lot of work to do,” the Californian adds with a laugh. “The comeback isn’t complete yet.” **CM**