

Kim Kirchen shows off his new Columbia kit during training for the early-season Classics

SECRETS OF THE ARDENNES

Team Columbia powerhouse and five-time Luxembourg sportsman of the year, Kim Kirchen knows a thing or two about winning on the tough, hilly terrain of Belgium's Ardennes region – last year, he claimed victory at Flèche Wallonne. Here, he reveals a few tricks of the Classicist's trade...

Words by **Daniel Friebe** Photography by **Tim De Waele**

“I’ve been riding the Ardennes Classics for so many years now that my experience is a real competitive advantage. There comes a point where you don’t just know the route – you also know the *race*. You know exactly what your options are, how much energy you have, how much energy you need to do certain things. Amstel’s one race in which a lack of experience almost automatically means wasted energy, because you can save so much by being in the right place on climbs and descents.”

“The help we’ve had on core strength in our team is certainly quite a big contributor to the performance gains I’ve made in the past couple of years. Touch wood, it’s also pretty much solved the back problems I suffered from for several years. At first, you’re not sure which exercises your body needs, but you gradually learn and tailor your routine to the types of movement your particular riding style involves.”

“As a rule, I use the same bike frame for the Ardennes Classics as I do for the rest of the year. The issue of wheels is more complicated, because it’s not just a case of using the same rims you liked last year; I’ll have to see how each pair of wheels interacts with our new Scott frame, and I can only really gauge that in races. The team doesn’t have a single wheel sponsor precisely because there may be a different, best wheel for every different race or terrain. We have Zipp wheels, Shimano wheels... we have a lot to choose from.”


“People make the mistake of lumping all of the Ardennes Classics together. In terms of the equipment, and particularly the wheels you need, they’re quite different. For Liège, you need to something that’s aerodynamic, light and stiff, so a high-profile Zipp wheel might work well. At Amstel, there are more, shorter hills, smaller roads and braking is more important – especially if there’s a

chance of rain – so a low-profile rim is usually the answer.”

“I’d love to do the Tour of Flanders and go for a result there. In order to do that, though, I’d have to have really good form already, because it would mean missing the Tour of the Basque Country, which is usually vital as a finishing touch to my training for the Ardennes Classics. You can do all the work you want at home, but the difference between winning and losing at Amstel, Liège or Flèche Wallonne hinges on what you do in races.”

“Luxembourg’s a good place to train for the Ardennes Classics... because it pretty much is the Ardennes. Three weeks before Ardennes Week, I’ll do motor-paced sessions where I repeat short, steep climbs three or four times in quick succession. There are five or six climbs near where I live that are ideal: I maintain a constant, high power output, then accelerate in the last couple of hundred metres. They’re very high-intensity, four or five-minute efforts.”

“At Flèche Wallonne, a lot of riders make the mistake of hitting the bottom of the Mur too hard. You have to keep your pace and power pretty consistent. It’s not essential to start that climb at the front. It is vital not to blow up. Ideally, you’ll do the whole Mur in the same gear. Last year, it was great for me to have Cadel Evans pulling all the way up at a very regular pace.”

“Experience counts before the race, during the race and after the race. It might be something as simple as not eating rare beef, because if the meat’s not really fresh, bacteria can survive the cooking process. I tried to teach Mark Cavendish this a couple of years ago. I never thought I’d tell an Englishman off for not ordering his steak well done!” 

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