



living the DREAM

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At the tender age of 23 it looks like Craig Lewis has it all. He is riding professional for one of the best squads in the world, his next door neighbor is not only his teammate, but also one of the most respected riders in the peloton and he is married to a beautiful woman. However, it hasn't all been a bed of roses for Lewis. During the time trial in the 2004 Tour de Georgia an SUV pulled in front of him. With no time to react, Lewis slammed into it resulting in 47 broken bones and punctured lungs. This could have ended his career, but instead the collusion taught him how to push himself harder than he had ever before. On the eve of the Greenville road race, ROAD magazine stopped by his house to get the low down from who has been stuck with the label of America's next great hope.

How does a guy from South Carolina decide to ride a bike? I picked it up as a hobby in high school. I started working at a bike shop and started riding out on the road. I met Rich Hincapie (George Hincapie's brother) who is from Greenville and I started being competitive on his development team. Then I met George.

Where did you meet Rich Hincapie, and what made him call you? At the local Tuesday night ride, he looks out for all the juniors in the area. He gave me a call and wanted me to be on his team. He tries to help out all the young guys in the area and there aren't that many, so I think that was reason enough to call me.

At the press conference George Hincapie said he's been training with you since you were 16. How did that relationship form? It was convenience. I was young, didn't have a job, and George could ride with me. He was great to let me tag along with him and teach me. That was the only reason we made it work. Juggling school and riding a bike gave me more free time to do his schedule.

George must have seen something in you to let a 16-year-old rider tag along with him. Rich was talking me up more than anything. I started riding with George on a once-a-month basis. Eventually I did more and more training with him and I got better. I don't think he would have wasted his time otherwise.

Was there a point when you thought you could race professionally? Probably when I was 18 I knew that it could be something I could do for a few years. I didn't know how far I could take it. Slipstream, the team I was on, was progressing at pretty much the same rate as I was, coming from nothing to doing small trips to Europe. It fit in well with my progression. It was a progression from knowing nothing about the sport to gradually thinking it could be a future.

You and John Devine have been proclaimed as the next big thing. Do you feel any of the pressure from that? Not so much. The sport is so hard and it takes so many years to adapt, there is no reason to put that pressure on myself to meet other people's expectations. I'm happy where I am now and the support I have from the team. Obviously they want me to still be progressing at the rate I am now and they want me to be in the Tour in the next year or two. I don't have huge aspirations to be like Lance or anything. I'm just having fun doing this.

In the 2004 Tour de Georgia time trial you were hit by a car that made its way onto the course. Both your lungs were punctured, fractured scapula, collarbone, tibia, wrist, and skull, cracked ribs, broken nose and vertebra, and broken jaw. Why did you get back on a bike? It was the only thing I could do. Riding a bike was easier for my muscles and joints. That's what got me back on a trainer. After that it was a release to get out of the house because I was in the hospital for 2 months. I then realized that I didn't lose too much fitness and I could come back.

In the present how has the crash affected? Not so much. But it was a gradual process. When I started I wanted to make sure my body wasn't overloaded. It was month after month of getting better. This winter I took a break and came back 10 times stronger with a lot more power than before. I think there might be more recovery to come, but it hasn't bothered me mentally at all.

So it has given you some untapped ability than before? For sure. I have never suffered that much again.

It puts everything in perspective? It was a blessing and I don't regret it happening at all. I learned so much from it.

You left Slipstream, which on paper seems to be suited for grooming young riders. Why go to Columbia? It was a tough decision and I started with Slipstream. I can't say it was one thing that forced me to leave. The opportunities that George has given me in the past, along with racing and riding with George was, in the back of my mind, something that hopefully I would be able to do with him one day (as a teammate). His career is kind of coming to an end and I had to take a chance and go with George. It's been a great decision and I love the team. I do miss Slipstream. As you can see I have Pat (McCarty, Garmin-Chipotle member) staying with me. It was a great group of guys to race with and be around. I do miss that and how they develop the riders and bring them up, but I'm super happy right now.



You've had a quite year. What have you been up to? I've been learning the ropes. It's another level every year and now I'm at the ProTour level and doing all the big races. One of the drawbacks of being on such a good team like Columbia is that opportunities can be few and far between when you have guys like Cavendish winning stages. So I've been working for the GC guys and sprint guys and have learned and progressed a lot. The team still has put a lot of trust and faith in me. They took me to the Tour camps so I could see the roads and mountains for the future. They do want to develop me. That was one thing I was worried about when I left Slipstream that I would get lost, but Columbia has taken care of me.

You've had physiological testing that shows you produce very similar watts per kilogram as Armstrong, but you say that you have no aspirations to be a multi-Tour winner. However in the back of your mind you must be thinking about it. Columbia isn't taking you to these Tour camps for a European vacation. It must be for a reason. It definitely isn't a vacation (laughing). It is a goal. I don't know about next year, but definitely the following year as a goal and they see that as well. I don't know about victory, I haven't even

done a Grand Tour, doing that's the first step. If I keep progressing like I am and surround myself with riders like George and the staff I have, I can go pretty far.

At the beginning of the year Columbia was scheduled to race the Vuelta and you were possibly going to be on the squad for that stage race. However they didn't send a team. Did this disappoint you? It is a disappointment not to be there. It's a great race. It would have been nice to develop that way. There was also a shot to have done the Giro as well, but that didn't pan out either. But I can see where Bob (Stapleton, owner) is coming from with that decision. We are pretty stretched as it is with Tour of Ireland, Missouri, and USPRO going on. I'm not complaining about sleeping in my own bed to race the national championships.

Have you been surprised by anything switching to Columbia? We still do the ACE testing, which is just our 2 teams (Columbia and Slipstream), which I'm used to. In regards to big shocks, not too much. Columbia is a big organization and so is the staff. Everything is so dialed. I literally don't have to deal with anything. They send me a plane ticket and I know I'm going to the race. They always

stick to the race schedule and love to hear my input from what I want to do. That's the difference coming from Slipstream because they have fewer guys and they might have to juggle around at the last moment. It's a bigger group of guys with 30, rather than 25 that Garmin has, it really helps out. It's unfortunate that all the big teams are cutting back next year. Maybe it will go back to 25 riders.

You worked at a bike shop and had posters of the riders on the wall. How is it now to be riding against them? It's cool, but you become accustomed to it over the years. In 2004 when Lance was doing the Tour de Georgia that was huge to race against him. Cipollini was there, which was a big shock. After that you get used to it. When you get to a certain level you are more accepted by all the riders and you realize that they are normal people and turn out to be good friends. You don't look at them as celebrities. I look at George more as a brother than a celebrity.

Compare this year with the years you had at Slipstream. This year is different because they [Garmin] have a much bigger roster. But the past 4 years we would go to races with the goal of surviving or getting in the early break. We never really had the actual chance to win races and ride for the win. Then I go to the biggest and best team and we have 70 wins. When we show up to the race we are expected to win and the other teams look at us. So I've learned how to ride for the best guys in the world. I don't think you can ask for much more than that.

Where do you feel you need to improve as a cyclist? I'm pretty average at everything right now. The biggest improvements would be to see what my strengths could be. I can do a decent time trial and decent climbing days. I probably need to improve more in climbs because that seems to be where I have lost time in stage races. My bad days have been on the long climbs rather than the time trials. That's what I'm going to focus on these next couple of years.

Is Columbia giving you the time to physically mature as their possible stage race GC contender? Yeah they are. They have put me in every weeklong stage race this year. Every month I've done a week long stage race and they all have long hills in them. They have labeled me as a climber when they saw me and that's what I was stuck with this year. And it's paid off. I've become a much better climber than ever before. I've been doing training camps in the Pyrénées or going to the Alps and racing there.

That seems like a lot to put on a 23-year old rider. I just got my schedule and I saw that I'm racing until Lombardia [laughing]. It is a lot, but they have given me plenty of breaks. And it's fun to be at the races hanging out with the guys. I'm looking forward to getting back.

When can we expect to see you contest your first Grand Tour? Next season for sure. We won't sit down and discuss schedules until November. The Tour is definitely a possibility. More likely I'll do the Giro, but like Garmin and Columbia did this year, they had guys do

both and I won't be too thrilled to do that. But if it's an opportunity to do the Tour, I'd do it. You'll probably see me in the Giro. It will be their decision.

HINCAPIE ON LEWIS

What's your relationship with Craig? It's pretty good. He's a great friend and I take a lot of pride with him. I feel like I brought him along in his younger years and he's on one of the best teams in the world. He's like a brother to me.

Where do you think he can improve? He's jumped to a huge level this year from the past couple of years, which is standard procedure in his growth. He's progressing really well. Just because there are guys winning a ton of races that are his age right now doesn't mean that he won't be in a couple of years or even next year. He has gotten tremendously stronger compared to last year. If he keeps going like that, he'll be able to do a lot.

When you say that he is going to be able to do a lot, do you mean in Grand Tours? Hincapie: I could see him getting better at stage races. He can time trial well, sprint well. He's a good all-around rider. He hasn't done a Grand Tour yet, so it's hard to see how he'll do. Typically he would be better at longer stage races than one-day races. *R*

