

Multimedia

HELL ON WHEELS



"Today's one of those days that I can't stand," says veteran sprinter Erik Zabel, looking at a mountainous stage profile in the race bible halfway through the 2003 Tour de France. "And I ask myself why.... Look at this shit. Ooh, la, la. Why didn't I become a surfer?"

Zabel's words were captured by German Academy Award winner Pepe Danquart in his new film documentary, "Hell on Wheels." Danquart, who was allowed full access to the T-Mobile squad at the Tour, focuses on Zabel and his roommate, Rolf Aldag, in this beautiful 123-minute movie. Zabel's laid-back humor, mixed with occasional anguish, is the highlight.

Danquart had never been to a bike race before he began filming "Hell on Wheels." "I wanted to know what it takes to win the Tour de France," he said. "In the team, in the body, in the mind. We wanted to show how everybody who participates in the contest has to push himself to the limit, physically and mentally. How every cyclist, as well as every member of the team, cannot hide from the pressure of success, and how they deal with it."

Danquart obtains many of Zabel's reflections during his daily massage, where T-Mobile team soigneur Dieter "Eule" Ruthenberg serves as masseur and confidant. One day on the massage table, Zabel confesses that he may never be able to beat rival sprinter Alessandro Petacchi. "Petacchi is so fast. He's so much better than everyone else that it almost makes it bearable," Zabel says after losing multiple stages to the Italian. "It's worse when you're always second or third and a new guy wins every day. Then you begin to despair."

While the 2003 Tour was filled with drama and memorable scenes — Tyler Hamilton's broken collarbone, the return of Jan Ullrich, Joseba Beloki's race-ending crash and Lance Armstrong's musette-bag crash on Luz Ardiden — the film remains focused on the hardships of three weeks at maximum intensity, using Zabel and Aldag as subjects.

Many scenes give viewers a fly-on-the-wall perspective of the riders' lives during the Tour: Ruthenberg thickly coating Zabel's chamois with cream before gently setting the shorts next to the rider on the hotel bed, riders with road rash awkwardly angling their bodies to sleep, Andreas Klöden struggling to breathe on the team bus after crashing.

Little is made of the Tour celebrating its 100th anniversary, and neither Armstrong, Ullrich nor even T-Mobile's Alexander Vinokourov are featured in great quantity. Armstrong's voice does open the film, however, with a sound bite from a pre-race press conference. "I show up prepared," Armstrong says. "I show up motivated. I show up because I love it and I respect it and I want to do well. Nothing means more to me than to win this event."

Instead, the stars share screen time with spectators setting up roadside, mechanics prepping bikes, clips from vintage Tours de France, sport directors yelling through their radios while driving manically behind the race and the giant travelling circus that is the race's infrastructure.

"I also wanted to tell the story of what the Tour means on many levels," Danquart said. "The marketing of the event and its participants, the TV audience and the vibrant crowds along the course, the fascination of the battle for the yellow or green jersey, and last but not least I wanted to show the gigantic organization that is necessary to make such an event happen."

Recently released for DVD distribution in the United States, "Hell on Wheels" is an insightful, professionally produced documentary on professional cycling. This is essential viewing for any fan.

—NEAL ROGERS

"Hell on Wheels" (123 minutes, in German with English subtitles) is available for \$29.95 at www.firststrunfeatures.com.