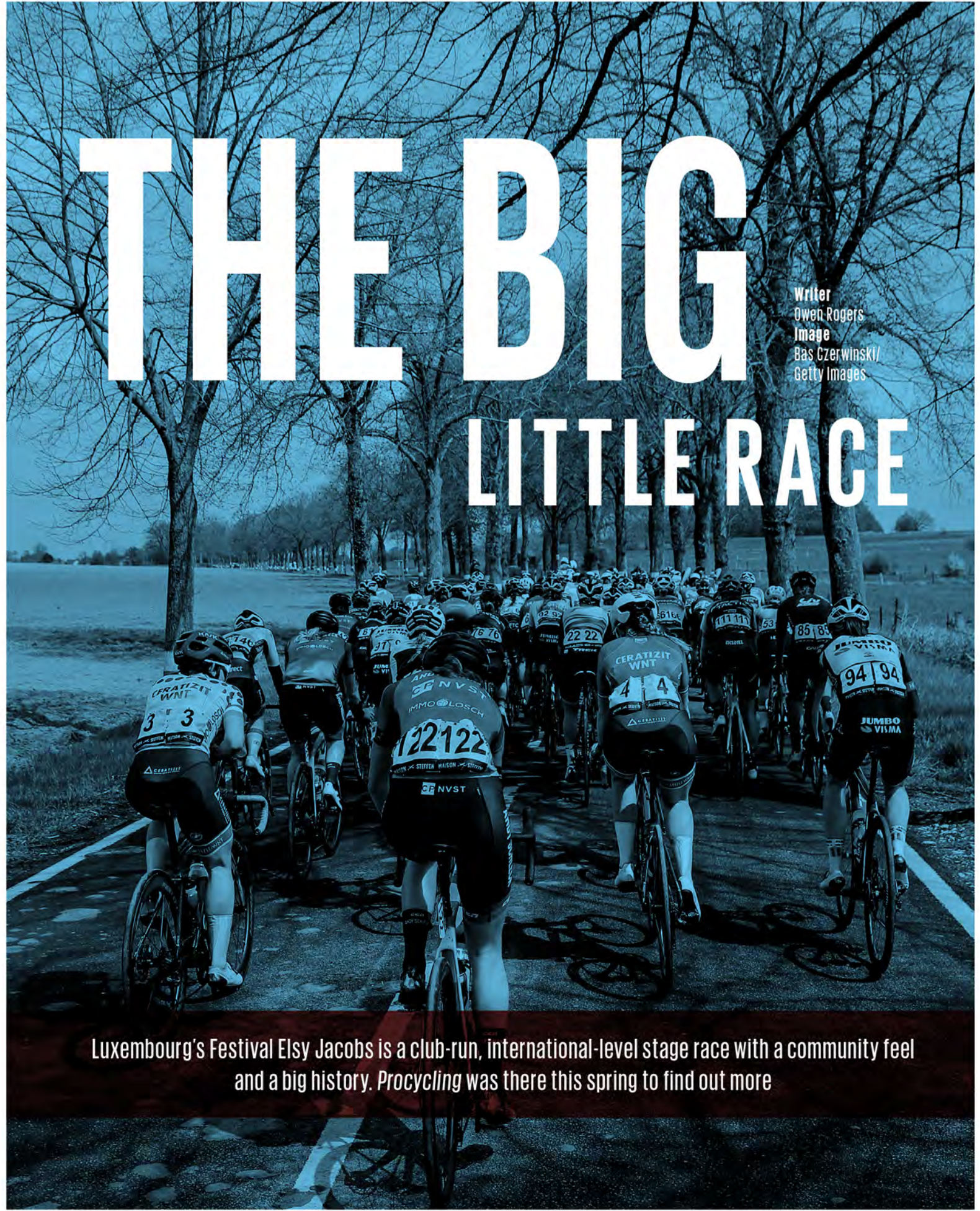


THE BIG LITTLE RACE

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Luxembourg's Festival Elsy Jacobs is a club-run, international-level stage race with a community feel and a big history. *ProCycling* was there this spring to find out more

CERATIZIT FESTIVAL ELSY JACOBS



Garnich, a sleepy village with a population of little more than 2,000 people, a few kilometres west of Luxembourg City on the Grand Duchy's border with Belgium, might seem an odd place for an international cycling race. But it is where Elsy Jacobs, the first women's road race world champion and Hour record holder, was brought up, and through the years the race has built itself up into an impressive event, with some equally impressive winners. Emma Pooley, Marianne Vos, Anna van der Breggen and Kasia Niewiadoma have all won, as has home heroine Majerus.

Yet when it was first organised in 2001, Festival Elsy Jacobs was not a race at all, but a recreational

ride created after Gaston Zangerlé published his biography of Jacobs, *La Grande Duchesse de la Petite Reine*.

"The official presentation took place in Garnich, and there some friends, the mayor, Elsy's sister Cécile and I decided to create the Randonnée Elsy Jacobs," explains Zangerlé, who remains involved in the organisation. "In 2008 we were celebrating the 50th anniversary of Elsy's world championship as well as the 50th anniversary of her world record, and on that occasion our club and the community organised a professional women's race. We thought it would take place only once but 2008 was very successful and we decided to continue." 🗨️

▼ Marianne Vos (r), pictured here in the 2011 race, has won Elsy Jacobs three times, a record

he Luxembourg village of Garnich is normally buzzing after the final stage of Festival Elsy Jacobs. Smoke from the barbecue would drift towards the podium over knots of people. In the queue, fans would weigh up the choices. Burger or hot dog? Which sausage? A grillwurst, a red mettwurst or a cheesy Blanne Jang? Nearby, Andy Schleck and his family would wait for the presentation with the rest of the crowd, and wearing her red white and blue national champion's jersey, Christine Majerus should be the centre of attention.

But covid-19 means there was no barbecue in 2021, and no crowd. Majerus headed to the SD Worx team bus and only photographers waited for the presentation. At least you could hear laughing from behind the stage while the jersey winners chatted as they waited to raise their arms for the pictures.

Emma Norsgaard had the biggest smile, having finally reached the top step after a string of podium placings throughout the spring. The Danish champion won both road stages, the young rider and points jerseys and Movistar's first stage race GC since the women's squad appeared in 2018.

Over the years, the race has built itself up into an impressive event, with some equally impressive winners. Emma Pooley, Marianne Vos, Anna van der Breggen and Kasia Niewiadoma have all won



Image: Cor Vos

Starting as GP Elsy Jacobs, the race has been a truly international event from the outset. Italian Monia Bacaille won that first year, and perhaps predictably Dutchwoman Vos is the most successful, her four stages and three overall victories straddling the race's transition from one-day to stage race in 2012.

Cycling is Luxembourg's most successful professional sport. From Nicolas Frantz's 1927 Tour de France victory, through Charly Gaul's grand tour winning exploits in the 1950s to Andy Schleck and Bob Jungels, the men have made a disproportionate mark on the sport for a country of

only 630,000. The women's sport has not experienced similar success, a motivation for the race to continue past that first edition.

"We wanted to give our Luxembourgish female racers the opportunity to get out of the shadows of the Schleck brothers and Kim Kirchen, to help them to be known, to give them the opportunity to compete on an international level and get them to the Olympics," says Claude Losch, now the race director.

"Mission accomplished: London 2012 with Christine Majerus and Rio 2016 with Christine and Chantal Hoffman."

Luxembourg road and time trial champion Majerus is one of the strongest and most highly rated

► Lorena Wiebes was the first race leader in 2021 after winning the prologue on day one

▼ Christine Majerus is the home heroine of Elsy Jacobs and has raced it every year it has been held

domestiques in the peloton, and plenty strong enough to have taken some big wins of her own. She was fourth at the first running of the race, and is the only woman to have ridden every edition. She remains the lone home victor, taking a stage and the GC in 2017.

"It has been an important race for me because I did not start with the biggest races," she says. "For us Luxembourg riders it was important to take it seriously, and of course it's always a bit more motivation to race at home in front of your family and friends.

"It is the only UCI women's race in Luxembourg, so it plays its part in the development of women's sport in Luxembourg, to show that there are professional bike races going on for women and hopefully it inspires little girls to get started in cycling."

At the race Majerus is all smiles and never short of someone to talk to, not just because of her status as national champion and a top international rider, but because the race is organised by the club she grew up with, SaF Zéisseng.

On edge of Luxembourg City, Zéisseng, or Cessange in French in this multilingual country, hosted this year's prologue. It was only 2.2km long, and a 14 per cent slope within 200m of rolling down the start ramp made it a case of hanging on across the open fields and houses to the line. Canadian time trial champion Leah Kirchmann set the early fastest time, but was later usurped by her DSM team-mate and sprinter Lorena Wiebes, the Dutchwoman holding on to win by an impressive three seconds.

Anyone who has organised even the lowest level race on public roads will tell you how much work is involved, but an international event during a pandemic is on another scale. Once the government were convinced the race could be run safely, the organisers were under extra scrutiny after well publicised



LA GRANDE DUCHESSE

Born in 1933, the youngest in a large family, Elsy Jacobs worked with her mother around the house and on the family farm. But with her only sister working away, she joined her four brothers on their bikes. There was no such thing as women's racing in Luxembourg, so to feed her competitive spirit Jacobs would head to nearby Belgium or France. With no race licence she would resort to subterfuge, pleading ignorance, then winning.

By 1955 the sport was gaining momentum with the creation of the first Tour de France Féminin, where Jacobs finished 17th. The race was dominated by the Brits, who later joined forces with the French, Belgians and Russians to propose a women's World Championships. Though they were voted down the die was cast.

In 1957 the UCI sanctioned a World Championships, and the next year when Jacobs lined up in Reims, France, as a team of one, women's racing by then was at last supported by the Luxembourg Federation.

Against the might of the bigger teams Jacobs found herself in a seven-woman break on the main climb, on the first of the race's three 20km laps. On the second lap she attacked and wasn't seen again, writing her name in the history books as the first ever female rainbow jersey. Three months later she headed to Milan's Vigorelli velodrome setting a new Hour record of 41.347km which stood until 1972, when Maria Cressari beat it, though only at altitude.

In 1959, and not before time, the Luxembourg Federation finally instituted a women's National Championships, and there was no surprise when Jacobs won it. Indeed, she held the title for all but one year until 1974.

Between 1955 and 1978 Jacobs competed in 1,059 races, winning 301 and making the podium on a further 339 occasions. She was not just a fearsome competitor, but at the forefront of the first dawn of international women's racing, one of a small group who set the scene for all those who came afterwards. She died in 1998.

incidents with traffic on the road at the 2020 Tour of Luxembourg men's race. Everything was done with little intervention from the national federation.

"It was never an option to cancel the race," says Losch. "We had to negotiate very hard with our government and finally got the authorisation three weeks before the race, after everything was booked and organised."

SaF Zéisseng is one of the biggest cycling clubs in the country, with an illustrious list of alumni. As well as Majerus, it counts both Schleck brothers and Jungels among former members. It runs groups of all levels, owns a children's cycling school and women's Continental team – Andy Schleck-CP Invest-Immo Losch. However, as with any club, finding the 200 volunteers needed to run the race is a perennial challenge.

At 125.1km, stage 1 was the longest in the race's history, and with two women up the road the race had settled briefly when a crash took Wiebes down, leaving her with injuries to her knee and shoulder. Though it was clear she would be unable to compete in the final sprint, she was far from done, working hard to ensure Kirchmann was in place for the uphill sprint in Steinfort. But Norsgaard surged clear, taking the win on the back of a powerful, mature performance by Movistar.

It was more of the same for stage 2. With the Spanish squad so confident in the young Dane, they refused to work when Kirchmann, second overnight, was distanced. Their belief was well placed, and while it was close, Ceratizit-WNT's Maria Giulia Confalonieri having gone long, Norsgaard's victory was somehow inevitable. ◻

Cycling is Luxembourg's most successful pro sport. From Nicolas Frantz's 1927 Tour win to Andy Schleck the men have made a disproportionate mark





CERATIZIT FESTIVAL ELSY JACOBS

If Elsy Jacobs has the feel of a club race it is still one with a high quality international field, good hotels, excellent security and first-rate organisation, and while it has always visited Garnich, it has never stood still. It has been live-streamed since 2016, much earlier than many far more illustrious events, and though it began life as a UCI 1.1 event it is now part of the recently created ProSeries.

This second tier of international races was created ahead of the truncated 2020 season to provide a bridge between the top tier and .1 races, giving a home for many of those events which have supported the women's sport for years, but could not fulfil the requirements of the WorldTour.

Whether Elsy Jacobs can be elevated to the WorldTour depends on sporting geopolitics: its regular date on the first weekend of May clashes with the Tour of Chongming Island. And though it provides a far more interesting sporting challenge than the Chinese sprint-fest, a day in Luxembourg's hilly north could also help.

Majerus thinks her home race has found its level, at least for now. "You can see there's an evolution and it's a good organisation, but they have their two feet on the ground, they know what they can



and what they can't do and what they should aim for."

Each year, the day after the race finishes, the 30 or so people most closely involved in planning begin looking towards the next edition. None of them are paid and it is this community ownership and pride that gives the race its excellence and intimate atmosphere. It's

▲ Eventual 2021 winner Norsgaard contemplates her defence of the race lead

◀ Germany's Lisa Brennauer en route to victory in the 2019 edition of Elsy Jacobs

a race that has deep roots in its community and locality, which is a huge asset for any event, but also the ambition to aim high.

"This is the essence. It's where it starts," says Majerus. "I also do sport because it's my passion and that's why I got into sport. I didn't start it because I thought, 'This is a good opportunity to make money, and it's the same for the races.

"You really can feel a difference in personal investment between races that are organised by a company and races that are organised by people, the races run by people who live with it through the whole year, and you can really feel the difference.

"We should not forget, without these races, bigger races would not exist. And it's also these races that allow younger riders to be able to take it step by step and not get pushed straight into the big ocean with only sharks. Here they are with dolphins, and that's a healthier way of trying to get better." ▣

FESTIVAL ELSY JACOBS WINNERS' LIST



2021

EMMA NORSGAARD



2019

LISA BRENNAUER



2018

LETIZIA PATERNOSTER



2017

CHRISTINE MAJERUS



2016

KASIA NIEWIADOMA



2015 Anna van der Breggen 2014 Anna van der Breggen 2013 Marianne Vos 2012 Marianne Vos
2011 Marianne Vos 2010 Emma Pooley 2009 Svetlana Stolbova 2008 Monica Baccaille