

THE HISTORY OF THE TOUR DE FRANCE

– *Written by Will Fotheringham, United Kingdom*

Most memorable sports events come down to a single image of a single instant, transmitted around the world and distinctive enough to stick in the minds of fans and the media. The 2016 Tour de France produced the sight of the lanky, raw-boned Briton Chris Froome running towards the top of a mountain, having thrown his broken bike to one side. That would have been surprising enough, but the fact that Froome was wearing the fabled yellow race leader's jersey and that he went on to win the 2000-mile 22-day marathon made it one of the sporting moments of the year.

It was less than a minute before Froome was given a replacement bike, but still, the brief episode summed up why the Tour de France has gripped the imagination since it was founded in 1903. In the pioneering years, the cyclists had to take to their feet on a regular basis: there were mountain climbs they couldn't pedal up and there were occasions when they had to wheel a broken bike for miles to find a place for repairs.

The peripherals – the level of support received by the cyclists, the quality of their bikes and kit – have changed over the years, but the common chord between the men who pedal and the public who watch them remains the same after 113 years: you give everything in your power to get to the top of the hill. When the Tour was launched, the link was a fundamental one, everyone in rural France rode a bike to get to work so they knew just how much physical exertion was required to get from A to B.

Nowadays, the crowds who throng the roadsides for the Tour's 20 stages of roughly 100 miles each are a mix of cyclists from outside France, and locals estimated at between 12 and 15 million, the biggest for any sports event worldwide. Tour fans don't get to see the event unfolding in front of them from beginning to end as happens in a stadium environment.

The race itself can pass in as little as 30 seconds if the 200 cyclists are all together, offering at most a snapshot of a whole day's racing action. But it offers a spectacle which

is free to view and, because of the scale of the caravan of vehicles that accompanies the Tour, the entire show takes several hours from beginning to end, although for many less committed fans, the big draw is a caravan of publicity vehicles chucking out free samples.

While for locals this is a national institution, hardcore cycling fans can ride their bikes over precisely the same roads as the race itself uses, before or after the event – the two-wheeled equivalent of bowling a cheeky over at Lords or taking a jump at Aintree. For a sports event of this magnitude, in the 21st century, the Tour is astonishingly accessible. By and large, there are no barriers – apart from close to the finish or through towns – so the race passes inches from the spectators; as riders toil up the mountains, it is easy to make out precisely who is who.

The interaction between fans and stars is unmatched. Fans hand drinks to the riders – Belgium this year mourned the death of an aficionado, Lucien Blyau, who had served up hundreds of mini cans of Coke



to the Tour riders each year for 35 years – and on occasion help out when riders have mechanical issues. Struggling backmarkers are pushed up mountains. The fans dress up for the television cameras and run alongside their heroes even as the key moments of the race unfold.

Which brings us back to the Froome incident, on Mont Ventoux in Southern France on July 14, Bastille Day. The Tour leader broke his bike when he collided with a motorbike conveying a cameraman, which had been held up when the crowds spread too thickly onto the road. As he ran up the mountain – knowing that, bike or no bike, every yard closer to the finish line would reduce the time he lost – some of the crowd ran with him, others shot video of the episode on their mobile phones. The mix of mayhem and sporting endeavour was typical of the Tour, which has blended excess and heroism in equal measure since 1903.

HISTORY

The Tour was launched as a publicity stunt during a circulation war between two sports papers: the well-established *Le Vélo* and its upstart rival, *l'Auto*, which covered a range of sports in spite of its title. Cycle races had developed rapidly in the late 19th

century once the pastime became popular, but most were standalone, place-to-place affairs; *Le Vélo* was the market leader among the papers that reported the sport and organised the two biggest races: Paris-Brest-Paris and Bordeaux-Paris. The struggling *l'Auto* needed a sensational idea to boost its sales, running at about a quarter of *Le Vélo*'s 80,000 and it was its chief cycling reporter, Géo Lefèvre who came up with the idea of a race around France in six stages: Paris-Lyon-Marseille-Toulouse-Bordeaux-Nantes-Paris.

Initially, there were doubts whether any of the 60 starters would manage to complete the marathon stages of the first edition, even though there were 13 rest days interspersed between the stages, but the race was a popular success. The second edition was a disaster, however, with riots along the way as crowds attempted to influence the outcome in favour of their local heroes; the first four finishers overall were disqualified, including the winner of the first year's race, the extravagantly moustachioed Maurice Garin.

The verdict of *l'Auto*'s editor Henri Desgrange after the Tour of 1904, was that the race was “dead”, but in fact he and Lefèvre had created a unique event, a picaresque soap opera, an early 21st century version

of a reality television show in which the cast of characters – heroes, villains, likeable losers, charismatic charlatans – struggled and fought against a constantly changing backdrop. Their daily doings were catnip for the readership and sales rocketed to 65,000; eventually, *Le Vélo* would close, while the direct descendant of *l'Auto* – *l'Equipe* is still France's leading sports newspaper.

The first turning point came in 1910, when Lefèvre and Desgrange routed the race through the Pyrenees. The route was reconnoitred in winter, when the passes were blanketed in snow so deep that the roads could not be made out; that summer there were fears that the riders might be attacked by bears. The pair weren't certain that any of their men would make it over the dirt tracks of the Col de l'Aubisque and Tourmalet. Desgrange was so nervous he didn't dare attend the stage. The riders had to push their bikes and as the eventual race winner Octave Lapize passed Lefèvre, he muttered: “you are all murderers.”

Desgrange's response was to make the race even harder, by taking the race into the Alps the following year, when it crossed the 2645 m high Col du Galibier and also by lengthening the distance to well over 3000 miles, while tightening the rules to the point where the Tour seemed positively at odds with the men who competed in it. Racing at night was abandoned to make the riders less vulnerable to wayward fans, while the stages were shortened and increased in number, so that the event expanded to last 3 weeks. That of course meant more sales.

Broken bikes were common in the early days; as late as 1928 one rider rode 55 miles on a ladies' bike borrowed from a spectator, while the ‘Old Gaul’ Eugène Christophe broke his forks in 1913 as he descended the Tourmalet pass, ran eight miles to the town at the foot of the mountain to find a blacksmith's forge and laboriously made a new set from plain metal tubes. That took him 4 hours, with the race organisers watching all the while to ensure he received no outside assistance. At one point he let a small boy work the bellows, for which he

was given a time penalty. In the 1920s, riders could be penalised for infractions as trivial as wearing the wrong jersey or not showing a broken bike to the organisers.

Christophe is immortalised with a plaque on a wall on the site of the blacksmith's in Saint-Marie de Campan; he is also celebrated as the first rider to wear the yellow race leader's jersey. The *maillot jaune* is now one of sport's most coveted prizes, but in 1919, when Desgrange brought it in, it was merely a way of enabling spectators to spot the rider who was leading the event. By happy coincidence yellow was also the colour of the paper on which *l'Auto* was printed, although it is also said that yellow was the cheapest colour the jersey makers had in stock. In any case, the *maillot jaune* gave the race a daily focus: who was leading, who might lead, who had led.

The event that guaranteed the Tour's success into the 21st century came in 1936, when paid holidays were instituted by law in France. Desgrange had given his race a July date; the bulk of the population took their time off in summer, giving the Tour a ready-made audience in search of innocent diversion. That meant a trip to watch the race became as integral to the French summer as a trip to the sea, if not more so given the geography of France. By then, they had the publicity caravan to watch; the

parade of advertising floats preceding the actual race was instituted in 1930, purely as a way of boosting its income.

The Tour was suspended during both World Wars and it enjoyed a golden age in the years after World War II, when home riders such as Louison Bobet and Jacques Anquetil won time after time – three times in Bobet's case, five for Anquetil, whose rivalry with Raymond Poulidor is deeply etched into French consciousness to this day. Until 1961 the race was contested by national teams, with France fielding both a national squad and various regional outfits; that led to intense focus on who would lead Les Bleus and who would ride in which team, all adding to the immense hype around the event.

The proliferation of French stars, national and regional, spawned a whole range of local races, track meetings and circuit events around towns throughout France in which the heroes of the Tour would be on view. Until the 1990s, most of a professional cyclist's income came not from prize money or a team retainer, but from appearance fees directly related to how he had fared in the great race.

There were small steps forward – notably in 1975, when the Tour finished on the Champs Elysees for the first time – the big change came in the 1980s when the Tour

went global. The Italians, Spanish and Belgians had been present almost from day one, with Spain and Italy eventually acquiring their own three-week Tours to rival France's. The British had appeared in the 1950s, when memories of the Liberation were still strong – the first Briton truly to break through at the Tour, Tom Simpson, was not nicknamed 'Tommy' by chance. The 1980s saw the arrival of Americans, Australians, Colombians and East Europeans, with the Russians following in 1990.

In 1990, a third victory for the American Greg LeMond cemented the Tour's status as a sports event of world stature. The expansion was massive, with the arrival of major sponsors such as Coca-Cola, which famously displaced Perrier water as the race's official drink (today it is Vittel). Starts outside France became more common – Berlin in 1987, Dublin in 1998, London in 2007 – and the Tour travelled outside its borders more frequently, although plans for a start on America's east coast never bore fruit.

As the 21st century beckoned, scandal hit the Tour, with the 1998 race coming close to being abandoned after police raids came across industrial quantities of banned drugs. The seven successive victories for the American cancer survivor Lance Armstrong

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expanded the global audience further, but the Texan's wins have been blanked from the record books after he was revealed to have been using banned drugs such as the blood booster erythropoietin and blood transfusions. Armstrong was far from the sole offender – the 2006 winner Floyd Landis and the 2010 victor Alberto Contador were also banned for doping and their victories expunged – and questions continue to be asked of his successors.

HEROES

Desgrange's event hinged on the creation of heroes managing feats that were ever more superhuman, but since the 1980s the race has been gradually pared back in distance. Once the norm, stages over 200 kilometres are now the exception; on the other hand, there are now more mountain stages than ever before as the organisers seek to make the race more dynamic and spectacular – both scenically and competitively – with the worldwide television audience specifically in mind.

When Chris Froome won the 2016 race he joined just a handful of men to win the

race three times, the first being the Belgian Philippe Thys, nicknamed 'The Basset Hound', whose victories came before and after the First World War. The second was the Brylcreemed picture book hero Louison Bobet, who began life in a bakery in Brittany and ended it a successful businessman on the back of his Tour hat-trick in 1953 to 55. His era came just after the heyday of the Italians, when the mournful looking Fausto Coppi managed – in 1949 and 1952 – the double with his home Tour, the Giro d'Italia, a feat which remains rare to this day.

Coppi and Bobet were the two biggest characters in the Tour's golden era, which was populated by charismatic stars such as Coppi's great rival Gino Bartali, a famously religious man who built a chapel in his house and worked to save refugees from the Nazis during World War II and the Spaniard Federico Bahamontes, the Tour's greatest ever mountain climber, famed for an episode in which he escaped up a mountain pass and paused at the summit to eat an ice cream.

Anquetil was the next great star, although his five Tour wins between 1957 and 1964

could not earn him the popularity of his great rival Raymond Poulidor, who never even wore the yellow jersey, yet remains one of France's most popular sportsmen by virtue of his innocent smile and bashful demeanour. Anquetil was criticised for his clinical racing style and aristocratic hauteur, but harsher words came the way of the next Tour great, Eddy Merckx, who dominated the entire sport, year-round, from 1968 to 1976, taking five Tours along the way in just six starts. Merckx would win up to eight stages per Tour – a third of what was on offer – and would take most of the subsidiary prizes as well; he received virulent hate mail from French fans because he appeared so invulnerable and did not become truly popular until 1975, when he completed the Tour in a valiant second place after breaking a cheekbone in a crash and surviving on liquid food.

Merckx was an aberration in an era of French dominance of the Tour; his last win in 1974 was followed by nine French victories in 11 years, five of them going to the pugnacious Breton Bernard Hinault, who led a riders' strike in his first Tour, 1978 and



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fought memorably against LeMond – his own team mate – as the American took his first win in 1986. LeMond's second win in 1989, against the Frenchman Laurent Fignon, remains the Tour by which all others are judged and mostly found wanting. Neither of the pair were at their best, which meant one would take the *maillot jaune* before losing it to the other, but never by more than a small margin. The 1989 race culminated in a time trial stage finishing on the Champs Elysees, with LeMond snatching the race win by a mere 8 seconds. That LeMond had returned from a shooting accident, which came close to costing him his life and which had left him with lead shot throughout his body, merely added to the romance.

HERITAGE

It is said that, until *l'Auto* began publishing maps to illustrate the Tour route, few French people actually had an idea of what their country looked like on paper. Thanks in part to the epic rivalry between Poulidor and Anquetil, the Tour has put down firm roots in French culture and politics, even though, for many years, cycling was looked down on as a working-class, blue-collar sport. This

holds now, even though no Frenchman has actually won the Tour since 1985.

The critic Roland Barthes included a section on the race in *Mythologies*, his 1957 exploration of how we imbue certain events and people with epic qualities; Froome's brief run this year took place on Mont Ventoux, the mountain which Barthes calls the most evil of all the Tour's ascents and added another twist to the mountain's mythology. The Tour has been immortalised by rock groups – most notably Kraftwerk, by film directors such as Louis Malle and Claude Lelouch, and in animations such as *Les Triplettes de Belleville* (a.k.a. *Belleville Rendezvous*).

It has been appropriated by politicians such as Jacques Chirac and Nicolas Sarkozy; before becoming president, Francois Mitterrand described himself as, “the Poulidor of Politics”. It was Chirac who brought the Tour to the Champs Elysees when he was the mayor of Paris – the only other day in the year when the great avenue is closed is Bastille Day, for the Military Parade. After the Second World War, the Tour's revival was a symbol of the country's return to normality and in 1968, amidst

student riots, the Tour went ahead as a signal that France was functioning as usual.

The 2016 edition was run amidst tight security in the aftermath of the Paris attacks of November 2015, an atmosphere of tension heightened after the Bastille Day carnage in Nice. A day later, as the race skirted Lyon, the rural roads were packed with crowds waving tricolours while heavily armed police maintained a discreet presence. There were few banners and no overt political statements, merely the feeling that here was a vast, silent mass of people proclaiming their faith in the centrepiece of the French summer.



Further reading

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