

Handout Mentality – Tour de France – Caveat Emptor

Long ago in a far off land, 1956 in Cambridge, England, I joined my first bike club. I was 12 years old and the youngest member of the club. There was no such thing as juvenile racing in those days and I followed the typical path to competition – via cycle touring. First I joined the Cyclist's Touring Club (current President one Phil Liggett) and after many miles and some experience in bunch riding, I graduated to a full on racing club. I did not have to take out a racing licence to join the racing club. Most competition in Britain in those days was in time trials for which a licence was not required – just membership of a registered club. When I asked, at fourteen, for a racing licence for track or so called "massed start" events, I was refused. I was two years too young. So I entered the odd race by filling in the space for licence number with "licence applied for." It always worked. No computers in those days.

Many riders who rode in clubs didn't actually race. Their interest was in the weekly club ride, a fairly social excursion into the then relatively car free country lanes. In concept and in distance, it's not so different from what happens now with one very obvious exception. It was taboo to wear racing clothes on a club ride. There was a time and place for everything and for the club ride it was neat casual – fashion conscious cockneys wore knee length pants called plus twos, long socks, a woolly jersey and a french beret. Us provincials were never quite as stylish. Many wore jeans on long rides. If you think of where the seams go – ooh - it made no sense. The regular bike for fun guy never dressed to identify with the racer and the racer never dressed to race unless he was actually racing – that is with a number on.

The reason for this bit of personal history is to contrast it with how most cyclists come into the sport nowadays. This year, the last two hours of every stage of the Tour de France have been shown on Australian TV. This coverage has been available in Europe for many years. My brother used to send me all the tapes from England. I'm sure the colour and excitement of the occasion have lured many a dreamer into the local bike shop hot to hit the road in the colours of their hero. That's why the team replica bikes are advertised in July. When I started out, you never wore racing clothes outside a race. Nowadays you would not buy your first bike without also getting a good pair of nicks and a racing jersey. 50 years ago we did not dress to look like Tour riders – we dressed to look like tourists.

But then 50 years ago we didn't know much about the Tour de France. We got a bit, a very small bit in the national press. We had quite a spread in the national "comic" - Cycling Weekly -even if, by definition, the news was a bit stale. After 1960 if you wanted some excitement, you found a newsagent that stocked Miroir du Cyclisme, all in French of course but the photos were fantastic. If only I'd kept the copies I bought of Anquetil vs Poulidor. They're a collectors' item nowadays. (The magazine gradually sank down over the horizon in 1994). And of course you could listen to the Tour on Radio Luxemburg, a commercial station that beat the BBC monopoly by broadcasting from the tiny European country. Commentary in French of course, but you could just about make out what was going on.

Back in Cambridge in 1956 by pure co-incidence I could have bought a Tour de France team replica bike. I really wanted one before I discovered the dual limitations of meagre resources and parental discouragement. Soon after too I discovered that a "gen" (short for genuine) racing bike was never bought in one bit. You bought a handbuilt frame from a small shop, Chater-Lea cranks with cotter pins, Airlite hubs, Weinmann rims, GB brakes, stem and bars, a leather Brooks saddle, (that's all I can still remember by brand) you took the lot home, usually on your shoulder, and put it together. More often than not these parts were 2nd 3rd or 4th hand. When I built my first racing bike, the whole transmission was on the left side of the machine. I discreetly went home and started again. Gear ratios? Very few "real racing men" rode multi-geared bikes. Derailleurs were not yet reliable.

Back to the team issue bike. The reason why I could have bought a team bike in Cambridge in 1956 was that in 1955 the British cycle manufacturer Hercules, whose best days were behind it and whose future days were numbered, decided to enter a team in the Tour de France. I'll save the tale of its annihilation for another time but the relevance is that one of the members came from Cambridge. His name was Fred Krebs. He came home from France older and wiser, showing off "le tan" (unavailable on British beaches) and then seemed to disappear from the sport. I never saw let alone met Fred Krebs but I presume on the basis of local connection, a Cambridge bike shop had been lured into stocking a team replica bike because of Fred. I wonder if it ever sold it. I never saw it "up the road."

Like many British industries of the 50s, Hercules had no comprehension of the forces of world commerce that were about to destroy it. The British venture into the Tour made about as much sense as the Charge of the Light Brigade just over 100 years earlier. They had no idea of the opposition and the sacrifices were a sad waste.

But twelve years later, earlier failures forgotten, the Brits were back again. Trade teams had been the norm since 1962 but in 1967 and 1968 there was a brief reversion to the old style national/provincial teams and a team of pro and semi-pro Brits appeared in white jerseys with Union Jacks on the shoulders. They'd learned a bit since being wiped out in 1955 – if you wanted to go fast in Europe you took go fast supplements. Unfortunately this led to a catastrophe even worse than '55 when the team leader, Tom Simpson, collapsed and died on Mount Ventoux from the combined effects of officially sanctioned dehydration (only two bidons per rider per day), heat exhaustion, amphetamines and his own desperation. I think three or four of the team managed to stay clear of the sag wagon until Paris. I remember a picture of them on a rest day playing billiards. The French were amused that most of them were on holiday leave from their day jobs.

The Americans like foreign campaigns because it's about the only way they learn there are other nations living on this planet, so in 1986 an almost all American team sponsored by the convenience chain 7-11 appeared in the Tour. It's amusing now, but it must have been a source of irritation to American cycling that the only non US member of the team, Canadian Alex Steida became the first North American ever to wear the yellow jersey. Like the Brits of '55 and '67, the Yanks of '86 gave the locals some amusement and the sag wagon some passengers. Ironically, 1986 marked the first American victory in the Tour. But Greg Lemond was riding on a French team, La Vie Claire.

One year after 7-11, the Brits, with the Simpson debacle 20 years in the past, tried again with a trade team – ANC-Halfords. It included an Australian Shane Sutton, Gary's brother. Malcolm Elliott, famous here for being thrown off the Sun Tour for fighting – who is still racing by the way – scored a third on one stage. Four survivors made it into Paris.

This year Cadel Evans finished second in the Tour and it has probably crossed his mind that if Michael "Van Der Chook" Rasmussen had not been permitted to start for telling his team porkies about his pre-Tour activities, or if he (Evans) had not got sucked into Rasmussen's fight with Alberto Contador he would possibly have won. So once again the drums say that moves are afoot for an Australian team in the Tour. Six Australians were selected for the tour this year and you only need nine for a team. There are plenty of good Australian riders in Europe right now. Baden Cooke, Allan Davis, Luke Roberts, Matt White all have Tour experience. Cadel's on the podium – lets have our own team.

Let's be realistic. The Tour de France is like no other sporting event and always has been. It's a flying freak show, the travelogue tour of a beautiful country and a slick organization – did you realise that the presentation ceremony gets a prompter so nothing is missed? This feel good sheen partially obscures the large number of seriously injured cyclists and the ones that are struggling every day to make it inside the time limit. On just the first stage of this year's Tour, two of the Aussie contingent received injuries which caused them to leave the race soon after. Two more fell on the same descent later in the race, one of them sustaining horrific injuries. Of the two that finished, Cadel Evans was on the podium, but Simon Gerrans gave the distinct impression of being glad it was all over.

The fact that you can go into a bike shop and come out with a team replica bike might make you feel like a Tour rider. If you worked hard enough you might, if you were physically gifted, get your power to weight ratio down into the right area and your work output into the right zone. You'd look like a Tour rider and on your good days you'd go as fast as a Tour rider. The trick between the dream and the reality is to string 20 of your best days together at a time and in a manner of someone else's choosing. The Tour de France is a brutal race. In one of its very earliest editions a suffering rider was labouring up a col when he saw a man who looked like the race director. "Assassin!" he yelled. The job description still stands.

40 years ago, Friday 13th July 1967 Tom Simpson died in the Tour de France. A few days later I was riding along a fairly quiet road when I crossed with a commuter cyclist going the other way. I thought I heard him mutter 'junkie' as we passed. If he didn't say it, it's probably worse that I thought he did. I admired Tom Simpson, I was a fan, but I didn't ride with the pros and I never took drugs. I held no responsibility for Tom Simpson's life or his death. So why did I feel involved or incriminated? Because cycling is full of dreamers. When I trained, I raced Jacques Anquetil even though no-one saw us because we were in a shed, on the rollers (with a tandem tyre on the back to make it tough). Somehow I thought myself into belonging with the vedettes, the stars. I suppose there's worse things you can do.

The dream of an Australian team in the Tour is fine as long as it remains a dream. When you go from dream to reality it doesn't stack up. You need \$15 million a year and probably five years to establish - \$75 million unless you are simply going to replace an existing team sponsor. Australia's premier stage race, the Tour Down Under, well established with plenty of lovely public money committed, still can't get a corporate sponsor. Probably five years is very optimistic to establish a team. Remember when AG2R were Casino – that was ten years ago and they're still nothing to get excited about. Would the team ride Australian bikes? No. Would the team have mainly Australian riders. Possibly – if you wanted a team with all the potential and charisma of Bouygues Telecom or Agriturbel.

So what is the point? Why should it matter, if an Australian finally did win the Tour if he were on a Belgian team sponsored by a Belgian lottery, supported by Americans, Belgians and Ghengiskhanians? Soccer teams in the English Premier League have been known to turn out without a solitary English player. The fans only care if they lose. This year an Australian, one that people said would never win the Tour because he didn't take the right things, stood on the podium. That might be as good as it gets. He might go one better next year. Every year about 300 riders line up for the Tour. Less than two-thirds make the cut and around half the original hopefuls actually get to Paris. Most of those who have stood on the podium needed far more than mineral water and vitamin pills to get there.

I suppose that over the last twenty years, since the Tour de France stopped being such a French dominated race, it's become the shop window for all cycling – the only race that nearly everyone hears about. The photography is breathtaking, the scenery the sort of stuff you see on travel posters. The race has assumed a supremacy in the world of cycling because it regularly wins the Oscar for best film. In making the Tour bigger, it's carried the sport with it – drug scandals notwithstanding. Now the Tour is THE race to be seen in. Nothing else comes close. And if you can't be there as a competitor, you need to be there as a participating spectator, pedalling over the parcours or going hysterical at the side of the road. It's the Mecca of cycling.

This makes Cadel Evan's achievement that more special and that much less likely to be followed up by some national effort to add to the legend of Australian sporting excellence. I've mentioned four national teams, Hercules, the GB team, 7-11 and ANC-Halfords. All failed and all were before the Tour got really big which if you want to pin it down to one day, was when Greg Lemond beat Laurent Fignon by eight seconds in 1989. It signalled the end of the French era and the start of the international one.

Congratulations Cadel. It's a great achievement. Possibly one that very few people can truly relate to. But it's your property, not as a pathfinder or stepping stone for the next big move. In 1955 the British discovered the yawning gap between their home pros and the Tour. In 1967 they had closed some of the gap but in 1987 they went backwards again. The Americans never made it as 7-11 in 1986 but as part of multinational groups there's been an American on the top of the podium in Paris eleven times from that year on. It's a shame only ten of those have counted. But that's another story.