

Trek-Livestrong U23 team train in Santa Rosa

By Gary Boulanger, US editor
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When Lance Armstrong last year announced his intention to return to the pro peloton, he also announced he would be backing an under-23 development team.

The Texan sat down with long-time business partner Bart Knaggs and hashed out a plan to form a world-class squad, led by Belgian retired pro Axel Merckx, son of one of the greatest racers of all time, Eddy Merckx.

The formation of the Trek-Livestrong U23 team was announced at the 2008 Interbike trade show in Las Vegas, with teenage phenomenon Taylor Phinney sat at Armstrong's side.

Armstrong met the whole U23 squad on February 3 in Santa Rosa, California, when the young riders descended on the same hotel as his Astana team.



The Trek-Livestrong U23 team spent most of the day climbing a steady pace. (Gary Boulanger)



Team director Axel Merckx gives last-minute instructions

other's respect," he said. "There's much to learn, and we'll pace them accordingly."

BikeRadar spent a day in Merckx's team car, a rented Chevrolet Suburban, as the team rode 90-plus miles through Sonoma County, tackling the mighty King's Ridge and Coleman Valley Roads before riding along the coast of California Highway 1.

The ride didn't start smoothly, though, as Phinney, a new Cyclingnews.com diarist, missed the designated start time after switching bikes. Once he joined the group, the lanky Coloradan received a stern talking to by Knaggs and Merckx.

We asked Merckx if Phinney was the de facto leader of the team. "We don't have a designated leader because it's important for them to all learn and earn each

Knaggs, who also managed the Discovery Channel Cycling Team, doesn't tolerate anything but professionalism, even from up-and-coming stars like Phinney, son of Tour de France stage winner and 7-Eleven star David Phinney and 1984 Olympic road champion Connie Carpenter-Phinney.



General manager Bart Knaggs (L) consults team director Axel Merckx about the day's ride

"I told him, 'You have 19 hours in the day to mess with your bike'," Knaggs told Merckx as he hung onto the side of the Suburban. "The other five belong on the bike."

For the next five hours or so, Merckx had the team, including Ryan Baumann (21), Sam Bewley (21), Cody Campbell (18), Guy East (21), Ben King (19), Ryohei Komoroi (20), Taylor Kuphaldt (18), Taylor Phinney (18), Jesse Sergent (20) and Bjorn Selander (20), follow local rider Ryan Eastman (16) from Team Swift, who trains regularly on the rolling roads of Sonoma County.

Merckx understands the importance of focused training and not going full bore all the time, something his U23 riders have a hard time understanding. A pro for 15 years, Merckx was thankful for his time under noted directors Hennie Kuiper (Motorola), John Lelangue (Phonak), Jim Ochowicz (Motorola) and, of course, his father, winner of 525 races during his fierce reign over the pro peloton in the 1960s and '70s.

Setting the right pace

"The guys want to go all-out all the time," Merckx said. "All I have to do to get them to fall within proper training limitations is remind them that I read their power readings each night." The team are sponsored by Saris, manufacturers of the CycleOps Powertap 2.4SL, which captures power readings, heart rate, cadence, speed, and energy expenditure. A quick reminder of this during a toilet break was all the prompting the riders needed to stick with the day's training plan.



The team stayed together for the ride, although the steep grades of Coleman Valley Road and King's Ride created a brief split in the peloton. The pace was steady and the narrow roads throughout the training ride were nearly void of traffic.

The team's first race of the year is the Vuelta a Mexico Telmex, from 1-8 March. The International Cycling Union (UCI) 2.2 category event is part of the UCI American Tour, offering eight days of tough climbing stages around Mexico City. American Floyd Landis will lead his Team OUCH there after competing in the Amgen Tour of California. Merckx is excited to see his boys test their legs in competition, but is patient.



“The whole point of having a development team is to help these guys develop into professional cyclists, not burn them out,” he said. “Our team is also not a feeder program for Team Astana – pro racing is a free agent’s market – and we’ll do our best to introduce them to the demands of the road.”

As the team rolled back into Santa Rosa, it was apparent a gelling had taken place. Selander, fresh off a U23 27th placing at the World Cyclo-Cross Championships in Holland, has a professional and poised attitude, and handled team radio duties for Merckx on the ride.

“So far I’m pleased with the team’s progress,” Merckx said. “Everything is beginning to shape up nicely. I’m getting to know each individual rider and I’m looking forward to seeing some great things this year.”

Training the next generation of champions

Armstrong’s involvement with youth development programmes began as a teenager when he decided to turn his attention from triathlon to road racing. He trained with what was then called the United States Cycling Federation (USCF) at its Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs, Colorado, riding with the likes of Bobby Julich and George Hincapie, and racing at three Olympics.



Bjorn Selander (L) and Taylor Phinney

In 1995 the lifelong Trek athlete and founder and chairman of the Livestrong Foundation established

the Lance Armstrong Junior Olympic Race Series through USA Cycling.

When he decided he wanted to take youth cycling development to another level with the new U23 team, a quick phone call to Trek director of marketing Dean Gore was all it took to get the Wisconsin bicycle maker on board. Trek then added their Bontrager brand to provide clothing, shoes, wheels, saddles, handlebars and stems.

SRAM were also added – at Interbike it was announced that Armstrong had become an investor in the Chicago-based corporation, whose Red gruppo was being raced by Johan Bruyneel's Team Astana – as were longtime Armstrong sponsors Giro and Oakley.

Merckx, who retired from T-Mobile in 2007, had been discussing a team director role with Rock Racing and some others when Armstrong contacted him about directing the Livestrong U23 team. Armstrong and Merckx raced together on Team Motorola in 1995 and 1996, riding Merckx bikes built in the elder Merckx's Belgian factory, and he jumped at the chance to work with his old team-mate.

CycleOps and Speedplay, sponsors of Merckx's Phonak team in 2006, came on board as well. Mellow Johnny's Bike Shop, launched by Knaggs and Armstrong in Austin, Texas last May, is the home base for the team and co-sponsor.

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