

Handout Mentality – Broken Chains and Crooked Roads

So far this summer I have been confined to barracks and consequently have missed not just the Christmas Handicap and getting fried at a Christmas carnival, but the Bay Series, Buninyong and the chance to visit Adelaide and gaze at my hero Miguel Indurain who is guest of honour at the Tour Down Under this year.

To some extent television will probably keep me informed and I have already probably seen more of the Bay Series and Buninyong from time spent in front of the idiot box than I would have managed from 1500 kms of driving. But I have worked on my information bank by the old fashioned method of reading a book – two in fact. I successfully petitioned Santa (by threatening to play Rodney Rude's tribute song again) into giving me Willy Voet's "Breaking The Chain" and Les Woodland's "The Crooked Road To Victory." A friend who told me that once I started on former Festina soigneur Voet's story I would not put it down and I did in fact read it in one day.

I've just finished Woodland's scandalfest wondering why someone who seems to find his subject matter so distasteful should continue to make a living writing about it. I know that it hasn't always been so because when I was involved with the British Cycling Federation's coaching scheme back in the early 60s, the only book National Coach Norman Sheil could offer was Woodland's "Cycle Racing: Training To Win." I've probably still got a copy somewhere. I believe the book is now on it's fourth revised edition.

I lingered over the Tom Simpson part of the book – coincidentally Woodland and I were both in Cambridge England when news of Simpson's death hit the media/fan – and the bit where the British media acquired an attitude towards the Tour de France and professional cycling generally, an attitude that is still very much with us today. The pursuit of Lance Armstrong and latterly Floyd Landis by the London Sunday Times journalist David Walsh (L.A. Confidential) had it's spiritual inspiration in the 1967 probing of Simpson's medical records at Avignon Hospital by the Daily Mail's Jim Manning. The British press, bulldog-style, clamped it's jaws on it's quarry and has hung on long after it forgot why.

And there's an element of vendetta about the *Crooked Road To Victory* too. Over the years as a multi lingual journalist covering the turbulent times of professional cycling – from Anquetil to Armstrong – Woodland has picked up a wealth of stories, some quite funny but few with happy endings. Towards the end of the book he tells the stories of two controversial world championships – 1946 when Rik Van Steenbergen ran down his fellow Belgian Marcel Kint and towed the Swiss Hans Knecht into the rainbow jersey and 1982, when Greg Lemond decided to go after Jack Boyer, a USA team mate, and handed the title to Giuseppe Saronni. Both demonstrate, at the highest level, the conflict between the rule book concept that cycling is an individual sport and the ethical position that individuals sacrifice their chances for their teams.

Cycling is a sport often conducted in blatant disregard for it's own rules, nowhere more obvious than this country. A long history of handicap racing, which requires spontaneous but theoretically illegal teaming, may account for some of the success of Australian riders in European pro teams compared with British cyclists, who used to be raised on a diet of individual time trials. In this country respect for the unwritten rule book can get farcical. My introduction to Australian handicap racing was a Caulfield-Carnegie event where the scratchmen caught everyone, then sent their representative, now a prominent Cycling Victoria official, up the road and disrupted any efforts to chase until the bunch was reduced to just rolling along. Since we were racing for our own \$2 entry fees, the net result was that, after chopping the prize money, the scratch riders went home even for the day, the rest of us were down to the tune of entry fee and petrol costs. Welcome to pro cycling.

Some years later I graduated to what Woodland calls "Men In Blazers," becoming a state level commissaire. The official who took my course, another well known Victorian figure, told us that six day races were above the law – there was no attempt to bring any sheriffs to this frontier of the sport. Woodland leaves me with the distinct impression that he regards the smoke filled milieu of the six day race as the breeding ground for much of what is wrong with the sport, particularly in the areas of race fixing and drug abuse.

Crooked Road is a good read if you're still wondering about some of the mysteries of pro cycling's somewhat murky past but, with the exception of quoting the above mentioned Willy Voet's tale of the 1998 Festina scandal, Woodland does not venture past the early 80s. My theory is that since the odd mistake and the rambling nature of the narrative suggests the publishers skipped on an editor, they were probably unwilling to sponsor a legal eagle casting his beady eye over the text too. Woodland may have "the goss" on the modern day rule breakers but he's either been scooped by their race to the confessional, or saving his stories on the few who are stubbornly clinging to an alternative view of history for another day. In the meantime, you'll just have to join the dots for yourself.