

Introduction



In early August 1971, a few days before my twelfth birthday, my family moved to Brussels. I already knew how to ride a bicycle. I soon realized, however, that I knew nothing about cycling. Alternating between the Flemish- and French-language television stations or glued to my radio, I discovered a sport I could never have imagined. Bloodied, mud-splattered racers careened over the treacherous cobblestones of northern France, the strongest inexorably pulling away, meter by painful meter, from the rest. Less selective races concluded dramatically with scores of contestants gathering themselves for a perilous sprint, swerving acrobatically as they fought their way to the front of the pack. Stretched out over kilometers, participants in the Tour de France inched up the great climbs of the Alps and Pyrenees and rocketed down the descents, leaving the motorcycles of the television camera crews in their wake.

This new world had its own mysterious language. There were *pelotons* (packs of racers) and *sprints massifs* (group sprints); *démarrages* (attacks), *attaques*, and *échappées* (breakaways); *cols* (climbs), *défaillances* (collapses), and *abandons* (withdrawals). A new calendar restructured my sense of time from February to November, as one-day races, week-long stage races, national and world championships, and the three-week Tours of Spain, Italy, and France succeeded each other at a dizzying pace. I learned of new places, from the legendary Tourmalet and Galibier climbs in the Tour de France to cities like Milan and San Remo, Paris and Roubaix, that have been linked for more than a century by the race itineraries they evoke. Above all, I was introduced to new characters with exotic names, whose posters, carefully unstapled from *Le Miroir du Cyclisme*, covered my bedroom walls. There

were tanned champions from the Mediterranean, like the star-crossed Spaniard Luis Ocaña, the gracious Italian Felice Gimondi, and the stocky Joaquin Agostinho of Portugal. There was the good-natured Frenchman Raymond Poulidor—"Pou-Pou" to his legions of fans—with his lovable knack for finishing second in the most important races, and the enigmatic Dutchman Joop Zoetemelk, in whom the same knack was somehow less lovable. And of course there were rugged Flemings like Roger de Vlaeminck and Freddy Maertens, who excelled at the prestigious one-day *classiques*, never more so than when the weather was cold and wet and the terrain the slick country roads of their native Flanders. Reigning above them all was another Belgian, Eddy Merckx: the "Cannibal" dominated European professional cycling during this period with an unquenchable thirst for victory I found utterly captivating.

Cycling had its own history. I pored over the sports pages of the Brussels daily *Le Soir* and each issue of my cycling magazine, gradually piecing together the careers of earlier champions with magical names like Fausto Coppi, Louison Bobet, and Jacques Anquetil. Their exploits had created a heroic mythology that stretched back in time, full of tense rivalries, hard-won victories, and bitter defeats. That *légende*, I came to understand, was founded on a set of core values: courage, perseverance, the tolerance of pain, and, in the case of the greatest champions, *panache*. No sport was more grueling and, thus, to the awestruck adolescent sports fan, no group of men more worthy of admiration. With its virtuous heroes, epic moments, and legendary places, cycling was a world of its own.

Or so I believed when we left Belgium in July 1975. Some fifteen years later, enrolled in graduate school, I was fishing around for a dissertation topic when one of my professors made a passing comment about the popularity of the Tour in the 1930s. On reflection, it struck me that far from being a world of its own, the race was inextricably and meaningfully connected to the world around it. For one thing, it epitomized the rise of mass spectator sport, a phenomenon with far-reaching social, cultural, political, and economic consequences (which, curiously, has received relatively little attention from historians of modern France).¹ For another, it offered a new lens through which to view twentieth-century French history, one that was likely to yield original insights into developments both in sport and in other aspects of French life. The race I had watched as a boy was more than trivial entertainment; it was a legitimate subject of historical study.

My dissertation explored the social, cultural, and political history of bi-

cycling under the Third Republic, including aspects of the Tour. When it came time to develop the dissertation into a book, I focused on the topic that had first inspired me: the race itself. I was especially fascinated by the diverse meanings with which the French have invested the Tour since its creation in 1903. They are important for two reasons. First, they deepen our understanding of the impact of sport on modern France. Second, they reveal much about the hopes and fears of the French as they confronted the challenges of an often traumatic twentieth century. Together, these meanings constitute the Tour's cultural history.

My approach to that history has been informed by two historiographic trends. Recent scholarship on the construction of identities has argued that, rather than being the self-evident expression of certain supposedly natural, timeless, and universal roles, social identities are historically contingent, shaped by tensions and conflicts within a given society at a particular time. Although often promoted as objective and neutral, representations of class or gender identities, for example, reflect specific interests, values, and social visions. This explains why they are so often challenged by alternative representations designed to advance competing interests, values, and social visions. Some of the most interesting scholarship on identity has been influenced by the new cultural history, itself inspired by disciplines such as cultural anthropology and literary criticism.²

In seeking to understand the socially constructed nature of identities, practitioners of the new cultural history have shown particular interest in events, activities, places, and individuals previously ignored or dismissed as insignificant. Resurrecting such subjects and inserting them into historical narratives has required exploiting a broad range of primary sources in popular culture and the history of everyday life, many of which had heretofore received scant attention from historians. My own research led me to examine advertising posters, postcards, and press photographs; poems, songs, and novels; films and television coverage; the Parisian and provincial press; and the words of politicians, military officers, physicians, cycling club members, sports officials, the Tour's organizers, its public, and, of course, the racers and their families.

These sources have helped me to reconstitute what I believe are the most important public narratives inspired by the Tour. They address a range of subjects, including war, the nature of heroism, women's emancipation, industrialization, class relations, and the often ambiguous relationship between local and national identity. Various groups—the race's organizers, the

racers, the press, and different constituencies within its vast public—have sought to control the Tour's image, infusing the event with meanings that furthered their specific interests or reflected their particular worldview. The result has been a variety of depictions of France, ranging from idealized portrayals of a traditional, stable, and united community to disturbing visions of a modern, chaotic nation riven by social conflict and political polarization. To understand the complex, often contradictory ways the French have experienced their Tour is to understand the stories they have told to themselves and to each other about who they are, whence they came, and where they are heading. It is to shed light on their attempts to embrace, control, or reverse the dramatic changes of the past century. And it is to affirm the importance of sport in that process.

The French have found the Tour a particularly productive site for competing narratives about France and Frenchness. The race quickly established itself as the nation's most popular sporting event, attracting ever more extensive media coverage. Unlike the soccer World Cup or the Olympic Games, which are held only once every four years and shift from continent to continent, the Tour de France is held annually in the same general area. Each summer *la grande boucle* (the great loop), as the race has been known from its earliest days, provides the French with a familiar and very public screen on which to project their understandings of the past, assessments of the present, and aspirations for the future. From year to year, and from generation to generation, they have used these projections to evaluate the changes and challenges, but also the continuities, that have shaped their lives.

Most of these Tour-inspired narratives reflect their often conflicted relationship with modernity. This is hardly surprising. The race itself was made possible by a number of trends associated with modern life, including technological innovation, the development of a mass press (and subsequently other media), and the emergence of a society characterized by increased leisure and the mass consumption of nonessential goods. As a result, the relationship between the French and their Tour has been double-edged. On the one hand, their ambivalence toward the modern has shaped French thinking about and experience of the race. On the other hand, they have often turned to the Tour to make sense of the twentieth century, notably with respect to such important issues as class relations, gender roles, social cohesion, national unity, the nature of work, and public health. They have done so by using the race to tell stories about both what it means to be French and what it means to be modern.

These stories have been as varied as the motivations and perspectives that inspired them. Some have sought to resolve perceived tensions between the two terms *French* and *modern* by celebrating the Tour as a manifestation of the irresistible and resolutely positive march of progress. Others have embraced the Tour as embodying a traditional France that must be defended against the nefarious forces of modernity. Still others have attacked the race as emblematic of the destructive pathologies of modern life, from the numbingly repetitive work of the assembly line to widespread drug abuse.

This book is organized both chronologically and thematically. Chapter 1 addresses the convergence of inventions, institutions, interest groups, and motivations that led to the birth of cycling in the late nineteenth century, setting the stage for the Tour's creation in the early twentieth. It then examines the race's evolution as an athletic competition, a commercial enterprise, and a media event. The chapter is structured around two often contested concepts, modernity and progress, that play a central role in the narratives analyzed in subsequent chapters. Chapter 2 illustrates how the ever-changing itinerary of *la grande boucle* has been exploited to generate diverse and often opposing views of French society, history, and identity. Chapter 3 focuses on representations of Tour participants as heroic, hyper-masculine *géants de la route* (giants of the road), explains the motivations behind and the enduring appeal of this image, and examines how and why women have been limited to carefully prescribed, traditionally female roles in this male universe and in the stories told about it.

The final three chapters address images of the Tour and its racers in relation to notions of work. The physical and psychological conditions of the race and the racers' status as national heroes placed them at the center of French debates about work and class. As individuals who improved their socioeconomic condition by their physical strength and endurance rather than through their social networks or educational qualifications, professional bicycle racers challenged the assumptions of bourgeois society, threatened the status quo, and provided a potentially disruptive model for the masses. Chapter 4 examines attempts by the sports daily that organized the race through 1939 to defuse this potential threat by celebrating Tour participants as exemplary *ouvriers de la pédale* (pedal workers) and publicly punishing those who deviated from rigorously enforced rules of appropriate conduct. Racers often resisted this campaign to transform them into "respectable" members of the (lower) middle class and remained true to their working-class identity. Chapter 5 explores how opponents of the Tour dur-

ing this period undermined representations of racers as model workers, describing them instead as slave laborers. These commentators exploited the Tour's much-celebrated extreme nature to formulate a broad critique of the exploitation of labor which, they argued, characterized the increasingly rationalized factories of early-twentieth-century France. Finally, chapter 6 examines postwar debates about the Tour as work, relates them to the racers' longstanding practice of doping, and explores the implications of that practice for their heroic image as France's *géants de la route*.