

# Unusual and little-known Tales from the 'Tour de France' 1903 - 1947

With Barrington Day



The line between insanity and genius is said to be a fine one, and in early 20<sup>th</sup> century France, anyone envisaging a near 2,500km cycle race around the country would have been widely viewed as unhinged. But that didn't stop Géo Lefèvre, a journalist with L'Auto magazine at the time, from proceeding with his inspired plan. His editor, Henri Desgrange, was bold enough to believe in the idea and to throw his backing behind the Tour de France. So, on 1st July 1903, sixty pioneers set out on their bicycles from Montgeron. After six mammoth stages (Nantes - Paris, 471 km!), only 21 "routiers", led by Maurice Garin, arrived at the end of this first epic. Having provoked a mixture of astonishment and admiration, le Tour soon won over the sporting public and the roadside crowds swelled. The French people took to their hearts this



Tour Founder - Henri Desgrange

unusual event which placed their towns, their countryside, and since 1910, even their mountains, in the spotlight.

Le Tour has always moved with the times. Like France as a whole, it benefited from the introduction of paid holidays from 1936; it has lived through wars, and then savoured the "trente glorieuses" period of economic prosperity while enjoying the heydays of **Coppi, Bobet, Anquetil** and **Poulidor**. It has opened itself up to foreign countries with the onset of globalisation. Over a hundred years after its inception, le Tour continues to gain strength from its experience.



Maurice Garin - First Tour Winner 1903

Maurice Garin, classified as French was actually born in Italy was nicknamed the little 'Chimney sweep' he was only 5'3" tall with a handlebar



Henri Desgrange - In his racing days

moustache, **what was their attire** in those early days! Race rules were silent on the matter; cycling shorts were yet to be invented. Maurice Garin probably had the hardest wearing crotch of all. His under garments remain a mystery, but he took on the arduous task of riding the Tour in a white blazer, long black trousers tucked into his woolly socks and topped with a flat cap, looking rather like a Somerset Barber!

**Cheating** blighted the second Tour de France in 1904. The top four to finish were disqualified including the 1903 winner Maurice Garin, and race organiser Henri Desgrange declared: "The Tour de France is finished and I'm afraid its second edition has been the last. We have reached the end of the Tour and we are disgusted, frustrated and discouraged." Frenchman Henri Cornet was awarded

the title, although he was reprimanded for accepting a lift in a car. He remains the youngest winner, at the age of 19. The riders disqualified were Maurice Garin and Brother Cesar Garin (both banned for 2 years), Lucien Pothier and Chevalier (both banned for life). Eight others were also disqualified, mainly for using Trains and Cars.

**For the first tour in 1903** the riders were timed over the 2,428 km, divided into six stages, with two or three rest days between each stage. Garin the winner was timed at 94h 33min 0s, the 2<sup>nd</sup> placed rider Lucien Pothier was 2h 59m 21s adrift, with the 3<sup>rd</sup> place going to Fernand Augereau at 4h 29m 34s behind the winner. In 1905 this was changed to a points system, this continued until 1912. The timing system was re-introduced for the 1913 Tour. The points experiment was declared a failure.

There was another rule change in 1905, Pacers were allowed on the first and last stages, ironically Lucien Pothier was suspended for life the previous year for exactly that, he used an illegal pacer. I expect it made him smile. This is the year that the tour was ruined by nails scattered over the road, on one stage, every rider punctured at least once. Jean-Baptiste Dortignacq punctured 15 times, he eventually finished 3<sup>rd</sup> in Paris.

**Tour Stars Lost in The Great War.** Three former Tour Winners lost their lives in the Great War Lucien Petit-Breton, France Tour Winner 1907 and 1908. Francois Faber, Luxembourg Tour Winner 1909. Octave Lapize, France Tour Winner 1910. Emile Engel, stage one winner of the 1914 race. Francois Lafour, first rider over the top of the Col d'Aubisque in 1910.

**The first non-Frenchman** to win the tour was Francois Faber of Luxembourg in 1909; he was 2<sup>nd</sup> in



1914 Tour de France Bike

1908 and again in 1910. The Belgian Philippe Thys was the first rider to win the tour three times 1913, 1914 and 1920, we had to wait over 30 years for our first 3 times consecutive winner. The Frenchman Louison Bobet has that honour winning in 1953, 1954 and 1955. The first five time winner was Jacques Anquetil 1957, 1961, 1962, 1963, and 1964. Again we had a very long wait for the first five times consecutive winner, Miguel Indurain 1991, 1992, 1993, 1994 and 1995, will this ever be surpassed?

**After the introduction** of the Pyrenees in

1910, Desgrange decided that he would include the huge Alpine Giant, the Col du Galibier in 1911, the highest point ever attempted in the Tour. It was 8,386 ft. Although it was July, it was still covered in snow. Emile Georget was the first over the summit covered in wet

mud, looking like a monster. **1910** The premier mountain stage of the Tour traced a steep path

from Luchon to Bayonne. François Lafourcade led all the top riders over the Aubisque climb, while

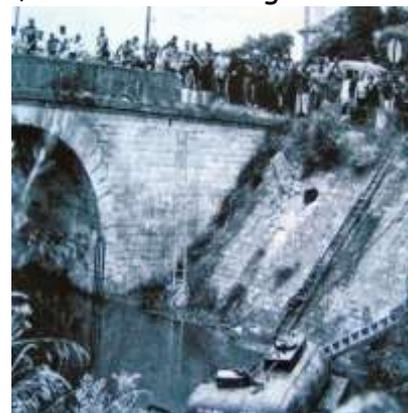


Riders on The Col du Galibier - 1914

Lapize, one of the best climbers in the race, struggled. When Lapize came across the race organizer's car, one word was enough to convey what he thought of the new climbs: "**Assassins!**" he screamed at Tour director Henri Desgrange.

**Gustave Garrigou**, the only rider to climb the Tourmalet without getting off of his bicycle (second at the top), receives a 100-Francs bonus. He went on to win the 1911 'Tour'

**Death on the Tour.** In 1910 Adolphe Heliere died while swimming at Nice during a rest day. 1935 The Spaniard **Francisco Cepeda** was descending the Col du Galibier when he plunged down a ravine. He died from his injuries on the way to hospital. 1967 **Tommy Simpson** died of heart failure whilst climbing Mount Ventoux. 1995 **Fabio Casartelli** crashed on the descent of the Col de Portlet d'Aspet. He died where he fell. 1958 an official was killed. This one has to be the strangest and, in a way, most tragic Tour de France death, the strangest because of whom it involved, and the most tragic because of when it happened. **Constant Wouters** was the director of the "Parc des Princes", a stadium in western Paris that served as the finish line for the Tour de France from 1903 until the late 1960s. Thus, it was on the last day of the 1958 Tour that Wouters, stepped too close to the track and collided with cyclist **André Darrigade**, who was sprinting for the line. Darrigade suffered a fractured skull and some broken ribs, but he was able to take a lap of honour after the race. Wouters, however, was more seriously injured, and he died 11 days later. **By far the worst** 'Tour de France' tragedy, in fact one of the worst in French sporting history did not actually involve any



The Tragedy at Dordogne

riders. It was on 11<sup>th</sup> July 1964, hundreds of cycling fans lined the route of the 19<sup>th</sup> stage from Bordeaux to Brive in the Dordogne, a tanker lorry attempted to take the bend too quickly, lost control and crashed through the wall of spectators, over a bridge and into a canal. This awful incident took the lives of 20 people.

**Just after the Great War in 1919**, the Tour riders had the faded hue of well washed under garments. There were cycling jerseys, but no dye. The trade teams wore grey jerseys with embroidery on the shoulders to distinguish them. Alphonse Bauge a team director had a bright idea and suggested that the race leader should be dressed in a colourful shirt, Henri Desgrange was approached and the 'Yellow Jersey' (Maillot Jaune) was born. Previous to this the race Leader wore a '**GREEN**' armband. The first rider to wear the Maillot Jaune was the Frenchman Eugene Christophe. He complained that the spectators laughed at him and said he looked like a canary. However, he had been leading the race for seven stages already, with five to go the Tour was his to lose. The unbelievable happened, it was two thirds into the penultimate stage, chirpy as a canary, he was pounding along on the only cobbled section of the day, when one of the greatest moments of heartbreak in sporting history occurred, His



Eugene Christophe the 1st Wearer of the Maillot Jaune

forks snapped. One immediately thinks back to 1913 and the legend of the Blacksmiths in Sainte-Marie-de-Campan. Yes, it happened again; however, there was a forge only a kilometre away, the run and the repair still took 2 hours, but he pulled back to 3<sup>rd</sup> place in Paris. He also suffered the same fate in the 1922 Tour.

**1920, such bad luck.** Italian **Napoleon Paoli** was descending at speed down a narrow mountain Road, suddenly, there was a donkey standing in his path. He and his bike flew into the air, when he landed,

**Paoli** was on the back of the donkey, the beast panicked, setting off in the opposite direction, finally collapsing with exhaustion, the rider managed to dismount, he then had to run back a kilometre to regain his bike, lying by the road side. That was not the end of the drama, further along the road he was hit on the head by a falling rock. Confused and dazed, **Paoli** managed to get over the Tourmalet, where he gave up and fell asleep in a shepherd's hut. **Napoleon Paoli** rode three 'Tours' but never ever reached the finish of any.

**Honoré Barthélémy** took part and finished fifth overall and won four stages in the 1919 Tour de France. He was born in Paris, France. In 1920, he crashed on the stage to Aix-en-Provence and only slowly got back on his bike, dazed and bloody. He could not bend his back and had to turn his handlebars upside down to be able to continue. As his dizziness lessened, he realised that what he thought was concussion was blindness. A flint had gone into an eye, rendering it defunct. Despite that, he finished not only that day but the Tour, coming eighth overall, despite half-blindness, a broken shoulder and a dislocated wrist. He was carried in triumph at the finish. Being fitted with a glass eye did not deter him from racing. Dusty roads made it uncomfortable and he often took it out. The socket would then become infected and he would plug it with cotton. "It makes no difference to my sight but it's more comfortable," he said. The glass eye often fell out, usually when sprinting for the finish, and in 1924 he had to get down on his knees, together with several spectators at the finish line to see where it had gone. He grumbled that he spent more on replacement eyes than he earned in prizes. At the 1921 Tour de France, he finished third overall and won stage 12. He last rode the Tour 1927, abandoning on stage 9.

**As we know**, Henri Desgrange seemed to dream up new rules for each 'Tour' sometimes it was actually during the race. A new rule in 1921 allowed riders to replace broken parts, "goody" the riders thought, and then it turned out that they would have to carry the broken bits to the finish for inspection. One such rider, Leon Scieur, rode 300 kilometres to the finish with a broken wheel strapped to his back. The cogs cut deeply into his flesh; he carried the scars for the rest of his life. However, he was the winner of the 'Tour'. This rule also covered clothing. The stage starts were normally early in the morning, and it was quite often cold, sometimes as low as 4 or 5 degrees many riders would wear extra layers of clothing, the rule was that they had to finish wearing the same clothes, sometimes the afternoon temperature

could reach 30 degrees or more. This caused a large and public falling out between the Pelissier Brothers (Henri and Francis) and Henri Desgrange

**In 1924 and 1925** the Tour was won by Ottavio Bottecchia, the first Italian to do so. Then just before the 1926 tour, in fact June 3<sup>rd</sup>, Bottecchia was found lying in the road outside the village of

Peonis, near his home, he was discovered by farmers, he had a cracked skull, a broken collarbone and other bones broken; his bike was leaning against a tree apparently undamaged. He was carried to a bar, laid on a table and a priest gave him the last rites, he died 12 days later never regaining consciousness. Accident or Assassination? The accident theory was soon dismissed. There is a theory that Fascists murdered him for speaking against Mussolini. An Italian dying from stab wounds on a New York water front claimed that he was a paid hit man and carried out the murder. In 1949 a farmer in Pordenone confessed from his deathbed that he threw a rock at a man eating his grapes,

just to scare him, but how did the body end up in Peonis? 35 miles from Pordenone, also grapes are not edible until late summer, certainly not in June.



#### Monument to Bottecchia in Trasaghis by the Tagliamento River

**The 1927 winner**, Nicolas Frantz of Luxembourg came to the start of the 1928 wearing the Yellow Jersey, he never surrendered it. He also pushed the limits of preparation. Bringing with him twenty-two pairs of shorts and twenty-two pairs of white socks, one set for each stage. Apparently, he did not want to bother with laundry duties.

**For the 1930 Tour**, it was decided by the Tour Organisation would issue their own bikes to the competitors. The frames had no manufacturer's markings and of course they were **YELLOW**. The only concession made to the riders was that they could use their own saddles and handlebars. They were also heavy, weighing in at about 40 pounds.

**Also in 1930** new "national-team" structure was introduced by the 'Tour' organizers. This was a blessing for France, whose countryman Charles Pélissier won eight stages. Even better, fellow Frenchman André Leducq won the overall title. Shouldered by his French compatriots, the up-and-coming Leducq blossomed. He captured the yellow jersey in Luchon and rode strongly all the way to Paris.

**1935 Time for a Drink.** The heat was overpowering on the stage from Pau to Bordeaux, the whole Peloton were gasping for a drink, they couldn't believe their eyes, up ahead was a line of tables, laden with ice cold beer. An immediate truce was called and the whole peloton stopped to quench their thirst that is all except Julien Moineau, an unknown from France, he put his head down and went for victory, to win by several minutes. It turned out that the impromptu break had been organised by his mates.

**In 1935 aluminium wheel** rims came into use, previously they were made of light wood. Although in 1934 a rider (un-named) used aluminium rims, they were disguised by painting them with a 'wood grain' finish.

**The first King of the Mountains** was crowned in 1933 - He was Vincente Treuba of Spain. Although the 'Polka-Dot Jersey' (maillot blanc a pois rouges) was not used until much later.

**The Green Points Jersey** (maillot vert) was introduced in 1953 - The first winner was Fritz Schaer of Switzerland.

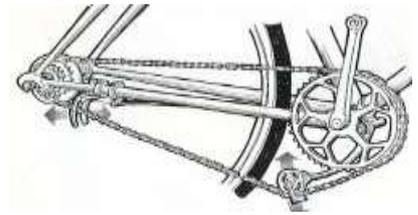
**The First Englishman.** In 1937 Charles Holland became the first Englishman to compete in the 'Tour' proudly wearing the 'Union Jack' He had two team mates, Bill Burl and Pierre Gachon, a Frenchman adopted by Canada, he rode as a Canadian. Charles rode gallantly against such riders as Gino Bartali, the new Italian Hero. Unfortunately, Bartali crashed whilst descending from a mountain summit, ending up in a stream. Charles gave a very good account of himself, but he



1939 Tour Bike

was not having the best of luck, eventually on stage 15, he ran out of tyres and had to abandon after being well outside the time limit as a result. There would not be another English rider in the 'Tour' until the 'Hercules' onslaught of 1955.

**It was not until 1938** that Desgrange allowed derailleur gears to be used in the 'Tour' although they had been around since the early 1900s, albeit there were only two sprockets on the back wheel. Gino Bartali pioneered the derailleur, being one of the first to use this type of gearing for racing. So, no more turning the rear wheel around to change gear.



The Osgear

Bartali and his team used the very reliable Osgear until 1951. In fact, a Belgian rider was given a penalty (10 minutes) when caught using such a device to climb the Aubisque in 1936. The double chainring was allowed in 1947. Incidentally, Desgrange was always against the use of freewheels, believing that the riders, should pedal the whole distance of the 'Tour'

**Gino Bartali** won the 'Tour' in 1938 and 1948, this still stands as the widest gap between



Gino Bartali on his way to victory - 1938

wins. Apparently the 1948 win saved Italy from embarking on Civil War. There was a lot of unrest throughout the country, a leading Union Leader had been shot and a general strike was in the offing. The Italian President telephoned Bartali at his Hotel in Cannes. "You must win the 'Tour' it could bring peace to our country". As we all know Bartali duly obliged. The Italian people were glued to their wireless sets, so they seemed to forget the countries troubles. It should also be remembered that during World War II Bartali used to carry secret documents hidden inside

his seat pin, thus saving the lives of hundreds of Italian Jews, to the Germans on the border he was just a mad cyclist out training. In fact, he actually hid a family of Jews in the cellar of his house in Florence.

**Henri Desgrange died in 1940**; for the next 30 years the reins were taken over by Jacques Goddet, still using the iron hand of authority like his predecessor.

**From 1939 until 1948** the last rider on each stage was pulled out, this was supposedly to encourage more competitive racing. After that the '**Lanterne Rouge**' was awarded to the last rider in the 'Tour' mostly they had a lot of support from the public. A famous name comes to mind. Tony Hoare from Emsworth, he finished 59<sup>th</sup> in 1955 the 2<sup>nd</sup> Englishman to finish the 'Tour' behind Brian Robinson

**Jean Robic** had recently married; he had no wealth to speak of. He was already a racing cyclist, not too well known, he had won a few small races during the war years, he had no wealth to speak of, so he told his new wife, Raymonde Cornic (yes, she was a lady) " I will bring you first prize in the Tour de France". This was in 1947, the first 'Tour' to be held

after the War. He was selected to ride for the North Regional Team of France. Half way through the race he looked a very unlikely winner.

He was not liked by too many people, the journalists loathed him. Because of his diminutive stature, he was only 5'3" and weighed just over nine stone; he was given many nicknames 'Kid Goat', 'The Hobgoblin of Brittany Moor' and 'Leather Head' The last one because he always wore a leather crash hat after breaking his skull in the 1944 Paris-Roubaix. He had a nasty temper and swore a lot. At the mountain summits he would take on a bottle or bottles filled with lead, to help him descend faster. Eventually bottles with solids were outlawed, he then used mercury. (Sounds dangerous) However, he did win the 'Tour' he wasn't really in the picture until reaching the



Jean Robic - 1947 Tour Winner

later stages of the race. He was lying 3<sup>rd</sup> at the start of the last stage. He broke all the unwritten rules and attacked on the last day. He did a deal with **Edouard Fachleitner**, supposedly money changed hands! **Robic** won the 'Tour' but he never wore the leader's jersey. It is alleged that **Pierra Brambilla** who was leading the race at the start of the last day, eventually finishing 3<sup>rd</sup> went home to Italy and buried his bike in his garden, totally disgusted with the whole affair.

The contents of the above article were gleaned from my personal knowledge, 'Wikipedia' and the following books were used mainly to confirm dates and spelling: 'Dancing Uphill' (Frances Holland) 'Vive le Tour!' (Nick Brownlee) and Blazing Saddles (Matt Rendell). All worth reading.

## E&O.E

Hoping that you all found the foregoing interesting, give me your views through the 'Fareham Wheelers' Blog. If there is enough interest, Barrie will cobble together history from 1948 to 1960ish.