

Handout Mentality – the Voice struggles to stay upbeat

Phil Liggett is introduced as “The Voice of Cycling” - usually by folks who don't have the time or inclination to discover that cycling now has many voices, some of them not entirely sane as you can see for yourself from a quick visit to an online bike racing forum. In a recent TV interview the Voice declared that he had thought long and hard about his future in these troubled times. The Voice was tired of talking up a rider in the spring only to discover by autumn that his natural born talents had been tweaked by a weakness for substance abuse.

I have to say that I have followed Phil Liggett's career for a long time – we're the same age and grew up on the same little island - and I have a lot of admiration for his ability as a TV commentator. He has long brought reassurance to a sport that probably doesn't deserve it. But if I was to name “The Voice of Cycling” right now it wouldn't be Phil Liggett. It would be a man who came to prominence with a book about the importance of bike racing in Columbia of all places – Matt Rendell.

If you have yet to pick up one of Rendell's books they include Kings of the Mountains, (the Columbian story), A Significant Other - the story of Victor Hugo Pena (a Columbian) in the 2003 Centenary Tour de France - Death of Marco Pantani and Blazing Saddles, sub-titled The Cruel and Unusual History of the Tour de France. I've read the first and last of these and asked Santa for the others. If you have yet to discover Matt Rendell, he is English, an excellent journalist and his insights into the professional peloton are not as a graduate former member.

He does not shy away from frank descriptions of some of my favourite bike riders. – Bjarne Riis “a thick-skinned sod” or Dirty Dick Virenque “the pantomime prince of performance enhancement.” He admits to getting off on the pure spectacle of the Tour whilst not getting bogged down in the argument as to who are the true believers. And he manages to write about the past in his Cruel and Unusual History of the Tour de France as if he were a journalist of those times.

Rendell's Tour book is very clear on one thing. It's much revered founder Henri Desgrange, whose initials used to grace the yellow jersey, took his business model not from any Olympic ideal of healthy competition but from the philosophy of his countryman, the Marquis de Sade. A perfect Tour for Desgranges was where one survivor staggered over the finish line and presumably expired immediately following the podium ceremony. Small wonder then that Octave Lapize yelled “assassins” at a suit who he wrongly presumed to be a race official as he trudged up the Tourmalet in 1910 and Gustav Garrigou “ varied it to “bandits” on the Galibier the following year. In those days of single gears and fix your own mechanical problems the Tour went all of 2000km further than the present editions. It also had a set of rules that were varied at Desgrange's discretion to add whatever additional discomforts he could dream up for his unfortunate victims. For instance the 1928 edition, which included Hubert Opperman in its line-up, was run as a team time trial for 15 of its 22 marathon stages.

If there was any doubt about what the riders were using to survive Desgrange's efforts to make the Tour as brutal as possible, an article in Le Petit Parisien by Albert Londres in 1924 should have dispelled any thoughts that the Tour could be survived, never mind won, on vitamins, mineral water and fresh mountain air. As Rendell tells it, Londres had just returned from a visit to French penal colonies at Cayenne in South America – if you read the book or saw Steve McQueen in Papillon you would have an idea of how bad conditions would have been there – and he headlined an article based on an interview with the Pelissier brothers, Henri and Francis, “Convicts of the Road.” Henri Pelissier, who had won the Tour the previous year, was a rider who stood up to Desgranges and he blew the whistle on the 1924 Tour on the second stage. The brothers showed Londres the potions they needed to circle France – cocaine, chloroform and three boxes of pills each carried which they called simply “dynamite.”

Some 30 years later the use of dope caused a scandal as Rendell reminds us. Jean Mallejac of the French National Team was lucky to survive a near fatal collapse on Mount Ventoux, a mountain that would have qualified for Desgrange's sadistic criteria with honours. Several other riders were severely distressed and brought to a halt that day. 12 years later, a rider did die on Ventoux when Tom Simpson, his judgement impaired by amphetamines, cognac and more than a touch of sheer desperation, took his dehydrated body beyond resuscitation. Desgrange's Tour de Souffrance, now under the control of his disciple Jacques Goddet, permitted each rider just two litres of water a day. Seems ludicrous by modern standards.

Simpson's death was in 1967, the same year Phil Liggett decided not to take up the offer of a perilous career on a small Belgian team and become a journalist on the British weekly “Cycling.” By 1973, Liggett was also an International level commissaire, at 30 the youngest in the world. He also ran his own tour, the Tour of Britain for many years. But despite his move to the reporting, rule enforcement and organisational side of the sport, Liggett is not known for expressing strong opinions on the wayward antics of the professional peloton. He does not seem able to go where Matt Rendell treads fearlessly and be ruthlessly critical of those who despite warning after warning are still prepared to cheat and lie. Personal criticism does not seem to be the Liggett style and I don't suppose he would have survived to be The Voice of Cycling if it had. On the other hand, Rendell's reporting in Blazing Saddles seems to be meticulously researched, so since he has commentated on 33 Tours de France, Liggett must have been let down for more than half his life. No wonder he's not as cheerful as he used to be.