

CYCLING

Before His Exit, a Top Sprinter Lets a Chance to Win a Stage Slip Away

By JULIET MACUR

TRIESTE, Italy — Legs pumping and heart racing, Mark Cavendish was positive that he could beat every rider to the finish Sunday at the Giro d'Italia.

He is, after all, one of the world's best sprinters. And, after all, he has said that no one can beat him in the final 100 meters of a race.

But this time, he was wrong.

Alessandro Petacchi, an Italian rider on the LPR Brakes-Farnese Vini team, stayed out front to win Stage 2 in this port city not far from Slovenia. As Petacchi pumped his arms, Cavendish dropped his head.

"It probably serves me right," Cavendish said of expecting to win in those final, chaotic seconds of the 97-mile stage. "Of course, with an ego like mine, to lose is going to be damaging."

For Cavendish, the 23-year-old firecracker of a competitor on Team Columbia-Highroad, keeping the leader's pink jersey was some consolation. He finished in 3 hours 43 minutes 7 seconds, the same time as Petacchi, and his Columbia teammates are in second through fifth place in the overall standings. Lance Armstrong, the seven-time Tour de France winner, is in 10th, 27 seconds back.

But the clock is ticking for Cavendish — and other sprint specialists — to win a stage.

There are seven stages in this 21-stage race that could be classified as fertile ground for sprinters because they are flat or somewhat flat. Two come near the end of the second week. Another two happen in the final days of the race.

By then, sprinters, like Caven-

dal day.

Between now and then, there are seven mountaintop finishes spread throughout the competition. Cavendish will suffer through at least three of them before calling it quits, said Bob Stapleton, Columbia's team owner.

"We don't want him to do too much before the Tour de France because he obviously has big ambitions there," Stapleton said. "We want to keep him as fresh as possible for when we need him. It's all part of the team's strategy."

Leaving before the finish is simply part of the job, said the retired Italian cyclist Mario Cipollini, arguably the greatest sprinter of his era.

Cipollini, nicknamed The Lion King, Super Mario and Mario the Magnificent, said he believed that sprinters do not need to stay to the end of the race to get their glory. They can win often and early in a stage race, he said, before leaving their teammates to toil until the finish.

"The soul of the sprinter is to always think he is the best in the world and that he can win every race," Cipollini said after Sunday's stage, as two dozen fans clamored around him for photos. "Three weeks is too long for us to race because it can hurt us. We're kind of delicate athletes."

Still, there is another task to be done: help their teammates win. The sprinters often work hard at the front of the pack to make it easier for their colleagues — particularly the ones going for the overall race win — to make it to the race's finish.

When riders tuck in behind their teammates, they can save up to 40 percent of their energy, said Allen Lim, an exercise physi-



three-week race before it became detrimental to their future performances. Remaining in the race increases the aerobic capacity of the sprinters, but doing so risks their anaerobic capacity — which is what makes them fast in bursts.

"It's like trying to be tall and short at the same time," Lim said. "It's just not going to happen."

As a sprint specialist, it is a careful balance between going all out in the sprint stages and trying not to expend too much energy on the climbs. For sprinters, the problem remains in the mountains because riders can be dropped from the race if they do not finish close enough to the leader.

"It's never nice to quit a race, but it's better to leave on your own terms," said Julian Dean, a sprinter on Team Garmin who is competing in his 12th Grand Tour. "In the mountains, you just try to get through them the best as you can. And, sure, that means pain. Most of the time, the sprinters will work together at the very back of the pack."

Cavendish, Dean and other sprinters have that pain and camaraderie to look forward to. While Monday's 123-mile stage from Grado to Valdobbiadene is somewhat level, the two stages after that will be contested in the Dolomites.

After that, three medium-size mountain stages lead up to a circuit race in Milan, which could be Cavendish's final stage before he heads home.

On Sunday, though, he did not have time to think about that. He was busy flogging himself for letting down his team.

Cavendish said he should have sprinted toward the finish earlier