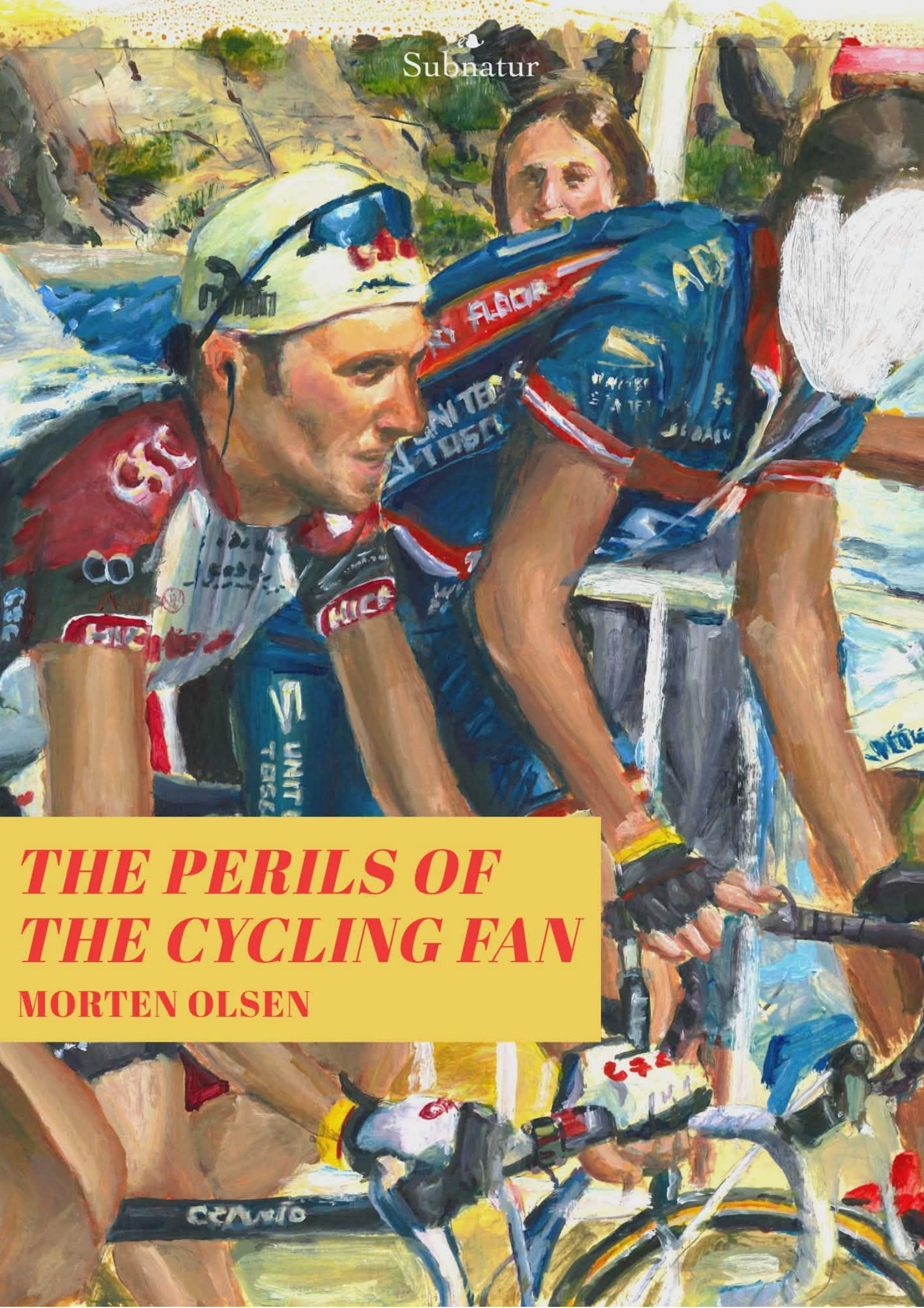




Subnatur

***THE PERILS OF
THE CYCLING FAN***
MORTEN OLSEN

The Perils of the Cycling Fan

Morten Olsen

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About the book

This book was written between the autumn of 2024 and the late summer of 2025, in a time when Tadej Pogacar's dominance reached new heights but also sowed new doubts about the trustworthiness of modern cycling. Morten Olsen takes us through his own journey of being a cycling fan, which starts with the legendary Tour de France of 2003, one of the best editions in modern history. We revisit highlights from cycling of the 2000s, such as the 2005 Giro d'Italia, and low points such as the scandal years from 2006 to 2008. But even those scandalous years provided great bike racing. We see Morten Olsen growing more skeptical about cycling after Lance Armstrong starts his comeback in 2009, as signs emerged indicating that doping was not a problem of the past, and that there was perhaps a lack of willingness to clean up the sport. And we follow how a few surprising winners of some of the world's biggest races in the early 2010s made the writer turn his back on cycling, the sport that had been his greatest obsession for a decade. In the end, Morten Olsen returned to cycling in 2017 and has not left it since. This book is his reflection on what it is like to be a cycling fan, an endeavor filled with both joy and frustration.

Sources for events, quotes, and facts cited in this book can be found in the reference list at the end.

Preface

What is it about cycling that makes it so captivating? There are many reasons, of course, but there are some core aspects that keep drawing us into the sport. For one, in cycling we find several of the fundamental struggles that have been part of literary tradition for centuries, if not millennia: There is the fight of one human against another; the fight of human against nature; the fight of human against machine; the struggle between betrayal and loyalty; and the struggle of the eternal aide who must sacrifice personal glory at the altar of the greater good. But, above all else, there is the fight of human against self.

These aspects are, I think, part of what gives cycling its otherworldliness, part of what makes some people write poetry on cycling, or write prose (such as this), or feel enthralled, even lifted, by a cycling race in ways that we otherwise only find in art. The ending of a very, very good cycling race can give you that same feeling you get from sitting in the cinema as a great movie ends, the credits roll and the lights turn on, or the feeling after you put down a book where the ending touched something in you, lifted your spirit so that you felt different, changed, but in a very good way. Cycling has a gift for taking in people and absorbing them in a spectacle that few other sports have. People will stay in front of their TV through endlessly boring transport stages across static, lifeless landscapes because they hope to once again get *that* feeling, that feeling you once got when watching a special bike race. Children and old women and men and people in-between will jump on their own bikes and, without hesitation or being forced to do it, will happily suffer many hours, often alone, as they try to reenact this phenomenon that has captured them. Cycling can, in sum, be immensely inspiring.

But of course, there is also something very plainly attractive about cycling, something that has little to do with poetry or an ethereal quality. Cycling consists of bike races. It is about who gets across the line first. And here cycling has a quality that few other endurance sports have, something that creates the tactical – sometimes almost political – dynamics that make bike races so much more entertaining than a long-distance run: drafting. If you break away and your opponent is in your wheel, they probably win, because they have saved energy. That is why the strongest does not always win in cycling, but sometimes the smartest or most cunning or the one with the least honor, and that is why you need a team. Essentially, drafting is what makes cycling interesting.

At least most of the time. For there is one thing, one type of bike race that really elevates cycling and takes it to its poetic heights, and that is one where drafting becomes much less important: mountain races. The dramatic scenery of the Alps and Pyrenees and Dolomites are probably what has helped make the term ‘mythical’ become a word often mentioned in combination with the sport.

Another aspect creating the dynamic in cycling that keeps you interested all year round is the versatility of challenges, which creates a variety of challengers. Mountains, big hills, small hills, flatlands, time trials, wind, cobbles, rain, sun, heat and cold create so many different types of riders,

each with their own attributes. Some are small, some are big, some can handle everything well, some handle just one thing well but may handle it so well that it becomes their career.

Yet there are even more aspects that draw us into cycling. Another fascinating characteristic is the scarcity of victory. The majority of professional cyclists are essentially eternal losers, except for perhaps a very few times during their career. But that may be what creates cycling's love of the loser; the few riders who actually win on a regular basis get so much praise because victories are so few in cycling that, to inject some justice into the world order, we end up loving even more the cyclists bound to everlasting failure, the ones who (like most of the rest of us) never see the light of individual success. And with this love of the loser also comes the admiration of the domestique – in few sports like cycling does the servant, who is of no particular importance, and who could be substituted with ever so many other adequate helpers, get so much praise. We love their sacrifice, as they spend just as much time on the bike and away from family, just as much time living like monks in monasteries, just as much if not more time suffering as their team leaders, while they get little of the glory and even less of the financial rewards.

There is much good to be said about cycling. But of course, not everything about the sport is good. For one thing – as cycling loathers will often go to as a first point – cycling can be very boring. And yes, that is true, some races, like an endless stage through northern French industrial towns, with an already doomed two-man breakaway, those can be quite boring. Cycling can both be the most dramatic of sports, but it can also be one of the most monotonous – you are never guaranteed entertainment. Perhaps that is what makes the sport special and makes the grand moments feel even greater. It is like searching for animals in the wild. Most of the time, no animals show up. Yet, you persist, in anticipation of that moment that you know is bound to come at some point. When finally an animal does show itself, the amazement is even greater. You may even say that cycling in this way encapsulates life. Long valleys of stale repetition interrupted by a few larger-than-life moments that make the whole journey worthwhile.

One thing, above all, tarnishes the reputation of the sport: the doping. Doping has not only killed many riders, it has also on several occasions almost brought down all of professional cycling, as sponsors no longer wanted to be associated with what was probably, in the eyes of the public, the dirtiest of any major sport. And you cannot really blame the sponsors for leaving. What do you think of first when you hear the word Festina? Watches – or doping? For many people, the term 'Festina affair' is probably more well-known than the Festina brand itself.

But as with the rest of the entertainment industry, anything to do with shady affairs is also often a source of attraction. In cycling, the doping – in its own, two-sided way – also adds to the spectacle of the sport. For one thing, doping has given cycling many of its arch-villains. Ferrari, Fuentes, Armstrong, Bruyneel and so on. For another, the doping adds a layer of darkness to almost any of the big heroes of cycling, and this makes cycling a sport with more complex and thus more interesting stars.

The doping is, for the cycling fan, a complicated affair. Many a fan has probably lost a bit of their childish beliefs in the innocence of this world as they found out that their favorite rider had

doped. But the love for the sport often stays, and this creates two battles for the fan: one against the rest of the world with all these people who try to bring down cycling's reputation even further, and another inward against cycling itself. In the first battle, the cycling fan defends cycling against all the cynics who do not care for the sport – the fan tells these cynics that cycling only has its tarnished reputation because the sport actually has (or had) good testing or because the authorities have (at least in previous periods) been willing to get to the bottom of doping accusations. Football or tennis, the cycling fan says, or such other sports are at least as dirty as cycling but just ignore the problems and are thus also spared the public humiliation. But even as the fan tries to defend cycling outwards, the fan may also, in the second battle, where the fan turns against cycling itself, be among the first to loudly be suspicious of any rider that breaches what is considered 'normal' for this rider. And so, the cycling fan can end up furthering the suspicion-regime where every rider is seen as potentially criminal.

If you follow cycling long enough, you might – as I have – turn into some sort of nihilist fan. You know that what you see might not be completely true or pure, you sometimes may even loudly insist that things should be better, but you also still just want the entertainment and thrills and fascination. So, you end up not always asking the tough questions even while also not believing everything you see, merely trying to enjoy the show. In the end, you perhaps only start speaking up about possible fraud when a rider becomes too dominant, or when a rider too obviously breaks with what has been previously considered the real level of that rider. We want entertainment, we want spectacle, and yes, we know everything is probably not right, and that is fine until a certain point – but most of all, we do not want to be bored or taken for fools!

However, many of us probably can never really let go of that ethical obligation to gain a sport that is truly right and just for all. What about all the riders who were just as talented and dedicated but whose careers ended up with nothing because they were overtaken by dopers? Resolving this question is the constant moral imperative of the sport, and for the cycling fan, the question always lingers. How do you deal with this issue? Do you resign to nihilism and just enjoy the racing, or do you fight for a better and fairer sport?

The cycling world has laid ground to some of sport's greatest scenes, most dramatic events, biggest heroes and greatest villains. This preface will only have scratched the surface of what makes cycling so fascinating, and that is what this book will dive further into.

This is my story of being a cycling fan. It is a story that starts in July 2003, during one of the greatest editions of the Tour de France of the 21st century, as I first fell in love with bike racing. It is a story that continued, as the love turned into obsession, through great joys but probably even more disappointments and heartbreaks. I watched my heroes win, I watched them fail or being banned for years. I watched some of them get terribly injured. And I watched riders lying on the ground, completely still, never coming back to life. Such experiences put serious dents into your love for the sport. But in the end, it was for completely different reasons that I fell out of love with cycling. It was with the help of a couple of Anglo-Saxons, some of bike racing's unlikeliest of champions, riders

whom I just could never trust, and from that point on, I almost completely forgot the sport for some years, until cycling and I slowly and quietly entered into a more stable relationship.

I hope other cycling fans can recognize themselves, some of their passion, and some of their frustrations, in this book about my journey of being a cycling fan for now more than two decades. Perhaps you can enjoy revisiting some of these stories, or perhaps you are a newcomer and will find this book interesting to learn about the cycling world, much as I with great enthusiasm read everything on cycling in the years after I first fell in love with the sport.

Chapter 1

It all started in the summer of 2003, in the month of July. I was 9 years old, at this time fresh into an obsession with football. I was spending a week at a football camp, during the school holiday, together with many of my friends from school. It was a great time. The summer was warm and sunny – at least as I remember it now. I was happy. Where I would later use cycling a bit in the same way as other children sometimes use fantasy worlds – as a way of escaping worries of the daily life and immersing myself into a world of heroes, villains, dreams and drama – cycling did not have that role yet. It had no role at all.

Before this summer, I had basically no relation to cycling. I had been on a vacation to France in the summer of 1998 and the Tour de France had passed us by that year. Other than that, the only thing I had picked up on cycling was that some people found it boring. Nobody I knew was openly into cycling, a lot different than football which many people around me would talk passionately about. I had just picked up football through watching Denmark beat Iceland 6-0 (with a great long-shot from Thomas Gravesen, a player whose temper and public comparisons to an ogre often overshadowed his excellent technical skills) together with some family, and I became passionate about Real Madrid and the Danish team Brøndby. I also found out that sports could arrest me and influence me in ways that nothing else had done until this point, and I found out that my ability to become more insanely obsessed with my interests than more or less anyone else I knew came with the risk that I could sometimes also become very much more emotionally affected by sports than anyone else I knew. In the summer of 2002, when I was 8, as Brøndby was on the verge of losing the Danish championship, I could not handle it and had to lie in bed, feeling sick as my confused grandmother tried to care for me. Luckily, Brøndby saved the championship with a now legendary long-range late goal, scored with the outside of the foot in a manner that would have been the envy of Roberto Carlos. Not long after, Denmark played Senegal in the World Cup. As the competition was played in Japan and South Korea, the matches were always on during school hours. And for this game, the whole school had been allowed to watch it in the gymnastics hall. I was there, and my guess is there would have been very few 8-year-olds as obsessed with football as I was. But while the rest of the school was watching the final minutes of the match, which ended 1-1, I could not handle it. I could not watch. I had to walk out of the hall, feeling sick. This was the beginning of a not always healthy obsession with sports, an obsession that nonetheless has also enriched my life in many ways and led me to become acquainted with many great people.

None of this – not the future joys or disappointments, or how much cycling would take of my free time in the next decades to come – did I know of as the summer holiday in 2003 started. But, for now, I was just happy, happy playing football during the day at my summer football camp, and when I got home, I was also happy, lying on the couch watching TV, staying in my mother's small summer cottage in northern Zealand.

The question I ask myself is, when exactly did I get hooked? I am not quite sure, but it happened sometime during the first part of this Tour, quite by accident. I occasionally try to think back to see it more clearly, when it was, what it was that really caught my attention. Your memories as a child can be such a mix of what actually happened, what others have told you about some related situations, and your own confusing experiences mixing up different events.

I have some small recollections of watching a replay of the crash on stage 1, the stage where Team CSC leader Tyler Hamilton broke his collarbone. I have some recollection of Alessandro Petacchi, one of the best sprinters in history, winning a bunch of stages – but was that something I experienced or something I watched later on? That I do not know.

But there is something I do remember, vividly: The crash of Joseba Beloki and the legendary save from Lance Armstrong, as he went left, avoiding Beloki, and rode across a French field on the way to Gap. Whether I watched it live or on the daily highlights show that Danish TV 2 always broadcast after the stage, I do not know. But I watched it, and I was immensely fascinated. There was something about it – the speed, the attack of Vinokourov, the drama of the crash with Beloki's tire coming off and shortly after his teammate Jaksche standing in distress trying to call for help while comforting the crying Beloki (today there is nothing I hate more than watching crashes in cycling, but at this point in my life these events were still fascinating), Armstrong's quick reaction, so much narrative of victory, pain and skill happening in so little time. This was unlike anything I had ever seen. It was deeply captivating.

Of course, I had missed the day before where Iban Mayo (who would later come to occupy my mind much more) won on Alpe d'Huez, where Tyler Hamilton with the broken collarbone had even been able to attack. After the stage to Gap where Beloki all but ended his career, a breakaway stage followed. This was won by the Dane Jakob Piil. I did not watch the stage live but saw the highlights later that day; the Danish media were of course making quite a fuss about this, the first Danish Tour stage win since Bjarne Riis in 1996 (we will also get back to Bjarne in this book). I remember Piil and his breakaway companion Fabio Sacchi shaking hands just before they sprinted against each other for the win. This also seemed so loaded with narrative – these two had together broken away from the rest of the breakaway, they had been partners and had helped each other, until these last 1000 meters, when they suddenly turned into enemies, and the handshake was the symbol marking collaboration turning into rivalry.

I missed Jan Ullrich's massive comeback win in Cap Découverte. Ullrich, the former prodigy who was supposed to win every Tour for 10 years after his win as a 23-year-old in 1997, who was now on his way to be crowned as the eternal runner-up, who had been injured for a long part of 2002 and had also tested positive for amphetamine that year, was in 2003 on the very temporary Team Bianchi, and was clawing his way back in the general classification with a comeback that had seemed quite unlikely just a few days before. But I knew of none of this.

I got back into the Tour on the next stage, ending on Ax-3-Domaines. I was staying with some friends who had no interest in cycling. But their TV was running, TV2 was playing, and suddenly I was watching Carlos Sastre winning with his child's pacifier in his mouth, a victory celebration so

original compared to the very mundane football goal celebrations of that time. But this Sastre win, or what was happening on the screen, meant nothing to the people around me, my friends, people who took no notice of cycling events. Nonetheless, on my own, I was again drawn into this spectacle, though as I saw it, Sastre's win was more fascinating than the action behind him, where Jan Ullrich almost took the yellow jersey from Lance Armstrong. To me, Armstrong and Ullrich were still not really characters, the yellow jersey was still something obscure, and the rivalry between Armstrong and Ullrich had no importance – I was watching and learning to understand this sport day by day, but I had many lessons still to come.

An obstacle to my cycling obsession, as it was slowly building here, was the general opposition to cycling among people around me – something that probably many other cycling fans can recognize, the alienating feeling of being so fascinated by something that other people will loudly claim as horrendously boring. None of my friends or family (except, I later found out, my mother who was imitating Merckx when riding to school in the 1970s) thought cycling was anything else than some guys on bicycles just riding around – and it was hard to argue against this since, yes, that is also what cycling is about, and at this time I could not articulate that it was also so much more. My mother's boyfriend at that time, formerly a gymnast at a high level of competition, told me that he did not want to follow cycling anymore after the Festina affair of 1998. I took no further notice, as issues of doping seemed very far away during the Tour in 2003, at least to the still casual cycling fan that I was at 9 years old (although I would, later, have to contemplate decisions like my mother's boyfriend: in light of widespread doping, should I continue supporting the sport?).

The Tour that year took place following two major events, both in March 2003, that would shape the decades following. First, the death of Andrei Kivilev during Paris-Nice, a rider who had been 4th in the Tour de France in 2001. His death caused the UCI to make helmets compulsory, initially for everything but the last climb, but quickly also for the last climb as well. I came into cycling watching some of the last Tour mountains ridden without helmets. Helmets are without a doubt a great benefit to the sport and will have saved quite a few lives by now. They also make us see less of the riders' grimaces and give us less of the charisma that comes from alternative haircuts and different types of cycling caps. The helmet-less riders had a certain aesthetic charm, and I am glad that I got to watch a bit of it, though it is for all important purposes much better with helmets worn at all times.

The other big event of March 2003 was the war of aggression against Iraq, started by the United States and United Kingdom and quickly supported by Denmark, a war that turned a generation against their political elites, caused lasting damage to norms of international law, and crystallized violent jihadism across the globe and thereby in turn kickstarted new eras of surveillance states in Europe and North America. I remember it, the first months of the war, from TV and from hearing about it in school. My school's principal even gave us notice when Baghdad had fallen, almost as if it was something to celebrate, an act that seems quite strange today, and even back then would have been out of place as there was not a lot of patriotic enthusiasm for Denmark's role in the invasion in the center of the relatively progressive Copenhagen where my school was. Lance Armstrong, of

course, was an American, and was from Texas, just like George W. Bush. With the run-up to the Iraq War came also the largest international anti-war movement since the Vietnam War, and I wonder how much the anti-American sentiments that year influenced people's view of Armstrong. Armstrong (who was critical of the war, nonetheless) was on his way to a record-equalizing five Tour wins.

The final big mountain stage ended on top of Luz-Ardiden. It was another historic stage. Jan Ullrich actually stood a chance of winning the Tour, but it was Iban Mayo who started the attacking, being followed by Armstrong in yellow who quickly overtook Mayo. Armstrong had this almost machine-like standing pedal stroke, while Mayo was dancing on the pedals. Here, I am quite certain that I was watching it live and not just the afternoon post-race rundown, though I will of course never be completely certain. But I am quite sure I was watching it, live, as it happened, as Armstrong overtook Mayo and then had his right-side handlebar stuck in the cap held in the hands of a little boy standing on the side of the road. Armstrong and Mayo go down, Armstrong has bike problems and Tyler Hamilton tells the others to wait for Armstrong, perhaps unnecessarily as they were doing it anyway. Armstrong gets back to the favorites, to Ullrich who – perhaps, if he had just maintained the view that staying on your bike is part of cycling, and had just ridden away – might have changed how things ended up. Armstrong, of course, had waited for Ullrich when the German crashed during the 2001 Tour. Alas, Armstrong, probably high on adrenaline after the crash, now just overtook Ullrich here on Luz-Ardiden, edging closer to the win and his fifth Tour. To the nine-year-old me, this taught me a few lessons on the humans that I was watching: Tyler Hamilton, Lance's former teammate, was a man that in arguing for the others to wait for Armstrong seemed to uphold an unwritten moral code and looked as if he still had some loyalty to his former leader (though Hamilton a decade later would betray Armstrong by going public with stories on the doping that was going on at Armstrong's US Postal team in the early 2000s); and then there was Jan Ullrich, the wunderkind and eternal number two (still with a great palmares, no less), a person who would, as seen here on this mountain, do the right thing and wait after his competitor was struck by misfortune, only to have that same competitor exploit the act of benevolence and rob him of his last big chance of Tour success. Both Hamilton and Ullrich waited for Armstrong – and lost. Armstrong did not show gratitude for their waiting, he just rode away from them, taking the stage win and dealing a blow to Ullrich's chances of redeeming the narrative of his career. Ullrich would remain the eternal number two.

The next stage, though not a stage for big attacks on the yellow jersey, was the final stage that included some mountains. It looked like a day for a breakaway, and so it was, as Tyler Hamilton, with a cracked collarbone still tied up under his shirt, soloed for more than 100 kilometers to the win. Hamilton was by this time the absolute favorite of Danish TV where he was known simply as 'Tyler'.

As Hamilton was riding for the Danish Team CSC, he had taken over the role of being Denmark's summer sweetheart, a role that Laurent Jalabert had had in the years before when he was the first big star of Bjarne Riis' CSC team. This was a time when Danish cycling, after the glorious 1990s, was on a low in terms of talent and results. But CSC, one of the best teams in the world, run by Riis – the winner of the 1996 Tour and by this time the only ever Danish Tour winner – was Danish and had many Danes in leading positions, and so became the hope of the nation every summer. The

Danes simply adopted whoever was the leading character of CSC and cared for them almost as if they were Danes themselves – this had happened to Jalabert, was now happening to Hamilton, and would soon happen to Ivan Basso, then Carlos Sastre, and then the Schleck brothers, until the uptake of new heroes from Riis' team into Danish fandom would wane as Contador and Riis himself got further implicated in doping stories, and as the eccentric (for lack of better words) but not very likeable Oleg Tinkov became a leading figure of Riis' teams.

I had not planned on watching the stage of Hamilton's win. As a nine-year-old, there was still just a lot and nothing much going on at the same time, and making plans for watching this very, very new interest of mine had not become a thing yet. As I was into football and thought I wanted to be a professional football player, I had gone to a sportswear shop to buy some goalkeeper gloves with my pocket money. I was never going to be a good goalkeeper, but I did not know that at this time – Peter Schmeichel, and my favorite, Real Madrid keeper Iker Casillas, had imprinted a desire to try it out, and the trials and failures of childhood dreams are, of course, also part of growing up.

At the sportswear shop, which was inside a shopping mall in central Copenhagen, I also passed an electronics store. Inside here, the latest TVs were on display. This was when some of the first flat screen TVs had hit the market, they were shown off to the public in the mall, and on these TVs, the Tour de France was on. Here I saw this guy that I by now recognized by his CSC colors and his tied-up collarbone. It was Tyler Hamilton, and he was on his own. I walked home, with my new gloves, and watched the end of the stage. The commentators were, as I remember it, amazed by the heroic comeback of Hamilton, who they said could have quit the Tour but instead rode on, ignored the pain, and achieved one of his biggest successes.

The Tour of 2003 was the last with the commentating duo of Jørn Mader and Jørgen Leth speaking for Danish TV 2. These two had become famous to any Dane watching the Tour (and, for most Danes, the Tour was all the cycling they ever watched). Known for their quasi-poetic descriptions and patriotic enthusiasm, this commentating duo had been a staple of Danish TV since 1989. But 2003 – my first Tour – would end up as their last one together. Jørn Mader, the lead commentator, was fired from speaking the Tour, supposedly after a night of binge drinking together with a famed Danish pop star, after which Mader had gone to work, commentating while still drunk. Jørgen Leth, famous both for his brilliant short film "The Perfect Human" which won an Oscar in the 1960s, and for his magnificent 1970s cycling documentaries "Stars and Watercarriers" and "A Sunday in Hell", was the co-commentator acting as the expert, and he too would soon be gone. In autumn 2005, Leth released a book called "The Imperfect Human", detailing – amongst many other things – a recent sexual relationship with the underage daughter of his Haitian cook, where Leth claimed to "take the cook's daughter when he wanted" because it was his "right". It did not take long for Danish TV 2 to fire Leth, though he was re-hired a few years later.

In any case, it was not a huge loss that these were the last commentating days of Leth and Mader. As much as they were heralded for their sort-of-poetic enthusiastic speaking, they had also become less and less knowledgeable on cycling, and were surprisingly bad at interpreting the basics of what was happening on their screens, such as whether a rider was attacking or had been dropped.

Instead, a few years later, the new commentating duo was to consist of Dennis Ritter – a young journalist with a nice warm voice who was obviously just very, very interested in cycling – and Rolf Sørensen, by that time the best ever Danish cyclist, who was at first as commentator mostly known for all too often just talking about himself and how he himself had raced, but who would over the years, given his great love for the sport and immense intuition for understanding different race situations, evolve into Denmark's best cycling commentator. These two, 'Rolf and Ritter' as they are called, would soon constitute the classic Danish TV Tour commentating duo that would be the 'voice of the summer' for new generations. But for now, and for the last time, it was Mader and Leth.

Finally, the time came for the time trial that would end the fight for the general classification, a 49-kilometer stage going to Nantes in western France. And it was raining. I was spending the time with a middle-aged couple who often looked after me, as my father lived on another continent and was rarely present, and as my mother often had to travel because of her job and needed other people to take care of me from time to time. This middle-aged, childless couple had advertised that they wanted to help look after a child if the parents needed it sometimes. For me, this was a great place to be – the wife was very sweet, and the husband was obsessed with football (like me) but also had an interest in cycling. He did not find it boring, and he had no reservations towards doping or whatever – it was just entertainment, and so I did not have to answer for myself regarding my newfound interest.

Jan Ullrich was a minute behind Armstrong but had taken more than that on the time trial to Cap Découverte on stage 12. I do not remember how close Ullrich actually came to beating Armstrong on this last time trial. But I do remember the crash. It was all very quick, Ullrich sliding and getting back up. But even I knew that, at that point, it was over (looking back at reports, I can see that Ullrich had started to gain a bit of time on Armstrong but was nowhere near getting the minute he needed). The final stage on the day after was my first experience of what was presented as the unofficial world championship for sprinters, the sprint on the Champs-Élysées. Naturally, I then expected that the winner of that sprint, Jean-Patrick Nazon, was more or less the best sprinter in the world. If not him, I then expected that the eventual winner of the green jersey (the *sprinters' jersey*), Baden Cooke, would have to be the world's top sprinter. As it was, this Tour was probably the highlight of the quite solid but not overwhelming careers of those two sprinters who were otherwise never among the best during this decade.

And that was it. I did not watch any more cycling that year. At that time, unless someone with a strong relation to Denmark did something worth reporting, cycling usually was mostly absent from the main sports news and from the biggest Danish TV stations after the Tour. The Tour was what people knew, most people would not and perhaps still will not really be aware of any other bike races (they may have heard of a Giro or Paris-Roubaix but will not have any relation to it, probably having never watched it). And so it was for me, too. While it was hard to avoid the Tour that summer, because I was home and turned the TV on to one of the main Danish TV stations that focused on the Tour all throughout the day, there was much less widely broadcast cycling for me to accidentally fall upon the rest of the year. It also did not help that so few I knew cared anything about cycling, and that if anyone did, they only cared about the Tour. And the result was that I did not watch any live cycling until the

following summer. But cycling had not left me. I told a friend, when school started again after the summer break, that I wanted to be a cyclist. Well, there's so much that you just say when you are a child. But I was inspired, cycling was obviously still with me. It had left a mark, there was now no going back to a world without cycling.

As to the end of the Tour, this was also the end of Jan Ullrich as a contestant for a Grand Tour title. Ullrich's 2003 Tour looked like the big comeback but was actually his last year at the absolute top level. Not that his next few years, until Operacion Puerto would put his career to an involuntary end, were bad. But the 2003 Tour was his last grand moment, seven years after he, as a 22-year-old, burst onto the world cycling scene with his second place in the 1996 Tour, a Tour he might even have won, had he known how good he was earlier in the race. The cliché when writing and reading about Ullrich is of course that he was the Jahrhundert-Talent, a talent seen only once every hundred years, but that he mentally was not strong enough for the profession, perhaps also brought down by bad company. Whatever it was, 2003 – the big comeback year – was also the beginning of the end.

For Armstrong, the 2003 Tour not only put him at the record equaling five Tour wins. It also gave him a Tour win that was worth remembering, in a race that approached the label of 'mythical'. This was something that had been missing from his Tour wins until that point. Not that I remember watching any of them live, but reading and hearing about them, you sense a robot-like dominant performance, with only a few stages worth talking about, and with the 2001 and 2002 Tours as perhaps the low points in terms of entertainment. But the 2003 Tour gave him that epic win, where he had to battle not only himself but a worthy opponent. These wins are important in order to elevate Tour winners from being just great athletes into being the main characters of a larger narrative. For Anquetil, Poulidor was part of making him what he became – both in his time and afterwards. For Merckx, it was probably Ocaña. For Hinault it was LeMond. Indurain, on the other hand, never had any worthy competitor, which may also be why he and his wins occupy a smaller place in cycling history.