



Defending champion Terpstra returns alongside world's finest

On 7th April, Antwerp will welcome an all-star peloton to the start line of the 103rd Tour of Flanders including last year's victor, Niki Terpstra. Standing between the Dutchman and repeat victory in Oudenaarde are world champion Alejandro Valverde, Peter Sagan, Michael Matthews and Belgium's leading stars Oliver Naesen, Greg Van Avermaet, Philippe Gilbert and Sep Vanmarcke, to name a few of the preliminary list of participants.

General Race Director Scott Sunderland sheds light on those racing. "We see teams with one strong leader, for whom the entire team will be working. Niki Terpstra made a conscious choice for this with his move to Direct Energie. Within his team, which starts thanks to a wildcard, he is the absolute leader. This situation is new to him, compared with Deceuninck - Quick-Step, the team he was riding for until last year. With Lampaert, Gilbert, Jungels and Stybar in the team, they have at least four cards to play."

For Belgium's other WorldTour team, Lotto Soudal, Tiesj Benoot will lead the way. Racing on home soil, Naesen (AG2R La Mondiale), Vanmarcke (EF Education First) and Van Avermaet (CCC Team)

vanmarcke (EF Education First) and van Avermaet (CCC Team) have all shined here in the past and will be aiming for the top step of the podium. Amongst others, they will face former winner Sagan (BORA-hansgrohe), European champion Matteo Trentin (Mitchelton-SCOTT) and world champion Valverde (Movistar), who will be supported by Jürgen Roelandts, a podium finisher in 2013.

“At the start there will also be a lot of riders with a fast finish. Team Sunweb’s Michael Matthews, the Kristoff-Gaviria duo from UAE Team Emirates, Arnaud Démare for Groupama-FDJ and John Degenkolb with Trek-Segafredo. The latter can count on Belgians Jasper Stuyven and Edward Theuns, both of whom can go deep into the finale,” says Sunderland.

To emphasise the diverse talents in the field, Sunderland highlights the cyclocross riders. “With Wout van Aert (Jumbo-Visma) and Mathieu van der Poel (Corendon - Circus), we are seeing an interesting development in cycling. Two cyclocross riders who are throwing themselves into the Flemish classics. Indeed, the latter can count on the experience of two-time winner Stijn Devolder.”

“Almost every team has riders who can play a role in the finale,” Sunderland continues. “Look at Team Sky. They may have a less obvious favourite, but with Moscon, Doull, Rowe and Stannard they can count on a very strong team that can help determine the outcome of the race. This is also the case for Team Dimension Data, with Vermote, Valgren and Boasson Hagen. In the finale come Sunday 7th April, having a teammate at the front of the race will count for a lot.”

The preliminary start list presents a host of possible favourites to take the honours in Oudenaarde. Any major changes to the list will be announced by the organisation in due course.