

The Bike Whisperer

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His name may not be that well known but Mike Neel is one of the most influential figures in the history of American cycling. This ex-hippie and 7-Eleven directeur sportif has quite a tale to tell...



Old enough to drive but not old enough to vote, the high school dropout ran away from his Oakland, California home with a friend and lived a hippie's life in Mexico. The drugs were cheap and the dropout's friend would later get hooked on heroin. But after seeing several friends die from overdoses, the tall son of a self-made concrete millionaire left the seedy life of Haight-Ashbury and became a bike racer.

Mike Neel's life story is a rollercoaster ride of highs and lows, of heartache and success. He was destined to be a famous, pioneering bike racer but his personal light flamed out quickly after the 1976 World Road Race Championship.

The 179-mile race was held in Ostuni, Italy. On the last lap, Felice Gimondi had two team-mates pushing him and Neel was alongside them following the wheel of Frans Verbeeck. "I was making my way to the front of the chase group, trying to get on Eddy Merckx's wheel," Neel tells *ProCycling* in his California home nearly

36 years later. "Gimondi decided he wanted that wheel and shoved me aside before the sprint started. Verbeeck was leading Merckx and I was out in the wind on the left. Suddenly, a small figure comes sprinting by me. It's Bernard Hinault! I'm like, 'Shit...'"

"I'm out in the wind, no wheel to grab, passed by Hinault with 200 metres to go, and Jan Raas passes me," Neel continues. "There were four up the road, so we were sprinting for fifth. I finished fourth in the sprint, 10th in the Worlds. I was pissed because I thought I could've finished fifth if I'd gotten on Merckx's wheel. I didn't have the experience to know better."

Neel has replayed that situation in his head hundreds of times, winning the

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sprint. Neel's Magniflex team-mate Tino Conti finished third, behind Francesco Moser and Freddy Maertens. Merckx won the field sprint for fifth.

"I kept my mouth shut about my Gimondi experience because in Italy, you want to get invited to criteriums. If I'd squawked about him, I wouldn't have been invited to anything. All the criteriums were orchestrated. I played along."

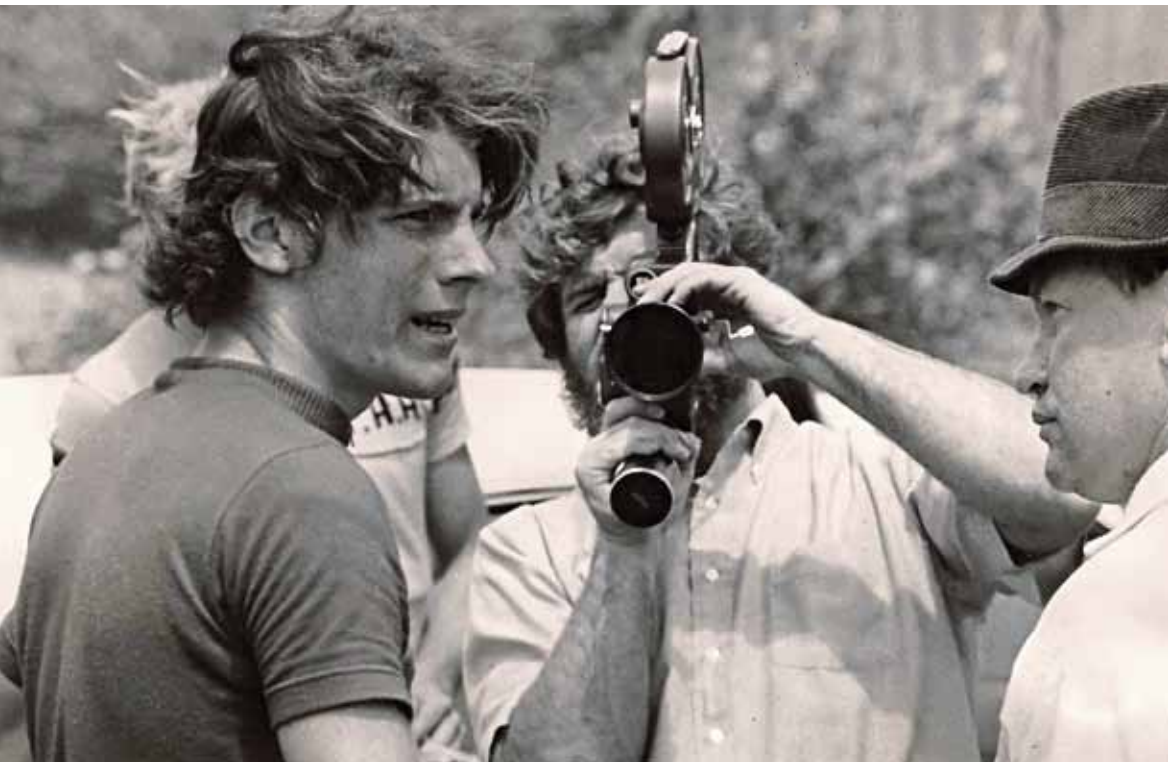
This race sums up Mike Neel's character: gifted enough to duke it out with some of the greatest racers in history, naive enough to let another racer push him off the all-important wheel in one of the biggest events on the calendar. His decision to not play along so easily from that day forward would provide both agony and ecstasy for the riders he would eventually direct in the Giro and Tour.

The runaway

Neel's path to the grand tours began as a horse groom in Golden Gate Park, where he worked after running away from home at 16. "I took care of 10 horses and got

Mike Neel, 61, lives in Fort Jones on a sprawling spread he bought with his 7-Eleven earnings over 21 years ago





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Above Racing for Velo Sport Berkeley in the early 70s, Neel learned what winning felt like, early and quickly

\$100 a month each,” the now 61-year-old says. “I was a rich teenager! I never fit in with school; I wasn’t planning my future, especially in San Francisco in the late 60s. There was turmoil and politics, so I did what I could: working the shipyards.”

In 1969, aged 18, the deaths of friends after his Mexico experience set him straight and he restarted his life. Someone left a note on his Schwinn road bike asking if he’d like to ride. Neel wore Levi’s shorts and tall basketball socks with tennis shoes, riding around Lake Chabot with the experienced riders.

Never much of an athlete as a child, the naturally gifted Neel dropped everyone on the ride, so they encouraged him to race.

“About a week after that first ride, I saw a Raleigh International bike with Campagnolo components and Weinmann brakes in Berkeley’s Velo-Sport Bicycle Shop,” Neel says. “The bike was \$95. The owner, Peter Rich, said I could take the bike and pay him later. I paid him half, then rode it to Mendocino, about 170 miles up the coast. I broke into a cabin on the beach and stayed the night. It

was two-and-a-half days of adventure.”

Two weeks later, Rich mentioned a handicap race around Lake Merced. Neel took fourth, the same place he’d take against stiffer competition around Sacramento a few weeks later.

Neel’s winning ways were expanding, including victory in the 1971 Mt Hamilton Classic, which includes a 32km climb to the top of the 1,370m peak. Jonathan Boyer – who’d eventually race under Neel at 7-Eleven – won the junior edition.

“In the 70s, we had to fend for ourselves,” Boyer says from Rwanda, where he’s coaching. “It was never easy being the only ones from America in a foreign country. Mike was able to overcome incredible hardships and still perform as a top cyclist.”

When, in 1971, shop owner Peter Rich organised the Tour of California in 1971, he including Neel on his team. The inclusion helped his leader to finish fifth. Neel’s trajectory from hippie to bike racer was rising fast and he moved to Europe.



Mexico, Merckx and Montreal

In 1972, after quitting the Tour of Mexico, Neel caught a bus to Mexico City to watch Merckx set the hour record. He was impressed by the clinical preparation of Merckx and his team of mechanics and coaches. He also saw how excruciating the effort was and the suffering needed.

Neel made a meagre living in French bike shops before moving to Chicago. With the 1976 Olympics in his sights, he showed up at future 7-Eleven rider Tom Schuler’s parents’ house in Michigan. It was 1975 and they drove to Florida, Mississippi and New York for the Olympic trials, winning races en route. Neel’s club-mate George Mount also made the team, as did John Howard.

Neel was team captain for the Olympic road race and told Mount when to make his move, bridging up to the breakaway. Howard tried chasing down his compatriot and Neel had to literally grab him to hold him back. Mount finished sixth, crediting his captain with helping him. Neel himself crashed in the rain on the slick road right before the field sprint.

After the Olympics, Neel became a pro with Magniflex and moved to Italy – his professional stint lasting just a year. Short-sighted directors and poor living conditions made the decision easy for Neel, who had worked in the Magniflex mattress factory to make ends meet.

The emerging leader

Neel returned to the States in 1978 and got an offer to coach at national level. He also started a bicycle distribution company with Lee Katz. In 1979 he was in charge of the team time trial squad, while Eddy Borysewicz was leading the US national cycling programme.

In July 1979, after Neel’s US team won the Pan Am Games team time trial, Neel and Eddy B bumped heads over team selection, prompting Neel to return to racing. He raced with Boyer, who finished fifth at the 1980 Worlds.

“I still had my Neel & Katz company but my relationship with Lee wasn’t healthy. I was planning to race with the Miko-Mercier team, so I went to Europe with my wife. I raced for the team and overdid my role as team helper, subsequently getting dropped. So, I quit. I raced in the States, worked at my business, then started coaching again. I coached the GS Mengoni team at the 1983 Coors Classic, Alexi Grewal’s coming-out race, where he finished third overall.” Grewal won the 1984 Olympic Road Race in Los Angeles.



7-Eleven comes calling

Neel lost his business after having a blowout with Katz and got out of coaching in 1983. But a fortuitous call came from Neel’s ex-team-mate Jim Ochowicz after the Los Angeles Olympics.

“I got an offer to run the 7-Eleven junior team,” Neel says. “We won everything imaginable; I then got a call from Och, asking me if I’d consider going to Europe to direct the men’s team in 1985. I said yes. My first race directing was the Tour of Baja, which we won. Then we went to the Giro.

“I told the riders they could finish the stage and buy a plane ticket home because I was so pissed at their performance early in the race. Ron Kiefel took it to heart and got in a break on stage 15. There was an uphill finish – Ron’s speciality.” Kiefel never looked back, becoming the first American to win a grand tour stage.

“What Mike brought to the table was his understanding of the American racer’s psyche,” Kiefel says. “We didn’t always take Mike’s advice to heart right away, so he worked to play up our strengths and get the best out of us.”

This set the stage for another Neel victory on stage 20 with Andy Hampsten. “I drove the course with Andy before the stage in Gran Paradiso,” Neel says. “We

talked about where he should attack on the short stage, which was steep. I told him to attack as hard as he could. He didn’t have enough confidence in himself but he was always finishing in the lead group.” Hampsten flew up the hill like a man possessed, winning the stage.

“He went from being a \$10,000-a-year rider to a \$200,000-a-year rider almost overnight,” Neel notes. Hinault offered Hampsten a spot at La Vie Claire but the combination of Ochowicz’s business dealings and Neel’s European connections meant the 7-Eleven team was invited to its first Tour de France the following June.

1986 Tour shocker

Team 7-Eleven’s 1986 Tour de France debut was auspicious. Canadian Alex Stieda treated the 85km road stage – the first of the second day’s two races – as a criterium, shooting off the front and staying out long enough to take every Tour jersey, including yellow. The day’s second stage, a team time trial, proved disastrous, where crashes, flats and Stieda’s empty tank returned the yellow jersey to Thierry Marie. Davis Phinney made up for 7-Eleven’s heart-breaking TTT by winning the next day.

In 1987, Neel’s team won three more stages but Hampsten struggled to 16th,

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team-mate Raúl Alcalá finishing ninth. “I remember the ’87 Giro del Trentino, when the stage finished at Francesco Moser’s home town of Predazzo,” Alcalá recalls. “We had to climb 5km to the top with another 5km to the finish. Mike advised us to be prepared because Moser was the race favourite. I stuck with the Italian and won the stage.

“Mike was a visionary, one that believed in me and gave me the chance to be a professional. I consider him the man who taught me to be a smart racer.”

The ascent: 1988 Giro d’Italia

“I joined 7-Eleven in 1987,” Hampsten says. “I negotiated my joining to include Mike being the director. I made sure he would be directing the team because Mike knew European racing and American racers. He treated his racers like thoroughbred ☺

Above US stalwart John Howard (right), who raced three Olympics, didn’t impress Neel much during the 70s



“I’d write out a training regimen, including three hours of cross-country skiing, two hours mountain biking and an hour hiking. We didn’t have indoor trainers, so we improvised”

Above After racing in Europe, Neel decamped to Chicago, where he raced road and track, earning a decent living

horses. He’d tell us how to rest and eat well so our tired bodies would recuperate. He explained what we could expect at the races and he told us how to train.” And like several of his 7-Eleven team-mates, he relied on Neel’s training for conditioning.

“I’d write them out a training regimen to hang on their fridge,” Neel says, “including four hours of snowshoeing, three hours of cross-country skiing, two hours’ mountain biking and an hour of hiking. We didn’t have indoor trainers, so we improvised.”

Hampsten raced the ’88 Giro with gusto, winning the hilly stage 12 before flexing his muscles during the historic stage 14 over the Gavia Pass. Neel took notice of the weather forecast.

“We had a pep talk before the stage where I told the guys this was our big chance to get the leader’s jersey and win the race,” he explains. “All we have to do is prepare for the weather. I had all the guys rubbed down with Vaseline to retain the body’s heat. We bought ski gloves and caps the night before. I handed Andy a wool hat early in the stage to stay warm.

“I also made Andy put his raincoat on at the top of the Gavia Pass and as soon as he did that, Erik Breukink attacked, winning the stage ahead of Andy.” He won the



Above A relaxed-looking Mike Neel during his days as directeur sportif with the 7-Eleven team

CARMICHAEL ON NEEL

Chris Carmichael raced for Neel’s 7-Eleven team from 1985-1988

Mike was one of the first people who made a difference in how we performed. Most coaches then didn’t know that much more than us about training or tactics. Mike made a difference and when it came time for me to transition out of racing his example stood as something to aspire to as a coach. I can still see his hand in the philosophy and tactics I use today.

A couple of lessons I remember from Mike:

He was great at reading people inside and outside of a race. He would look at a guy and say he would never be a GC contender in a big Tour, despite his talent. He would say he was too nervous, that those guys would fold under pressure. That influenced how I viewed athletes when I was a coach and how I advised and guided athletes as they prepared for big races.

Mike used to say that the most important tactic in racing is patience. He would tell us to let the distance and terrain wear down the peloton – even if you knew you were the strongest guy. You only had two bullets, and you could waste them by attacking early, trying to win with brute force. You had to be patient, wait for the hills, heat and distance to soften people up – then hit them.

battle but Hampsten won the war, taking the pink jersey with eight stages to go.

Hampsten won the stage 18 uphill time trial. Neel controlled the race beautifully through the end in Vittorio Veneto, where Hampsten beat Breukink by 1:43 overall, also taking the mountain climber’s jersey.

The descent: car accident

Neel’s relationship with Ochowicz finally unravelled in 1989. “We’d started in 1985 with Americans and got results,” Neel says. “Then there was the European factor, with Dag-Otto Lauritzen and Sean Yates, who weren’t always on my side. After Andy won the ’88 Giro, he was invited to dinners, didn’t recover enough for the Tour and I caught flak when we didn’t get results.

“My relationship with Och was slowly deteriorating but we had good results in early 1989. He was working to keep the team in the black, I was in Europe. Paris-Roubaix was a day and a half after the Tour of the Basque Country. “We were in Biarritz and Jeff Pierce forgot his plane ticket, so I gave him mine and decided to sleep in the back of the car heading for Paris.”

Team mechanic Michael Haney fell asleep at the wheel and crashed, injuring himself and Neel, who was in a coma for several days. Neel doesn’t think he had the best recovery advice afterwards and his relationship with Ochowicz came to an end. He lost his job with 7-Eleven and doesn’t think he’s been the same since.

At peace

Neel now lives in Fort Jones, California. Twice divorced, he lives in a renovated schoolhouse purchased for \$50 at an auction 10 years ago, on 10 acres he bought when he was making nearly six figures with 7-Eleven in 1989. Every day he rides a seven-year-old Ridley Damocles.

“Looking back, my life would’ve been different if I’d flown to Paris in April 1989,” Neel says. His frustration is apparent throughout our two days together and he’s sometimes quick to blame others. We point out that maybe his racing DNA, mixed with naïveté and disdain for corporate direction undercut his ability to stay employed. After a long pause, he agrees, pointing out the one train wreck he avoided in 2008: declining a contract to direct the ill-fated Rock Racing team.

“Working with riders was similar to working with horses but there are no politics working with horses,” he says. “I’m riding more and like any other rider, would like to lose few pounds.”

It seems the runaway teenager from 1968 has found his true calling once again. 