

Rominger closes the file

With 12 seasons to his credit, Tony Rominger is hanging up his wheels after building a solid palmarès as cycling's best all-rounder of the 1990s

WORDS: William Fotheringham PICTURES: Graham Watson and Phil O'Connor



Top: Rominger contemplates retirement from the balcony of his Monaco apartment

Above: Putting the heat on Indurain in the 1993 Tour de France

AT the risk of damning a super bike rider with faint praise, you could describe Tony Rominger as the man who, in the 1990s, played a similar role alongside Miguel Indurain to that which Felice Gimondi played next to Eddy Merckx. Like Gimondi, Rominger was much, much more than merely chief of the supporting cast — he was a rider capable of winning anything on his day, apart from a major

Tour with the name 'M. Indurain (Spain)' on the start sheet. Of all the riders who broke themselves on the Indurain rock, he was, without doubt, the best.

Rominger is, to a great extent, Indurain's mirror image. He's small and chatty where Big Mig is statuesque and reserved. He seems comparatively footloose — born in Denmark of Swiss parents, resident in Monaco and riding for Swiss, Italian, French and Spanish teams during his career — whereas Indurain stuck closely to his home area of Navarre and never left the team where he started racing as a pro.

Where Indurain seemed content to follow the instructions of his mentors, Rominger actively sought a professional trainer — Michele Ferrari — and professional management in Mark McCormack's IMG. And where Indurain was the man of the sun, Rominger reserved some of his best rides for the kind of days where you wouldn't put a dog out of doors. The best example was the 1992 Tour of Lombardy, which he won in a lengthy lone break in a freezing day-long downpour.

Clearly there were also similarities: like Indurain — and like all champions for that matter — Rominger built a family around him that comprised Ferrari, his agent, Marc Biver, his wife, Brigitte, his mechanic, Alejandro Torralbo, masseur, Mercelino Torrontegui, and his Clas team manager, Juan Fernandez. Like Indurain, Rominger matured late but reserved his best performances for his 30s. He put it down to his late start in cycling — he didn't begin racing properly until the age of 21. At the same age Indurain had already started his first Tour de France.

Knowing when to strike

Rominger, like the Spaniard, had an excellent nose for the right moment to put the boot in — witness his attack on Alex Zülle or a rain-soaked stage of the 1993 Vuelta — and could dominate a three-week stage race like no other rider in the 1990s. You can't argue with a Vuelta victory taken with six stage wins along the way, or a Giro taken with three. No one else has ever won three Vueltas on the trot.

"Indurain was a nice person," says Rominger, hardly courting controversy. "I respected him a lot because he was a good cyclist, but I was never afraid of him. He had to do 4,000 kilometres just like I did. The only thing

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Left: Rominger in the 1993 Tour of Spain and revelling in the bad weather and the obvious discomfort of Alex Zülle (in green)

Below: Tour in tatters — Rominger has blown on the Hautacam stage of the 1994 race

Bottom: Giving Berzin a lesson in stage racing in the 1995 Tour of Italy

France, he was better than me in the heat — at every other race I was the same or stronger.”

But Rominger never cracked Indurain. Even when he and his team were on form, in the 1993 Tour, things didn't go his way. Clas lost their two best men for the team time trial, Arsenio Gonzalez and Abraham Olano, in the first two days. Their team time trial was a shambles, which meant Rominger had the worst of the weather in the Lac de Madine time trial. “Jon Unzaga started three minutes behind me, and he actually stopped and sheltered from the wind and hail. The guys in the afternoon had no wind, and sun.”

Rominger calculates that he lost between five and seven minutes before the race even reached the Alps. At the finish he was 4-59 behind. In the final week, the Swiss actually looked stronger than Indurain, who was suffering from an abscess in a tooth. When the Spaniard was put under pressure on the Tourmalet, the Pole Zenon Jaskula, who was to finish third overall, was unwilling to assist Rominger, probably conscious that the Swiss would cane him in the final time trial. Indeed, Rominger won the final *contre la montre*.

This gave him — and the press — grounds for optimism that 1994 might see a real fight between the pair. Rominger was well-prepared and confident, while Indurain was on the back foot after losing the Giro to Evgeni Berzin. But the enduring images of that Tour are the Swiss's distress in the Pyrenees, and his tearful abandon as the race headed across the Midi. “I was sure of myself that year, and when I gave up I was still in second place. I don't know what happened. I had a real problem with my stomach. I couldn't recover.”

Enter Ferrari — Rominger's saviour

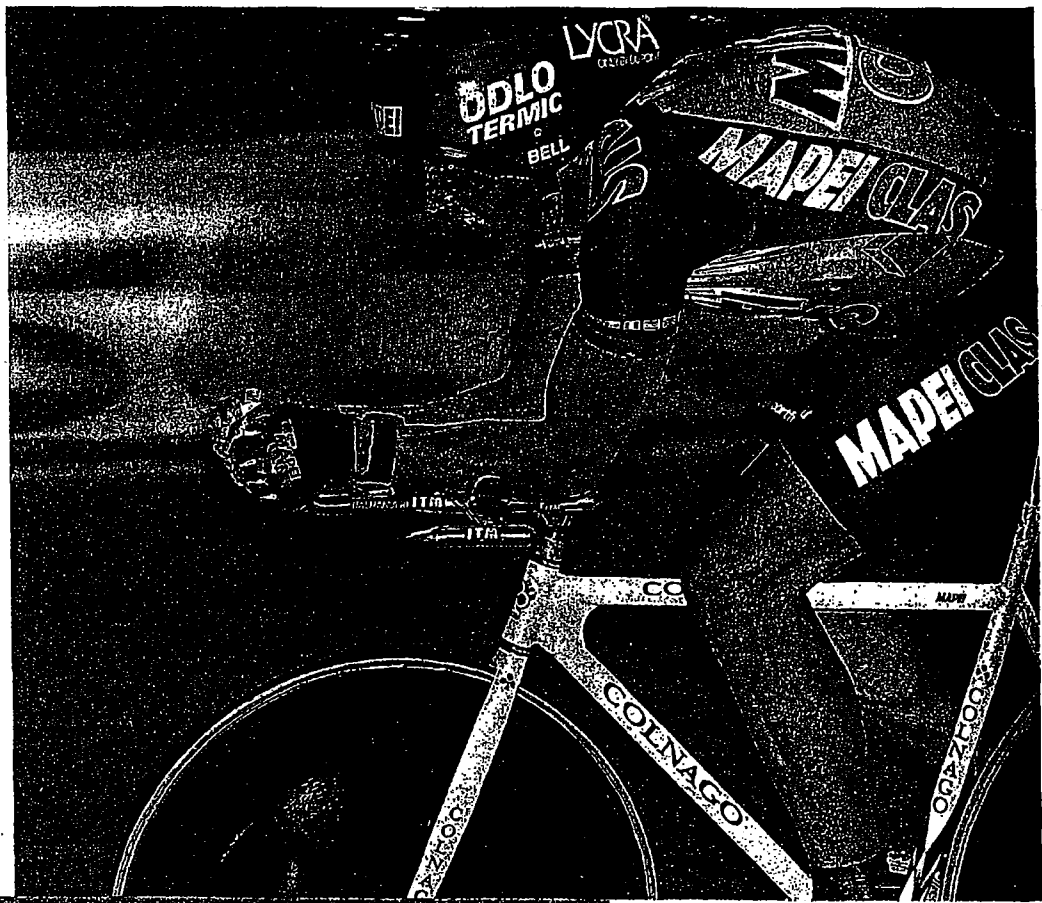
Indurain had won, and Rominger would never challenge him again in the Tour, despite the fact that he was to win the 1995 Giro in utterly convincing style. The Swiss was so demoralised that he came close to quitting. He recalls coming home from the Tour with no motivation and sitting around his flat in Monaco in a state of depression. Apparently his wife put him back on his bike because she was fed up with him sitting doing nothing, while Ferrari, like a clever coach should, found his man a new challenge.

‘Indurain was a nice person.

I respected him a lot because he was a good cyclist, but I was never afraid of him’



— "The Hour was so easy"



Below: Rominger won three stages and the overall in the 1995 Tour of Italy



'The Tour de France was a race like the Giro or the Vuelta. Three weeks of suffering... I would like to have won it, but it was not the only race to win'

"Ferrari saved me," admits Rominger. "He phoned me and asked me what I wanted to prepare. He said that if I wanted to do the World's, I would have to start doing five, six or seven hours a day — now. I told him I couldn't do it, so he said we should try to win all the time trials, and I would have to train two or three hours a day and that would be it. I came back and won the Grand Prix Eddy Merckx, but with a small gap, then was very strong in the Telekom Grand Prix, then in the Grand Prix des Nations [on the same Lac de Madine course where he lost the 1993 Tour] I was flying and won by three or four minutes."

The objective was Indurain's hour record, which was "on the shelf", according to Hour expert Peter Keen. "You have to be in good shape and find a good position, and you have to adapt to the track," says Rominger, who had the first two in spades, but found the third a problem. "I got on the track at Bordeaux and fell off after 60 metres. The first thing I did was to look around and see if the crew from Swiss television had been able to cover it. It was the only thing I was

thinking about. Everyone said 'God, what is he doing?', but after two days I saw I would beat the record." For "beat" read "smash out of sight": Rominger put a total of 2.25 kilometres on Indurain's distance in two attempts.

Keeping sight of the bigger picture

In keeping with his cosmopolitan image, Rominger had a broader view of cycling than Indurain — although you could argue that he had to look outside the Tour de France because of the Spaniard's monopolistic grip on the race. "For me, the Tour de France was a race like the Giro or the Vuelta. Three weeks of suffering. For sure I would like to have won it, but it was not the only race to win."

The Swiss feels that the Tour's pre-eminence is bad for cycling. "If people feel there is only one big winner in the year, you will end up losing a lot of sponsors, because they only look to this race. Before it was nice when Merckx and Hinault tried to win everything in the year. In races like the Giro or the Vuelta it's good for the crowd to have big champions, and when the big champions focus on just one race in the year, that's disappointing for the fans."

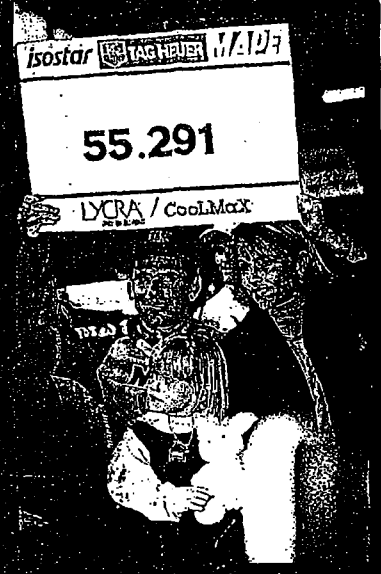
Intriguingly, Rominger didn't come into cycling through the Tour, but remembers pictures beamed over the Alps from the Giro d'Italia. "During the Tour de France we were always on holiday in Denmark. The Giro was the biggest thing in cycling for me when I was aged between 10 and 15, with the big Italian riders against Manuel Fuente and Merckx. It was the biggest event in the year and the *maglia rosa* was the jersey that mattered for me. Merckx was the big hero." Like his hero, Rominger could score on any terrain — hour record or hilly classic, time trial or major Tour. But, unfortunately, cycling has changed since the days of Merckx: one event matters to the wider public — the Tour de France — and in that event Rominger came up against a man who exerted the same mesmeric effect as Merckx.

dad, kids and wife, Brigitte



◀ Best moment:

winning the 1992 Vuelta. "When I won my first Vuelta I knew I was able to win every kind of race. I was lucky because in the first time trial after a week I lost three minutes on Erik Breukink. It wasn't very good for my confidence but I was still fifth or sixth overall and, as the race went on, I moved up and took the jersey with two days to go. I was never one of the big favourites, and it gave me a lot of confidence."



Worst moment: ▶

pulling out of the 1997 Tour de France. "The good thing about sport is that you only remember the positive things. The only negative ones still in my mind are when I pulled out in 1994 and when I crashed this year. This year's was an incredible crash — we were going at 60kph, a bike without a rider came from my left and I had no time to react. I always try to get back on my bike really quickly. I tried once, felt something was broken, and it was all over."



▲ The hour record: happy days!

"Fernandez [Clas manager] was happier with the record than I was, because he loved track training, but I enjoyed it more than anything else I've done because my family were there, and Biver, Ferrari, Fernandez, Alejandro the mechanic and Torrontegui the massour; all the people I love. It was really easy — after all, it only lasted an hour. The first one, I trained for five days, got the record, then went home again. Ferrari called and said 'I think you can go better if you train a bit more, so we'll try in two weeks'. I came back with better equipment and position, and a little more training, and went even better. The Hour was so easy!"

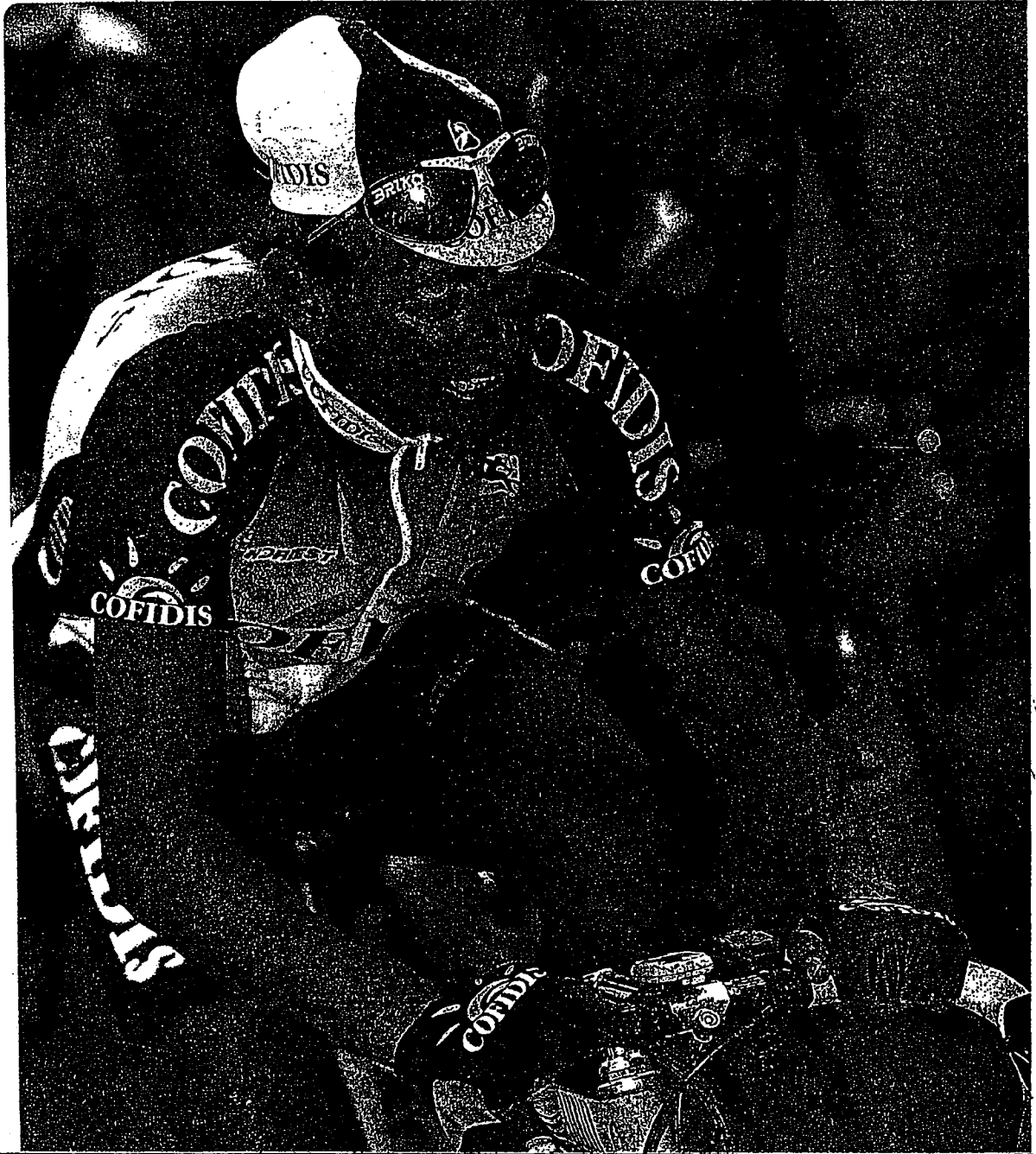
IT'S not always the very biggest winners who introduce the most radical and far-reaching changes into cycling. Fiorenzo Magni was the first person to bring in a sponsor who wasn't a bike manufacturer, in the 1950s, while Greg LeMond introduced pro cycling to the million-dollar salary and the triathlon extension. In contrast, the legacies of Miguel Indurain, Bernard Hinault and Eddy Merckx were mainly in their considerable racing achievements.

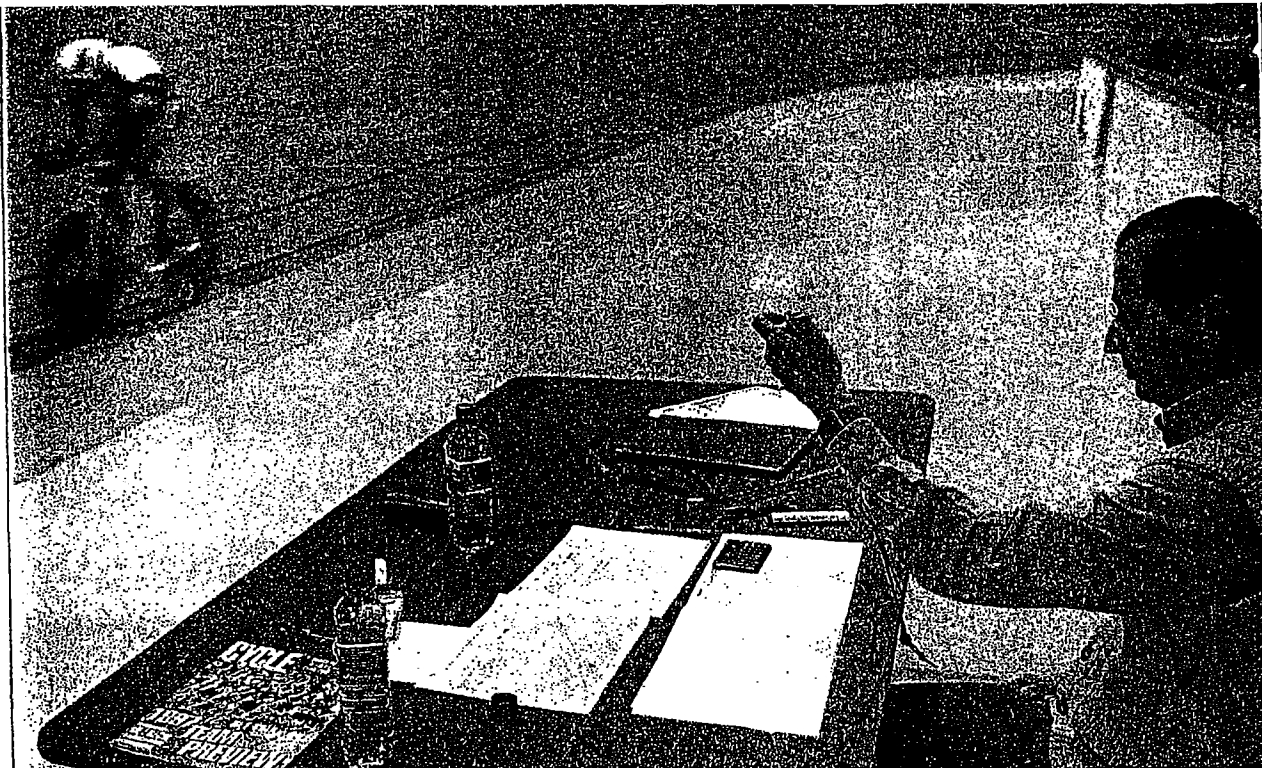
Time will decide the influence on cycling of Tony Rominger's relationship with the world's largest sports management company, IMG, but there is no doubt about the influence of his trainer, Dr Michele Ferrari, and the example their highly productive working relationship has set. Name one cycling star who hasn't got a personal trainer, or one personal trainer who isn't well paid...

Ferrari and Rominger weren't the first trainer and protégé to

won Milan-San Remo and the Giro d'Italia. But the Swiss and the man they nickname 'Testarossa' brought the concept of the personal trainer into big-time road racing. "Ferrari was the trainer at Supermercati Brianzoli when I was there in 1987," recalls Rominger. "That was Moser's team, and he had worked on Moser's hour records. He measured every rider's legs, and looked at the relation of the shin and thigh bone. He came to me and said 'you could be a big champion', purely on the basis of my physique.

"He said 'if you train well and live a serious life, you can be one of the best in the world'. I hadn't won any races. He tried to motivate me to believe him by pointing out that he'd done a lot of studies in this, and that the relationship of my thigh to my shin was the same as Moser's and so on. At the time I did





my own programmes, so when he asked if he could do some for me, I just said I'd go on doing it myself. Three months later I asked him to train me. The difference he made was that I trained a lot harder than I had before. In my first two years as a pro I would go out and do seven or seven-and-a-half hour rides. With Michele I would never do more than six — it was simply more specialised work."

Contact between the two was regular, sometimes daily, and it was Ferrari who organised the altitude training camps where Rominger prepared for the Tour de France in 1993 and 1994. They were a radical departure, and worked one year, but not the next. "They increase your red cell count and haematocrit, so you get more oxygen and more power," explains Rominger. "It's good mentally, but you have to be able to train hard. If you can't, it's not worth it." Since his controversial comments over the use of EPO in 1994, Ferrari's profile has become lower, but he still trains a string of stars, including Giro winner, Ivan Gotti, the 'Lion King', Mario Cipollini, the entire ONCE team and American Lance Armstrong.

But it was Rominger who contacted the Swiss arm of Mark McCormack's IMG in 1992. "I called once, and the next day Mark Biver was here." IMG now has 12 riders on its books, including Alex Zülle, Laurent Dufaux and America's Bobby Julich, as well as young Briton David Millar. They've also made forays into race organisation with the revitalised A Travers Lausanne and Rominger Classic, and the less successful first running of the Tour of Langkawi.

If Ferrari was the man who tuned the machine, Biver and IMG kept the operation running smoothly. "They took away a lot of problems, taxes and contracts," explains Rominger. "Some riders think you lose money but in the end a manager earns it for you. When you sign a contract, it's not a contract the team has drawn up, so when there is trouble with the team, you will always win because the contract is watertight. I never lost money because a team didn't want to pay me, but I know a lot of riders who did."

Biver's influence meant that Rominger simply had less to

think about, and could pay more attention to what mattered. "They took away a lot of small worries which would have cost me time. I never went to sign a contract with Mapei, for example — Biver did it for me. Paying tax in France can be complex — there's a lot of time involved in seeing the taxman and filling in forms — so you can get into problems as well." He also points out that, when it came to getting a contract, IMG drove a harder bargain than he would have done. "It's easier to sell a third person than it is to sell yourself — a third party is always less likely to be modest."

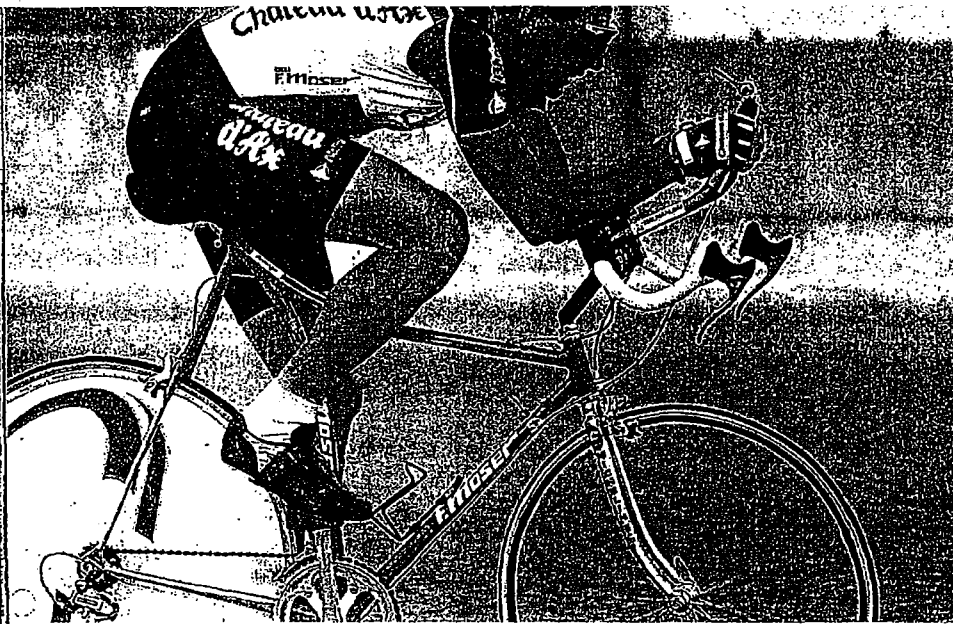
It should be pointed out that Rominger is not at all disinterested when it comes to talking about IMG — the company will employ him next year, as he has taken over as its cycling specialist from Australian ex-professional Stephen Hodge, who left IMG in October. "The aim is to get more money involved," says Rominger. "The strategy is to have more riders, so that we can sell a package to criterium organisers. My role is mainly to make contact with the riders and sponsors."

Above: Rominger and Ferrari track testing in Manchester this year — they decided against another hour record attempt

Far left: IMG handled Rominger's move to a French team, Cofidis, in his final season

'He came to me and said 'you could be a big champion', purely on the basis of my physique' Rominger on Ferrari

IMG is looking after the mountain bike World Cup next year for the UCI, and the 1998 World Mountain Bike Championships in Canada, although Rominger isn't going to be heavily involved in that side of things. The Swiss says that McCormack's group is looking to set up a team, and there are informed rumours that IMG recently looked to market cycling's first division teams as a whole, although the move met resistance. Cycling is an under-marketed sport, and IMG seems to have long-term aims: its progress will make interesting watching, if events since Rominger's first speculative phone call five years ago are anything to go by.



Above: Early tri-bar position in the 1989 GP des Nations

The Rominger years

1986 Cilo-Aufina: three wins

1987 Supermercattl Brianzoli: one win, Giro di Reggio Calabria

1988 Chateau d'Aix: eight wins including stages in Tour of the Mediterranean, Tour of Trentino, Tour of Romandie, and Tour of Italy; Giro dell'Emilia

1989 Chateau d'Aix: six wins including stage and overall in Tour of the Mediterranean; overall, Tirreno-Adriatico; Tour of Lombardy

1990 Chateau d'Aix: seven wins including stages in Tour of the Mediterranean, Dauphiné Libéré and Tirreno-Adriatico; overall, Tirreno-Adriatico

1991 Toshiba: 10 wins including prologue, two stages and overall in Paris-Nice; two stages and overall in Tour of Romandie; stage in Dauphiné; GP des Nations

1992 Clas-Cajastur: 17 wins including prologue and stage in Paris-Nice; two stages and overall in Tour of Basque Country; two stages and overall in Tour of Spain; stage in Tour of

Asturias; Tour of Lombardy

1993 Clas-Cajastur: 16 wins including stage in Criterium International; three stages and overall in Tour of Basque Country; two stages and overall in Tour of Spain (also mountains and points winner); three stages and mountains jersey in Tour de France (second overall); Subida a Urkiola

1994 Mapei-Clas: 21 wins including stage and overall in Paris-Nice; two stages and overall in Tour of Basque Country; six stages and overall in Tour of Spain (leader from start to finish); GP Eddy Merckx; GP Telekom; GP des Nations; Montjuich Hill-climb. Breaks world hour record twice

1995 Mapei-GB: 17 wins including stage in Tour of Basque Country; stage in Tour of Trentino; three stages and overall in Tour of Romandie; three stages and overall in Tour of Italy; GP Telekom

1996 Mapei-GB: eight wins including two stages and overall in Tour of Burgos; two stages in Tour of Spain (third overall); bronze medal, World Time Trial Championships

1997 Cofidis: no major wins CYCLE SPORT

Below: Rominger is mistaken on the 15th stage of the 1987 Giro — Johan Van der Velde has already won

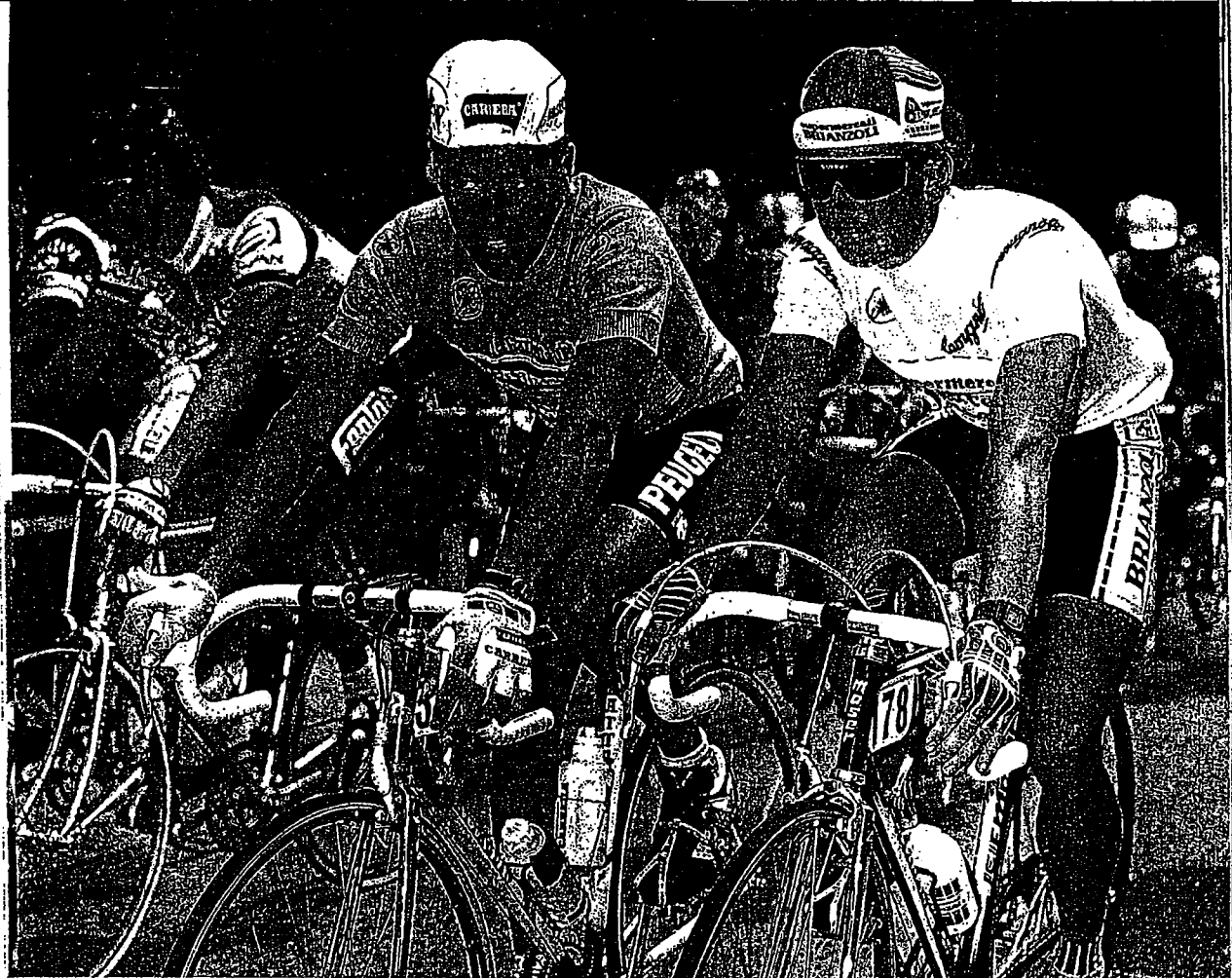
Centre: His first year as a pro, with Cilo, Rominger (left) and Bernard Hinault (centre) in the 1986 Etoile des Bessèges





With his own
adversary Indurain
on Mont Faron in
the 1992 Paris-Nice

Left: After
colliding with a
cameraman at
Avila in the 1992
Tour of Spain



Below: With
eventual winner
Stephen Roche in
the 1987 Tour of
Italy