

## SPORTING LEGENDS: AXEL MERCKX

**SPORT: CYCLING**

**COMPETITIVE ERA: 1993 - 2007**

Axel Merckx (born August 8, 1972 in Uccle, Belgium), the son of the legendary Eddy Merckx, was a professional road bicycle racer since November 1993.

In 1995 he joined Team Motorola as a team-mate of the young Lance Armstrong.



Despite several strong years of racing, including winning the Belgian national championship in 2000, Axel is probably still more famous for being the son of five-time Tour de France champion Eddy Merckx than for any of his cycling exploits.

Despite being overshadowed by his father's formidable record, Axel has repeatedly vowed to make his mark by accomplishing feats Eddy never managed - including a Tour de France stage win at the top of Alpe d'Huez and a win in the Paris-Tours World Cup race - but has yet to make good on these promises.

He has a large number of fans in Belgium, and would undoubtedly engender a great deal more goodwill if he were ever to achieve either of those elusive wins. One place where he has overshadowed his father is at the Olympic Games.

A good climber, Axel is probably at his best in the mid-altitude mountain ranges, notably the Massif Central and the Ardennes. His favorite race, and the one he feels best in, is Liège-Bastogne-Liège. He is also always aiming for a Tour de France stage win, and can often be found in long breaks. His sprinting capacities are not that strong, so he is often beaten at the finish.

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Merckx enjoyed his 2004 Olympic Bronze success in Athens.

Axel Merckx won the bronze medal in the road race during the 2004 Summer Olympic Games in Athens, moving off the bunch with a canny move in the final kilometre, thus getting a result his father never accomplished.

Axel married Canadian triathlete Jodi Cross in 1997, and currently resides in Monaco. He has two children, Axana and Athina Grace (born June 30, 2005).

In stage 5 (Vaison-la-Romaine - Grenoble) of the Dauphiné Libéré Merckx placed a solo breakaway of 110 km and won. He arrived 2'15" ahead of Inigo Landa, the overall winner.

In the 2005 Tour de France Merckx finished 39th in the General Classification, as best-placed Belgian. In breakaways and when blocking the peloton together with his team, he often sets the tempo, both for his personal honor and to serve the team. Like 2004, in 2005 Davitamon-Lotto focused on the green jersey (Robbie McEwen) and on a top-ten place (Cadel Evans), so Axel's role became more that of a super-domestique, fetching bidons and keeping his team-mates out of the wind.

There were two stages very important for Axel: stage 12 (Briançon - Digne-les-Bains) on July 14 (Bastille Day), because his father won that same stage on July 9, 1969, and stage 18 (Albi - Mende) on July 21, the Belgian national holiday.

Stage 12 saw an initial escape with Merckx in it. Later Thor Hushovd and Stuart O'Grady joined in, and on the Col du Corbin it was Axel's task to keep the pace up by breaking away and throw them off to minimise Robbie McEwen's green jersey point loss. At the same time, the Davitamon-Lotto domestiques like Johan Vansummeren, Christophe Brandt and Mario Aerts rode fast (this might seem a strange tactic), to catch Hushovd and O'Grady.

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Merckx was an incredibly focused rider, determined to create his OWN racing legacy.

After the sprinters were left behind, Merckx tried to focus on the stage win, but on the top of the Col du Corobin David Moncoutié broke away, and raced to the finish. Merckx finished 7th, but might have kept up with Moncoutié if he hadn't spent his energy on throwing both sprinters off.

In stage 18, on the very steep finish at Mende-Aérodrome, Merckx, together with Cédric Vasseur and Marcos Serrano, dropped the other members of the breakaway, but later was dropped himself by a very strong Serrano, who took the victory.

Merckx was disappointed (by showing a hand gesture) in Vasseur, who unchivalrously took the 2nd place (without even sprinting) before a pretty exhausted Merckx, because he did nearly no work during the breakaway and "stole" the victory.

### Major Victories:

**1996**

2nd stage Trittico Premondiale (GP Sanson)

**1998**

3d stage Bayern Rundfahrt

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Merckx's endurance was superb, he just lacked a devastating sprint capability.

### Major Victories:

#### **2000**

Belgian National Championship  
Tour du Région Wallonne  
Criterium Aalst  
8th stage Giro d'Italia

#### **2001**

Grand Prix de Wallonie  
Ronde d'Aix-en-Provence  
Gianetti Day

#### **2002**

Combativity Paris-Nice

#### **2003**

Tour de L'Ain

#### **2004**

3d Olympic Road Race

#### **2005**

5th stage Dauphiné Libéré

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### Scott Burton's Final Thought

It can never be easy following in the footsteps of one of the greatest road race cyclists of all time, especially so when that same cyclist is your father!

You can spend your entire sporting career trying to live up to other people's expectations. However, it can be said that Axel Merckx had a mighty fine cycling career all of his own.

He was by no means the greatest racer of his generation, but he always gave his absolute best and was an athlete that Belgium were very proud of.



Axel Merckx savoured each and every victory during his career.