

The View From The Back Seat

• Today's stage has started, and 7-Eleven coach Mike Neel drives the team's following car also containing mechanic Richard Gilstrap and an unnamed photojournalist. On the roof are four bikes and several pairs of wheels, and inside are more wheels, extra jerseys, raincoats, food, water, beer (for the crew) and most important, a CB radio receiver. This is a good way to see Italy, since the 150 miles will be travelled at bicycle speed, but it isn't much of a way to see a bike race. Because the cars are assigned an order of travel based on the standings of the team's riders, the 7-Eleven car is well back from the peloton, which is invisible ahead of a dozen or more cars.

The CB crackles now and then when a rider requests assistance and a car will pull out of line and move up. Those in the car wave back at the crowds, saying "Ciao!" to any pretty girls, until the radio voice says, "7-Eleven avanti." Neel pulls out of line and accelerates between the cars and the police motorcycles, narrowly missing the spectators lining the road. Neel mutters, "It's more dangerous to be a spectator here than a racer," as he misses an especially enthusiastic fan

by a few centimeters.

Davis Phinney is riding near the back of the peloton with his hand up, and slows to allow the car to come alongside. "Fifteen cog is skipping," he says, then pulls over while Gilstrap flies out of the car and replaces the wheel. Neel gives Phinney a long running push, and he rejoins the field in a few seconds.

As the car gets rolling, Neel stares at a rider going back down the road in the opposite direction as though he had forgotten something. This is apparently only a demonstration of how slowly things are moving up front, because a few seconds later the same rider casually cruises back toward the pack. During this slow part of the race Neel muses that the Europeans were waiting to see what kind of team would come out of the U.S., and that the team had acquitted itself nobly.

The day wears on, and as the weather changes from rainy to sunny the riders call the car forward one at a time by raising a hand and strip off raincoats, picking up sunglasses, food or water in the process. As Neel hands off a water bottle or musette he instructs the rider to take his hand; he punches the gas and slings the rider

right back to the peloton.

"Is that legal?" he is asked.

"Not if the *giuria* sees it, but everyone does it."

Davis Phinney is having a tough day. On a rainy stage the day before his shoes had chafed his feet, and both his big toes are now swollen and inflamed. He tells Neel that every bump in the road is agony, and that he's getting a cramp from favoring the foot that hurts more. Mike takes in the information, then drives next to the car carrying the race doctor, where he holds a spirited discussion in Italian and explains the situation. The doctor moves up next to Phinney and gives him medication for the pain.

As the end of the race approaches, Phinney drifts back again to get his helmet, which he only wears for the sprint. He takes the opportunity to say that the medication is only marginally successful and that he has never been so miserable in a race, but then charges back to the pack. Only half joking, Mike says, "He's not going to let a toe keep him out of this race. We'll amputate it if we have to."

Twenty miles from the finish the pace goes up suddenly to a real racing tempo, and the pack begins to shed riders. Then, a crash. Follow cars suddenly break their neat formation and go all over the road, some trying to get

past the pileup, others pulling over to let mechanics in coveralls run to the scene, each carrying a pair of wheels.

A crash is always a crisis. The rider is faced with two alternatives: either get back on the bike no matter how badly

he is hurt and try to finish, or quit on the spot. Like the tide, the race waits for no man, but it's hard for a rider to give up on something that has cost him half a year of effort, no matter how much his body tells him to.



Seven-Eleven was the first professional team from America to attempt the Giro, and team coach Mike Neel (changing Davis Phinney's wheel) had much to be proud of: both Andy Hampsten and Ron Kiefel finished in the top 20.

Neel and Gilstrap arrive 30 seconds after the crash, but the only rider who hasn't remounted is 7-Eleven's Jeff Bradley, sitting on the street surrounded by spectators and holding a deep gash over his eye. Neel's analysis is rapid, accurate and brutal, qualities that seem to define the Giro. "Get back in the car," he orders. "He's out of the race." An ambulance edges through the crowd, siren wailing, as the follow car moves out again, leaving Bradley by the side of the road to be tended by strangers.

Neel is upset. "He was having a great day, and he was in position to do well on the stage." He curses in two languages. "He had a broken collarbone. We'll have to send him home."

The car overtakes Phinney, riding slowly and holding the bars with one hand, a victim of the same crash. If he was miserable before, he is even more so now, and he is losing a lot of time to the fast-moving peloton.

At the finish line the spectators are excited nearly to hysteria by the sprint, and the excited crowd surges like an angry sea around the reviewing stand where the winner is congratulated, but the story is different at the other end of the field. As stragglers limp in, today's victims of the relentless Giro lick their wounds. In 18 hours they will line up to do it again.