

# A star is born at the Tour: 22-year-old champion Egan Bernal

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AP Photo/Christophe Ena

**Tour de France winner Egan Bernal, of Columbia, celebrates on the podium after the 21st stage of the Tour de France cycling race over 79.53 miles with start in Rambouillet and finish in Paris, France, on Sunday.**

PARIS — The skies over Paris were yellow, ignited by a glorious golden sunset.

The partying fans' shirts were yellow, Colombians making themselves at home on the Champs-Elysees.

But the yellow that counted most was the iconic jersey that fit so snugly on the slim shoulders of Egan Bernal.

His crowning Sunday as the Tour de France's youngest post-World War II champion, and its first from South America, heralded the birth of a new supernova in the cycling universe.

Winning a Tour for the ages at the unusually young age of 22 immediately prompted the question: How many more might he win?

Get this: He's younger than the Tour's greatest champions — five-time winners Jacques Anquetil, Eddy Merckx, Bernard Hinault and Miguel Indurain — all were when they were first crowned. Pity those in the peloton who also hope to win future editions of cycling's greatest race: They could be in for quite a wait.

"I am the most happy guy

in the world. I just won the Tour de France, and, yeah, I can't believe it," Bernal said, looking bemused on the podium in the race winner's jersey and silhouetted by the splendid sunset.

The slightly built Colombian with a killer instinct on the road proved to be the strongest of the 176 strong men who roared off from the start in Brussels, Belgium, on July 6 on their

2,092-mile odyssey that delivered the most absorbing, drama-packed Tour in decades and confirmation that the prodigy Bernal is the real deal.

Riding a yellow bike, and cheered by Colombian fans who were partying even before he rattled up the cobblestones of the Champs-Elysees, Bernal crossed the line with his teammate Geraint Thomas,

the 2018 champion who this year finished second. Steven Kruijswijk completed what Tour organizers said was the tightest podium in the 116-year history of the race, with just 1 minute, 31 seconds separating first and third places after three weeks of racing.

The 21st and final stage was won in a sprint finish on the famous avenue by Australian Caleb Ewan, the

dominant sprinter of his first Tour with three stage wins. Keeping with race tradition on its final day, the 155 riders who survived the Tour rode at a pedestrian pace and in a joyful atmosphere before hitting the Champs-Elysees. Bernal chatted with French rival Julian Alaphilippe and raised a glass of champagne as he rode.

At the finish, Bernal fell into the arms of his family.

"I cannot believe it. It's just incredible. I am sorry. I have no words," he said through a translator. "I still can't understand what is happening to me."

Tearful Colombians celebrated their new hero.

"When I saw that he won, I said, 'I need to go with my music to support him,'" said clarinet-playing Colombian fan Sebastian Cortes, who traveled from Strasbourg in eastern France for the celebration.

But millions of French fans who had lined the roads through east, central and southern France, and up into the thinning air of the Pyrenees and Alps, were ruing a bittersweet Tour.

First, their hearts soared with fabulous racing from French riders Alaphilippe, who held the iconic yellow

jersey for 14 days, and Thibaut Pinot, who won on the first of seven 6,500-foot-plus peaks scaled by the highest Tour in history.

But joy turned to sorrow when Alaphilippe and Pinot's prospects of becoming France's first winner since Hinault in 1985 were cruelly dashed just two days before the grand finale in Paris, on an epic Stage 19 where Mother Nature became a party-poopng guest. An almighty dump of torrential rain and hail severed the Tour route just as Bernal was succeeding in ripping the race lead off Alaphilippe, who'd clung to it like a kid with a favorite toy.

"Julian Alaphilippe made us dream," said Celestin Simon, a Parisian who cheered his hero on the Champs-Elysees in a pointy hat of French red, white and blue. "Unfortunately, there's no victory at the end."

Alaphilippe, more than anyone, first ignited and then stoked what will long be remembered as a Tour of fireworks. With his goatee beard and can't-catch-me attacks that rivals couldn't match, Alaphilippe embodied "panache," the old-school class so cherished by Tour fans.

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		3	7	1	9	6		5
						1		
	6	2						4
	1		9	6	4		5	
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	9	3					7	

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