

THE MENNONITE RIDER

Note from the Web Page Editor: This story was written by Joe Lindsey and appeared in the October 2002 edition of *Bicycling Magazine*, pp. 68-71.

Floyd Landis, the subject of the story, hails from Lancaster County. Although Floyd would not be considered a "Swiss Mennonite" in the usual sense of the term, his story is believed to be of interest to a wide Mennonite audience.

Unless you can ride 500 miles a week (in the dark) and unless you can pull a wheelie for half a mile (uphill), you're not gonna catch The Mennonite Rider. How Floyd Landis became the next great American hope.

It's a raw February day in the Amish and Mennonite heartland of Pennsylvania Dutch country, near Lancaster. The minus-zero temperature is embittered by a stiff wind. Exposed flesh freezes in minutes. The radio warns people not to venture outside. At one house, a car sprawls haphazardly across the curb, a broken mailbox trapped underneath; it slid down the driveway on the inch-thick sheet of ice coating everything. Nothing moves. Except a 17-year-old Mennonite kid, improbably braving the frigidity on a bicycle.

Perhaps the only thing crazier than Floyd Landis's act of defiance is his appearance. His dilapidated, \$300 Marin Muirwoods mountain bike is fluorescent orange-and-yellow. He wears five layers of clothing: cheap thermal underwear, sweatshirts and pants, topped by tattered red K-Mart sweatpants and a nondescript gray jacket. A safety-orange hunter's balaclava squirms under an oversized Bell helmet with a mesh cover. His feet are insulated with socks, plastic Baggies and another pair of socks, topped by oversized white \$5 tennis shoes covered by more Baggies.

He still can't feel his toes. But he rides for three hours, through towns with German-American names such as Strasburg, Kleinfeltersville and Landisville.

"I'm sure the neighbors thought I was crazy," says America's next great cycling revelation, our Lance Armstrong-in-waiting. "My mom did. But I would have gone nuts if I couldn't ride."

There are other promising racers from the United States, but none uniquely placed like Landis, at 26 the most gifted young American rider, with a spot on the USPS team and mentoring by Lance Armstrong, the most meticulous champion in history. Landis's physique matches that of the legends. His VO2 max, a key indicator of cycling potential, tested out at 89.9, just above five-time Tour-de-Franc winner Miguel Indurain's 88. He is also renowned for his handling skills—he once rode an uphill wheelie on Mount Palomar, near San Diego. For half a mile.

Picked to ride his first Tour de France this year to aid Armstrong, Landis provided strong support in the key mountain stages and hung on to finish 61st. It's no guarantee that a first-time Tour rider will finish at all; Armstrong didn't.

His past offers a key to his riding. Landis was one of six kids in a strict Mennonite household that banned modern influences such as TV and short pants. Bikes, however, were allowed. With

close friend Eric Gebhard, he began riding at age 15 to reach their favorite fishing spots. Soon, riding became more fun than fishing. "We liked the competition," Gebhard remembers. "But it was something more for Floyd. It was an escape."

It was also a dream. What Landis really wanted to do was race. "I read all sorts of training books, but I didn't really know what I was doing," he says. "The main thing I got from reading is that pros ride 500 miles a week, so I said, 'I'll do that.'" Busy with chores and a job at the local grocery store that didn't end until 9 p.m., he piled up mileage at night, riding until 2 or 3 a.m. "It was the only time I could ride without anyone saying anything," he says.

Lancaster County wasn't exactly an anonymous place for a boy named Floyd Landis; the phone book has 147 listings under "Landis", double the number of "Smiths." At the grocery store, he once met another Floyd Landis. Racing could be his ticket to a land that wasn't filled with Landises.

In 1993, he raced to an astounding win at junior nationals over defending world champion Jeff Osguthorpe. A stunned Landis was given a plane ticket to France for the world championships. The bike had, finally, taken him farther than he could ride it.

"It was my first time in an airport—my first time out of the country," he says. "I was trying to be as professional as possible, and the other kids were out drinking until two in the morning. I was stressed, and the race went horribly."

He returned home and didn't ride for a month. Then one day he told his mother that he was moving to California to be a bike racer. The Landises had supported Floyd's racing, even encouraged it. But they couldn't understand why he chose California. For Landis, the reason was clear: "San Diego was as far away from Pennsylvania as I could get and still be in the United States. I could start over."

He spent four years racing the mountain bike circuit on small teams with no paychecks, married and had a daughter. Broke, he entered a 75-mile road race on a blistering, 95-degree April day. Seething over being relegated to the amateur field, Landis dashed off the front from the gun, chasing the pro pack that had been released 15 minutes earlier. Arnie Baker, a well-known cycling coach, recalls, "We're riding along pretty good and I look over and there's Floyd, head down, passing us in the dirt on the side of the road." Landis won the amateur race by 45 minutes.

Baker wasn't the only expert who noticed. That season, Team Mercury signed Landis to a \$600-a-month road-racing contract. After Mercury disbanded in 2001, USPS called.

He stays in four-star hotels now, keeps an apartment in Spain, owns a brand-new, 2,500-square-foot home in Murrieta, California (though he travels so much he can't remember the address), and thanks to the bike, he's entered a world that a 17-year old kid with a frost-rimmed mouth could only imagine: his own private Landisville.