STEPHEN ROCHE

Born to Ride

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About the Book

On 6 September 1987, Stephen Roche touched greatness. Victory at the World Cycling Championship in Austria completed a near-unprecedented ‘triple crown’ that included triumphs in the same year at the Tour de France and the Giro d’Italia. In April, against all odds, he fought his own team and an angry, partisan Italian crowd who spat at him on his way to taking the Giro. In July a superhuman effort at La Plagne saw him secure the yellow jersey just before he blacked out. Roche’s victory in Austria confirmed his virtuosity.

Born to Ride, Stephen Roche’s first full autobiography, uses his best year as the starting point to explore the rest of his life. He doesn’t hold back as he examines the many ups and downs of his time on and off the bike, scrutinising victories, defeats, rivals, serious injury, doping allegations and agonizing family breakdown.

At the heart of the book lies an enigma. For all his charm and rare, natural talent, beneath the surface lies an incredible tenacity and determination. Roche finally reveals himself as a smiling assassin; a master-strategist who lives to attack.

About the Author

Stephen Roche was born in Dundrum, Dublin, Ireland. As a road racing cyclist, over the course of 13 years, he recorded 58 professional career wins, including the Tour de France, the Giro d'Italia and the World Road Racing Championship, all of which he won in 1987. Since retiring, Stephen has set up and built Stephen Roche Cycling Holidays and Training Camps, based in Majorca and worked as a commentator for Eurosport. *Born to Ride* is his first full autobiography.

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To my mother and father.
None of this would have happened without you.

Stephen Roche
with Peter Cossins

Born to Ride

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PROLOGUE

AUSTRIA: 6 SEPTEMBER 1987

LYING IN MY bed in the hotel room I can hear the rain hammering down outside. Yesterday the temperature had been well over 30 degrees, but it feels an awful lot cooler now. I smile, and guess that Sean Kelly, lying in bed across our shared room, is probably smiling too.

I don't suppose either of us really fancies the prospect of spending up to seven hours enduring lashing rain and muscle-numbing cold in one of the toughest and most important races of the season, but if you're an Irish cyclist you're not going to be unfamiliar with those conditions. I won't say I like the bad weather, but it suits me better than the heat. Although I like the sun on my back as much as anyone when racing, I know the heat doesn't entirely agree with me.

It isn't the rain that has got me smiling, though. Hearing the growing buzz of activity in the building around us and imagining the same kind of activity in hotels throughout Villach, the Austrian ski resort hosting the 1987 World Championships, I can picture my 160-odd opponents gathering their thoughts ahead of the biggest one-day race of the season.

I'm sure half of them are thinking: 'Oh shit, it's raining.' That will immediately ensure they are below their normal level, so I can count them out as realistic rivals. Then there are another few per cent who don't ride well in the wet. I can count them out too. Then there are the guys who think

they’re in form but aren’t. I can strike them off the list as well. Then there are the guys who are going to crash. They’re gone too.

Consequently, among my 167 opponents who will be racing for the honour of wearing the rainbow bands of the world champion, there are just a few who are realistically in contention. I don’t know whether others count me among them, but I do know that if I can keep my nose clean and stay clear of trouble, there is a good chance I am going to be in the final shake-up. It’s been that kind of season: everything has gone my way and the sudden arrival of the rain fires my optimism, which had dimmed in recent weeks.

Just a couple of weeks earlier I wouldn’t have even entertained the slightest thought of victory at the Worlds. After the Tour, I had ridden some very lucrative criteriums in Belgium, Holland and France. One of them was on a circuit over the cobbled climb of the Oude Kwaremont, one of the key sections in the Tour of Flanders. We had to go over it 16 times – a crazy test for a criterium. It was wet too, making it even tougher. At one point my rear wheel slipped on the cobbles and I hurt my thigh muscle. I thought I’d torn something. I realised the injury was probably due to fatigue. I had to ease off.

Although the money was good, I cancelled my remaining criterium commitments and went to join my wife Lydia and young children, Nicolas and Christel, at my in-laws’ holiday home on the Ile d’Oléron, near La Rochelle. I rested for a week, before starting to train again for the Worlds, getting up every day at six in the morning to avoid the heat. Next up, I rode in a series of three pre-Worlds preparation races in Italy with my Carrera team. I was in good form, but still kind of sluggish.

From Italy I had ridden across into Austria with my Irish teammates, Sean Kelly, Martin Earley and Paul Kimmage. We had arrived in Villach a couple of days before the road race, where, in theory, I had the chance to become just the

second rider in history, after Eddy Merckx, to win the Giro, Tour and Worlds in the same season. But Merckx was a rider apart, untouchable, a phenomenon. His achievement could not be repeated. Besides, everyone – the great Merckx included – insisted that the course in Villach would suit a rider with a strong finishing sprint, which counted me out. Defending champion Moreno Argentin was most people's favourite, but our own Sean Kelly was getting good reviews as well. For the whole year, my objective for the Worlds had been to do what I could to help Sean take the rainbow jersey. The so-called Triple Crown hadn't entered my thoughts.

That suited me because it removed a lot of expectation. I'd been riding very hard and leading a team since February. I didn't need any more pressure. I didn't have it in my head that I could be world champion because everyone was saying it's a flat race. I was there to make up the numbers, to help Sean, the one Irish pro with a fearsome finishing sprint. That was it.

However, when I rode the circuit myself, I re-evaluated. I went out with Sean, Martin, Kimmage and our final teammate, Alan McCormack, in the 30+ degree heat, rode a lap and said to myself: 'This circuit ain't for no sprinter.' It was easy for one lap, not too tough at all, but we were set to do 23. I didn't tell anyone else, but I was sure it wasn't going to be a course for a sprinter. There were two climbs on it for starters. Going up past the start/finish line there was a climb of maybe 3 or 4km – a long drag really – but we would be going up it 23 times, so it would get increasingly difficult. There was another hill on the far side of the circuit. This one was much steeper. It was this second hill that got me thinking for the first time that, given good form and good luck, I might have a chance.

I still felt it was just a small chance, though. My season had been injury-free, but in the days leading up to the Worlds the knee problems that had all but wiped out the

previous season for me had returned. I'd had pain in my left knee since those post-Tour criteriums and it was getting worse. Even the friction of my legwarmers over my knee made riding agony. I could only deal with it by cutting a hole in them around the sore point.

The heat, though, was beyond my control. The day before the race it had been 35, 36 degrees. I'd been saying to myself: 'Jeez, if it's going to be as hot as this, I'm going to suffer tomorrow.' I'd met up with Carrera directeur Davide Boifava and his assistant, Sandro Quintarelli, and bought us all an ice cream. They couldn't believe I was having an ice cream, consuming all of those calories the day before the Worlds. They told me the Italian riders would never consider doing such a thing, but I felt it would have done me more harm not having it and wanting it, than actually having it. Besides, the Worlds wasn't my race to win, was it?

But, lying in bed, hearing the rain slapping the window, I'm thinking: 'This will make it interesting.' Perhaps things might go my way.

I get dressed and join my teammates for breakfast. In the middle of it I am called across to the reception desk to take a phone call. It's my friend Angelo ringing me from Paris. He tells me I can achieve what Merckx has done. I'm listening to him, not really believing him, saying: 'Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah! OK, OK. I'll talk to you later.' I put the phone down and notice I've been fiddling with something. It's the key to room 13 that someone has left on the desk. I'm a bit taken aback. I'm not overly superstitious, but the number 13 seems to have some significance for me. It feels a bit strange, but it's nothing. Just a coincidence.

When the race gets under way I have three raincoats on – two light ones and a heavy plastic one over the top. Ahead of us lie 23 laps of the 12km circuit – 276km in total. I decide to keep the heavy raincoat on for the first hour or so. The rain continues to pour down, but after a couple of

hours it starts to ease off and it's a relief to get rid of my top layer when it does. During these early laps I am just staying in the wheels, sheltering from the wind behind other riders, freewheeling almost. That's obviously an exaggeration, but that's how easy I want it to feel, so that I can save everything I can for the end.

As usual, I've given a lot of thought to my choice of gearing over the last couple of days leading into the race. Almost everyone else has selected a straight-through 12–18 block, the seven sprockets on the rear wheel providing a uniform range of gears. However, my thinking is that I want to be able to use the 18 as my last sprocket if it comes down to the crunch on the final climb during the last lap. When you have a 12–18 block and select the 18 to make an attack, the rear mech can easily end up caught in the wheel because it is sitting so close to the spokes. So I've opted for a 12–20 block, which means that I can use my big chainring with the 18 because it will be my second-last sprocket. It should give me more leverage and therefore enable me to generate more power than someone who is riding the equivalent gear ratio on the small ring, which may prove significant at the end of 270-odd kilometres of racing.

As the laps tick by, I remain in the wheels, saving energy by letting others sit in the wind. Every time I hit the two hills, I put it in the small ring and pedal as easily as I can, using as little energy as possible. Three hours in and I take off another jacket. The race is starting to open up. From time to time groups of riders break away but Sean, Paul, Martin, Alan and I aren't worrying because so far there have always been others prepared to bring them back. Argentin's Italian team is 13-strong, while all of the major cycling powers including France, Holland, Belgium and Spain have teams of 12. Martin Earley and Paul Kimmage are also doing a good job in keeping the pack together, but it's complicated trying to know when to commit resources

from a five-man team that's vastly underpowered compared to many others.

The wet conditions provide another complicating factor: crashes. There are plenty of them, especially on the descents, which are treacherous. Fortunately, the Irish lads are staying upright.

With five laps to go the speed increases significantly. Italian leader Argentin goes clear with Holland's Teun van Vliet, Spain's Juan Fernández and Belgium's Jan Nevens. We sit tight for a while as the French organise the chase behind. The four leaders open a gap of almost a minute. The French are struggling to get it back. Martin joins them in driving the pursuit. The gap is coming down as we hurtle through the start/finish line to complete the fastest lap of the race. With less than four laps to the finish, I come out of the wheels for the first time, driving on the front of the bunch with Martin. We're bringing everyone back up to Argentin's group, but we know there's sure to be an attack when it comes back together.

With three laps to go the speed is relentlessly fast. Riders are consistently going out of the back now, their hopes of victory gone as the main pack leaves them. Belgium's Claude Criquielion attacks. France's Gilbert Duclos-Lassalle and Italy's new young star, Maurizio Fondriest, jump across to join him. I need to keep the race together for Sean, so that he has a shot at the sprint finish, but also keep the pace high enough that riders continue to drop out of contention. My acceleration splits the peloton for a while, taking 20-odd riders across to join the three leaders. The bigger group behind soon comes back up to us again, though.

On the penultimate lap, Holland's Erik Breukink, who had pushed me hard at the Giro, goes off solo. But there's no chance of one man staying clear with everyone this committed. The USA's Andy Hampsten tries his luck, and I chase him down.

Coming into the final lap and going into the first climb for the last time, another small group goes clear. I jump to the front of the peloton with Sean on my wheel and we ride away across to them. I go straight to the front and lead up the climb in my big ring.

It is almost the first time I've gone up this climb in the big ring and for most of the next 3km I am out of the saddle, winding it up as we go over the top. We've got a gap. I look around and see we've got a nice bunch of lads with us. Argentin is there, as are Criquielion, Germany's Rolf Gölz, Holland's Breukink, van Vliet and Steven Rooks, France's Marc Madiot, Denmark's Rolf Sørensen, Canada's Steve Bauer, Spain's Fernández and Switzerland's Guido Winterberg. There are 13 of us, and Switzerland's Jogi Müller joins us to make it 14 before the final climb.

I keep riding hard at the front to make sure the main bunch can't close the gap. Every time the pace decreases, I go to the front again. It's not just a case of going to the back, coming through and doing my turn. I am doing more than my turn to ensure the peloton remains out of range.

We drop down the descent and head around to the steeper climb for the final time. There is a flurry of attacks but Sean and I chase them down. One guy does get dropped, though. Madiot falls out of contention. We're back to 13 again. That number.

We hammer up the climb. I've still got Sean on my wheel. As we go over the top with about 4km remaining, I think to myself: 'If I keep riding like this, I'm not going to be able to lead Sean out for the sprint.' I drop towards the back of the line to get a bit of a breather.

A couple more attempts are neutralised, then van Vliet attacks and Gölz takes off after him. A gap starts to open so I accelerate away from the back of the line, jump onto Gölz's wheel and we join up with van Vliet. Winterberg and Sørensen are quick to follow, making it five at the front.

I’m expecting more riders to respond, but guess that everyone is waiting for Argentin to commit himself. He’s the favourite, he’s the only rider from the race’s strongest team and he’s defending the title. But the gap widens and I start wondering: ‘What am I going to do?’ I know I’m not going to beat these guys in a straight-up sprint: Gölz and van Vliet are much, much faster than me. I decide I’d better hold fire until the group comes back together again.

It soon becomes clear, though, that Sean’s group isn’t going to get back to us. ‘OK, I’ve got to do something myself now because I don’t want to finish fifth out of five,’ I think to myself. My brain is ticking over rapidly, sizing up the situation. We drop down the descent into the final corner and up to the left I can see the finishing line, 400 metres away. The approach to it is flattish to start with, then rears up a bit underneath a bridge 150 metres short of the line.

In a few split seconds, I analyse everything. I know there is going to be some tension between Gölz and van Vliet as they are equally good in the sprint. If I surprise them by attacking, van Vliet knows that if he responds Gölz will chase him and will win because he’ll be sprinting from a better position. If Gölz goes after me, he knows that van Vliet will chase him down and win for the same reason. Neither man will want the other to win having coming off their wheel. ‘OK, that’s those two covered,’ I think. Sørensen is currently on the front, the worst position to be in as he won’t see the attacks coming, so that’s him covered as well.

I’m fourth in line but I have Winterberg on my wheel. If I’m right, he represents my biggest threat. How am I going to work this out? We swing in a wide arc around the corner into the finishing straight. The wind is coming off the right, so automatically we are hugging the left-hand side of the road. I wait, and wait, and wait.

I know that if I go on the right, I'll be heading into the wind with Winterberg on my wheel. Ultimately, he will come off my wheel and beat me. That's not the solution. I want to go and take no prisoners.

I keep waiting, noticing the gap against the left-hand barriers starting to narrow as Sørensen drifts left in the wind. It is beginning to disappear altogether when I accelerate, the instant zip provided by the 18 sprocket immediately putting some vital distance between Winterberg and me. I shoot down the blind side, past Sørensen's left shoulder just as he's about to shut the gap along the barriers. I'm out into the open and can sense that there's no one on my wheel. I guess that Winterberg has tried to follow my line of attack but has been baulked by Sørensen, who in turn is waiting for Gölz and van Vliet to react.

I get 10 metres clear, pumping the pedals as hard and as fast as I can. I take a quick look under my arm and can't quite believe it. 'Where are they? I'm going to win this thing.' I've not won a championship since taking the Irish junior crown in 1977. I never lead out and win sprints.

Then it's over. I throw both arms in the air, coast across the line. I've won the World Championship. I look back and see Sean sprinting for second place, but Argentin, the man everyone had to beat, is too quick and claims silver. Juan Fernández takes the bronze. But even as they are finishing, Sean has his arms in the air, an instinctive, heartfelt act from a genuine friend. He rides alongside me and, for a moment, we have our arms around each other. Then the press descend on us. There are microphones and mayhem.

'Stephen Roche, world champion, you've won the Triple Crown. How did you do it?'

CHAPTER 1

FROM PINCUSHIONS TO PEUGEOT

ALTHOUGH THERE WAS no racing history in my family at all, cycling did play a vital part in bringing my parents together. My father, Larry Roche, rode everywhere on his bike and often went out touring in the countryside around Dublin. My mother, Bunny Samson, was one of a group of girls who wanted to form a touring club but didn't know where to start. Larry offered his services and organised rides around Dublin for the group. The two of them started as friends and their relationship developed from there.

I was born on 28 November 1959, the second of six children. My elder sister Maria is 11 months older than me, then I came along, and eighteen months later came Carol. My brother Jude's about a year younger than her, then Laurence and finally Pamela. It's a large family by today's standards.

Like most kids I must have been three or four when my parents got me my first bike. It was a small blue children's bike that they bought at a second-hand shop down in Ranelagh where my mother was brought up. I never really had any big interest in cycling as a young kid. Like everyone else I played a bit of football, went swimming and just knocked around. I also worked with my dad on his milk round.

Later on I had a Chopper, which I used to deliver papers with a friend of mine, Derek Doyle. We delivered all around my estate and his. We used to earn one penny per paper, which wasn't much, but I would ask people to keep the papers for me and at the end of the week I'd go around and collect them and sell them back to the paper mill.

I guess seeing me delivering papers on my bike planted a seed in the head of Pat Flynn, one of my parents' neighbours. It was she who first thought that cycling might be the sport for me. Our estate was U-shaped and in the middle of that U was a playing field where the neighbourhood kids used to meet to play football. One day, I would have been thirteen years old, I was playing in goal when Pat walked off the usual path across the field to talk to me.

Pat knew everything that went on in the neighbourhood and said she had seen me out on my bike and seemed to like it. She explained that a new cycling club would be meeting outside the H. Williams supermarket the following Wednesday night and that if I was interested in riding a bit more I should go along. I said OK. That was my first step towards a bike-racing career and Pat's husband Steve would soon help me take many more. A good rider and one of the best wheelbuilders I've ever met, Steve quickly became a very good friend and mentor, taking me out on training rides and showing me not so much how to ride a bike, but how to enjoy the bike.

The club that met that Wednesday outside the local supermarket was a section of the Orwell Wheelers, a Dublin bike club that had just re-formed. Three guys ran it – Paddy Doran, Noel O'Neill and the late Noel Hammond. Noel O'Neill had become the club coach after finishing his own racing career, which had reached international level, while Paddy was still racing at that time. Noel Hammond was one of the mainstays of the club and later took me on one of my first international trips to Junior Week in

Harrogate. Every Wednesday night we'd meet up and ride in the countryside surrounding Dublin.

Encouraged by Noel, Paddy and Steve, I started to get a taste for riding and, not before too long, for racing as well. My first victory came in a slow bicycle race. The idea was to take as long as you possibly could to cover a short course. My victory prize was a pincushion, which my parents still have at home now.

I can just about remember my first road race victory as a 13-year-old. I was away in a break with a friend of mind called Paul Tansey, whose dad used to run Joe Daly Cycles in Dundrum. It was Joe who organised the charity race every year from Dundrum to Enniskerry and back that would, many years later, see my son Nicolas make his first competitive racing appearance. Anyway, this circuit we were on featured a very steep descent down from the Golden Ball bar, then a sharp left-hand turn into a long finishing straight on Ballyogan Road. We were going so quick down the hill that Paul missed the left turn and I only just managed to make it. I veered left onto a false flat that was perhaps a mile long and gave it all I had, my legs poking out all over the place. But I managed to hold on and win.

I liked the atmosphere of racing straight off. It also appealed because you could just turn up at an event and race. You didn't need to get picked like you did in football, where you'd play with your mates from Monday to Saturday then on Sunday end up sitting on the bench watching them play because you weren't good enough. With cycling, I would ride with my friends all week and then race with them on the weekend. It didn't matter whether you won, lost or even finished. The important thing was that we were able to compete together.

That winter Paddy Doran gave me an old frame and Steve Flynn gave me a pair of wheels to go with it. I've still got the front wheel from that set now, more than 30 years

on, and it's still dead straight. Someone else got me a pair of brakes and I built the bike up, sprayed the frame blue and raced on it the following season. It was a 23-inch frame and I ended up riding a 22, so it was a bit big for me, but that bike gave me a few good runs until the frame broke a week before the National Championships. The timing of that wasn't great, but luckily my grandfather gave me the money to buy my first bike, which was a Mercian. To repay his generosity, I did some maintenance work on his caravan and his blue Fiat 124, which he later sold to me when I got my driving licence. I still have that bike at home in Ireland now and plan to get it renovated.

My parents very rarely came to see me racing because of family and work commitments. The important thing for my parents was that I was riding my bike in the fresh air and that I was enjoying it. They never thought, and no one else did either, that cycling could become a way of life. They were more concerned that I get my schooling done and get started with an apprenticeship.

In fact, my dad didn't use to hide the fact that he was against me getting heavily involved in racing because it might interfere with my schooling. He was also worried about me getting injured. Consequently, the first time I won a prize in a road race I hid my success from him. I say 'success', but I didn't actually win the race in question. I was the first finisher on high-pressure tyres – in fact, I was the only rider on high-pressure tyres. I won a set of draughts and chess in a box. I brought it home and had to hide it in the house. One day somebody found it and the question was asked of us where it had come from. I admitted, 'Er, well, I kind of won a prize in a race, you know …'

I'm sure my parents knew full well what I was up to. In fact, I used to talk about my cycling with Dad when I'd go out on the milk round with him. I had been helping him out there since I was five years old. Even when I went back

home at the weekends or in the winter when I was racing I'd still go out and deliver the milk with him. I didn't need to, but I used to love the contact. I'd get up at three or four in the morning, go out on the rounds with Dad and be back home by nine or ten, feeling really happy that I'd done a day's work.

A large part of the enjoyment came from being with him. He liked having me along and I learned so much from him. He was so pleasant and polite to people, so professional in his job. He would do everything to the letter and his service was always 100 per cent for the client. I think that definitely rubbed off on me and subsequently on my son, Nicolas, in terms of our interaction with people and with the media. It's something that you either have or haven't got.

Even now, it's incredible going out with my dad because everyone remembers him. He used to be a milkman in Dun Laoghaire 50 years ago, a milkman in Dollymount 20 years ago, and he was a security officer at the Superquinn store in Blackrock 10 years ago. I've met people from all those different decades today who recognise him and all have a great word to say about the man. That's incredible in its own way. My mum and dad were my role models. It wasn't as if they hammered into me that you had to be nice to people; it was more a case of good manners starting at home.

I was never really one for school. In fact, I was considered a bit of a write-off, but I got my Junior Certificate and at the age of 15 or 16 I started my apprenticeship to be a fitter at Hughes Dairy, where my dad worked. The one thing that Dad always insisted on when us kids started working was that we had to give Mum our wages. We would come in from work on payday, hand over our pay packets and Mum would take out what she needed and give us something back. Us six kids all had to contribute to the household when we could.

I guess my dad's view was quite traditional, in as much as he felt that he was preparing us kids for later in life when we were working. In those days you would give your money to your wife, as she'd be the one looking after the house. I didn't mind that at all and never thought to question it, mainly because I really enjoyed the work I was doing. I used to love going to work in the mornings. I always used to clock in at 8.23 for an 8.30 start and was very proud of being so punctual. I'm not quite the same now, though …

I learned so much from the guys I used to work with and became particularly skilful with my hands. Even now I can do almost anything with them. I've built houses, refitted apartments and done renovations. I've also taken apart and rebuilt more cars than I can remember. When it comes to things like that I'm not afraid of anything, which is thanks to my dad and to the people I used to work with. In fact, those skills enabled me to earn some decent money from odd-jobs that went straight into my pocket.

One of my friends from school, David Kneeshaw, who had also been told that he wasn't likely to get anywhere, had gone into carpentry and the two of us started a bit of a business on the side. My maintenance work gave me experience in plumbing, central heating, refrigeration, welding and the mechanical side of things, so if neighbours or friends wanted a kitchen fitted David would put it in and I'd do the plumbing. David left Ireland for the USA in 1987 and he now has 30-odd guys working for him, fitting libraries and bars with high-quality furniture. We're still friends and we often laugh about those early days.

If I'm asked what I would have done if racing hadn't turned out how it did for me, I look back on those days and think I would have probably done OK. Certainly I was doing well enough by the time I was 18 to be able to buy my own car, a Ford Cortina 1600E, replacing the Fiat 124 that my

granddad had sold to me. I kept the Cortina for 20 more years, restoring it two or three times over that period.

My racing career was advancing steadily, but was set back in 1977 because I had ingrowing toenails on both big toes. The pain got so bad I couldn't put a bike shoe on my foot. One evening I went up to Phoenix Park to watch the Tuesday night racing and was pumping up some tyres for a friend of mine behind a car. On the other side of this car, two guys were talking about a rider they knew, saying that he had been a flash in the pan but was now nowhere to be seen. He had been good, they said, but then the pressure had apparently got to him and he'd disappeared. One of them mentioned my name, but even before then I knew they were talking about me, and that lit a fuse.

The very next day I went into the Mater Hospital and had my two big toenails removed. I had no idea what the procedure was going to entail or the pain that was going to result. The memory of the pain gives me goose bumps even now when I think about it. They pulled them off and sent me straight out. Of course, I didn't think to take in sandals. So I had to press my bandaged toes into my normal shoes. Leaving the hospital I had to hold on to the fence as I walked up the road because I was in agony every time I put pressure on my feet. But having that procedure gave me a real spur, because before too long I was pain-free again.

I made the Irish Junior Championship my goal that season. I ended up in the front group with Lenny Kirk, who was a strong rider and very quick in a sprint. I realised that I had to wear him down because I knew he would beat me in a sprint. I would ride fast as I went by him, then ease up, then ride fast again, forcing him to push hard to stay with me, deliberately breaking up his rhythm. Finally, I got away from him and took the title.

I would never win the senior Irish title. In fact, the next time I tasted success in a major championship was when I won the Worlds in 1987. I had a good chance in the 1980

National Cyclo-Cross Championship, having won a cross event the week before. It was just before I went to France and going off there as a national champion would have been nice. But I skidded on black ice in the car on the way to the race and I took that as a sign to head back home.

I already felt pretty confident about my ability by that point, though. In 1979, aged just 19, I'd become the youngest rider ever to win the Health Race, previously known as the Rás Tailteann. That year was the first time the Irish Health Board had sponsored the race and the first time that the three federations in Ireland had come together to support the event. Up against me there was the great Billy Kerr, who was part of the Northern Ireland Cycling Federation, and John Mangan, from the National Cycling Association, who was racing at the time in France. I was the young kid from the big city, riding against these guys from the country who were thought to be much, much harder than city boys, so I was going to have my work cut out.

On my team I had Alan McCormack and Oliver McQuaid, and I ended up in the same kind of situation with Alan that I would revisit a few years later with Roberto Visentini at the Giro d'Italia. We both wanted to win, only one of us could, and neither of us would give the other any leeway. I was in great form that summer to the point where I even won a very fast uphill sprint on the stage into Westport – and I never really won sprints, ever. On one stage Alan McCormack got three minutes up on me in the break and I took off from the bunch and got across to him. I believed I was the strongest rider in that race and was determined to show it.

I was leading the race going into the time trial on the penultimate day, but shortly after the start I broke a spoke. There was no way I was going to jeopardise my chance of overall victory by stopping and changing a wheel, so I carried on with the brake rubbing slightly and won the time

trial. On the final day we rode into Dublin to finish in Phoenix Park. I've got some footage of that stage and in it I'm on the front heading into Dublin and everyone is lined out behind me. Occasionally, you can see me waving to people that I recognise at the roadside. Eventually I got away with two other guys and left them to fight it out in the sprint knowing I had the overall sewn up. That was my first major stage race victory and also the first time I realised I got better and better as races went on.

I'd also been competing against Robert Millar, Phil Anderson and other top amateurs at the Tour of Ireland. I was riding on the Irish team there and I remember having a number of run-ins with both of those two. Coming into Dublin on the last day, I was in a breakaway with Millar, who was riding for a composite British Airways team, and I was threatening the race lead held by one of his teammates, John Shortt. Millar was trying everything to unsettle me. He wouldn't allow my team manager, Peter Crinnion, to come up in the car alongside us to give me time checks. Every time Peter came up in the car, Millar would get in between us, so Peter couldn't talk to me. Years later, I remember Millar saying that he and Phil had seen something in me because it had taken both of them to keep me in check and they were the best amateurs in France at that time.

It was extremely useful for me to have someone like Peter Crinnion around as a mentor during that time. Peter had raced as an amateur on the Continent, spoke French and still had lots of friends over there. He knew how the system worked in France, and I'd pick his brain all the time to hear about his experiences and get his advice. I really valued his opinion. For me, when Crinnion spoke it was like God had spoken, because he'd been there and done it. Peter was always very positive about things and when I eventually went to France I still talked to him every week on the phone, giving him updates on my training and my

condition. He'd won races like the Route de France, which for many years was regarded as the amateur Tour de France, so he was well aware of the kind of pitfalls to avoid.

As far as racing went, during my early years in Ireland I never thought of it offering me a career. It was something that I was good at, but I wasn't overenthusiastic about my chances of making it, because the only Irishman who had in those years was Sean Kelly. But Kelly came from the countryside and everyone knew he had nails for breakfast. I was only a Dub, a guy from the big city, and I was in awe of Sean's achievements even at that stage. I'm not just saying that either. Last winter my parents were clearing out some stuff from their attic and found an old scrapbook in which I'd carefully stuck clippings about Sean's exploits.

It was only when I got onto the Olympic team that things started snowballing and a career in cycling began to look like a possibility. At that point, Lucien Bailly, who was the technical director of the French national team, came over to Ireland at the request of the Irish federation for a weekend of cycling with the national squad. We rode from Dublin down to Birr, about 60 miles away. That night he gave a presentation and the next day we rode back. The weather was awful and I was riding in the yellow oilskin that my dad had given me for delivering the milk, but I remember I rode pretty well going out to Birr and on the way back.

During the weekend Lucien Bailly took me aside and told me that I was wasting my time in Ireland, that I should be in Europe preparing for the Moscow Olympics. I told him I'd love to go, but didn't know anybody over in Europe. He said he knew of a club and that he could have a chat with them. When he got back to France he spoke to Mickey Wiegant and Claude Escalon at the Athlétic Club de Boulogne-Billancourt (ACBB). They wrote to me and said

they could find a place for me for the following season, the year of the Moscow Olympics.

When ACBB's offer came through, I got six months' leave of absence from the dairy and they very generously gave me £500 as a send-off. My workmates at the dairy had a collection that raised another £500. Joe Daly Cycles had a collection as well, and they also got 500 quid for me. With a similar amount of my own saved, I left work on 10 February 1980 and the next day took a flight to Paris to join my new club. I had £2,000 in my pocket, a saddle, a set of handlebars in my suitcase, and hardly a word of French.

I felt nervous about leaving. It was going to be the first occasion I'd spent any significant time away from home and my parents. However, I was determined to make the step. I knew I had to prove myself on the Continent and was also well aware of ACBB's reputation. In recent seasons, Paul Sherwen, Robert Millar and Phil Anderson had ridden in their colours and had then stepped up into the pro ranks. Going further back, the great Irish rider Shay Elliott had been with them in the mid-1950s. So I was sure I was doing the right thing.

There was a lot of fog in Paris that day, so my flight was very late. Claude was supposed to be collecting me, but he'd gone. So I got a taxi to the address I'd been writing to for the previous few months. When I got there, it was closed up and empty. I hadn't eaten all day so I jumped over the fence, hid my bags in the porch and went to a local restaurant. I ordered what I thought was something nice, but which turned out to be green pasta. It was the first time I'd ever seen green pasta. Back home I was used to eating meat, potatoes and cabbage, but here I was with broccoli and olives. Usually this would have been a big turnoff, but I was so hungry I nibbled at it until finally it got cold and was totally inedible. The waiter asked me if it had been OK, then only charged me ten francs because they were a bit embarrassed as I hadn't eaten very much of it.

I went back to where I'd left my bags, bundled myself into the warmest clothes in my case and settled into the corner of the entrance of what I later found out was the ACBB's *service course*, where the team's equipment was kept. At about five in the morning, a car pulled up. I remember it was a small Peugeot 104. Two guys were in it: Pascal Cuvelier and Jean-Louis Barrot, two of my new teammates who had come down from northern France and were heading to the south of France to join the rest of the club for a training camp. They'd been told to stop off and pick up Roche. One of them said: 'Are you Roche?' I said I was and climbed into the back of the car. I didn't say much as we drove for 16 hours to the team's training camp base, where I was glad to meet another English-speaker, a British rider called John Parker. I picked up French very quickly, which helped no end, and I could also mix well with everybody. Later, I was able to grasp Italian in much the same way. I had little formal training.

Before I'd gone I had thought that I might end up racing at the ACBB with Neil Martin, who was going out with my eldest sister Maria. Later on, they married, and their son Dan has become one of cycling's very best climbers in the current era. Neil had been out with the ACBB in the autumn of 1979 but, as it turned out, didn't get an invite back for the following year. He was pretty upset about it and I think he may have felt a bit aggrieved at me for a while because just as he was let go I was taken on.

I'd first met Neil at the British Schoolboy ESCA Trials at a Butlin's holiday camp in England. Although he was a few months younger than me, he'd beaten me. We remained friends and, although we didn't race a lot against each other, we'd spend a week or two together at my home in Dublin or his in Birmingham. During one of those visits he met my sister and they settled in England, where he rode for many domestic teams but never really got the break his talent deserved. I don't know why the ACBB didn't keep

him on. I can only guess that they thought Neil was already a very professional amateur and perhaps didn't offer the same potential for improvement that I did, given that I'd been in full-time work until the day I left Ireland.

Mickey Wiegant was the team boss, but he was getting on a bit by that stage and lived most of the time in the south of France, leaving Claude Escalon to look after things at the ACBB's Paris base. Wiegant always kept his relationship with riders at a very proper level. Whenever you spoke to Mr Wiegant you always had to address him using the more formal '*vous*' rather than the more familiar '*tu*'. During one of my first discussions with Wiegant I spoke to him using '*tu*'. Wiegant quickly pulled me up: 'Monsieur Roche, Monsieur Wiegant is not a friend, he is your elder. You must always use "*vous*".'

I learned a lot from Wiegant and Claude, and the ACBB was one of the best schools I could have ever gone to. Wiegant provided all our equipment, but he insisted that we had to appear in the correct kit at all times. For instance, we all had to come down to the dinner table wearing our orange Simplex-ACBB top. Never the black one, never the white one, always the orange one, and it was your job to make sure that it was clean. If you came down with something else on, you were told to go back upstairs and change straight away.

Always doing what Wiegant said extended to tactics on the road. I remember a race in the south during my first few weeks when I was in a break with a guy called Loubé Blagojevic, who should have turned pro in 1979 but had remained an amateur in order to ride at the 1980 Olympics. He was the star of the team and in great form at the start of that season. As the bunch started to close on the break, he jumped clear on his own. I thought maybe I could get across to him, so I jumped away as well. I was riding across the gap when a car came up. It was Wiegant. He shouted at me: 'Roche, what are you doing?' I told him I was trying to

get across. ‘No, no, no,’ he said. ‘Blagojevic is in front, you go back.’ But I insisted I was going to keep on riding. So, bump! He put me straight in the ditch. Then I understood. That was one of the lessons I had to learn: to be aware of the hierarchy within the team and to respect team orders.

I won Wiegant over quite quickly, though, as he had a preference for time triallists and racing against the clock was one of my strengths. When we were preparing for the Grand Prix de France or any special time trial he would bring us down to his house and we would live in his basement. We would eat dinner with him and his wife. Then he’d take us into the back room with all these wheels and tubular tyres he had been keeping for years. Tubulars are stitched closed around an inner tube, making them very light, and the theory is that they improve with age, becoming more durable and resistant to punctures. Some of Wiegant’s were 25 years old and positively vintage. He had Jacques Anquetil’s wheels, Bernard Thévenet’s wheels and he’d tell you that if you were doing well you’d be able to use a set of these special wheels in the event.

Training and racing in this environment meant I was changing very quickly. There were developments away from cycling too. One day I was racing at Longjumeau and saw a girl I liked the look of sitting with a young guy watching the racing. Pascal Cuvelier was also on the team that day and he happened to know she was called Lydia Arnaud and that the young guy with her was her brother, Thierry, who was on ACBB’s ‘B’ squad. I found out that Thierry was racing in Mantes-la-Jolie the next evening and that Lydia would probably be there watching him.

Pascal drove me over there and we saw her again, this time walking around with Thierry’s girlfriend of the time. Pascal got talking and I noticed that Lydia was wearing an ACBB top. That gave me a conversational opening, although my French was still far from fluent. We chatted haltingly and she asked me how many laps were left. I told