

CULTURE CLASH

65

The Guatemalan sunglasses rep who fled a civil war, went to university, made the Tour of Flanders breakaway and raced – clean – for US Postal Service during the Armstrong era



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ANTON VILLATORO

Words Andy McGrath

“Who took a shit in my camper?”

the bespectacled US Postal mechanic shouted. On and on he ranted at poor Anton Villatoro. Caught short just before the start of the 1998 Tour of Flanders, the domestique hadn't realised there was no water supply attached to the vehicle while answering the call of nature.

Being at the Tour of Flanders was the culmination of his lifelong dream, but getting such a bollocking was not part of it. He wasn't just going to roll around in the pack after that tirade.

Villatoro took to the start line with his blood boiling, ready to tear up the race. On the outskirts of Bruges, he followed the first attacks and the first Guatemalan competitor in Tour of Flanders history became the first one to get in a breakaway. It says a lot that this unusual inspiration to escape is far from the most fanciful part of his story.

In the summer of 1970, Anton Villatoro was born into a rainstorm in Guatemala City and a nation in the throes of a bloody civil war. The military-backed government was in a state of siege against leftists, suspected insurgents and the indigenou population; the Guatemalan army massacred entire Mayan towns. “People were being assassinated, bombs were going off in the middle of the night. It was a very dangerous place to live,” Villatoro says.

His Guatemalan father worked at the US Embassy and travelled to work in a bulletproof car. Their house was protected by a guard with a machine gun and a ten-foot barbed wire wall.

Villatoro witnessed terrible scenes. “I still remember driving slowly by a bullet-riddled car with a guy slumped over the steering wheel and blood splattered all over the windshield. I'm just eight years old in the back seat, looking at this. And that was the norm.” An estimated 200,000 people were killed over the course of the 36-year conflict in Guatemala.

At the end of the 1970s, his parents split up and his American mother returned to her native Kansas with Anton. He was safe, but felt like an alien: only able to speak Spanish, nobody could initially understand a word he said. But he picked up English rapidly and got hooked on two wheels after his grandfather bought him a BMX at Walmart. “I didn't like team sports – which, ironically, cycling at the higher level is – like baseball or football, because when I had a good game and someone else let the ball go through their legs, we lost,” he says. “I always liked to be in control of my own destiny. I think that's why I gravitated to BMX.”

The family moved to Colorado Springs and Anton fell hard for road cycling during his first year at the University of Colorado in Boulder, where he was studying international business and marketing. The *coup de foudre* was seeing Davis Phinney on the podium of the 1988 Coors Classic,

holding flowers and a magnum of champagne. Give me a piece of that, Anton thought.

Villatoro purposefully picked all the early classes at university, so he could be out on his bike by ten in the morning. While some of his peers awoke with pounding hangovers, he'd be taking in the rarefied mountain air and panoramas of the Peak to Peak Highway.

He kept racing and rising through the ranks in the early '90s, his bilingualism and marketing expertise helping him to get a job as a sunglasses rep for Ray Ban and Killer Loop. While racing the US elite circuit and trying to pay rent, Villatoro would meet stars like Miguel Indurain and Jeannie Longo to arrange contracts with them ahead of the 1996 Olympics. Then he remembered his dual nationality and realised he had a shot at being on the start line in Atlanta.

In the autumn of 1995, he made a list of teams to call and dialled the first number. It belonged to Mark Gorski, the manager of fledgling American squad US Postal Service. “I think I got the last spot,” he recalls. “I didn't know if it would just be the 1996 season with them. But I kept getting offered one-year extensions.”

The path to the Olympic Games was not straightforward. In June, he was at the USPRO Championships in Philadelphia when his father phoned and told him to get on a plane: the Guatemala cycling federation had announced they were going to hold the Olympic trials the very next morning.

“Maybe they changed the date because they knew I probably wouldn't be able to make it,” Villatoro suggests. Back home, it was controversial that he was being allowed to try out – despite having been born Guatemalan and having represented the national team at various Central American and Pan American Games. “Well, I skipped the race – [team-mate] Eddie Graygus won anyway – and flew to Guatemala. I barely made it, but I beat everybody

in the time-trial and so they had no choice but to make me their representative in the Olympics.” Against the clock in Atlanta, he was 25th, just a few seconds behind Johan Bruyneel, his future US Postal team manager.

Splitting his time between American and European races, Villatoro became US Postal's make-weight, often filling in at late notice for injured riders. For instance, he only found out he was racing the 1997 Vuelta a España four days before the start. Meanwhile, his erudition made him a marketing dream: “I was the one they would always send to appearances, autograph signings or whatever, so that the other guys could keep their feet up and recover.”

A tall, stocky guy who had spent the depths of the Colorado winter training to Paris-Roubaix videos, his heart was set on racing the cobbled Classics. It became a reality in spring 1998 when he was picked in a Postal line-up based around Viatcheslav Ekimov and George Hincapie. Having signed Lance Armstrong that winter, the team was slowly making a name for itself but still lacked financial clout. At that year's Tour of Flanders, they had a little camper van, brought by legendary mechanic Julien De Vriese, rather than a team bus.

Near the start, Villatoro needed to go to the toilet. At other races, he could usually wander over the road to a café and use their facilities, no problem. But this was De Ronde in Bruges, and there wasn't room to move. “So I went in the camper van. Next thing I know, the mechanic, this old grouchy Belgian guy, asks: ‘Who shit in my camper? You don't shit in my camper!’ He came down on me so hard that he hurt my feelings.

“I was so pissed off about getting screamed at for taking a crap in his camper that I got into the breakaway,” Villatoro says, laughing. “The gun went, Salvatore Commesso and two other guys attacked. I chased after 'em and we kept getting caught by more guys.”

There were 15 escapees in the end, including 1992 winner Jacky Durand, Steven de Jongh and Robbie McEwen. Villatoro was leading a race he had only seen before on TV and in magazines. “I wasn’t starstruck. I think my naivety helped me because if I had known who those guys were, I probably would have been defeated before I even started,” he says.

“Now that you understand where I came from, I was that kid who arrived in the US, who grew up with a single mother, who never got a penny. I had to work washing dishes in a Mexican restaurant when I was 14, I paid for my own college. Anything I’ve wanted, I’ve had to do on my own. So just to be racing in Europe, it almost felt like I was in a movie.

“I didn’t belong there, I was like an actor looking down at this kid in a breakaway in a World Cup event who somehow made his way onto the Postal Service and raced a few big races in Europe. I was just happy to be there. It was surreal.”

The escape spent four hours in front over the first few *hellingsen* before the Mapei-driven bunch caught them. Villatoro soon went from the thrill of being in the lead, with the thrum of helicopters overhead and spectators screaming into his ear, to getting dropped from the race caravan altogether. Such is pro cycling. Then he abandoned and realised he was lost. “The course wasn’t marked. I had to ask a nice man if I could get a ride back to the finish line.

“So I hitch-hiked with this middle-aged stranger. The funny part is, I made it back just a few minutes before the finish and got to see the last turn. I basically rolled in with the team cars and everyone else, as if I’d never disappeared.” His team manager was delighted with Villatoro for taking the onus off them by getting in the break. A week later, he started Paris-Roubaix too, but failed to finish.

That summer, Villatoro helped Lance Armstrong to victory at the

1998 Cascade Classic and joined him at the Vuelta. While the Texan finished fourth, marking the beginning of his rebirth as a Grand Tour contender, Villatoro only made it as far as the fourth stage. “I did as much as I could, I was a total workhorse. And I came back to the US just thinking I wasn’t very good, that I suck,” he says.

Hindsight and the Armstrong USADA revelations suggest there was a lot more going on behind the scenes. Over the years, Villatoro has struggled to decide how to talk about his story – “one where I didn’t touch it [drugs] *at all*.”

“In that summer of ’98, Festina got kicked out of the Tour, but I have the visual that systematic doping meant literally nine guys against the wall, pull down your shorts and they inject you like a racehorse,” he says. “With us, we each met one-on-one with the doctor behind closed doors, and that wasn’t part of our culture at all. And all the guys [in the team] talked down on it: ‘let’s kick their asses’, almost a them versus us mentality.

“How naïve I was, because now that everything has come out, it turns out here I was going to these marketing gigs, signing autographs, meeting postmasters in little towns, thinking I’m helping the team. And now I understand what was happening back at the hotel when I wasn’t there...”

Done with the gruelling world of European racing, Villatoro walked away from top-level cycling soon after his Vuelta abandon. “I’ll never forget, I came back to the US with a contract for 1999 and I told Mark [Gorski]: ‘I don’t know what I want to do with the rest of my life, but I know what I don’t want to do... this.’”

Gorski let him out of his contract so he could pursue an MBA. “In hindsight, it was the best thing that’s ever happened to me,” Villatoro says. “I have a wife and three daughters, I can look them in the eye and tell them I never touched any of that stuff.

“The thing that bothers me is that those guys [who cheated] still have all the power and millions of dollars, they still control the media and the message, they could squish me like a bug. So they want you, the reporter, and the public, to believe that everyone was doing it so they can feel justified and better for the decisions they’ve made – and I don’t blame anyone for whatever decisions they make, for whatever reason.


“But it’s disappointing to me that everyone thinks that everyone was doing it. I guarantee you: not everyone was doing it. I don’t know who they were, but I know I wasn’t, at least.”

Villatoro used to be proud to say he had raced on the US Postal team; now he uses qualifiers if it comes up. How does he reflect on his three years there? “I could be angry and resentful about it. Those guys took an opportunity from me... but that’s not the case. We were all at a high level, we were all good riders. None of that stuff makes you Superman, I know that because I didn’t do that stuff and those that did weren’t that much better than me.

“So I don’t blame the ones that did whatever they did, or the guys that are still doing whatever they’re doing because frankly, a lot of them would probably be working a blue-collar job if they didn’t have the income. If I had a wife and kids and no college degree back then, I might have made a different decision.”

Villatoro got his MBA at grad school, moved to San Diego and is the president and co-founder of RaceHQ, an online event planning and task management tool for participatory events. “It’s a happy ending for me because I have a life after cycling. It wasn’t my be-all-and-end-all. So when you ask me how it was being in those Grand Tours, the Tour of Flanders, Paris-Roubaix, then reflecting back on that ten-year-old kid who couldn’t speak English, read BMX Action magazine, saw Davis Phinney on the podium and graduated to road

cycling: that was my dream. And I got there. I did it.

“Holy shit dude, I was in Paris-Roubaix. That’s like playing baseball at Wrigley Field. I rode those cobblestones. I didn’t finish, but you know what, who cares? I met people from all over the world, I raced my bike in 22 countries and someone else paid for it,” he says. “Really, I was just an actor in a movie. It was a surreal experience and a great phase of my life. I wouldn’t exchange it for anything.” 

Andy McGrath is Editor of Rouleur