



THE CRUEL
AND UNUSUAL
HISTORY OF THE
TOUR DE
FRANCE



Blazing Saddles



**MATT
RENDELL**

CREDITS

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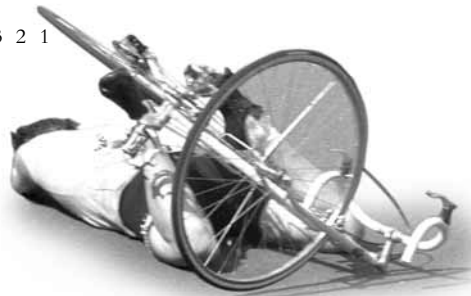
1830 North 55th Street
Boulder, Colorado 80301-2700 USA
303/440-0601 · Fax 303/444-6788 ·
E-mail velopress@insideinc.com

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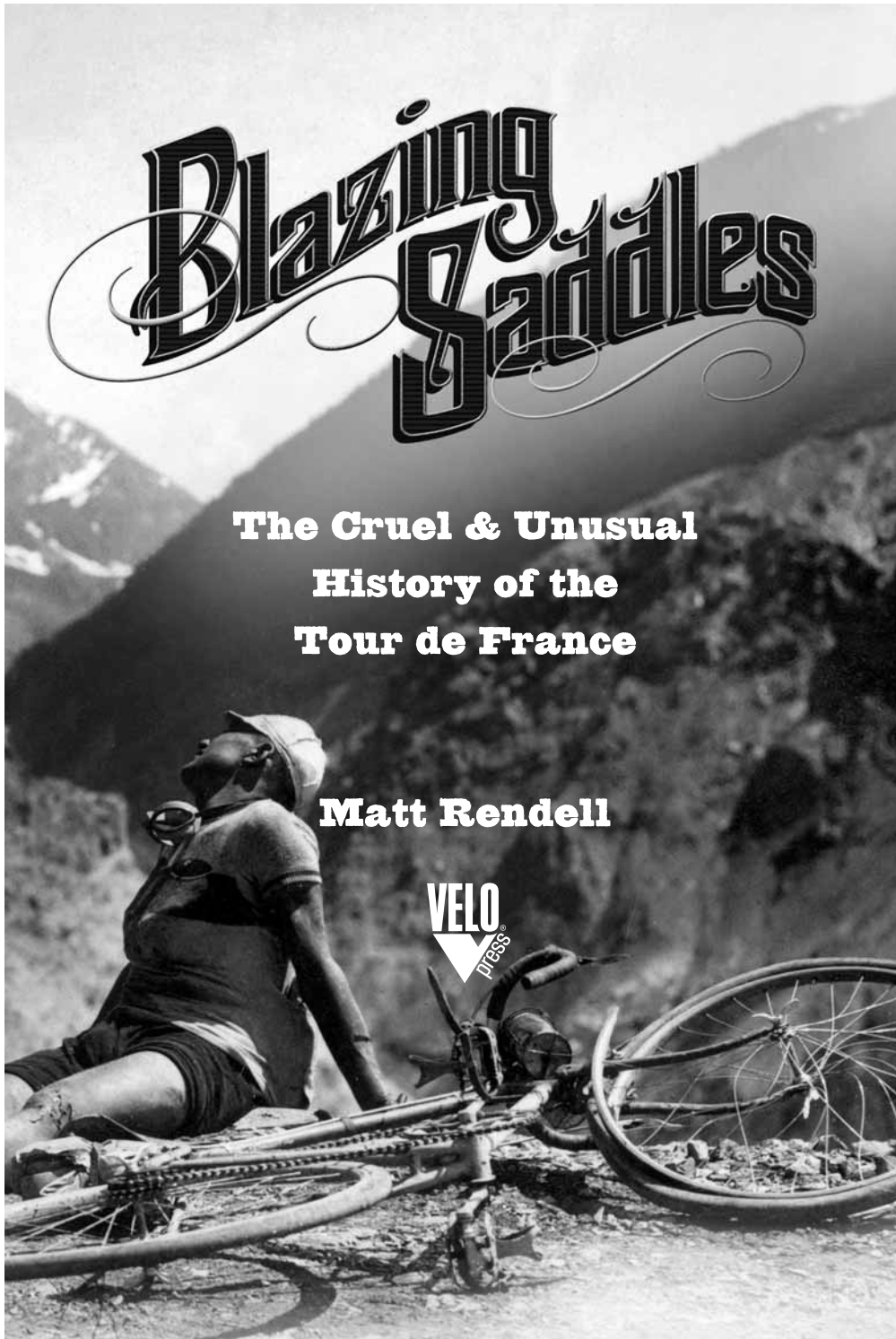


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VELO
press



PROLOGUE

Prologue, or ‘The Sporting Bumblebee’

1 July 1903, 3 a.m. One summer morning in the middle of the night, a random selection of homburgs, berets, tam-o’-shanters, deerstalkers, drainpipes, plus-fours, long shorts and short ones gathered outside a bar south of Paris, appropriately named ‘The Alarm Clock’. Swaddled in extra clothes against the cold, and with every available pocket, pouch and opening stuffed with food, tools and spare parts, the riders set off along the rubble corridors that passed for roads, fighting more for survival than speed – victory to the last man standing.

As well as inner tubes twisted into figures-of-eight across their shoulders in anticipation of the collarbone breaks many would suffer during the ordeal, the riders wore long sleeves, knee-length socks, and moustaches modelled on the handlebars beneath them. What rules there were stated the obvious: article five read ‘Bicycles of all types will be admitted, provided they are propelled solely by muscular force.’ The most important rule wasn’t written down at all: it was that the organisers could make any rule change they liked, at any time, and impose it on the racers.

A century on much has changed, but plenty of the old Tour remains. For the humblest water-carriers, it’s still all about survival, although the stars can amass enormous fortunes. And, for everyone concerned, it’s still about speed – although these days, that also means steroids, growth hormone, blood transfusions, EPO, the occasional bribe, not to mention endless, inconclusive investigations through the courts or in the media. In short, the Tour is a typical manifestation of contemporary sport, with all its chemical, judicial and extra-sporting paraphernalia. Perhaps not typical: the Tour de France has no permanent infrastructure or fixed installations, other

than France itself. Perhaps it was the very gauntness of this skeletal structure that allowed it to take everything the twentieth century could throw at it, and emerge intact, like a miraculous oak tree or outhouse untouched by a blitz that has razed the surrounding city to the ground.

A whiff of the apocalypse has always hung over the Tour. The 1904 edition was so blighted by cheating that its founder Henri Desgrange announced it would be 'the last Tour'. Much the same was said in 1967, 1998 and 2006 – not, strictly speaking, the first Tour to see its winner test positive in an anti-doping test (Pedro Delgado had that honour, or dishonour – or didn't have it, depending on your point of view – in 1988). In 2006, for once, there was no confusion over the illegality of the product concerned – which was a break with tradition, because confusion and illegality have been woven into the fabric of the Tour. Frame builders, component manufacturers and the riders themselves have always dreamed of weightlessness, so it's hardly surprising some of the latter have tended to dispense with the excess baggage of a conscience. In 1904, a rider named Chevalier – his forename has been lost – finished third in stage one after using a method of performance-enhancement with no equal even today: a car. The following year, it was estimated that 125 kilos of tin-tacks had been strewn across the roads: the favoured rider made the early break, and his followers booby-trapped the road ahead of his pursuers. And to think it took British intelligence half a century to fit James Bond's Aston Martin with a nail dispenser. In 1906, Maurice Carrère, Henri Gauban and Gaston Tuvache availed themselves of a passing train. However dastardly our contemporaries may be, they can't even approach such epic standards of dishonesty. The closest that pantomime prince of performance enhancement Richard Virenque ever came was to ask a TV helicopter pilot to fly behind him during a time-trial and carry him along with the downdraught. Small beer, you might say, if the bottles of cold beer lined up beside the road during a stage held in oppressive heat hadn't achieved their dastardly

PROLOGUE



Bernard Gauthier grabs a malted barley, hops and yeast sports rehydration package during the 1950 Tour de France.

goal in 1935: a truce to imbibe them allowed Julien Moineau – whose associates were responsible for the ale – to ride away and reach Bordeaux fifteen minutes ahead of the peloton. Lance Armstrong would never have fallen for it.

Most sports seem to work, in part, by demanding a set of obviously contradictory skills – footballers run using one set of super-developed thigh muscles, and kick the ball using a different and opposing set; boxing requires perfectly calibrated blows and razor-sharp reactions, delivered by a brain that's taking a pummelling. The cyclist has to school his heart in steady-state output over hours and hours, yet races are decided by sudden, darting accelerations. The rare physiques that can stand up to such wildly conflicting demands are centaur-like: a Tour de France winner must be capable of time-trialling, climbing and sprinting, and also be lucid, calculating and unflappable. A fair few, we may be forgiven for supposing, have also had to be doped, not just to the nines, but halfway to the roaring forties.

These days, there are still inoffensive shoves from team cars and extended drafts behind them, but the glass of brandy against the cold is a thing of the past. Modern performance enhancement means mobile hospitals, blood transfusions and genetically engineered copies of human hormones – procedures that can fool anti-doping tests and cost small fortunes. 'The drugs were for my dog/mother-in-law', 'I'm the chimeric brother of an unborn twin', 'Don't treat me like a criminal by asking for a DNA test to prove my innocence': the surreal poetry of the Tour has no end. In the old days, the accomplices were practical jokers, and the cheating was obvious. Today, they're mad scientists, raving doctors, two-faced team staff, lawyers with no concept of right and wrong, authorities like headless chickens, and riders with forked tongues. They're part of a long tradition, whose longevity runs against all reasonable expectation. Every known theory would suggest the Tour, like the bumblebee, should never get off the ground. But the French have a saying that

PROLOGUE

could have been invented for the Tour: 'Theory's all very well, but it can't stop things existing'. A lesser event would never have survived.

Paradoxically, this longest of sporting events, with so much time for terrible losses of form and miraculous recoveries, can also be one of the most predictable. Why, then, despite its interminable length, its sometimes unbearable tedium, and the scandals that accompany the race year after year, does the French public love the Tour? And – despite the famous *Daily Mirror* headline in 1974, when the Tour visited England for the first time: 'Can forty million Frenchmen be wrong?' – not just the French?

Doubtless, if doping and traffic jams were all there is to it, there'd be no Tour de France. Going back to 1903, and those entrants who looked more like nineteenth-century Arctic explorers than today's elite athletes, what was it all about? And what does the Tour hand down, year by year, like a shock wave? Does the answer lie in history? After all, when the Tour was created, France was reeling from years of dislocating forces. Between 1789 and 1914, it staggered through the Revolutionary Terror, two empires, a monarchy, two short-lived republics, a third that stood on the edge of the precipice for years, the siege of Paris, defeat in the 1870 Franco-Prussian War and the loss of Alsace-Lorraine, the Paris Commune and the 'week of blood' that followed it, and then the Dreyfus affair, which revealed the depth of racist bigotry in an otherwise civilised country. Over barricades or in government-backed intrigues, Frenchmen had been killing Frenchmen for more than a century. In 1903, the wounds were still wide open.

Given all this, is it too much to suspect that the protective circle the Tour drew around France provided a metaphor for keeping the nation whole? In the 1920s and 1930s, the Tour soothed more anxious souls than the Maginot Line ever would. Ancient history, some will say – although the hand-crafted, modern racing bike, like the hand-crafted mechanical watch, betrays our sense of nostalgia for an age that has passed.

Yet the Tour isn't backward looking. Its physical demands may drive body and mind to breaking point, but these days they do so on technology imported from Formula One and the aerospace industry, and timed to the thousandth of a second. More than a century ago, Géo Lefèvre complained he couldn't catch the racers, even on an express train. What would he say of today's riders, with their superhero physiques, and the science-fiction monitoring of their blood chemistry? Would he see them as paragons of the modern era – or as scapegoats? Lefèvre's boss, Henri Desgrange, that vigorous, self-obsessed titan who bestrode the race until his death in 1940, saw the perfect Tour as a race in which only one rider finished. Insanity! If the mad Marquis with the pornographic imagination had never existed, the word for taking pleasure from the infliction of pain and mental suffering on others would be 'desgrangism.' No wonder the Tour developed a tradition of recourse to illicit forms of assistance. And no wonder, even today (in common with almost every other major sporting event), we're as likely to find the results in police enquiries, court cases, journalistic accounts and confessional biographies as in the sports pages. The curious entertainment of the chase (it could almost be called a bloodsport) as lawyers and riders answer the indefensible with the risible, and the authorities attack the hornets' nest with a fly-swatter, keeps the Tour in our minds and hearts for the other eleven months of the year.

But to see the Tour as the subject of sporting and legal proceedings is only part of the picture. The sheer spectacle of the race just can't be ignored. Best seen first-hand, there's no better vantage point than a desolate mountainside, surrounded by bands of crazy, beer-fuelled Dutch in hysterical orange wigs, groups of zany, beer-fuelled Basques in hilarious orange wigs, and clutches of wacky, beer-fuelled Texans in uproarious orange wigs. An hour before the riders arrive, the scene before the Eurotrashed onlookers morphs into a hallucinogenic vision as a surreal flotilla drifts into view: infinite columns of madcap variations on gaudy, motorised

PROLOGUE

coffee-pots, gigantic wine gums on wheels, and towering cuddly toys with lunatic grins copulating with high-pitched, panting go-carts. Along its length of two hundred vehicles or more, this creeping slug of marketing artifice oozes an odd secretion that reeks – that’s it! – of boiled sweets and miniature cheeses, and drives otherwise civilised adults into a frenzy of desire for the giveaway key rings and biros that will never work spewing out of its pores. What an impression the publicity caravan would make on any passing Martian curious about that miracle, the human brain!

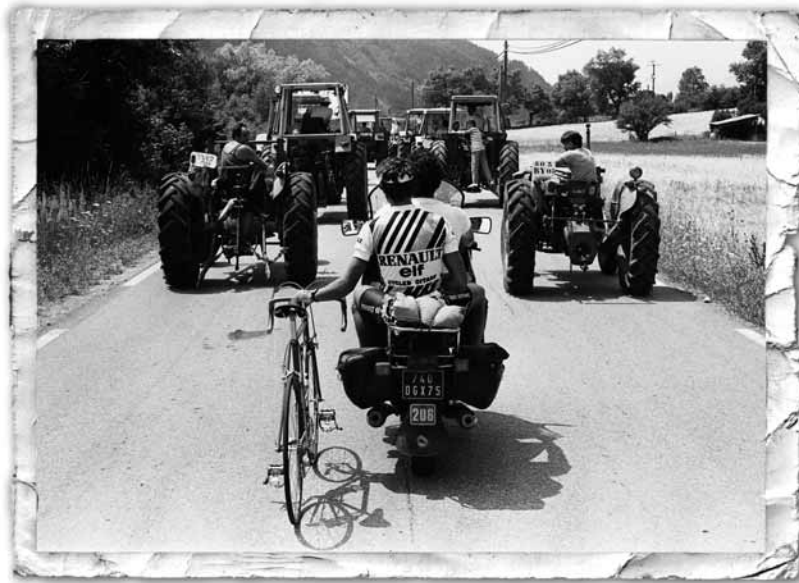
Then, a long, tense silence, several false alarms, and suddenly – blink and you’ve missed them – the giants of the road. First, the riders who are really racing, followed, in drips and drabs over the next half-hour, by the sick, the injured, and the hangers-on. Then, just as suddenly, the show’s over, folks! Prepare for the mother of all tailbacks – twenty hours to get off the mountain, and all in the name of a good time. Huh? you think: they must be joking. But they’re not: it really is a good time, the best of times, and you’ll never forget it. You, at the side of the road; them, inches away, rib-cages housing hearts and lungs that beat and bellow at such a pitch, you could be in the engine-room of a transatlantic liner. Extraordinary machines. Extraordinary men. And, years later, guaranteed, you’ll remember the day you saw the Tour de France. You’ll have that glow, even if you break down the component parts of your Tour de France experience, put them back together again, and get nothing more than empty hours, aching legs, and the buzz of a distant bumblebee, catching the breeze in impossible flight.

Alternatively, you can stay at home and enjoy the razor-sharp action pictures generated by ever more sophisticated television cameras carried by squadrons of helicopters and motorbikes. Can any sporting event compare? Except that, at every point, the sublime peaks and the gutter troughs coincide: for all the brilliant photography, you might as well be watching shapes in the fog. The mental gymnastics involved in never knowing whether to believe

BLAZING SADDLES

our eyes might just be driving us all insane. But the Tour, and the world, were ever thus. As the French also say, the more things change, the more they stay the same.

The Tour means wheeling and dealing, and always has done. Overall, and in every sense, the positives outweigh the negatives – although instead of ‘positives’, pending completion of the appeals procedure, we should probably say ‘non-negatives’. The Tour de France may have to be careful with its language, but rumours of its demise have been greatly exaggerated. It has always been as much about the world it exists in as about sport, and it has always attracted, in Desgrange’s famous phrase ‘blind passions and filthy suspicions’, which may be why, in spite of – because of – its extravagant panoply of faults, the Tour has always made a cruel and unusually good story, and always will.



It's not about the bike – Pascal Poisson gets a lift in the 1982 Tour.