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For the first time ever in his professional cycling career, George Hincapie is not under the guidance of Johan Bruyneel. As the years have ticked by Hincapie must have sensed a change in environment would be good for him. While bad luck continued at Paris-Roubaix he still had a decent spring season with a fifth at Flanders, ninth at Paris-Roubaix and a victory in the last stage of the Amgen Tour of California. However all that work has taken a toll. Splayed out on the hotel lobby's sofa, Hincapie talked about the on-going Tour de Georgia, the early season and the possibility of returning to the Olympics for a fifth time.

You have come off a heavy spring campaign, how are you feeling? I'm feeling good, but a little tired. Normally when I do Flanders and all those other races (Paris-Roubaix) like I did this year, my body shuts down. There was a lot of pressure on me this year. The races are very stressful. After doing all those races I feel like I've done the Tour de France. I'm tired and hope to recover here (Tour de Georgia).

You had a good Flanders [fifth place] and then Roubaix eluded you. Does that haunt you? It definitely was tough. I had great legs and felt I was one of the strongest guys in the race. To break my wheel when I did was bad luck, but you need to keep trying. The team was good and there was nothing else I could do. It was a bad luck day for us.

How much does luck have to play in Paris-Roubaix? A lot! The guys who did well had nothing happen to them. Obviously you have to be good, you need to be strong to be up there. But if you're strong and you're up there and you have something happen to your bike that is a big factor.

Is your role on the team twofold: leader and mentor? Yep. There are races I'm focused for and want to get a result, but I'm also on a team that has some of the best young talent in the world. We've won 20 races this year [at press time] and a lot of the

riders are under 23 years of age. It's a real pleasure to work with them, give them my experience and play a big part in their victories.

Who do you look to as the next strong American that fits into your Classics rider style? There aren't many guys right now. Tyler Farrar could be pretty good in the Classics. He knows the roads pretty well in Belgium. It's tough. There are Americans that do pretty well in the Tour of California and Tour de Georgia, but it is so different (in Europe). These races are hard (Tour de Georgia), but you can basically sit at the back and at the crunch time you can move up. There are 120 guys here (Georgia), the roads are wide and the wind isn't really a factor. When you go to Belgium or northern France you can never sit at the back. You need to be 100 percent focused all the time. It's all about positioning and then you need the legs after 260k. It's a whole different dimension. Racing here and doing the races over there are almost like a different sport. I think Tyler has potential.

Craig Lewis is your neighbor and teammate. How is he coming along? He's doing well. He got sick in Paris-Nice, but made a big jump from last year to this year. I've seen him change a tremendous amount. His training is much better. He needs to turn that corner and do all the big races. He's made a huge improvement. Hopefully he'll continue on that path.

What are your thoughts on the upcoming Olympics? I'd love to go. The Olympics are a special thing. So many people know about the Olympics. If I go it will be my fifth Olympics, so it would be nice to do a great race.

Why have you come to Georgia after such a hard spring? A couple of things: yeah I'm tired, but we are the only American ProTour team and it's important that I be here. Also it is so close to home. My family can come and watch. It's not a hard, stressful race.

At this Tour de Georgia do you have any strong goals or just riding through this race? Just riding through. Stage 5 is the longest stage and my chances

go up a little bit (3rd). The team time trial will be good (Team High Road was third). Saturday (Brasstown Bald) Levi is the clear favorite, but we hope to have some guys up there. [they did of course!]

Is the Giro on your schedule? No. I raced it last year and did 10 days. The Giro is awesome. I was coming back from my wrist injury and was filler on the team. It was great and one of my favorite Grand Tours I've ever done. It's hard, but not to the point that it's hard every day. At the Giro you go hard one day, then the next day everyone goes easy. I really enjoy doing it and would like to do it again.

You've raced the Tour de France 12 times, is this year going to be any different for you now that you're on High Road? Are you at a point with the Tour that it's just another race? That's a good question. I never really thought about it. I have really enjoyed the first part of the season with the team. It has gone well. We've done well and won a lot of races. I'm assuming that the Tour will be the same. Obviously it won't be the same when I was riding with Lance or Alberto, but I think we have guys that have the potential to be in the top five. If Kim Kirchen, Michael Rogers and Linus are healthy we will have a super strong team. If not, we have a lot of sprinters and I'll be looking for opportunities in breakaways, which is exciting. In Discovery and Postal we had to control the race from day-one. Breakaways weren't an option. On a team like this I should be able to go on a break when I feel good.

Proudest cycling moment so far in your career? Winning Pla d' Adet, stage 15 in the 2005 Tour de France. *✍*

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this shot was taken in a small patch of trees just outside of High Road's hotel just after stage 2 of the Tour de Georgia.