



2018 Race Preview

by Charles Elmer

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Introduction

Il Giro d'Italia is one of cycling's three Grand Tours, along with Le Tour de France and La Vuelta a España. It occurs annually during the month of May and is the first Grand Tour on the annual calendar. Akin to Le Tour, Il Giro consists of 21 daily stages with a couple of rest days in between. While its French counterpart is the more famous race, Il Giro is equally as difficult, and its high mountain passes can rival any other climbs in cycling.

The first three stages of this year's race will be run in Israel, with an opening time trial in Jerusalem. This is the first time ever that a Grand Tour has started outside of Europe. 18 more stages will be run in Italy to determine the final winner of the pink jersey, "il maglia rosa".

Inside is a stage-by-stage preview of the course, with race predictions at the end. Ciao!

- Charles Elmer

Email me at: c.elmer.98@gmail.com

2017 Giro d'Italia Recap

The 2017 Giro d'Italia was the 100th edition of the race. Many of the world's best stage racers elected to focus on Il Giro instead of Le Tour, including Vincenzo Nibali, Tom Dumoulin, and Nairo Quintana. These three riders were also the main favorites for the pink jersey, with Thibaut Pinot, Ilnur Zakarin, and Geraint Thomas expected to challenge.



Giro 100 logo

In the first week of the race Luxembourgger Bob Jungels led the race for several days and was a possible contender because of his strong time-trialing ability. French climber Thibaut Pinot lost time from an early crash, eliminating whatever margin for error he owned against the time-trialing of his rivals. Stage 9 broke the race open with a summit finish on Blockhaus. Quintana won the stage

with Dumoulin and Pinot close behind. Nibali and Bauke Mollema were in the mix as well, but most riders lost minutes on the mountain and fell out of contention.

Stage 10 was a 39.8km individual time trial which shook up the overall standings once again. Tom Dumoulin dominated the course and took over 2 minutes out of all the other contenders. With another time trial still to come, Dumoulin was now the favorite to win.

The next major mountain stage was Stage 14 into Santuario di Oropa. Dumoulin won the stage and took valuable seconds from the others. Bauke Mollema lost 2 minutes and slipped from 3rd to 6th overall. On the provisional podium stood Dumoulin, Quintana, and Pinot with Nibali in 4th.

Stage 16 was the queen stage of the 2017 edition, featuring the hallowed Passo dello Stelvio. A stomach problem caused Dumoulin to lose 2 minutes to Quintana, but it was Vincenzo Nibali who brought home a spectacular stage win while leaping up to 3rd place. Dumoulin's lead over Quintana shrank to 31".

On Stage 18, it was darkhorse Thibaut Pinot who attacked on the final climb to win back 58 seconds on the main favorites. He now sat 4th overall, 1'36" behind the leader. Dumoulin finally lost his lead on Stage 19 as Quintana, Nibali, and Pinot all rode away from him to Piancavallo. Still, Dumoulin was only 38" behind the new leader, Quintana, with the final time-trial 2 days away.

Nibali, Quintana, and Pinot escaped from Dumoulin again on Stage 20 to Asiago in the final road stage. Pinot took the stage in a sprint, but Dumoulin limited his losses thanks to strong riders in his chasing group.

Before the finale, the top 4 riders in the general classification were separated by only 53 seconds:

1. Nairo Quintana	COL	Movistar	90h00'38"
2. Vincenzo Nibali	ITA	Bahrain-Merida	39"
3. Thibaut Pinot	FRA	FDJ	43"
4. Tom Dumoulin	NED	Team Sunweb	53"

Dumoulin was favored to win the final pink jersey because he was easily the superior time-trialist. The 29.3km course would be enough to take back his deficit, and then some. He won 2nd on the stage and beat his 3 closest rivals by enough time to win the Giro d'Italia.

2017 Giro d'Italia: Final Top 10 Overall

1. Tom Dumoulin	NED	Team Sunweb	90h34'54"
2. Nairo Quintana	COL	Movistar	31"
3. Vincenzo Nibali	ITA	Bahrain-Merida	40"
4. Thibaut Pinot	FRA	FDJ	1'17"
5. Ilnur Zakarin	RUS	Katusha-Alpecin	1'56"
6. Domenico Pozzovivo	ITA	AG2R La Mondiale	3'11"
7. Bauke Mollema	NED	Trek-Segafredo	3'41"
8. Bob Jungels	LUX	Quick-Step Floors	7'04"
9. Adam Yates	GBR	Orica-Scott	8'10"
10. Davide Formolo	ITA	Cannondale-Drapac	15'17"

In the other classifications, Bob Jungels won the white jersey for the best young rider in the race as he finished 8th overall. Star Columbian sprinter Fernando Gaviria won the purple jersey as the winner of the points classification. He also won 4 stages during the event. Spanish climber Mikel Landa originally had his eyes on the general classification but lost too much time and chose to target the mountains classification. He won the blue jersey and a mountain stage. Nairo Quintana's Movistar team won the team classification.



Dumoulin celebrates his Giro win.

Cycling Glossary

General classification: The overall time standings in the race. Its leader wears the pink jersey.

Points classification: Riders gain points by placing well on stages, with the stage winner gaining the most points on the day. Its leader wears the purple jersey.

Mountains classification: Riders gain points by being first to the top of mountain climbs. Its leader wears the blue jersey.

Youth classification: The highest placed rider in the general classification who is 25 years or younger will wear the white jersey.

Peloton: The main group of the race, often containing most riders.

Breakaway: A small group of riders who attack early in the stage, usually looking for mountains points or the stage win.

Groupetto: A large group of riders behind the peloton which forms during long mountain stages.

Baroudeur: A breakaway specialist. Somewhat of an all-rounder but not a great climber or sprinter. They will attack frequently looking for stage wins.

Rouleur: An excellent time-trialist who may be capable of good climbing. Some can contend for the general classification.

GC rider: This rider targets the general classification and has a unique ability to excel in the mountains and the time-trials. In addition, they have the recovery and consistency to perform at a high level on every stage. They are the principal favorites for the pink jersey.

Domestique: The domestique is a rider whose purpose is to assist the leaders of his team. Some domestiques will form lead-out trains for their sprinter while others protect their GC rider in the mountains.

Climber: A lightly built rider who excels in the high mountains. Most climbers are stage-hunters, but those who are strong enough are favorites for the general classification. They also target the mountains classification.

Sprinter: An extremely powerful and explosive rider who is the fastest in the last 200 meters of a stage. They will look for wins on the early flat stages and contend for the points classification.

Puncheur: The puncheur is an all-rounder who is especially strong on short, steep hills. Their combination of stamina and acceleration makes them good stage hunters, but rarely contenders for the general classification.

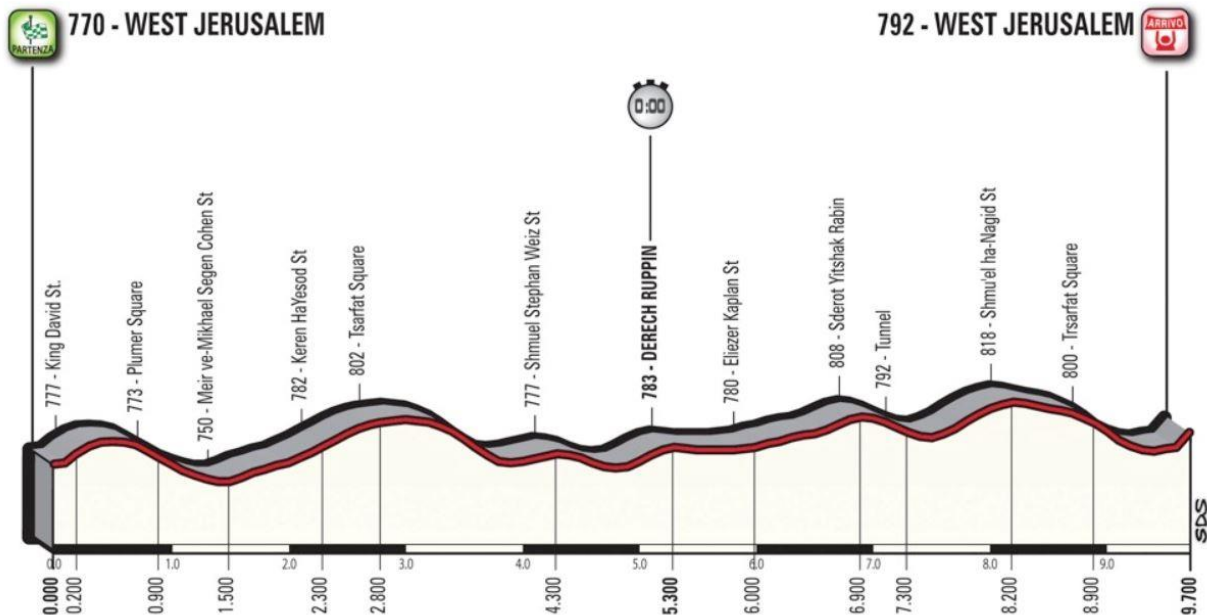
2018 Giro d'Italia: Route Map



The course begins with Stage 1, a short individual time-trial in Jerusalem, Israel. The following two stages are also run in Israel as the riders visit Haifa and Eilat. In Stages 4-6, the riders will race through Sicily and finish atop the volcano Monte Etna for the Stage 6 finale. From Stage 7 to Stage 13 the course heads northward as it traverses from the western coast to the eastern coast of the peninsula, and it features two summit finishes in the Apennines hills. The riders will enter the eastern Alps on Stage 14 to climb the feared Monte Zoncolan. A flat time-trial on Stage 16 will be crucial in the fight for the pink jersey. The 2018 Giro title will be decided on Stages 18, 19, and 20, three brutal days in the Alps, before finishing in Roma on Stage 21 to crown a victor.

2018 Giro d'Italia: Stage Previews

Stage 1: Jerusalem - Jerusalem (ITT) 9.7 km



The “Big Start” of the Giro d’Italia is outside of Europe for the first time, and this short opening time-trial in Jerusalem will provide the prologue specialists a chance to wear the first pink jersey of the race. It’s a hilly course with a steep ramp in the final 400 meters but at only 9.7 kilometers the distance is too short to cause serious time gaps amongst the main favorites.

Today’s stage winner will not only be the first overall leader of the race, but he will also claim first position in the points classification. BMC Racing’s Rohan Dennis will be the favorite to win today, with defending race champion Tom Dumoulin also expected to challenge.

Stage 2: Haifa - Tel Aviv

167 km



Stage 2 is the first road stage in a Grand Tour to be run entirely outside of Europe, so expect the sprinters to go for a historic victory in Tel Aviv. The profile is mostly flat, but the category 4 climb of Zikhron Ya-Aqov will be the battleground for the first points in the mountains classification. Watch out for an early attack from the punchy breakaway specialists. They will be quick enough to reach the top first and claim the first blue jersey of the 2018 Giro d'Italia. Unfortunately for the breakaway, the sprinters' teams will not let them stay away to the finish, so expect a frantic pace in the last 25 kilometers of the stage. It will be an explosive battle between the best sprinters in the peloton and the strongest will raise his arms in victory.

Also, of note is the bonus seconds available at the finish line. Non-mountain stages often have time bonuses of up to 20 seconds for the day's winner, and the sprinters who performed well in the Stage 1 time-trial could steal the pink jersey with a stage win today.

Stage 3: Be'er Sheva - Eilat 229 km



The sprinters should shine again on Stage 3, which finishes in the resort town of Eilat in southern Israel. Akin to Stage 2 the riders searching for early mountains points will attempt to be the first to top the category 4 Ramon Crater, but they will be reeled in by the peloton before the finish.

More bonus seconds will be up for grabs today, and the pink jersey could easily change hands again at the finish. Also important to the sprinters is the purple jersey of the points classification, and the most consistent sprinter from the last two days will hold an outright lead in the points classification.

Rest Day: Monday, May 7

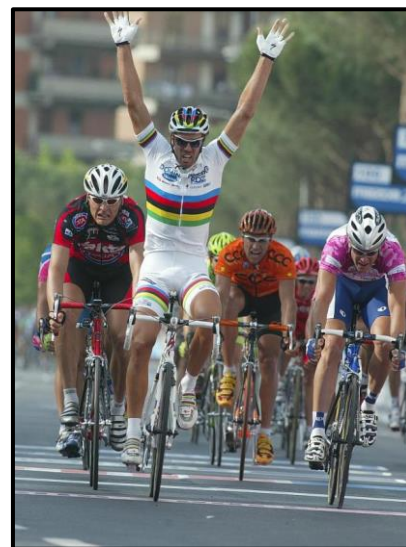
Today is the first of three rest days in the 2018 Giro as the riders travel from Israel to Sicily.

Giro Legends: the '90s

Mario Cipollini:

Super Mario is one of the great sprinters in cycling history and dominated the sport in the 1990s and early 2000s. Known for his outspoken personality, flamboyant racing suits, and hatred for the mountains, “Cipo” won an astounding 57 stages in Grand Tours.

A typical Grand Tour for Cipollini would begin with three to four stage wins in the first week of the race, then quitting once the mountains arrived. Most of his big wins came in the Giro d'Italia where he holds the record for career stage wins with 42. He rarely finished all 21 stages, but he did win the points classification in 1992, 1997, and 2002.



Mario Cipollini winning his record 42nd career Giro stage

Miguel Indurain:



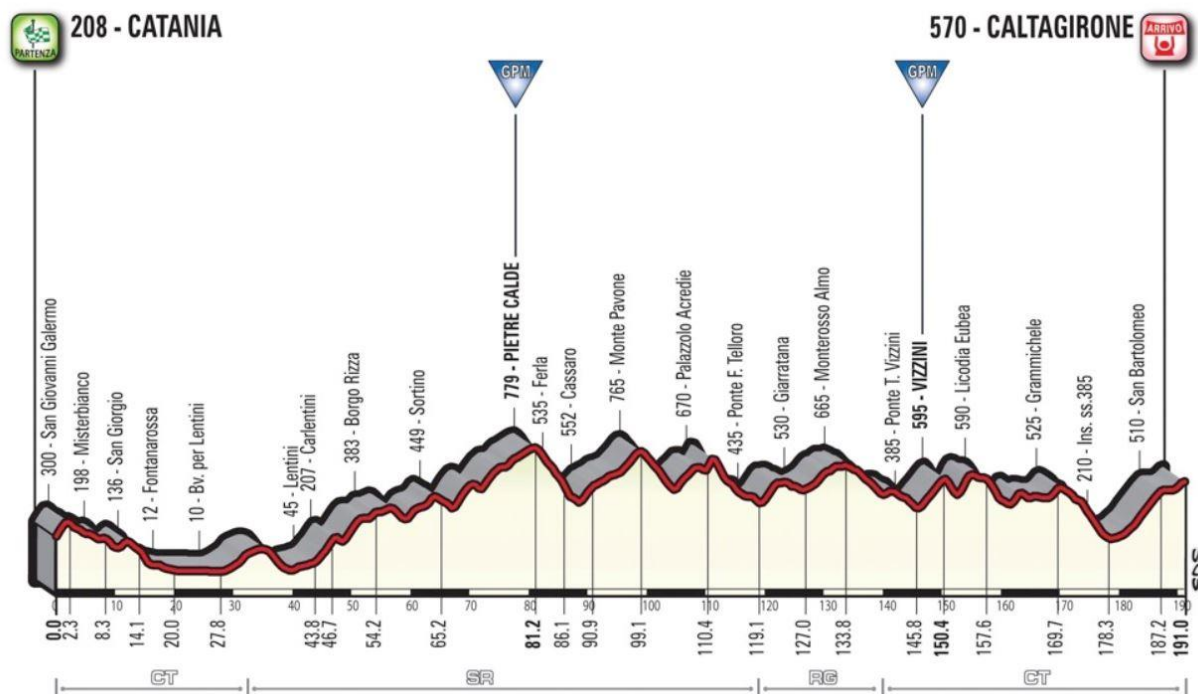
Indurain wins the 1993 Giro d'Italia

Considered by some to be the greatest stage racer of all time, Spaniard Miguel Indurain is best known for winning the Tour de France 5 times in a row from 1991-1995. He also won back-to-back Giro titles in 1992 and 1993, one of three cyclists to win 4 Grand Tours over a two-season span.

Indurain was unbeatable in the individual time-trial, winning nearly all that he started and often taking 4-6 minutes out of his rivals. His climbing ability was spectacular for a man of his size thanks to his rare physiology. No man in the peloton could match Indurain in a three-week race during his 5-year reign over the sport. Quiet and soft-spoken for a superstar, he let his riding do the talking.

Stage 4: Catania - Caltagirone

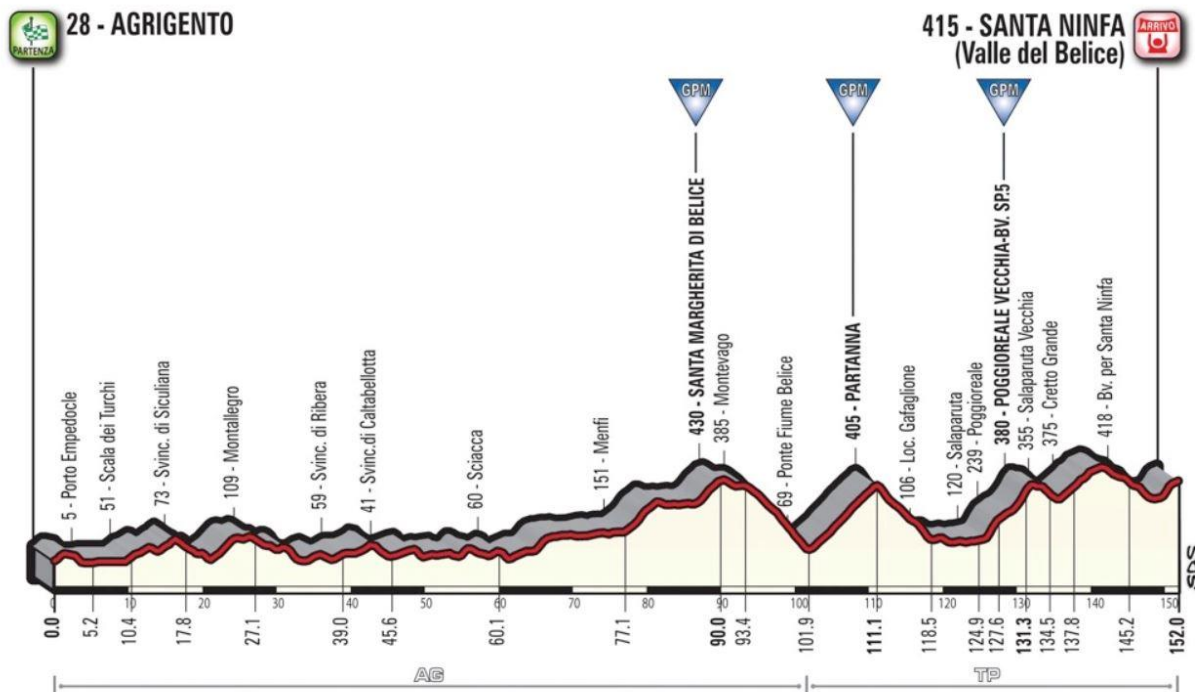
191 km



Hills will feature throughout Stage 4 which undulates through beautiful southern Sicily. Riders who are weaker on uphill sections will be dropped, the sprinters certainly among them. Today is the first serious opportunity for the baroudeurs to take a glorious stage win but holding off the peloton full of powerful climbers may prove to be too difficult. There are, however, a few mountains points available on the course today so a rider who already has a few points in the bank can establish a good lead in the mountains classification.

Today's finish is a short uphill climb to Caltagirone, and the puncheurs in the peloton will feature prominently. Positioning will be key for the general classification contenders to avoid getting caught out when there are splits in the peloton. It will be a cunning, explosive man who wins today, while a few who seek the pink jersey could lose valuable seconds.

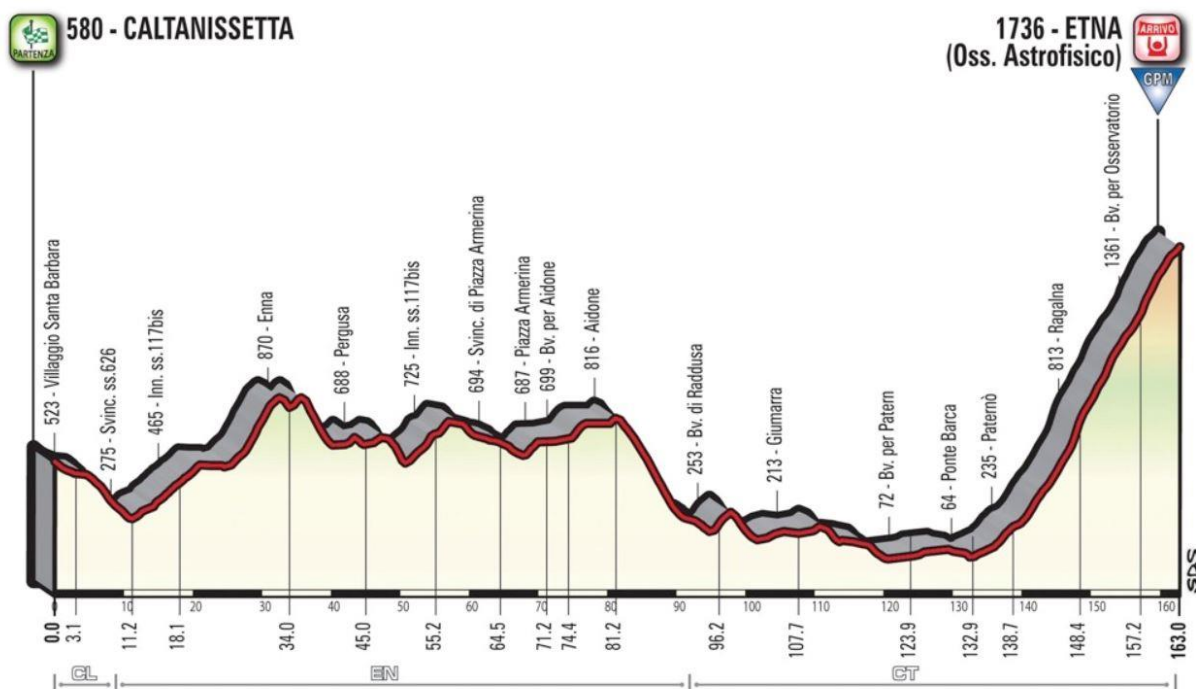
Stage 5: Agrigento - Santa Ninfa 152 km



Another hilly stage today, with more severe climbs than in Stage 4. The final kilometer to Santa Ninfa in Belice is uphill and extremely steep, promising an explosive finale amongst the riders at the front. With the summit finish on Monte Etna set for tomorrow, the climbers and GC contenders will want to save their attacks for the first major mountain of Il Giro. Today should be a stage for the breakaway.

There's extra incentive for the breakaway besides the stage win today. It's the largest collection of mountains points on a stage so far, meaning that the blue jersey could have a new owner once again. In addition, there will likely be a new rider in pink following today's stage. The escapees contesting the stage win should gain a couple minutes on the peloton and steal the race lead away.

Stage 6: Caltanissetta - Monte Etna



Il Giro visited Monte Etna on Stage 4 last year where Slovene climber Jan Polanc won the stage. The main favorites all finished together with few meaningful time gaps.

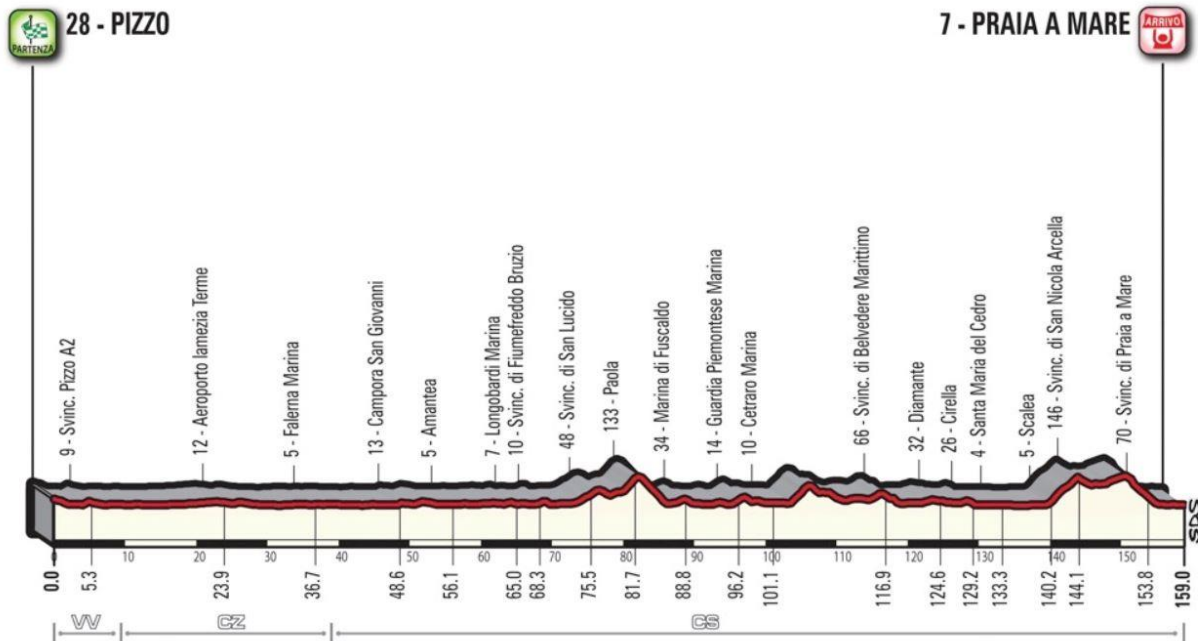
It's 25 kilometers from the foot of the climb to the observatory on top, easily the longest summit finish in this year's Giro. However, the climb is not especially steep, so it will be difficult to attack until the final kilometers.

This sort of ascent favors the rouleur-climbers such as Tom Dumoulin and Chris Froome. They can set a high tempo up the mountain and grind the lighter climbers off their wheels with pure power. For punchy climbers such as Thibaut Pinot and Fabio Aru, they will need to hang on until the end before attacking for the stage win.

If a breakaway were to succeed the group would need at least 5-6 minutes advantage at the foot of the climb, and that's for the strongest climber in the bunch. It could well be Stage 10 before the baroudeurs get another good shot at victory.

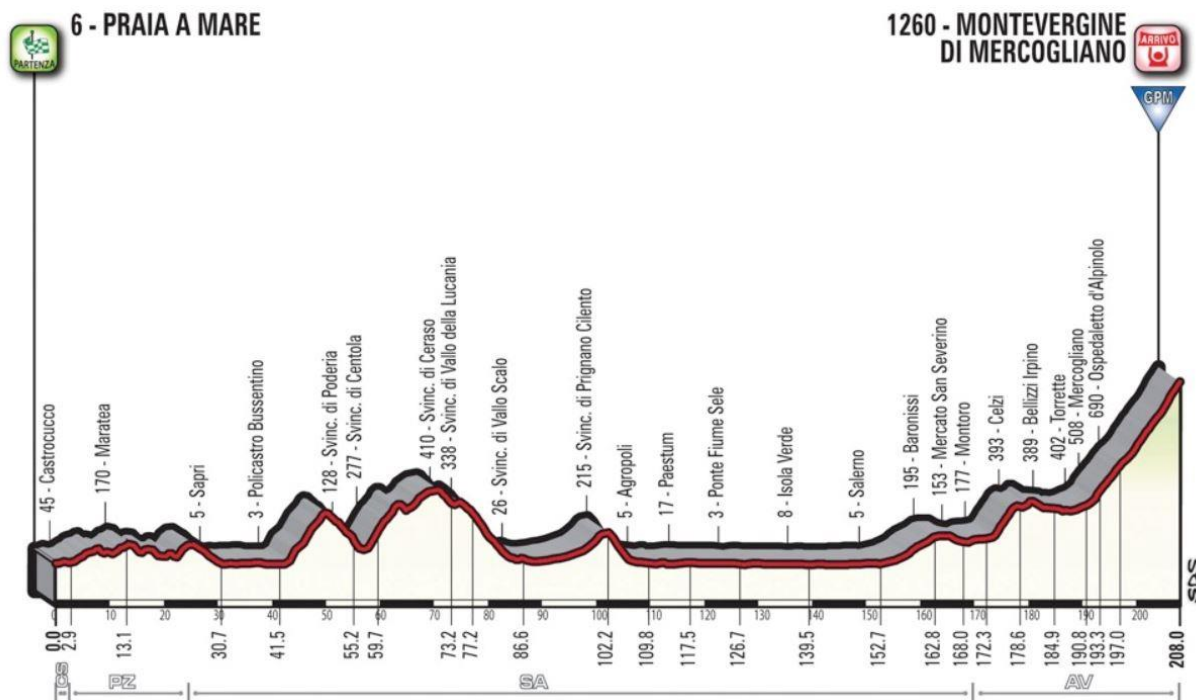
The first major selection in the general classification will be made today. You can't win the Giro on this climb, but you can lose it. Another prize for the winner should be the lead in the mountains classification thanks to the large number of points at the summit. Finally, there will be a new race leader at the end of day, and it will likely be one of the favorites for overall victory.

Stage 7: Pizzo - Praia a Mare



The sprinters had to give up the spotlight for the last few days, and they will be hungry for a win on Stage 7 to Praia a Mare. However, the breakaway of the day will contest this stage fiercely, and the undulations in the final 20 kilometers give the baroudeurs a fighting chance. Teams working for their sprinters will chase hard to bring home the win, because the next two stages are for the climbers. Today will be unpredictable, and we can expect a frantic race for the stage win. The GC riders simply need to stay out of trouble.

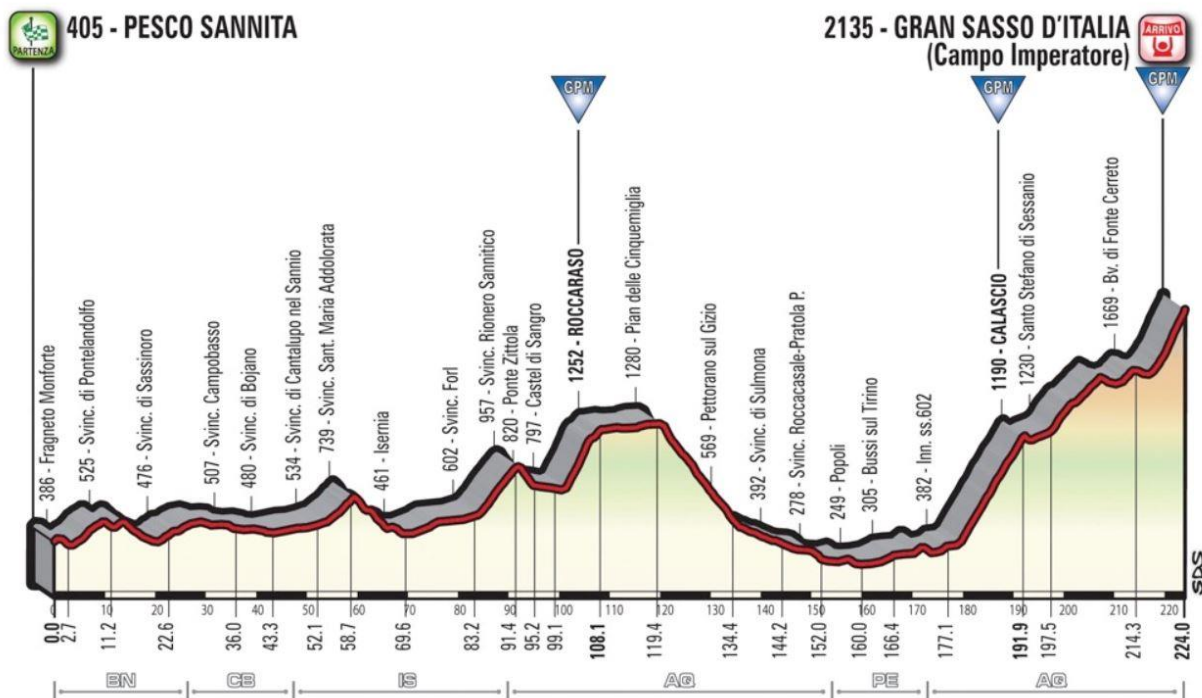
Stage 8: Praia a Mare - Montevergine di Mercogliano



Montevergine di Mercogliano was last used as a summit finish in 2011, when Belgian Bart de Clercq won a thrilling stage from a breakaway by just holding off the main favorites. The climb did little to create major time gaps between the favorites, and the same should be expected today.

Climbers in the breakaway will have a good chance at the stage win because the final climb is not too severe, but the peloton will approach very rapidly from behind. If the breakaway is caught, then a select group of 8-12 favorites should contest the stage win. A climber with a strong sprint like Thibaut Pinot has a great chance to win today, or perhaps a puncheur who can hang with the favorites.

Stage 9: Pesco Sannita - Gran Sasso



Stage 9 is the third mountaintop finish so far, and the most difficult. Il Giro has never climbed this specific route before and it should produce some incredible television pictures as it traverses through one of Italy's most spectacular sights. The finish is on the highest mountain in central Italy: Gran Sasso.

The final 45 kilometers of the stage are all uphill punctuated by brief sections of flat. It's the last 4 kilometers which are the most important of the race so far: a steep ramp to the top of Gran Sasso averaging 8.2% gradient. Because of the steep finale, the pure climbers could attack at the end with ruthless accelerations. However, the length of the climb favors the rouleurs, so the strong men today will be difficult to predict. The likes of Tom Dumoulin and Rohan Dennis must perform well to avoid losing time to their lightweight rivals.

Today's summit finish is too long for a breakaway to take the win. The main favorites will fight it out in what should be a classic Giro battle. Astana Pro Team's Miguel Angel Lopez looks to be the favorite to take the stage, winning on a very similar climb to Sierra Nevada in the 2017 Vuelta a España.

At the end of the day, we should know who is poised to make a serious challenge at the final podium in Roma. The big favorites will have separated themselves and they could have more than 2 minutes advantage on lesser contenders.

Rest Day: Monday, May 14

This is the second rest day of the 2018 Giro d'Italia

Giro Stories: 1988 Giro d'Italia

When we think of Americans competing for the top prize in Grand Tours, most of us think of the infamous Lance Armstrong and his 7 lost Tour titles. Greg LeMond also comes to mind for being the first American to win the Tour de France back in 1986. The forgotten man is the first, and only, American to win the Giro d'Italia: Andrew Hampsten.

Hampsten had already established himself in the cycling world after placing 4th overall in the 1986 Tour de France. He was among the favorites for the 1988 Giro along with Eric Breukink (NED), Urs Zimmerman (SUI), and Pedro Delgado (ESP). The course for this year's edition was unusually difficult thanks to the number of mountains on the route. Former cyclist Bob Roll and teammate of Hampsten once commented, "Those [organizers] put every mountain they could find in the race that year".

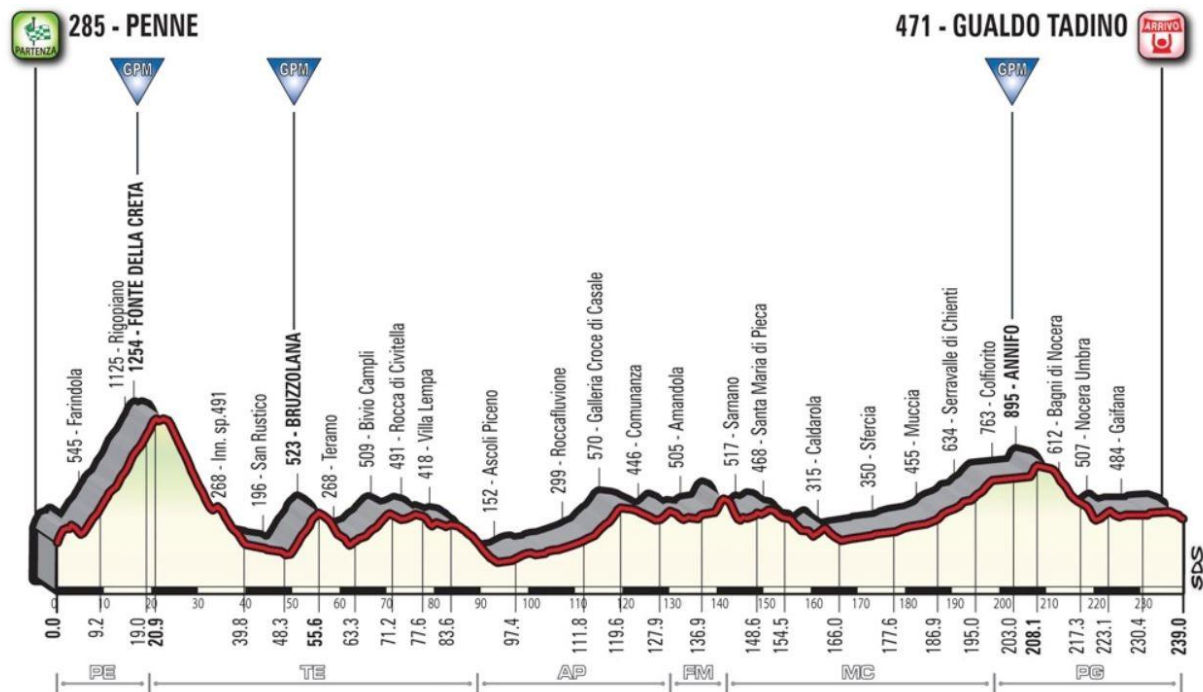
The fight for pink was tight, but it was the climb of the Gavia Pass on Stage 14 which defined the race. One of the mammoth climbs of cycling, the roads of the Gavia Pass were covered in mud as snow pelted the riders. Andrew Hampsten put in a suicidal attack at the foot of the climb, and it succeeded as all but one of his rivals cracked under the horrific conditions.



Andrew Hampsten ascends the Gavia Pass alone through a snowstorm.

Andy was caught and passed by Breukink on the descent for the stage win, but it was Hampsten who wore pink after this epic day. He held on to the race lead, even winning the final time-trial, to become the first American to win the Giro. Eric Breukink would finish 2nd place. Stage 14 is still remembered today as one of the legendary stages in Grand Tour history.

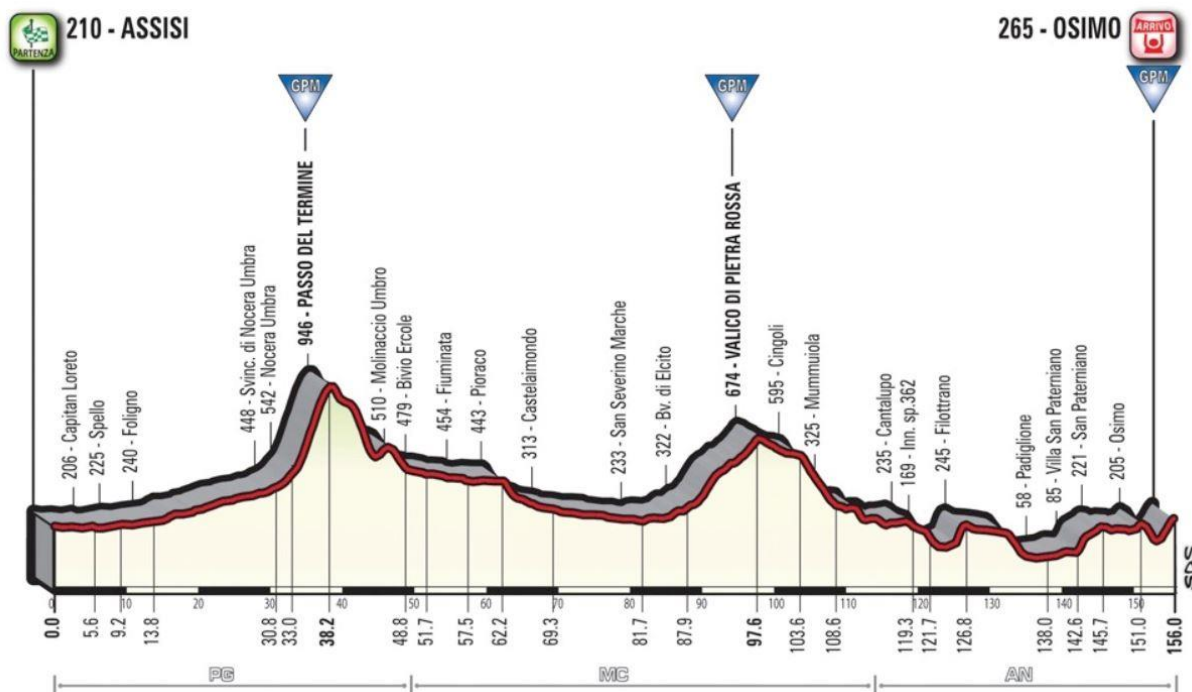
Stage 10: Penne - Gualdo Tadino



Stage 10 is ideal for the baroudeurs: an early climb, hilly throughout, a flat finish, and right after a major mountain stage. There should be a lull in the action in the fights for pink and purple, so it is ideal conditions for a glorious breakaway victory.

Most sprinters will be put in difficulty today, so any winner from the peloton would be a strong puncheur. But any rider who wants the best chance at victory today should get into the breakaway, which will finish a few minutes ahead of the peloton. Whoever wears pink today must stay out of trouble with a chaotic stage coming tomorrow.

Stage 11: Assisi - Osimo



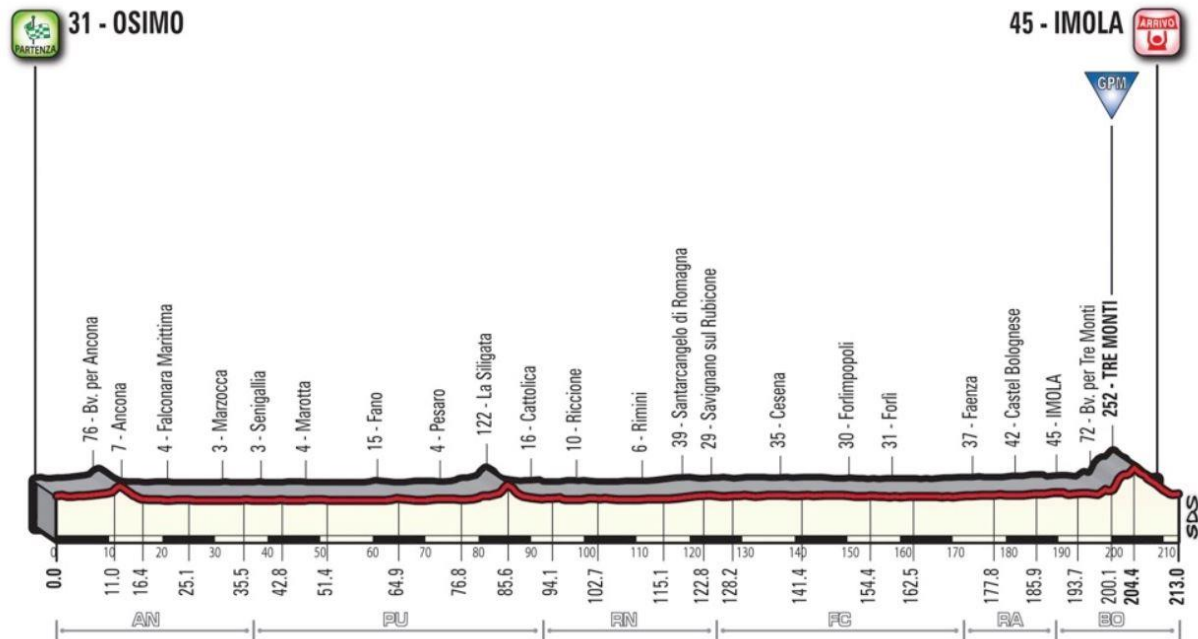
The final 70 kilometers of today's stage strongly resembles the course of a hilly classic, and much is at stake in every classification today.

Two climbs early in the race offer significant mountains points for a breakaway rider in contention for the blue jersey, tightening the competition as the race nears the Alps.

Although the profile doesn't feature any high mountains there are two short, steep ramps close to the finish in Osimo that reach gradients of 13%. The contenders fighting for pink must be on their guard to avoid being on the wrong side of a split in the peloton. An opportunistic rider looking to steal a few seconds can attack on the hill 5 kilometers from the finish line. The final climb into Osimo favors the puncheurs, and those contesting the stage win at the end can take a few seconds from the rest of the pack.

Don't count on the breakaway holding off the main bunch today. Look for puncheurs Michael Woods (CAN) and Fabio Aru (ITA) as favorites for the stage.

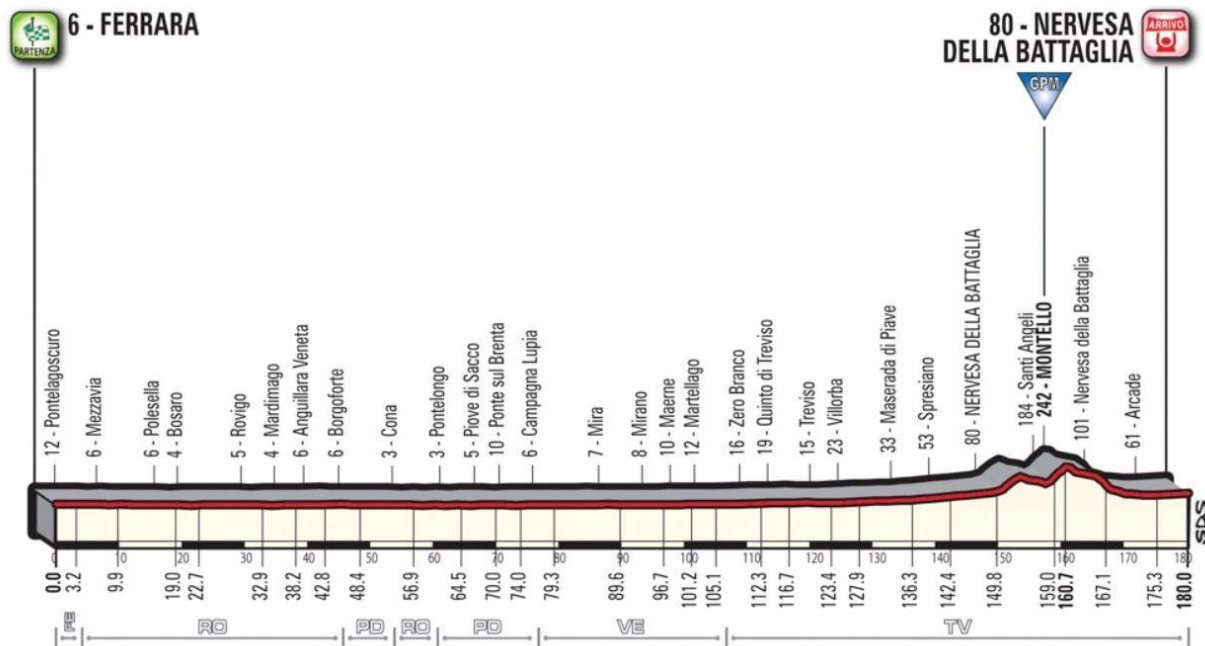
Stage 12: Osimo - Imola



Stage 12 covers a flat, scenic route along the Adriatic coast, passing through Forlì, before finishing in Imola. The short climb near the finish may lend itself to late attacks by the puncheurs, but the sprinters don't want to lose one of their final chances for victory and significant points towards the purple jersey. This peaceful stage will turn chaotic in the final 13 kilometers.

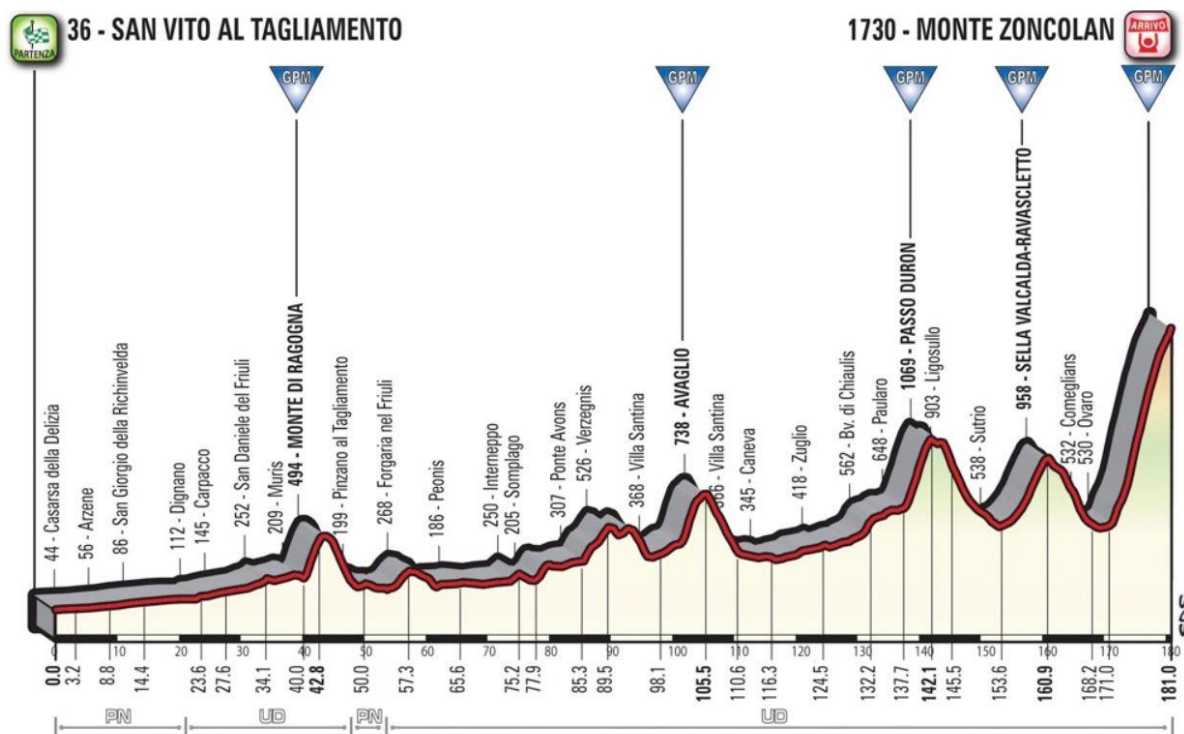
No changes at top of the general classification should occur today as the sprinters fight for the stage win.

Stage 13: Ferrara - Nervesa della Battaglia



Stage 13 is a big day for the sprinters. This is their last opportunity to win a stage until the final day of the race, so there will be no tickets handed out for a breakaway. Once the high mountains come tomorrow, many sprinters will abandon the race to save themselves for the Tour de France or Vuelta a España sprints. These sprinters would love to go out with a win and their teams will be motivated to make it happen. Any late attacks today will be swiftly caught.

Stage 14: San Vito al Tagliamento - Monte Zoncolan



Stage 14 is the first queen stage of il Giro, consisting of 5 categorized climbs as the course enters the Alps with a ferocious profile. The three climbs in the final 45 kilometers are especially difficult. Passo Duron and Sella Valcada-Ravascletto both have extended sections exceeding 10% gradient, but it's the finale that makes this stage appointment television.

10.1 kilometers in length and averaging 11.9% gradient, Monte Zoncolan is one the most feared climbs in all of cycling. It has a maximum slope of 22%, and a 6-kilometer section in the middle of the climb averaging 15% gradient. This is an astonishing, wicked climb that will have massive implications in the fight for il maglia rosa.

The short valley roads between the last three climbs give the climbers incredible flexibility in terms of where they choose to attack. Monte Zoncolan is almost impossible to predict, but the man who wins here today will take big time from his rivals. Strong men of the race will lay their foundations for overall victory on this mountain.

Tom Dumoulin and Chris Froome must be wary of the lightweight climbers today. Dumoulin in particular is vulnerable on these steep gradients and could lose decisive time. Watch out for climbers Miguel Angel Lopez and Thibaut Pinot, who have everything to gain on this stage.

Stage 15: Tolmezzo - Sappada



Yesterday, the stars of the Giro d'Italia took center stage. However, today's stage in the Dolomites will feature the unsung heroes in the breakaway.

The peloton will relax for the first half of the stage, allowing the baroudeurs to build up a significant advantage. Three categorized climbs in the final half of the stage will slowly whittle away the breakaway, and it will likely be that one brave man solos to a glorious stage win. With a good pool of mountains points up for grabs, contenders for the blue jersey will also go on the attack.

The uphill finale into Sappada isn't hard enough to separate the main favorites, but the two climbs before that are steep with short roads between the climbs. A brave climber looking to make up time can attack in the last 40 kilometers and take back some seconds before tomorrow's time-trial.

Breakaways are often a crapshoot to predict, but one man who will certainly try to make today's move is Thomas de Gendt. Perhaps the best baroudeur in the world, de Gendt will be the favorite if he gets in the break.

Rest Day: Monday, May 21

Today is the final rest day of the 2018 Giro d'Italia.

Giro Stories: Ranking the most Surprising Giro wins since 1985

6. Ivan Gotti (1997): Gotti had twice before finished 5th in a Grand Tour and was considered a podium contender for the 1997 Giro. But defending champion Pavel Tonkov was the heavy favorite to win the race, and quickly built up a massive lead in the first week. Gotti's daring attacks in the mountains, notably his stage 14 victory at Cervinia, resulted in a narrow final victory over Tonkov.

5. Ryder Hesjedal (2012): In what was expected to be a battle between the previous two Giro winners, Michele Scarponi and Ivan Basso, Hesjedal was not seen as a challenger for the top 3. As the race progressed, it became clear that all the top favorites were closely matched. In the end, it was Hesjedal who emerged victorious by only 16 seconds over Joaquim Rodriguez.

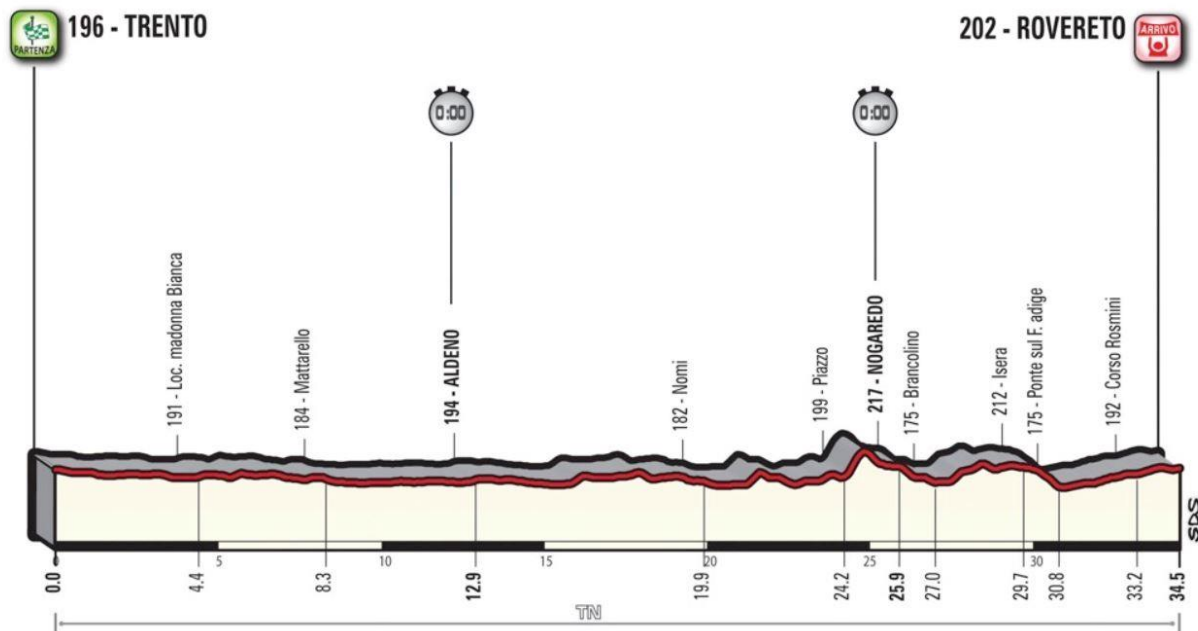
4. Stefano Garzelli (2000): Francesco Casagrande was the top favorite for the race, with Gilberto Simoni seen as his main threat. A former 9th place finisher in the Giro, Garzelli's consistency and toughness saw him at the forefront of the fight for pink. He stole the race lead from Casagrande on the penultimate stage to emerge as the winner.

3. Vincenzo Nibali (2016): Nibali was actually a top favorite for the 2016 Giro, but all hopes of winning seemed gone as he sat in 4th place, 4'43" behind race leader Steven Kruijswijk, after stage 18. His spectacular attack on stage 19 to Risoul won him the stage and launched him to 2nd place, 44" behind the new leader Esteban Chaves. Nibali attacked again on stage 20 to take the pink jersey and win the Giro with a legendary comeback.

2. Damiano Cunego (2004): Cunego's own teammate and defending race champion Gilberto Simoni entered the race as top favorite alongside Yaroslav Popovych. After losing the race lead to Popovych in the stage 13 time trial, Cunego attacked from far out on stage 16 to set up his teammate Simoni for a later attack. Simoni never bridged the gap and Cunego won the stage to reclaim the pink jersey. He held on to win the race at the young age of 22.

1. Ivan Gotti (1999): Both of Gotti's Giro wins were unexpected, but the circumstances around this one makes it an unforgettable and controversial event in cycling. Marco Pantani was leading the race by 5'38" after stage 20 thanks to his four mountain stage wins. He was controversially disqualified from the race for hematocrit levels above 50%. Gotti assumed the race lead and comfortably survived the last two stages to win his second Giro d'Italia in shocking fashion.

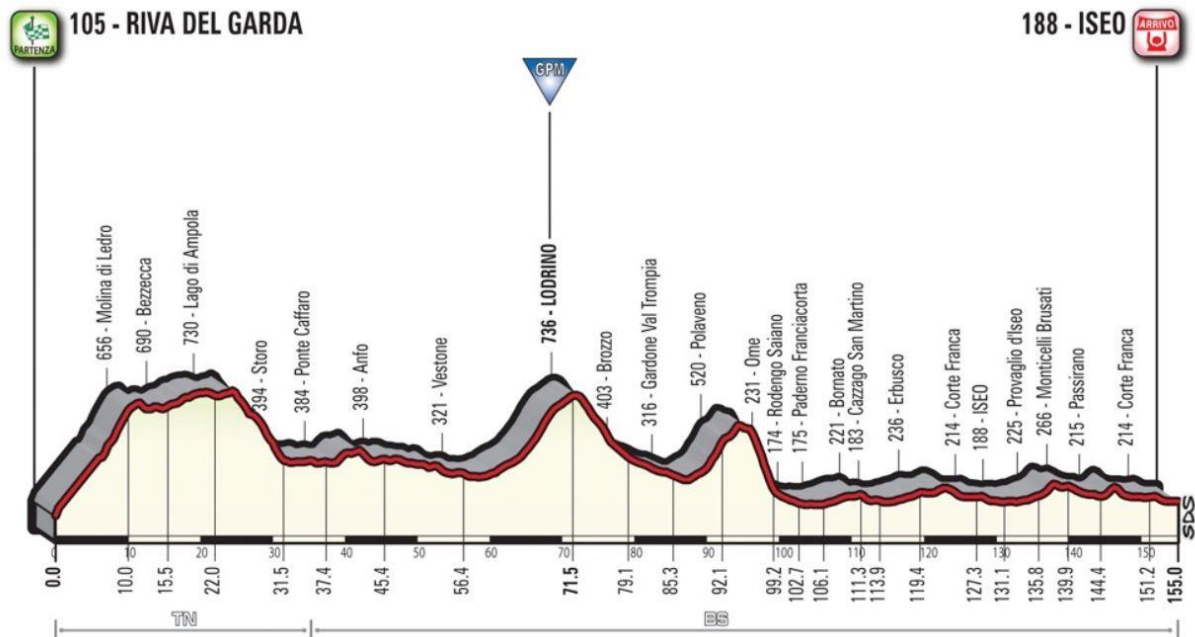
Stage 16: Trento - Rovereto (ITT)



Stage 16 is the long individual time-trial of the Giro d'Italia, and a decisive day for the general classification. It's a mostly flat course with minor undulations in the final third. Tom Dumoulin, Chris Froome, and Rohan Dennis will try to take big time out of the climbers while also contesting the stage win. Some time-trial specialists who have survived the early mountains could look to steal the stage win away from the GC riders.

Climbers who are weak in the time-trial could lose 2 - 4 minutes today, injecting some urgency into the final three days in the Alps.

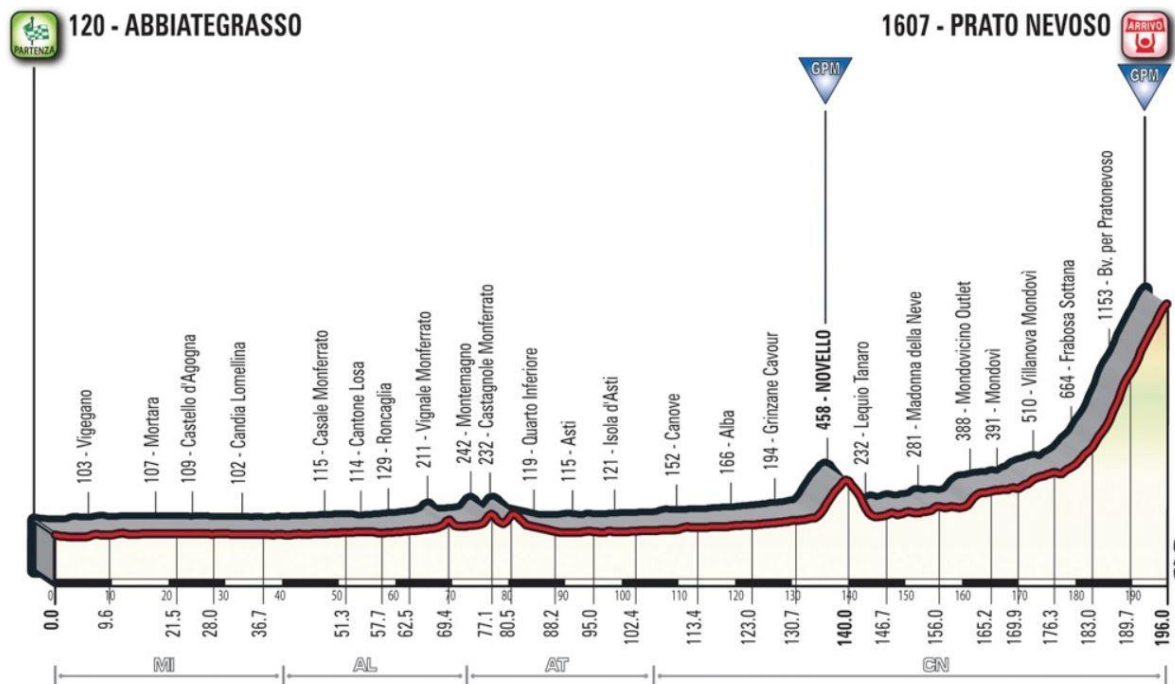
Stage 17: Riva del Garda - Iseo



The next three days will be fast, furious, and frantic as the fight for pink enters its final stages. However, today's stage should be a relaxed one for the peloton and the baroudeurs will have another shot at glory. Hills and valley roads in the first half of the stage will help the breakaway push its advantage. From there, the strong men of the break will attack each other late in the stage as they fight for the win.

Stage 17 should pass without incident to the favorites in the bunch. Their focus is clearly recovering before the Giro returns to the Alps tomorrow.

Stage 18: Abbiategrosso - Prato Nevoso



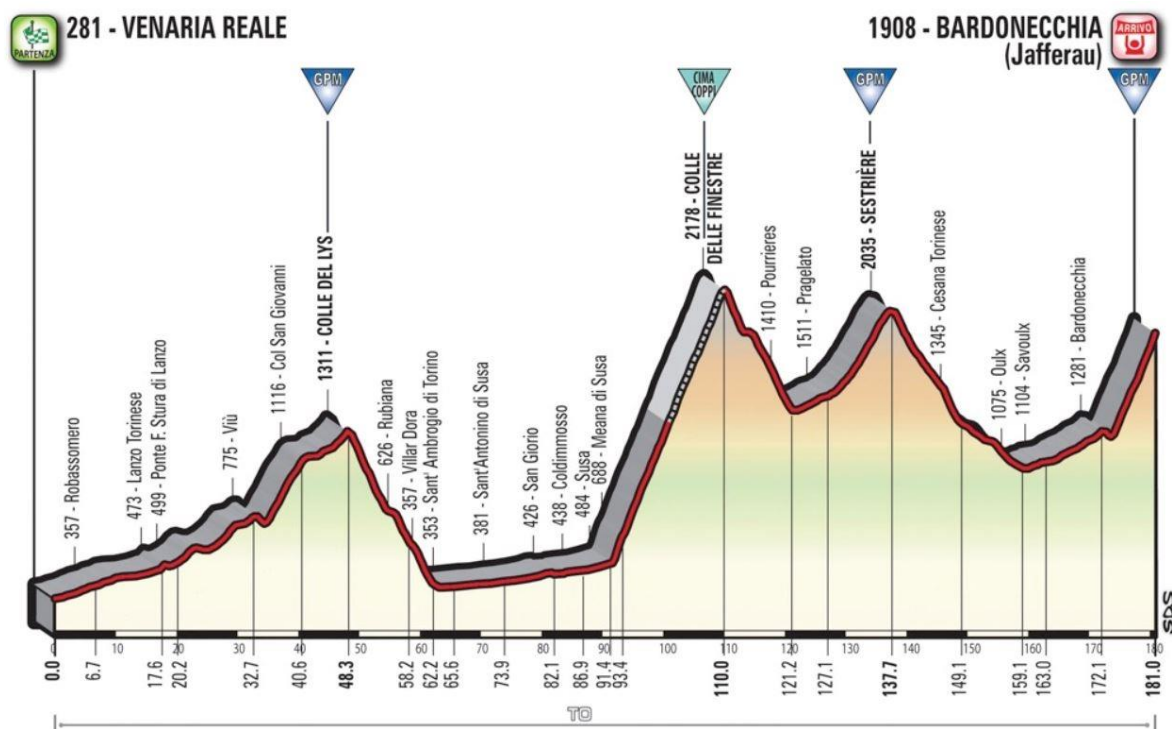
A trio of summit finishes will determine the final podium of the 2018 Giro d'Italia, the first of which being atop the ski station at Prato Nevoso. Last used in the 2008 Tour de France, the climb is long but not especially steep, favoring the rouleurs.

For the climbers with no chance at overall victory, this is perhaps their best chance for a mountain stage win. They will still need a healthy advantage at the base of the climb yet stand a chance of holding off the favorites in the end.

Time gaps amongst the top favorites should be small and many of them could finish together. Like on Monte Etna, it's up to the climbers to follow the hard pace set by the rouleurs before attacking at the end for precious seconds.

If anything, today's stage is an appetizer for tomorrow's grand day in the Alps.

Stage 19: Venaria Reale - Bardonecchia



Stage 19 is the second queen stage of the 2018 Giro with four high climbs including the highest point in the race: the Colle delle Finestre. 2013 was the most recent finish on Jafferau, with last year's runner-up Vincenzo Nibali winning the stage.

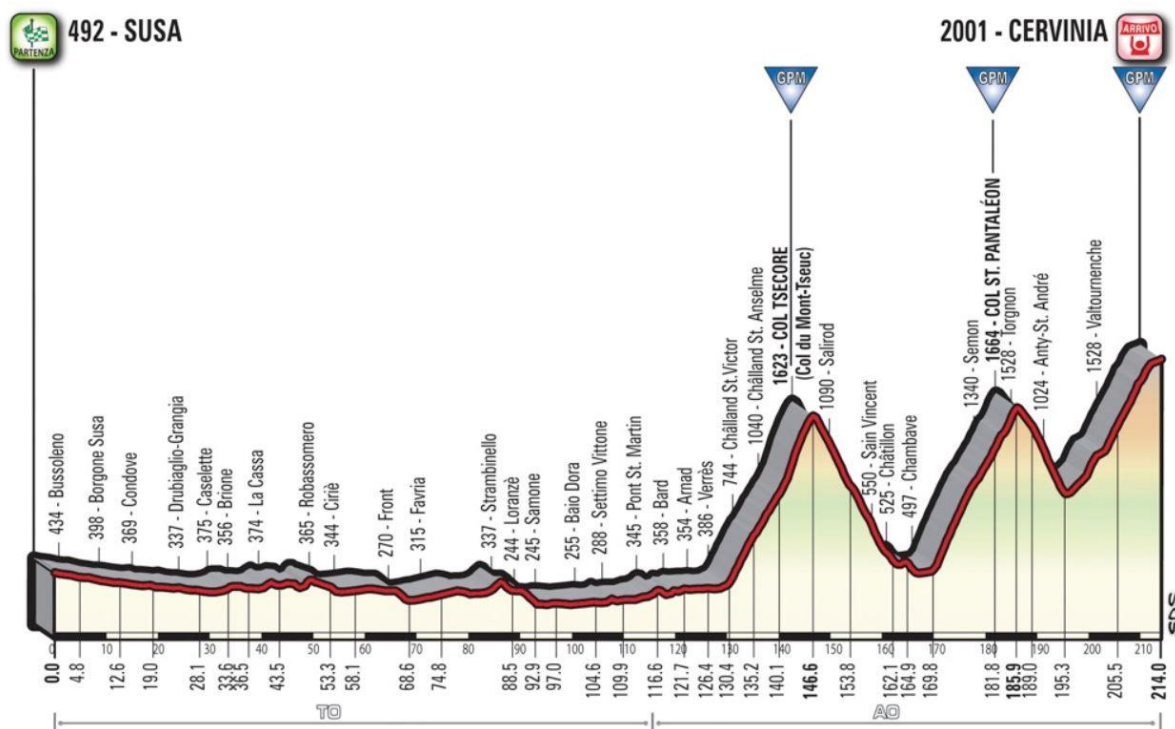
The real racing starts on the giant of the Colle delle Finestre, which is 18.6 kilometers long averaging 9.1% gradient and features gravel roads for the last 9 kilometers of ascent. Sestriere, the next mountain, is 16.9 kilometers long but far less steep. The rider who tops these climbs first will gain decisive points in the mountains classification.

The final ascent to Bardonecchia is only 7.25 kilometers long but is horribly steep at 9% gradient. Riders will be tired after the day's climbing and the long valley road from Sestriere to the foot of the final climb. Expect the best climbers to accelerate on the steep gradients of Bardonecchia and outlast their rivals to the finish.

Many riders in the breakaway will strive to be the first man to top the Colle delle Finestre, earning the Cima Coppi award and the prize money that comes with it. It's unlikely that the escapees will survive to win the stage, but stranger things have happened in the mountains.

Changes in the general classification will be extremely difficult to predict today, as team tactics could animate the race on the Colle delle Finestre or wait until the final climb. One thing's for sure: if you crack on the early climbs, you will lose decisive minutes.

Stage 20: Susa - Cervinia



Stage 20 is the final day in the mountains before the ceremonial stage into Roma. The first 130 kilometers are flat but the last 80 are the most difficult in this year's race: 4500 meters of ascending on just three Alpine climbs. This is appointment television.

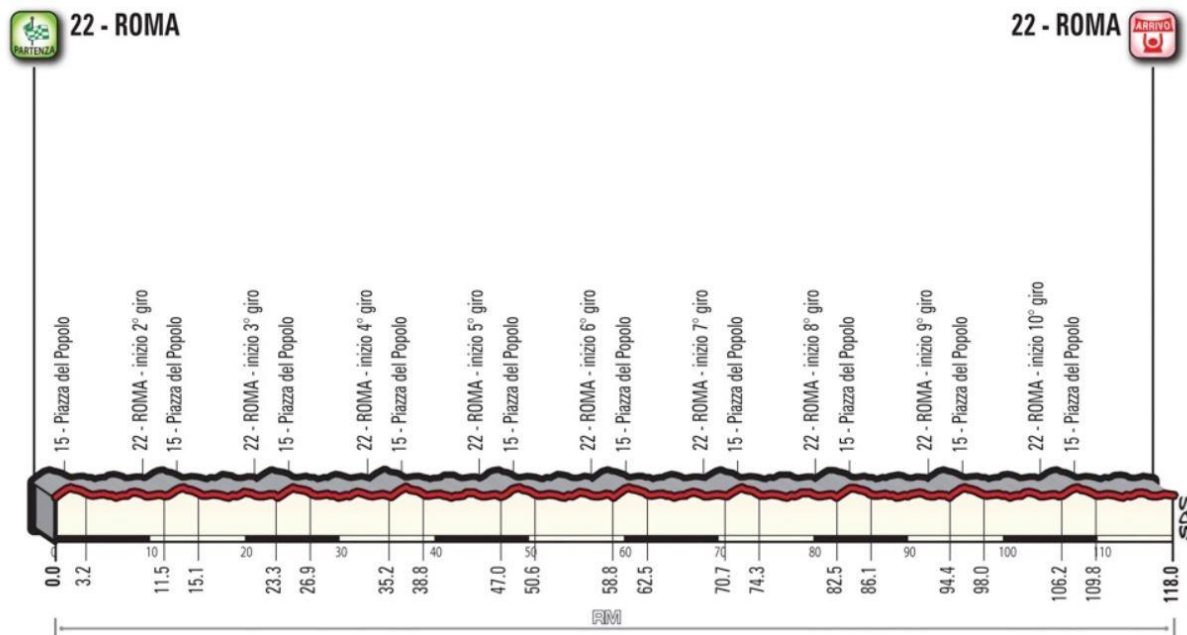
At the beginning of the day's hostilities is the Col Tsecore, which climbs for 16 kilometers at 7% gradient. Immediately following is the Col de Saint-Pantaléon, ascending 16.5 kilometers at 7% gradient as well. A short descent will take the riders to the final, decisive climb of the 2018 Giro d'Italia: Cervinia.

Cervinia is 19.15 kilometers long, a horribly long climb after three weeks of racing. It only averages 5% gradient, but it will burn in the riders' legs.

Three huge climbs mean that a huge amount of mountains points is available, and the blue jersey competition could come down to the results on this stage. However, it's the final battle for the pink jersey that takes the spotlight today. Because the valley roads between the climbs are so short, a brave contender who needs to make up a huge chunk of time can attack on the early climbs. With the mountains so tough and compacted, the man who wears pink today must be vigilant.

The final general classification will be decided on this stage. Whoever leads the race this evening will win the 2018 Giro d'Italia.

Stage 21: Roma - Roma



This is the final stage of the 2018 Giro d'Italia, an 11.8-kilometer circuit raced 10 times through the center of Italy's capital city. Most riders will be proud to finish the demanding, three-week marathon. Others will be disappointed in not fulfilling their lofty goals for the race. For all who survived to this point, only the final procession remains before the curtain closes on the 2018 Giro.

For the courageous sprinters who dragged themselves over the Alps, today is their chance to make the suffering worth it with a glorious stage victory. The baroudeurs will return to spoil their plans with late attacks, but the sprinters should rule the day.

Riders at the top of the overall time standings will not attack each other today, as there is an unwritten gentlemen's rule forbidding this. The men who will stand on the final podium have already secured their spots, they simply need to cross the finish line.

After the stage the podium ceremonies will be run one last time, and the final winner of il maglia rosa will lift the spiraled trophy in triumph.

Participating Teams

As a UCI World Tour race, all 18 World Tour teams are obligated to attend.
These teams are:

AG2R La Mondiale (FRA)
Astana Pro Team (KAZ)
Bahrain-Merida (BAH)
BMC Racing Team (USA)
Bora-Hansgrohe (GER)
Dimension Data (RSA)
Education First-Drapak p/b Cannondale (USA)
Groupama-FDJ (FRA)
Katusha-Alpecin (SUI)
Lotto-Soudal (BEL)
LottoNL-Jumbo (NED)
Mitchelton-Scott (AUS)
Movistar Team (ESP)
Quick-Step Floors (BEL)
Team Sky (GBR)
Team Sunweb (GER)
Trek-Segafredo (USA)
UAE Team Emirates (UAE)

In addition, 4 Continental Pro division teams accepted invitations to participate:

Androni Giocattoli-Sidermec (ITA)

Bardiani CSF (ITA)

Israel Cycling Academy (ISL)

Wilier Triestina-Selle Italia (ITA)

Each team will consist of 8 riders, along with the caravan of team cars, team directors, soigneurs, trainers, mechanics, and other staff.

2018 Giro d'Italia: Race Predictions

Predictions: Top 10 Overall

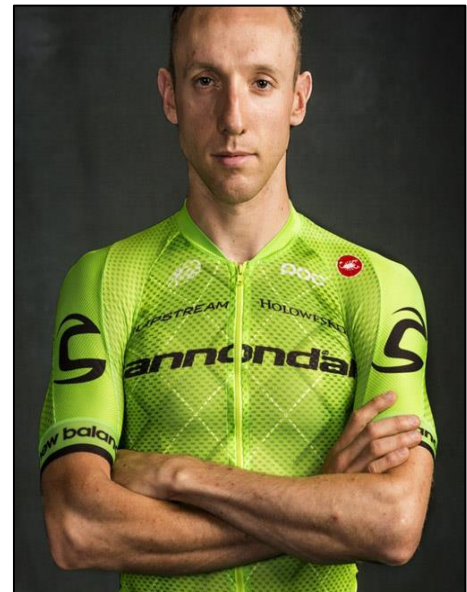
10. George Bennett (NZL), LottoNL-Jumbo



The Kiwi climber announced himself with 10th place overall in the 2016 Vuelta, and he earned his biggest result yet with last year's overall victory in the Tour of California. He's showed good form early this season with his performance in the Volta a Catalunya, and now he's building up for the Giro. Teammate Robert Gesink may start the race as team leader, but Bennett is LottoNL-Jumbo's best card for a top 10 finish.

9. Michael Woods (CAN), EF-Drpac

Michael Woods is a late-comer to the Grand Tours, riding his first one last year at 30 years of age. He showed no fear in the 2017 Vuelta as he climbed to 7th place overall. He's a dangerous puncheur for the hilly stages and a gifted climber, but his time-trialing could be the worst of any rider on this list. Woods is still somewhat of an enigma, yet it wouldn't be surprising if he outperformed this position.



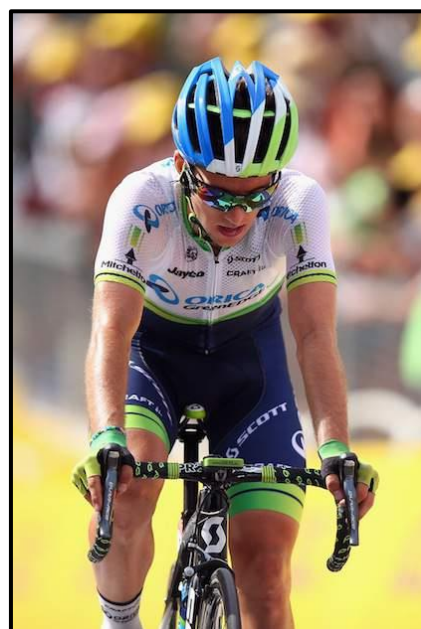
8. Domenico Pozzovivo (ITA), Bahrain-Merida



6th overall in last year's Giro, this pint-sized climber is still a threat at 35 years old. Pozzovivo excels on high summit finishes, so the top favorites will have a hard time shedding the Italian. His bid for a top 5 finish will be hampered by his time-trialing and descending. However, his fearless, attacking style could prove dangerous in the fight for pink. If he comes with the form he had at this year's Tour of the Alps, watch out.

7. Simon Yates (GBR), Mitchelton-Scott

Simon Yates will share leadership of Mitchelton-Scott with Esteban Chaves in the Giro d'Italia. He's a brilliant one-week stage racer and he's on superb form to start the season with 2nd overall in Paris-Nice and 4th overall in the Volta a Catalunya. Yates has been prone to bad days in previous Grand Tours and his time-trialing is a weakness. However, if his form is consistent over the three weeks, he'll compete with the top favorites to the end.



6. Miguel Angel Lopez (COL), Astana Pro Team



Miguel Angel Lopez is a rare talent. The 24-year-old Colombian was a revelation in last year's Vuelta as he took two stage wins in the high mountains on his way to 8th place overall. His hopes for a top 5 finish in that race were dashed by the time-trials and questionable positioning in the hilly stages. If he wants to be a serious contender for the final podium, Lopez must be more consistent. Then again, he's so gifted it might not even matter.

5. Fabio Aru (ITA), UAE Team Emirates

Aru hasn't quite recaptured the form he had during his electric 2014-2015 seasons, but he was solid last year and should never be counted out. He's tough, aggressive, and a superb climber. The former Vuelta champion has been quiet in the spring races as he prepares for the Giro d'Italia. His form this year is a bit of a mystery, but there's no question he'll battle all the way to Rome. After all, he's a proven champion racing on home soil.



4. Esteban Chaves (COL), Mitchelton-Scott



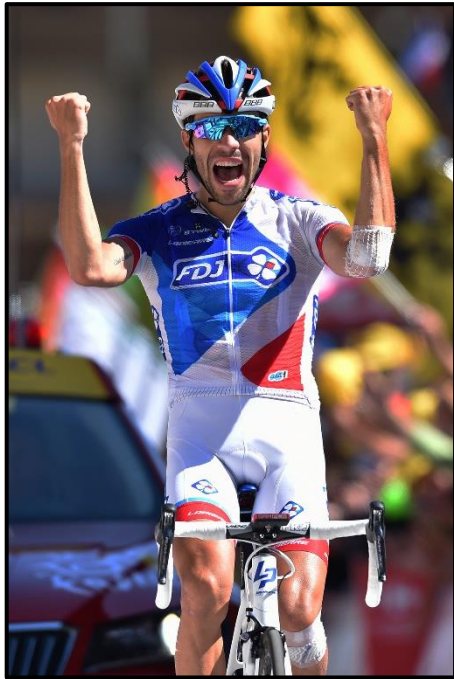
After a sterling 2016 season which saw him finish 2nd in the Giro and 3rd in the Vuelta, it seemed as if Esteban Chaves would become Columbia's next Grand Tour winner. But last year he was derailed by injuries as he struggled in the Tour de France and faded in the last week of the Vuelta. Chaves has highlighted the Giro as his main objective of the year and will announce his return to top form with 4th place in Rome.

3. Tom Dumoulin (NED), Team Sunweb

Defending champion Tom Dumoulin surprised cycling fans when he elected to return to the Giro instead of focusing on the Tour de France in 2018. Hailed as possibly the next great Grand Tour rider, the 27-year-old may be the top favorite to win pink. However, Dumoulin is vulnerable in the high mountains and has only 43.5 time-trial kilometers to work with. With the course less favorable than last year's edition, Dumoulin will fall just short of a repeat win.



2. Thibaut Pinot (FRA), Groupama-FDJ



Thibaut Pinot has seen the ups and downs of the Grand Tours. In 2014 he finished 3rd in the Tour de France and won the white jersey but has since been plagued by inconsistency and bad luck. He bounced back with an impressive 4th place in the 2017 Giro, and he's entering this year's race on extraordinary form. Look out for Pinot to animate the race in the mountains and surge to 2nd place in Rome.

1. Chris Froome (GBR), Team Sky

Chris Froome is a man on a mission. He has his sights set on the rare Giro-Tour double, as well as becoming the 7th rider to win all 3 Grand Tours at least once. His unique strength and consistency in both the mountains and the time-trials is unmatched in the pro peloton. The climbers will certainly attack him and Dumoulin may be faster in the long time-trial, but Froome's all-around ability and experience will win the 2018 Giro d'Italia.



Just missed the cut

Davide Formolo (ITA), Bora-Hansgrohe: The young Italian was 10th in 2017, but this year's list of contenders is stronger and deeper than before. He has proven talent and he's racing on home soil, so a surprise may be in store.

Sam Oomen (NED), Team Sunweb: Oomen is only 22 years old, yet he's Tom Dumoulin's top climbing domestique. His impressive performance in last year's Vuelta has him marked as a future star.

Rohan Dennis (AUS), BMC Racing Team: Arguably the best time-trialist in the world, Dennis has attempted to transform himself into a GC contender. His power against the clock makes him an intriguing threat, but can he hang on the climbs?

Louis Meintjes (RSA), Dimension Data: Meintjes has twice finished 8th overall in the Tour de France, encouraging results at just 26 years old. But he's struggling with injuries and poor form this spring and doesn't look ready to compete with the top GC men.

Nicolas Roche (IRL), BMC Racing Team: The aging Irishman seems to lack the extra juice in his legs to compete in the high mountains, but he is crafty and tough. This could be his last real shot at the GC in a Grand Tour.

Jarlinson Pantano (COL), Trek-Segafredo: Pantano is known as a stage-hunter in the high mountain stages. All it takes is one good breakaway to put this exciting climber in the thick of the GC race.

Wout Poels (NED), Team Sky: Poels will be the top domestique for Chris Froome, and he was brilliant in last year's Vuelta. As he guides Froome through the Alps, he could find himself in the top 10 overall.

Image References

All image references are in the order in which they appeared above.

2018 Giro d'Italia logo: Giro d'Italia official website

2017 Giro d'Italia logo: Giro d'Italia official website

Tom Dumoulin: AFP/Luca Bettini

Official route map: Giro d'Italia official website

Stage Previews:

Stages 1-3: Profiles from Giro d'Italia official website

Mario Cipollini: Bettini Photo

Miguel Indurain: EFE

Stages 4-9: profiles from Giro d'Italia official website

Andrew Hampsten: Sirotti

Stages 10-21: profiles from Giro d'Italia official website

Predictions:

George Bennett: Henri Potappel

Michael Woods: Cannondale Pro Team

Domenico Pozzovivo: Bahrain-Merida

Simon Yates: Bryn Lennon/Getty Images

Miguel Angel Lopez: Astana Pro Team

Fabio Aru: AP Photo/Peter Dejong

Esteban Chaves: Ezra Shaw/Getty Images North America

Tom Dumoulin: AP Photo/Antonio Calanni

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