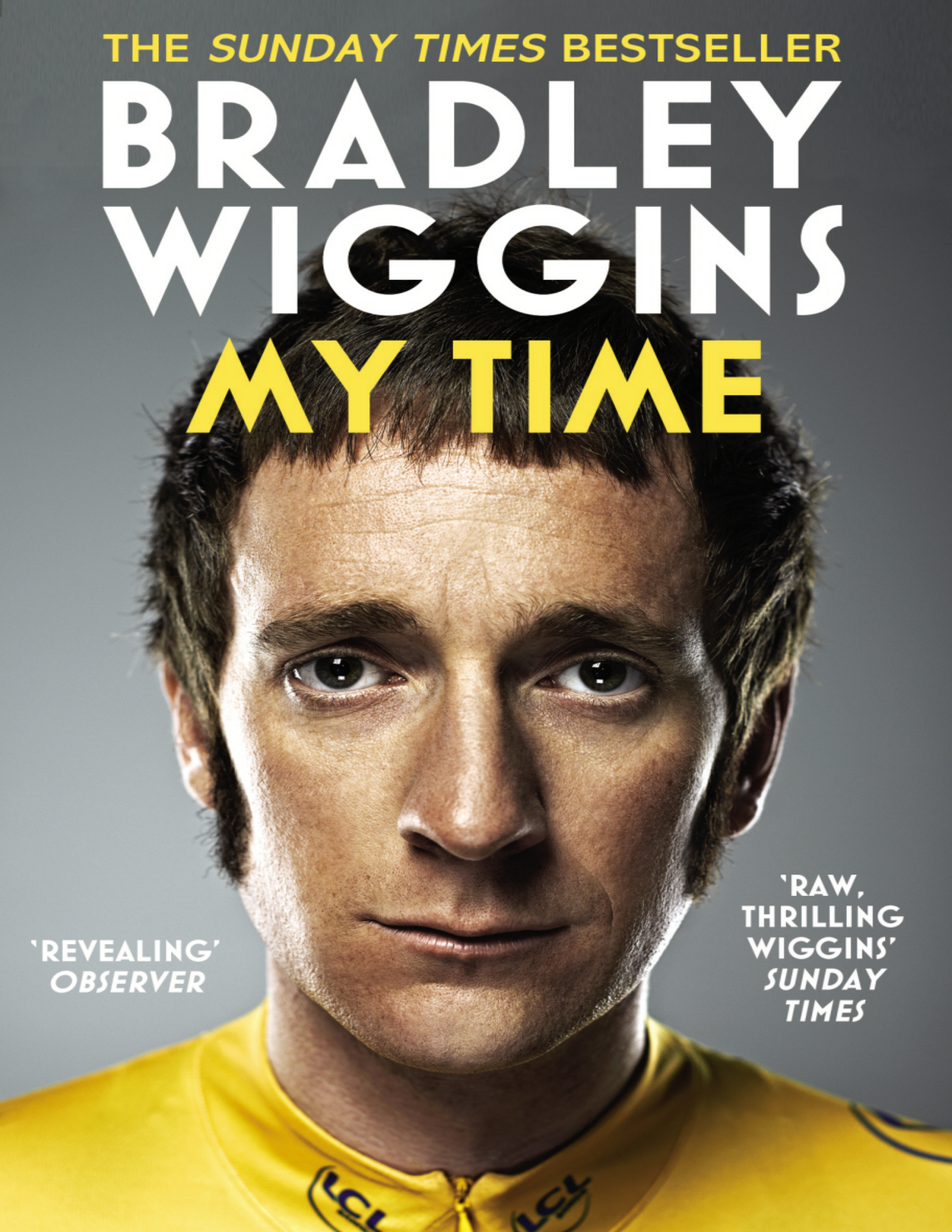
THE *SUNDAY TIMES* BESTSELLER

BRADLEY WIGGINS

MY TIME



'REVEALING' *OBSERVER*

'RAW, THRILLING WIGGINS' *SUNDAY TIMES*

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On 22 July 2012 Bradley Wiggins made history as the first British cyclist to win the Tour de France. Ten days later at the London Olympic Games he won the time trial to become his country's most decorated Olympian. In an instant 'Wiggo', the kid from Kilburn, was a national hero.

Two years previously, however, Wiggins had been staring into the abyss. His much-hyped attempt to conquer the 2010 Tour de France had ended in public humiliation. Poor results and indifferent form left him facing the sack from Team Sky. And then he was hit with the tragic news of the death of his granddad, George, the man who had raised him as a young boy. At rock bottom, Wiggins had to reach deep inside himself and find the strength to fight his way back.

Outspoken, honest, intelligent and fearless, Wiggins has been hailed as the people's champion. In *MY TIME* he tells the story of the remarkable journey that led him from his lowest ebb to win the world's toughest race. He opens up about the personal anguish that has driven him on and what it's like behind the scenes at Team Sky: the brutal training regimes, the sacrifices and his views on his teammates and rivals. He talks too about his anger at the spectre of doping that pursues his sport, how he dealt with

the rush of taking Olympic gold and above all what it takes to be the greatest.

About the Author

Bradley Wiggins grew up in Kilburn in London. He won the World Junior Pursuit title before going on to win seven Olympic medals including four gold medals spanning four games, and seven World Track Championship titles. In 2012 he became the first Briton to win the Tour de France, a feat that Sir Chris Hoy described as ‘the greatest sporting achievement’ by a British athlete. He was awarded the OBE in the 2005 New Year’s honours list and the CBE in 2009. He currently lives in the north-west of England with his wife, Cath, and their two children, Ben and Isabella.

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For Cath, Ben, Isabella, Mum, Nan, George and Ryan

Bradley Wiggins
with William Fotheringham

My Time

YELLOW JERSEY PRESS
LONDON

FOREWORD by Robert Millar

My first Tour de France was a muddle of feelings and emotions, but I did have one moment of clarity. I was hot, I was tired, and my lower limbs felt as if someone had filled them with lead. I wasn't even certain where I was, all I knew was that it was a village somewhere in south-central France and there were about 60km to the finish that day. My main focus for the last hour had been the mosquito bite that had developed angrily on my heel, just where shoe and foot met. It was driving me crazy and I couldn't work out if it actually hurt more than my legs. I knew it was my own fault as I had a habit of sticking one foot out of bed when I was trying to sleep and some enterprising biting insect had noticed the lack of citronella just where the rough skin starts and given me a souvenir for visiting his airspace. I looked up the road and saw we were temporarily leaving the countryside and entering a small piece of civilisation, slightly uphill on the way in meant slightly downhill on the way out, so for something to do I decided to move up a few places in the bunch. That might help me forget the mosquito bite.

It was a typical French village where you could sense nothing much ever happened, but because the Tour de France was passing through they were having a typical French village fête day to celebrate our arrival. The Tricolore flew from the village hall, there was a bit of

bunting, trestle tables with food, there was drinking, merriment and laughter. The whole village had turned out to greet us and they were enjoying themselves just like the mosquito had. I felt annoyed. And then on the right-hand side, just as we left the houses and headed back into the trees, I noticed an old woman sitting on a chair outside her door. Dressed all in black like old women in France tend to be, she must have been eighty if she was a day but she had a youthful twinkle in her eye and the world's biggest smile. Her happiness was that complete happiness you have when you are eight and you are having a great time, but she must have been a grandmother – maybe even a great-grandmother. Through the noise I heard her say, '*Allez les petits*' – go my little ones. To her we were her children, and I realised she was beaming with pride that we had come to see her. I knew then it was my duty not to disappoint her: I had to do my best, to be as good a Tour rider as I could be.

There's always a touch of theatre about each Tour de France; it may be a sporting competition but more often than not there's human drama each day. There are hidden clues in the terminology that imply it's as much a show as it is a bike race. The French call each day *un étape*, which when you translate it as they intended means part of a journey; in English each day is a stage which of course is a word that has little to do with travelling and much to do with the world of acting and performing. The outfits of the main players are appropriate to the entertainment world too. Something bright to distinguish the lead part, so a distinctive yellow jersey for the star of the show ensures everyone knows where to look and who to concentrate on. Then the other parts of the story fall into place: green for the envious one, red spots for the minstrel and white for the innocence of youth. It has all the ingredients to be the perfect sporting play acted out for three weeks in the perfect setting.

To be part of the show you already have to be good – very good. And to play one of the main roles you need every ounce of your talent, every last drop of your passion, to use every piece of your history to your advantage, question every part of your commitment. The journey to Tour stardom is as much about understanding yourself as it is about preparing yourself for the physical and mental battle ahead: every aspect of your character and ability will be tested to the maximum. There'll be times when emotionally you'll be drained by the sacrifices. The selfishness involved will affect those around you and the mental preparations will have you asking questions of yourself that expose faults and nerves you didn't want touching. There'll be plenty of times when you step beyond your physical limit and have to reassess the whole adventure and yet it's a journey you have a duty to travel if you get the opportunity.

Bradley Wiggins's arrival on cycling's greatest stage hasn't been a steady progression up the stairs to stand in the Parisian limelight. It has taken a certain time, considering the talent he possesses. Leaving the comfort of French teams and removing the crutches of his first home, track racing, forced him to change his ways. There have been dazzling highs but there have also been hesitations and desperate moments. As a career plan it has resembled a complex novel with some of the difficult passages as much his own doing as they were misfortune, but like all the best books it's come good in the end.

Over the following pages Bradley Wiggins takes you through the trials and tribulations, through the tears and the training that have seen him transformed from mere contender to stand on the Champs-Elysées as a Tour de France champion.

What it took to be as good as he could be.

Robert Millar
November 2012

PROLOGUE

OPEN ROAD

Saturday 21 July, 15:33 European Summer Time
Rue de la Résistance, Bonneval
Stage 19, 2012 Tour de France

It is the last hour before the final time trial of the Tour de France, and I am within reach of my open road. In every race, that's what I'm looking for: that sense of having clear space in front of me. That's when I feel truly in control. That open road can be the moment in a summit finish in the mountains where my last teammate peels off the group and it's all down to me; it can be the point where the strongmen in a stage race emerge and the fighting for position stops, or the moment when I have to come out of the jostling pack, and ramp the pace up so that Mark Cavendish can nail a finish sprint. That's where the physical side takes over and all I have to do is turn the taps on full.

The routine for this time trial is the same one I've built and perfected over fifteen years; as I go through it thoughts and images flash through my mind. These moments are ones you live so intensely, and it's surprising what details stick. I can still see the sun coming through the one-way window of the team bus, and the woman standing outside the warm-up area. She'd been waiting for an autograph for

a while, and I think she'd been there the day before, so I found a spare race number in my suitcase and asked the mechanic to take it over to her.

I can remember every minute of every time trial in 2012. It is all so precisely timed. In each time trial, screens tick over the minutes in front of the turbo trainers where the team staff set up the fans to cool us down and the bottles of energy drinks. The first thing the staff do as soon as they arrive at the start area in the morning is to sync all the clocks with the start clock on the ramp. There's no point in timing your warm-up using your watch. It might be five minutes fast, in which case you'd arrive at the start with eight minutes to go instead of three and be sitting around for too long; worst of all, if your watch is slow, you'd get there late.

My routine counts back from the warm-up. In my head that's when my race starts: the moment when I leave the bus and get on the turbo at precisely the right second. The warm-up starts exactly half an hour before I go down the ramp; if my start time is three minutes past three, I'll get on the turbo at two thirty-three on the dot.

I like to get to the bus early, soak up the atmosphere, chat with the mechanics, make sure everything's OK with the bikes, chat through my warm-up with my trainer Tim Kerrison, make sure I know about fuelling and hydration, and then go and sit down and listen to some music. At this point we get taped up by the physios using Kinesio tape; it's like putting on your armour before going into battle. Then it's a bit of stretching in the back of the bus. Get the numbers on the suit, get changed, smear on the chammy cream, leave the suit unzipped, put a vest on.

Every now and then little demons appear in my head. Something in my mind says: what if you puncture? What if the chain snaps? What if I lose two minutes? – silly little things like that. I try to put these worries to bed, but it's a constant background noise. I've stopped thinking rationally.

Half an hour before warm-up: I start listening to my playlist. It's a dance-music mix that my former teammate Steve Cummings did for me a couple of years ago at the Tour of Lombardy. I always start listening to it at exactly the same time; any earlier and I begin getting into the zone too soon.

Twenty minutes to warm-up: shoes on.

Ten minutes to warm-up: lace them up.

Zero hour: out of the bus and on to the turbo. My warm-up takes exactly twenty minutes. I've done it for fifteen years, the same ramping up in power. It's like a test on the old Kingcycle, the rig they used at British Cycling in the 1990s. I push myself up to threshold and then I'm totally in my own world. I am in the zone.

As I turn the pedals on the turbo trainer, people pass by but I see no one. Most of the time my eyes are closed. I'm going through the ride in my head: sitting on the start ramp, flying down off it. I'm constantly sensing what it's going to feel like, imagining lying on the time-trial handlebars, or skis, as we call them.

I always pick a power to ride at. If it's 460, 470 watts, I'm imagining being there, at that power. In my head it's feeling strong, flowing, everything's working. It's easy, I'm floating along, I'm gliding, it's feeling great. I can sustain this feeling for up to an hour.

Ten minutes to start: off the turbo, into the bus, have a piss; overshoes on, gloves on, wipe down, sit down for a couple of minutes. Calm down.

Six minutes: Tim comes in. 'Let's go.' Clip on visor, go down towards the cordoned-off area around the ramp, find a chair straight away; keep going through the start process in my head. This time I remember to turn the chair round to get away from the photographers' flashbulbs. My eyes are closed under the visor but they annoyed me last time. Vincenzo Nibali, who is 3rd overall, is just starting.

Three minutes: Chris Froome comes down the ramp; I go up the steps. I'm looking at him in the distance and the

car following him, and as they get further and further out of sight my mind gets really positive, really aggressive: I'm coming after you, I'll be seeing that soon – that kind of feeling.

Chris is my teammate but there are no teammates in time trialling: it's you against the clock and you against everybody else. You are in your own little world from the moment you get on the bus in the morning. I'm concentrating and thinking it through and at that point I don't give a monkey's about anyone else in the team and what they're going to do out there today.

In this race on this specific day Chris is like the rest of them and he is my closest competitor. And I am going after him.

One minute: clip into the pedals. Go to the starter. My *directeur sportif* Sean Yates is in the radio earpiece: 'Come on, Brad, let's go and get them.' I don't need reminding; I want to nail it.

Five seconds: throw the body back on the bike; push back on to the guy holding the saddle as if my back wheel is locked into a start gate on the track.

Three: deep breath in. Fill the lungs.

Two: deep breath out.

One: breathe in, deep as I can.

Winning the Tour de France is one good ride away.

Part One

Down And Out In London And Manchester

CHAPTER 1

THE PLANNER'S DREAM GOES WRONG

IN THE LATE evening of 17 October 2010 I was sitting in the lobby of a hotel in Milan Malpensa airport, all alone with the best part of two bottles of red wine inside me. I had just climbed off in the Tour of Lombardy, a legendary one-day Classic and the last big race of the season. Lombardy had been a complete disaster with only one rider from the team finishing – I had called it a day after getting caught behind a number of crashes. It was a low-key end to several months of total disappointment and public humiliation. I had flopped at the Tour de France. I had gone through a personal crisis. The team hadn't ridden well at the Tour of Britain, our big home race. It had been a tough first year for Team Sky, and the lowest point had come when the team pulled out of the Vuelta – the Tour of Spain – after the tragic death from septicaemia of our *soigneur* Txema González. A *soigneur* is the person who takes care of us on and off the bike, and Txema had looked after all of us at the Tour and the Giro d'Italia. He was a great guy, and his sudden death had hit us hard.

Being sent to race the end-of-season events – Paris–Tours, the Giro del Piemonte, Lombardy – is not the usual

fare for team leaders and supposed Grand Tour contenders. At that time of year we are meant to be resting to rebuild our strength for the following season. But the Sky management was grabbing at straws after the nightmare end to our year. I had been sent to Italy in the hope of picking up a ProTour point or two and to put some structure into the end of my season. If it had been down to me I'd have stopped in September, but that would have made the whole winter's training harder. I'd had no option but to go on.

The team had been booked into the Holiday Inn Express at Malpensa. There were a few of us, staff and riders, and they wanted to eat together. I didn't want to sit down and chew over the race. I told them I had found a flight that evening, got the bus to the airport, walked across to a half-finished hotel and checked in. I wanted to be alone. I was flying out of Milan the next day and here I was: absolutely wasted, on my own in this soulless airport hotel. In one sense it felt quite cheery if I'm honest: at least that season was finally done. I had put a big, fat, red pen through it.

The crisis of 2010 had been building since the summer of 2009 when I came out of the Tour de France having finished 4th, completely on cloud nine. I had equalled the British record in the world's greatest bike race, but it was totally unexpected. When I had signed with the American team Garmin in 2008 I hadn't done so thinking I would try and finish in the top five in the Tour de France the following year. Far from it. In fact, my main goal was merely to earn a place in Garmin's squad for the Tour, to be there in the mountains to work for the team leader, Christian Vande Velde, a genial American who'd finished 5th in 2008. I'd won two Olympic gold medals in Beijing, in the individual and team pursuits, which had been my only goal for the previous four years. With that in the bag, by the end of 2008 I'd had enough of track racing and I just wanted to compete hard on the road.

My previous contracts with road-racing teams hadn't been much to shout about, but Garmin felt I had potential and offered me a good deal. That in turn meant I wanted to repay them by giving it my best shot. My old GB track teammate Steve Cummings had just had a pretty good year on the road after dropping his weight, so I thought I would try and do the same and see how it affected my performance. So in 2009, I was just enjoying it and loving riding my bike again. I was in a great set-up where it was a lot of fun, people didn't take themselves too seriously and we went out and got the job done. On top of all that, I went to the Tour several kilos lighter than I ever had been, with my sights raised a bit. I'd climbed well in the Giro d'Italia, I'd gone past Lance Armstrong on a couple of mountains, and I had said publicly I would try for the top twenty in the Tour. Inside, I was thinking I might even get into the top ten. The Tour went almost perfectly: I never had a bad day, I surpassed everyone's expectations in the mountains, and, with a lot of help from the lads at Garmin, I rode into Paris in 4th overall, the best British performance since Robert Millar managed the same placing in 1984. I had surprised myself as well, and from the end of the Tour I began to think, 'Imagine what I could do if I really trained for this thing properly.'

Sky was a new team being formed for 2010 by Dave Brailsford, the performance director at British Cycling, and Shane Sutton, the head coach. Until the rest day in Limoges during the 2009 Tour de France, I had never thought of joining them; I had a two-year deal with Garmin. Dave and Shane were setting out to build a British team with the publicly stated goal of winning the Tour within five years with a British rider, and doing it clean. So they were on the hunt for a rider who could challenge at the Tour. My ride in 2009 came at the perfect time: all of a sudden Dave and Shane had the chance to launch Sky with a British leader. It was like a dream come true for everybody.

Dave came to visit me in Limoges, but I didn't want to be seen talking to another team boss. The transfer season in cycling doesn't officially begin until 1 August, so I told the guys at Garmin that I needed to get some toothpaste, hopped in a team car and drove to the supermarket round the corner from the Campanile hotel where we were staying. Dave and I had a coffee in a little café in the Carrefour and he put it to me.

'Come on, this is an ideal situation. Whatever happens in this Tour from now on, we've got a starting point. You've proved you can climb with the front group in the race. It's our goal for the next five years to win the Tour, and you can be our rider to go for the overall.'

Dave explained that they would work in the same way that he and Shane and the GB team had done on the track. Shane and Dave had guided me to my second and third Olympic gold medals on the track only the year before. I had been in that environment since I had been a junior, and had had access to the expertise within their system even when I was racing on the road. The approach that Dave and Shane and British Cycling had adopted in the run-up to Beijing was a constant search for perfection: the best equipment, the best back-up staff, the best experts to research every area from diet to aerodynamics. I knew that they would dissect what it takes to do the Tour in the same way they had done with my track events, the individual pursuit and the team pursuit. It wouldn't be easy, but it was something I understood. These guys had backed me since I was eighteen.

The critical point for me was that I would be working with the same team of backroom staff I'd had up to Beijing. Even when I was planning my road campaign for 2009 with Garmin I had had help from their dietician Nigel Mitchell; and my trainer, Matt Parker, had helped me get my 4th place in the Tour. The British Cycling staff were like my second family. I'm quite proud of the fact that I was the first athlete to be signed by the World Class Performance

Plan, as it was called back then, under its first head, Peter Keen, in 1998. I've been part of it ever since as it's grown under Dave into the best national sports team in the country. I can't imagine what my career would have been if they hadn't been there. One thing is certain: I wouldn't be where I am today without them. World Class came along at the right time in my life; I could have missed it either way by five years and it would have been a completely different story.

From the moment when Dave explained about the British Cycling link, I was sold straight away. I had eighteen months of my two-year deal with Garmin to go. I loved being there; they had believed in me and had given me the chance to do something on the road. But I'm a patriotic bloke, and the chance to lead a British team in the Tour was only going to come along once. The urge to go home was too strong.

I said, 'You know I've got a contract', and Dave said, 'We'll talk, we'll work that out.' The next two weeks went by, I finished 4th in the Tour; I went straight into the velodrome in Manchester a couple of days after riding into Paris. The velodrome had been the centre of my cycling world for eleven years – it's where the track team and all their staff are based, and it was where Sky would have their office. I met with Shane, Dave, and Carsten Jeppesen, their general manager. They felt my moving to Sky would be ideal, and that was when the whole transfer process started: they had to negotiate a way for me to get out of my contract with Garmin so that I could join them.

It was all new to me – in fact, a transfer battle of this kind was almost unprecedented for cycling – and it went on for a long, long time. Much too long, as it turned out. The week after the Tour we went back to Girona, the city in south-east Spain where my wife Cath and I had set up a second home for the season, as it's the Garmin base. I went out for dinner with the Garmin team director Jonathan Vaughters. He said, 'Look, I can pay you this much, but I

can’t pay you it next year because I don’t have the budget. In two years’ time I can pay you more, and I’ll match what Sky are going to pay.’ Jonathan is a lovely guy – he understood me and he understood that my urge to join Sky wasn’t really about the money. However, I think he was pissed off with the way everyone went about it and I think he felt a little bit threatened at the idea of losing a potential leader for the Tour.

As the deal was being negotiated, a lot of the press weren’t helping either. There were journalists digging for information, ringing up Jonathan, saying, ‘I heard Brad’s going to Sky. Is this true?’ Jonathan would then get annoyed, which didn’t make negotiating any easier. At the end of November, Dave and Carsten went to New York to meet Jonathan and fought it out over six hours in an office with all their lawyers. When they came out of that meeting they’d done the deal but it was all on the basis that nothing could be said. A week later I raced at a Revolution track meeting in Manchester and I gave the press the impression I might be staying at Garmin. I had no choice but to say that because if I’d said otherwise I would have violated the terms of the deal and I wouldn’t have had a team for 2010 at all. The whole thing was a mess from start to finish and when it was over and the announcement was made it was a huge relief for everyone. But that was just the beginning.

A lot of the problems that cropped up in 2010 went back to the fact that from the end of the Tour until I signed with Sky, which was almost five months, I didn’t have a team. I remember coming home on 9 December having been presented to the press in London as a Sky rider, and that was it, it was all done. But then it was Christmas, and New Year, and in all that time I hadn’t really started training for this big race in France that we were going to try and win.

It had all been about changing teams up to that point. I’d just been drifting along, going to all these dos – parties and dinners and the rest, all for having finished 4th in the

Tour – but because I didn't have a team, I hadn't done the usual thing you do in October. Every year, when the season's finished, that's when you sit down with your coaching team to plan the next season, set out your targets and discuss how you're going to achieve them. I had done none of that. I didn't even have a proper bike to train on: I was riding around on a bike made by my old mate Terry Dolan, who has a business a few miles away from my home in Lancashire. Garmin had taken back all the Felt bikes I had been using; as I wasn't with Sky yet, I didn't have a Pinarello to ride. I couldn't go to the first Sky get-together in Manchester and I was riding around in unmarked, black kit through November and December. It was a week before Christmas by the time we got it all signed and I was told that I would be looked after by Rod Ellingworth, who was Mark Cavendish's trainer and had joined Sky as race coach; Matt Parker, my trainer since 2007, would be working with me as well. But I still hadn't started training.

On 4 January I needed to be in London for the team launch at the Millbank Tower, a massive place down on the Embankment. I remember arriving at the hotel in London the previous night and shaking hands with a load of people I'd never met and who I was supposed to be leading. Someone told me that Thomas Löfkvist was frustrated that I'd signed because he had joined on the assumption that he would be the leader in the big Tours.

The hype around the team was immense. We had put our cards on the table: Sky wanted to win the Tour de France with a British rider within five years, and win it clean. The crowd at the launch was huge; when we came on to the stage to be introduced by Sky's Dermot Murnaghan, I was asked to stand in front of the other riders. I didn't want to at first; I wasn't keen to be at the head of it all. Already I felt uneasy about being the centre of attention. I spoke to the press there but had had no briefing about what I should or shouldn't say. I started babbling about how I would have

to learn to talk bullshit; I've no idea where it came from. It was all completely new to me.

Straight after the launch we flew to Valencia for the first training camp. I was really unfit, and struggled for the first few days, but all the cameras were there and only one question was being asked: can you win the Tour within five years? But even at that point I still hadn't sat down with anyone for a phased planning session that answered the basic question: right, how are we going to do this? We simply had no time to stop and reflect.

We rushed the race programme out and then drifted along. I said I had ridden the Giro d'Italia in 2009, and that it had seemed to work really well for me, so I would do the Giro again; before we knew it we were in April, and then we were off to the Giro. I won the prologue because I'd been training for that, and was in reasonable shape until a week to go. I was lying 7th by then, but I was beginning to feel really tired, so I dropped back from the lead group on one of the key mountain stages and then rode through to the end. Even if I hadn't sat up I wouldn't have been able to stay with the leaders. The problem was that everyone was watching me; if I wasn't physically up to it, it was easier to drop back and say I was saving myself for the Tour de France rather than having to explain to everyone that night what was going on. I knew I was going to have to save myself for the Tour or I would have nothing left, but the physical damage was done anyway.

Before the Tour we went on a training camp in the Alps to look at the mountain stages but during those few days, I just felt terrible. I hadn't done the work and I didn't perform. On the day we checked out the Col de la Madeleine, one of the biggest mountains in the Tour and a key climb in 2010, Michael Barry – the Canadian who was my personal watchdog for that Tour – was supposed to do about half an hour on the front and then I'd take over. It was something similar to how we might work it on the Tour, with the lead *domestique* – team worker – making the pace

to enable me, the team leader, to sit in his slipstream and save my strength. But it didn't work out like that: he dropped me at the foot of the sixteen-mile climb. Instead of me surging past him to take on the lead as he fell back, I was left behind. From there on in to the Tour it should have been apparent that I wasn't in the shape to get a podium finish. It was as simple as that.

The pressure during the Tour that year was massive. It was Team Sky's first year in cycling, the stated goal was to win the Tour, I had finished 4th the year before and the natural assumption was that I would perform better than before. The amount of media attention was immense, because no British team had been in this position. It was new to me too, and I didn't deal with it well.

The prologue was a nightmare – I wouldn't normally expect to finish 77th, even though I was riding in the rain – and for the whole race I was carrying the effects of a nasty crash on day two. I got through that, moved up to 14th overall after the stage across the cobbles of Northern France to Arenberg, and coming towards the Alps at the end of the first week I was feeling good. I was beginning to think I might be OK, even on the first big Alpine climb, the Col de la Ramaz on the stage to Morzine. I asked the team to ride on the front there, to set a decent pace, but by the time we got to the finish at Avoriaz I simply hadn't recovered. I was hanging on all the way up the final climb, counting down the kilometres until the point where I simply couldn't hold the lead group any more. When I look back now I'm amazed I clung on for so long, not accepting what was meant to be, that I was going to get dropped. As I crossed the line a journalist asked me if that was the end of my Tour. I told him where to go.

I had no option but to keep playing the game, keep telling people what they wanted to hear even though inside I knew it wasn't going to happen. I particularly remember the first rest day in Morzine, the very next day. The team was holding a press conference in the evening and I said to

Dave, ‘I am not going, it’s just not on, what am I going to say?’ His answer was, ‘Come on, Brad, just head down there. Say you’re going to continue riding, and just keep up that fighting spirit. The press don’t like people giving up, so just keep going.’

That was what I did. I tried to fight on but it’s hard to fight when you haven’t got any form because ultimately it depends on what strength you have in your legs. Every mountain day became a grind as I wasn’t quite good enough to stay with the first group when the racing got serious. I did start to come round a little bit in the third week and I had a couple of decent days. I was in the break one day in the Pyrenees and I had a good last time trial for 9th place. In fact, I was good enough physically to have a chance of winning it but the wind changed quite a bit so I rode in tougher weather than the guys who filled the top positions in the standings. I was the best of all the guys who rode in the harder conditions, but it didn’t count for anything.

So much had changed from the year before. All of a sudden I was leading a team – or I was supposed to be leading a team – and I didn’t really know how I’d got there. As far as building up to the Tour went, I had repeated the training and race programme that I had followed the year before. I thought it would work but it was all on a wing and a prayer. I finished 23rd in the Tour, which shows I was fit; what I was lacking was the last 10 per cent that it takes to compete with the best guys; for example, when we went over a certain altitude – about 1,600m we later worked out – I was struggling. As a result I was barely hanging on whenever the overall contenders began slugging it out.

Mentally it was tough. I felt I had let a lot of people down. I’m quite good at remaining positive though, and that’s what I was trying to do. But throughout that whole season I felt alone. I felt I had no one to talk to; I didn’t really have a coach to ring up on a daily basis, to give me constant feedback and support. My feelings finally got the

better of me in the Pyrenees, at the summit finish at Ax-Trois-Domaines, where I came in 36th, four minutes behind the favourites. Unusually, I was on my own when I got back to our camper van on the mountaintop; there was a wall of press waiting for me when I came out to ride back down the climb to the team bus, which was parked at the bottom. One of them, an Australian journalist I've known for many years, asked me what had happened. I just opened up: 'I'm fucked. I've got nothing. I don't have the form, it's as simple as that. I just haven't got it as I did last year. I just feel consistently mediocre. Not brilliant, not shit, just mediocre. I just haven't got it right this year.' It might not have been my most professional interview ever, but it was almost as if I was tired of the lies. It's incredibly hard telling people what they want to hear when you know the opposite is true. I didn't want to go on flogging a dead horse.

By the end of the Tour it was clear that we needed to look at where it had all gone wrong. There had to be a review of how we had built up to it, taking in everything: my racing programme, how we selected the team, how we dealt with the media, how we rode the race. At one point late on, Dave said to me, 'Look, we know you've got the machine. We know you can do it. You finished 4th last year. We just need to figure out how to get your body working properly.' But after Paris the whole team went their separate ways: we were all exhausted, and at the end of the Tour, all you want to do is get home. I didn't ride my bike for a week and then the Sunday after the Tour de France finished, I took part in the Manchester Sky Ride, one of a series of mass-participation cycle rides where thousands of members of the public could get on their bikes and pedal along with the stars.

That night I was sitting at home when my phone rang. It was my mum and she said, 'George has had a heart attack.' I said, 'Fucking hell', or something, and I hung up on her. I

had absolutely no idea what to say. George was my granddad.