

An American's Perspective on the Tour de France by Hal Rothman

Fromentine, 2 Juillet 2005

Cyclismo! There's nothing like the Tour. It's an international party of buffs and fans, cyclists galore, like no US sporting event. Parking is free; there were no tickets, and everybody-except the drunken Brits-was in a great mood, polite and friendly. Even the gendarmes.

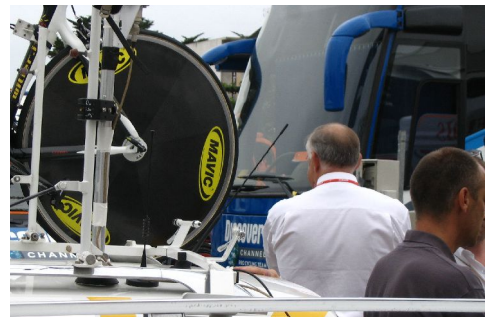
After taking the TGV, the high-speed train, from Paris to Nantes, we drove to Fromentine, about 90 km away. All the way, we followed the Francaise de Jeux bus, the strange French team loaded with Australian sprinters. We parked in the marais, the swamp, and walked and walked to the little village to the opening of the 2005 Tour de France. The air was warm, the clouds low, and the energy gathering and palpable. My 10-year-old, his 11-year-old French cousin, my sister, and me had come down, day tourists to see the show. I was so excited I couldn't contain myself. It really was the Tour de France.



They cordon off the roads early in the day and the parade of press, team, and sponsor cars zips by as you walk. But try to hitch a ride. Not a chance. Nestlé, one of the big tour sponsors, has a party van that blared insufferably loud music - Nestlé's French theme song, I presumed - and gave away newspapers about the tour and bottled water with the official Nestlé tour insignia. Lone cyclists in full team kits rode by, most with pot bellies and big smiles. A few looked like they might be pros.

First we reached the buses. Each team has its own bus, painted in its colors, adorned with advertising from sponsors, and strategically parked to create a training space. They're aligned in a sort of an inverse power ratio. The least important teams are on the outside, buses belonging to Lampre and other newcomers. Closer in, the names become recognizable. Cofidis, Fasso Bortolo, Davitimon Lotto, and Phonak were all close together.

At the very center, the Discovery bus was well sheltered. It was parked in the center of the town square, and it opened away from the fans on both sides. A tree blocked it too, and other buses were juxtaposed around that closing it off. Brent, my son, swears he saw Lance, but I didn't. I did see Chris Carmichael, gesturing with his arms as he always does. He was talking to some guy I didn't recognize.

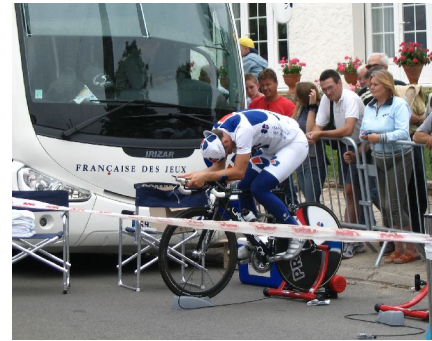




We might have seen Lance come in. A Discovery van with the shades drawn and a Texas flag decal in the corner of the windshield pulled through, with another Discovery car with technicians following. I can't help but think that Lance was inside. I guess we'll never know.

up. Outside each bus, a number of bicycles fixed to fluid trainers let everybody do their warmups. Guys came in and out smiling and laughing. Some trained so hard that the few fans who watched applauded. Others took off down the road, warming up at a different kind of pace. They looked loose, but simultaneously tense. After all, it was the start of the Tour de France.

We saw a guy that everybody said was a former tour winner, but I didn't recognize him. He was fiftyish, silver hair, and a great smile (see below). Maybe, you know him; if so, send an e-mail and let the list know.



You can tell the pro riders. They stand out from the fans and their kits. They don't look like you and me. They are sleek, fit like you've never seen, taut with long thin, rope-like muscles that ripple and absolutely no fat-and I mean, no fat-to be seen. As they lounged about, they reminded me of jaguars or cheetahs, predatory creatures who casually devour their prey. The difference is striking: they look nothing like even great local cyclists, any more than rec league basketball players look like NBA stars. Pro cyclists ooze confidence,

arrogance, and insouciance as they warm up and chat with one another, just waiting to feet. They're almost a different species, somehow more than human.

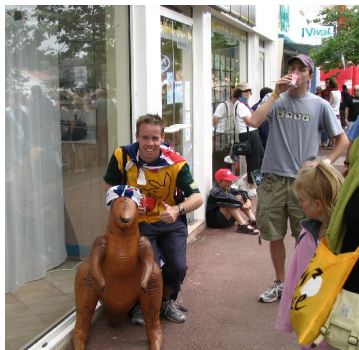


We walked to the starting chute for the time trial. It was 12:30, more than three hours before the start. From the vantage we held, the road was lined four or five deep for the entire 19 km course—except for the actual bridge to Noirmoutier, where there was nowhere to stand. Still, all those people, probably 50,000 all in all, and most of the more Americans. Even with Lance's success, the crowd was mostly European. The Americans who are there were exotics, people like you and me who love cycling and really want to see it. But we were still outsiders.

Held behind the barricades, the fans were already partying. People walked around and made new friends. One group was selling sausage and cheese, with cups of wine for five Euros—not a bad deal if you like the wine of the Loire or the Vendee, the two nearby Breton provinces. A man hacked at the sausage, another slice the cheese. A third poured the wine, a rough Basque red, into full wine glasses. The wine was strong, like in a Hemingway story.



Huitre – oysters – were Fromentine's specialty. It's people make their living from the sea and from tourism. With the oysters, they blend the two. At a farmers' market a block away from the crowd, you could get half a dozen and a glass of wine for six Euros. Much better than the sausage and cheese, but I like the Basque red a little better!



So we wandered around, buying souvenirs and meeting people. A couple of crazy Australians rooting for Francaise De Jeux and its two Aussie sprinters, Bradley McGee and Baden Cooke, caught my attention. Along with the Australian flag, they sported a rubber kangaroo, complete with a FDJ cycling cap. Warm and funny, they were a good advertisement for the English-speaking world. They made me want to check out Down Under sometime.

We finally found the spot close to the rail, about 30 m from the start line. At 15:40, Ludovic Turpin of AG2R Prevoyance rolled up to the line, spoke a few words to the race director, and the Tour was on! One after another they rolled by at minute intervals, as we struggled to get pictures. The batteries were running down in the camera, and we couldn't leave our post at the rail. There was no way we could get back in. Even my 10-year-old couldn't squeeze by. While there's an old French rule that says children can go where they please, at the Tour, it didn't really apply. Adults had been waiting for days, and they weren't giving up their spot, even to a cute kid wearing a maillot jeune.

Time trials are much better on TV than in person. We saw the riders out of the chute, and after that we had no idea what happened. It's not America. There are no big screens blasting the race to the crowd that sits there. With 19 km and 50,000 people between us and the finish line,



in the end, our best view was going to be on the replays on TV. Still, we stayed in watched, as minute by minute, another rider shot out. With the crush of the crowd, it was hard to see. We caught glimpses of nearly everybody, but the technology failed us from time to time and we got many fewer pictures.



Well, you know what happened in the end. Dave Zabriskie of CSC stole the show, with the elusive Lance two seconds back. He came out of his pedal at the start, but we missed it. He was within 15 feet of us, but for the life of me, I couldn't see it. I only heard about it on the radio in the car on the way back.

Still, we saw it there in Fromentine, the start of Lance's shot at seven, the real live Tour de France. And we'll be back, Lance or not. It was the best sporting event I've ever been to, and I've been to them all, the Super Bowl, the Final Four, and the World Series, but nothing compared to this. I'll be back, if not next year, then the year after. And if not that year, then the next.

