

by Jens Voigt

I am always surprised when people come up to me wearing a T-shirt that says, "Shut up legs!" It was just something I said once, long ago, to a journalist who'd asked how I could dig so deep in races. But even today people who see me say, "Come on, Jens. Tell us! You know what we want to hear!"

"Shut up legs," I say, and they love it. They laugh. They tell me it inspires them.

This is never annoying. It's flattering, this whole idea that I have somehow become a racer who means something to people. I would say I was a promising but not spectacular racer when I turned professional in 1997. It was two years before I got a really big win, the Criterium International, then two more before I won a stage of the Tour de France and got to wear the yellow jersey for a day. I would win two more Tour stages over the years (and wear yellow for another day in 2005), plus a stage of the Giro d'Italia, and four more titles at the Criterium International—respectable, but certainly not the sort of career that inspires T-shirts.

Somehow, I became known more for the way I race than the races I've won. I never imagined that, either. Whenever I got into a long and exhausting breakaway after I'd tried the same tactic just the day before, or when I attacked over and over in a race, or got up after a crash that had ruined my bicycle and finished the race on a loaner so small it made me look like a bear riding a circus bike, I was just always trying to do my job. I was just riding the only way I knew how.

I was just being myself. Maybe that appeals to cycling fans, too. People see what they get with me and they get what they see. I don't have brilliant earrings. I don't have tattoos. I don't have a Porsche or Ferrari in my garage. (And let's not forget my funny German accent—that helps as well!)

There is so much crisis in our world (and our sport) that maybe people also see and appreciate the stability in me. You know—Jens is this rock in the ocean. The waves are crashing against him, but he just stands there. Maybe a plain-talking guy who is the same every race and tries hard every chance he gets, maybe that connects, I don't know.

I think I will never understand fully why so many people seem to like me as a racer, but it is a nice feeling. It is also a great motivation. Okay, I'm not winning 10 races a year or anything, but I am still there to win one or two for myself, and I am still able to help my captains and friends win. There is a lot of satisfaction knowing that a tiny piece of someone's success is yours, and maybe

TALKING BACK

One of cycling's all-time great practitioners of suffering tries to understand and explain why making his legs hurt makes fans love him



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the way I have been supported by all of you, now some of my success can be yours. And there is satisfaction, too, in pushing back against the hands of time. In many races, at 39, I'm the oldest rider out there.

I don't know how much longer I will be able to win this fight against the clock. But for however long that is, I will refuse to let myself ride in a comfort zone, as if I have

nothing more to prove and I can go ahead and slow down on a difficult descent or, when the race becomes truly difficult, go ahead and ease up because I don't need to worry about my contract for the next year.

Every time I race, I will race so fiercely my legs cry, and when I can't do that anymore, that's when I will know it's time for myself to shut up and leave. E