BERNARD HINAULT

AND THE FALL AND RISE OF FRENCH CYCLING

WILLIAM FOTHERINGHAM

NUMBER ONE BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *MERCKX*

CONTENTS

Cover

About the Book

About the Author

Also by William Fotheringham

List of illustrations

Dedication

Title Page

Epigraph

Chapter 1 The Badger in a trap

Chapter 2 On the edge

Chapter 3 The Breton Boy

Chapter 4 Ripping up the script: rise and fall

Chapter 5 The slow walk to the top

Chapter 6 The Guimard system

Chapter 7 Chefs d’oeuvre

Chapter 8 Badger

Chapter 9 Rupture

Chapter 10 No favours

Chapter 11 *Un Bernard peut en cacher un autre* – Behind one Bernard there may be another

Chapter 12 The killer and the kindly lad

Chapter 13 Heads I win, tails you lose

Chapter 14 This is not au revoir, it’s goodbye
Chapter 15 Rebirth

Picture Section
Acknowledgements
Appendix 1
Appendix 2
Appendix 3
Appendix 4
Bibliography
Index
Copyright

ABOUT THE BOOK

Bernard Hinault is one of the greatest cyclists of all time. He is a five-time winner of the Tour de France and the only man to have won each of the Grand Tours on more than one occasion. Three decades on from his retirement, he remains the last Frenchman to win the Tour de France. His victory in 1985 marks the turning point when the nation who had dominated the first eight decades of the race they had invented suddenly found they were no longer able to win it.

Hinault is the last 'old-school' champion: a larger-than-life character from a working-class background, capable of winning on all terrains, in major Tours and one-day Classics. Nicknamed the 'Badger' for his combative style, he led a cyclists' strike in his first Tour and instigated a legendary punch-up with demonstrators in 1982 while in the middle of a race. Hinault's battles with team-mates Laurent Fignon and Greg LeMond provide some of the greatest moments in Tour history.

In *Bernard Hinault and the Fall and Rise of French Cycling*, number one bestselling author William Fotheringham finally gets to the bottom of this fascinating character and explores the reasons why the nation that considers itself cycling's home has found it so hard to produce another champion.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

William Fotheringham writes for the *Guardian* and *Observer* on cycling and rugby. A racing cyclist and launch editor of *Procycling* and *Cycle Sport* magazines, he has reported on over twenty Tours de France. He is the critically lauded author of *Fallen Angel*, *Roule Britannia*, and *Put Me Back on My Bike*, which *Vélo* magazine called ‘The best cycling biography ever written’ and the *Sunday Times* number one bestseller, *Merckx: Half Man, Half Bike*.

Also by William Fotheringham

Put Me Back on My Bike: In Search of Tom Simpson

Roule Britannia: Great Britain and the Tour de France

Fallen Angel: The Passion of Fausto Coppi

Cyclopedia: It's All About the Bike

A Century of Cycling

Fotheringham's Sporting Trivia

Fotheringham's Sporting Trivia: The Greatest Sporting Trivia

Book Ever II

Merckx: Half Man, Half Bike

Racing Hard: 20 Tumultuous Years in Cycling

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Bernard Hinault, Brittany, 1977 (Offside).
2. Robert Le Roux (archives Le Télégramme); Cyrille Guimard, 1977 (Offside); Hinault at the Montreal track world championship, 1974 (Offside).
3. Climbing out of the ravine during the 1977 Dauphiné Libéré (Offside); being helped on his way during the 1977 Dauphiné Libéré (Offside).
4. Rendez-vous chez Hinault, 1977 (*Paris Match*/Getty Images).
5. Hinault and family outside a house in Yffiniac, 1977 (*Paris Match*/Getty Images); in Yffiniac, 1977 (Offside).
6. At the riders strike, Valence, d'Agen, 1978 (Offside); being congratulated on winning the 1978 Tour de France (Getty Images).
7. Leading during the 1979 Tour de France (Getty Images); winning on the Champs Élysées from Joop Zoetemelk, 1979 (Corbis).
8. Cyclocross (Offside); in the snow at Liège–Bastogne–Liège, 1980 (Offside).
9. On horseback, Nevada, 1981 (Offside).
10. With Guimard and Greg LeMond, Nevada, 1981 (Offside); side-by-side with Laurent Fignon, 1981 (Offside).
11. On a tandem with Bernard Tapie, 1984 (Getty Images); with collection of yellow jerseys (Offside).
12–13. Sprinting with Eddy Planckaert and Guido Van Calster, 1981 (John Pierce).
14. Fighting with protesters (all Offside).

15. Bloodied and bruised at the 1985 Tour de France (both Offside).
16. Celebrating with Greg LeMond, Alpe d'Huez, 1986 (Getty Images); with a pint in Yorkshire, 2014 (Simon Wilkinson).

For Andy Walker, Robert Vogt and his late wife Ginette, for that golden summer of 1984.

WILLIAM FOTHERINGHAM

BERNARD HINAULT

And the Fall and Rise of French Cycling

YELLOW JERSEY PRESS
LONDON

‘The Mole had long wanted to make the acquaintance of the Badger. He seemed by all accounts to be such an important personage.’

– Kenneth Grahame, *The Wind in the Willows*

CHAPTER 1

THE BADGER IN A TRAP

'Everything you do is a permanent challenge. You have to be on top of it all the time but treat it as a game.'

– Bernard Hinault

Bernard Hinault was stuck. Crammed into the front passenger seat of the car in a backstreet of the Norman town of Lisieux, there was nowhere for him to go. The door wouldn't open; the crowd was too densely packed. Winding down the window was a no-no; too many bodies were pressed up against it. It was a balmy midsummer evening, the sun was setting, the fans had turned out in force and they had been waiting for a good while. Old, young, men, women, each wanted to get a sight of him, touch him, ask him for an autograph.

Hinault had arrived fashionably late for the start of the Lisieux criterium on 23 July 1985, and through the evening the crowd had swelled in anticipation of his arrival. They had started out looking for prime spots on the circuit, then had moved as if by osmosis, filling the pavement in front of the building where the riders were to get changed. The crush was understandable: two days earlier, Hinault had won the Tour de France for the fifth time, joining Eddy Merckx and Jacques Anquetil in the record books. Here he was, in the flesh.

I can't remember how Hinault eventually got out of the car and made it to the door of the changing rooms. What I do remember is that while the script called for a bit of

badger-type aggression – a snarl, at least, if not a swipe of the claws – there was none of that. He sat calmly and waited for the organisers to find some muscle and give him the space to emerge. He looked slight – he is one of those cyclists who looks larger on his bike than off it – and not unreasonably he looked a little tired. He didn't win. That privilege was reserved for the 'regional' Thierry Marie, a first-year professional who had just finished his debut Tour.

I wasn't in the throng around the car containing the man in the yellow jersey. Ironically enough, I hadn't come to see Hinault. The history-making and the drama of the 1985 Tour were not to be denied, but for a large group of us, the interest was more parochial. Along with a gaggle of teammates from the Etoile Sportive Livarotaise – a club based in a cheese-and-cider-making village ten miles to the south – I'd come to watch Thierry, our clubmate of the year before. Thierry was one of three Livarotais in the big race that evening: with him were François Lemarchand, another first-year pro who had just finished the Tour, and Alain Percy, a first-category amateur who had been selected for the Norman 'regional' team. They were the guys we trained, yarned and joked with. They were our conduit to the world of Hinault and company. That put the Badger well within six degrees of separation.

The little world that had bred Hinault, Maurice Le Guilloux, Vincent Barteau, Laurent Fignon and countless French professionals since the war was also our world. It was a world in which there were races by the score every weekend, and a fair few during the week. At some time in the year, almost every centre of population in Normandy and Brittany had its *Prix du Comité des Fêtes* or *Prix du Cyclisme*, no matter how isolated the village or how small the hamlet. Some had two or three in a summer. Hinault and the others we were watching had all started in those races. They had moved up to the bigger events, regional semi-Classics run with pride by clubs like ours, and thence

into the stratosphere. Hence the connection. For Livarot, a small-town club from deepest rural France, fielding two riders in the same Tour was an unlikely feat – at least since the days of ‘regional’ teams came to an end in the 1950s. It was like a backwoods football team fielding two players in an FA Cup final. For our boss, Robert Vogt, it didn’t get much better than this.

The point of the post-Tour criterium is – was – that you see your heroes in the flesh. It adds an extra, personal dimension to the photographs and the stories. Hinault had been a key part of my cycling life since it had begun in 1978, and now here he was. Stuck in a car, emerging to be lost in a sea of bodies, then whizzing past in the high-speed string backlit by the setting sun. It was Hinault’s curly hair, hedge-thick eyebrows and bared teeth that had filled the covers of the copies of *Miroir du Cyclisme* that I devoured as a teenager. I would lose myself in his world to the point that in physics lessons the teacher would return me abruptly to a land of equations and Bunsen burners with a coolly targeted lump of chalk. Hinault’s Tours and Classics were the ones my late father and I listened to on long-wave French radio stations, brought to us by Jean-Rene Godart and Jean-Paul Brouchon.

I had no particular passion for Hinault in spite of his obvious status as the top dog in the sport. What appealed was the fantastically clandestine nature of cycling: the process of discovering a culture few knew about or had an interest in, a journey guided by a language few people spoke and media that weren’t readily available. The magazines had to be bought in a shop in Soho; the radio had to be tuned to the right station at the right time. But Hinault always cropped up at the memorable moments, and their scarcity made them all the more notable.

On school exchange in Brittany in the 1979 Easter holidays, I pestered my hosts to let me watch Paris–Roubaix and Liège–Bastogne–Liège, where Hinault was among the

impotent chasers behind a dominant Didi Thurau. Somehow, I found a radio on which to listen to the finish of the Ballon d'Alsace stage of the 1979 Tour – Hinault's epic, now largely forgotten duel with Joop Zoetemelk – as my school form picnicked on a hillside in Devon during an outing when French exchange students returned that July. Hinault's 1980 Sallanches world championship I watched in episodes one afternoon on a visit to our twin village in Normandy, with the race split up by a long lunch and a drive between houses, during which my brother sicked up his Camembert.

Inspired by the knowledge that Hinault had broken away early at Sallanches in the rain to avoid confusion in the bunch, I tried something similar a year later at the Devon and Cornwall junior divisional championships, only to realise that it might have worked for him, but wouldn't for me. By 1982 I was wearing the John McEnroe-style sweatband in Renault-Elf's yellow and black, popularised by Hinault and Laurent Fignon. If the Badger and the Professor were happily flying in the face of practicality and good taste, I had no qualms about doing the same.

The 1984 Tour, Hinault against Fignon, was the first I lived in full, in France. I didn't appreciate it at the time: this would come to be the way that I experienced most Tours from 1990 onwards as a journalist, through French television and the newspaper *L'Équipe*. Every afternoon in that baking hot July – racing and training permitting – I trekked religiously up the hill in Livarot to M. and Mme Vogt's house, where the curtains would be drawn against the sun so that we could watch Hinault's drawn-out defeat and Fignon's utter triumph. We couldn't avoid feeling smug, given that we knew that the following season our Thierry would be riding with Fignon and Guimard at the all-conquering Renault-Elf team. With hindsight, it's amusing to recall the Schadenfreude we felt in the knowledge that Hinault had quit Guimard the previous

autumn. Now he was getting a kicking, and our boy was going to be among those putting the boot into the Badger in 1985. That July, no one expected Hinault to bite back.

The best part of thirty years later, I was again looking at the figure of Hinault squashed up in a car, but this time there were no crowds to get in the way, and I was in the car too. It was one of the red Skoda Superb saloons, emblazoned with logos and festooned with radio aerials that are driven by the Tour de France's top brass and we were sitting on the top of Holme Moss. The Yorkshire moorland was deserted, as you would expect in midweek at the end of March, and it was bone-achingly cold in a wind that seemed to come a long way from the east.

A national institution transposed to foreign territory made entertaining watching on that spring day in 2014. Hinault was contracted to visit Yorkshire to publicise the *Grand Départ* of the Tour in Leeds the coming July, and to that end he had begun with a ceremonial visit in the red Skoda to the Robin Hood pub in Cragg Vale. He'd had a rapid pie and pint in the bar – the photograph by Simon Wilkinson made many of the papers. He'd run through a load of questions for the local press, then slipped into cycling kit for a spin to the top of what purported to be the longest continuous ascent on English soil with a group of local cyclists. He had signed anything and everything from posters and T-shirts to the bunting which the locals were going to run up the telegraph poles when the Tour visited on 5 July.

Hinault had moved on from his years as the angry man of French cycling. He was no longer the guy who once said that he wished he had a jacket with tacks on it, to ward off the back slappers who would hassle him after stages. *Le Blaireau* had mellowed into an authoritative father figure, like the Badger Kenneth Grahame described in *The Wind in the Willows*. He jumped through the media and marketing

hoops with the same professionalism that was his hallmark on the bike: he had signed up for it, so he got on with the job, with no second thoughts.

We drove from Cragg Vale over the Moss and up and down the plethora of little climbs that made stage 2 of the Tour into Sheffield one of the toughest opening-weekend stages in recent Tours. He waxed lyrical about the stone walls – 'imagine the skill, the hours of work that's gone into those' – speculated about what wine you might drink if you shot and cooked one of the pheasants in the moorland fields, discussed terriers, and enjoyed the comparison between Yorkshiremen and the famously tough and insular Bretons. He clearly relished the succession of tight little descents on narrow roads and the gritty little climbs that peppered the end of the Sheffield stage. 'The riders won't enjoy this, especially if it rains,' he said smugly. 'I'd probably have complained but I'd have had a bit of fun here.'

You could argue that the notion of professional cycling as fun died on the day that Hinault symbolically hung his bike on a hook after his farewell race in November 1986. The phrase *se faire plaisir* – have fun, take pleasure, enjoy yourself – crops up all the time when you talk cycling with him. It might seem curious to use the term about something that demands as much pain and sacrifice as professional cycling, but Hinault was not alone: it was Fignon's philosophy as well. In twenty-five years on the Tour, the only winner I've heard describe racing as fun was Lance Armstrong, but that's a different story.

Hinault's career neatly bridged two eras. He started out in 1975, when the sport had barely changed in its essentials since the Second World War – better bikes and kit, better roads but not much else – and when he hung up his wheels cycling had begun to resemble its twenty-first-century incarnation. By his retirement in 1986 it was a

much bigger, far more business-oriented, fully international sport with more cash on the table and more sponsors. In Hinault's first Tour, 1978, the field comprised a mere eleven teams, with bike manufacturers dominating as sponsors and co-sponsors. Six of the teams were French. The Italians didn't even bother to turn up; a Swede, an Irishman and a brace of Britons (Barry Hoban and Paul Sherwen) were the only riders from outside the European heartland. By 1986, Hinault's last, the race had twenty-one teams, including two from Colombia and one from the USA, with a diverse mix of multinational sponsors, and riders from Australia, Norway, Canada and Mexico, as well as the obvious Europeans and a plethora of North and South Americans.

When I followed Hinault's win in the 1985 Tour – in front of the same French television set as I'd watched him on in 1984 – the race was well into its transition from being a French event with a smattering of international entrants to an international sporting event which took place – largely – on French soil. It had gone global in just a few years. Some historians locate the turning point as 1981, when the Australian Phil Anderson shook Hinault by clinging on to his wheel at the Pla d'Adet finish in the Pyrenees and briefly wore the yellow jersey. Anderson was the first non-European to lead the race, and that prompted Jacques Goddet to write his keynote editorial on globalising cycling in *L'Équipe*, '*un Tour mondialisé*'. The American Greg LeMond's victory in Hinault's last Tour was the first for a non-European; for veteran *L'Équipe* writer Pierre Chany, the presence of four nations in the top five overall represented the 'complete internationalisation of the Tour'. Chany reminded his readers that a few years earlier, it would have been unimaginable for the *maillot jaune* to come from outside Europe and looked forward to a time when no nation would dominate cycling – which is where we have arrived in the twenty-first century.

Hinault played his part in the transition in the 1980s. After his mentor Cyrille Guimard signed LeMond, he and Hinault took a celebrated trip to the US, marked by the 'cowboy togs' photo shoot, where Hinault, LeMond and the Renault manager posed in Old West outfits. This now looks like a key turning point. Hinault's later transfer to La Vie Claire exemplified the change in cycling: Renault was the state-owned car maker, with all the emotional baggage that went with that, while La Vie Claire was a chain of health-food stores run by a charismatic if roguish capitalist Bernard Tapie. It had a Mondrian-inspired racing jersey that summed up its modernity. And in drawing Tapie to cycling, Hinault brought in the big money.

Hinault is rightly hailed as cycling's last champion in another way. Since his time, no Tour de France winner – and barely any other riders at all – have raced an entire season with the goal of winning everything on offer. 'The last of his kind perhaps, racing from spring to autumn, triumphing on all terrains, piling one exploit on another, forging the second greatest record of cycling history behind Eddy Merckx,' wrote Olivier Margot in the introduction to *L'Équipe's* centenary celebration book of the Tour in 2003.

Fignon echoed Margot, pointing out that the reductive approach to targeting just the Tour de France has in its turn reduced the stature of the champions who adopt it: 'When Hinault was on song he would wipe out everyone; he would win everything he could from the start of the season to the end. Back then, cycling champions didn't do things in a small way. When the Badger won, he won big-time.'

'Hinault just did things, like falling off in the [1977] Dauphiné and winning, dominating [the 1980] Liège–Bastogne–Liège in the snow,' recalls Sam Abt, a journalist who covered the era for the *Herald Tribune*. 'They were extraordinary demonstrations of strength.'

There was another, broader change. In 1978, the American writer Felix Magowan could claim that ‘In the Latin countries, cycling is a sport practised mainly by the socially disadvantaged, those who might otherwise go into boxing … For the most part, the cyclists are the children of peasants, either landless day-labourers or small farm holders. In France they are more apt than not to be from Brittany, the one province where cycling enjoys a following akin to that in Belgium.’ That had gone by the late 1980s, partly because the international mix of the professional peloton meant potential racers came from far beyond cycling’s traditional industrial and agricultural base, but also because economic change across Europe meant there were fewer peasant farmers and industrial workers who needed cycling as a means of escape. Cycling changed its sociological mix in Hinault’s time, enough for Margot to describe him as ‘one of the last, symbolic representatives of a suffering working class’.

Most famously, however, Hinault was the last of the sport’s *patrons*, a series of authoritative figures going back to the founding days. They were the men with the hardest characters and the strongest legs, who could dictate the pace of the racing, and could exert influence with organisers and other teams. Their whims could affect their fellow professionals’ chances in other races, their influence could dictate what appearance money their inferiors earned. The *patrons* – Merckx, Rik Van Looy, Hinault, Anquetil – were a blend of union leader and mafia boss, but they had this in common: they ruled the sport through muscle and mouth. Hinault’s status as a *patron* was established early on when he took on the organisers of the Tour de France in 1978, and he continued to dominate his fellows to the end of his career. After which, the *patron* went the way of the dodo.

Hinault was the last man standing in another way. In 1985, France's dominance in the Tour could be taken for granted, purely because of recent history. The notion that no Frenchman was going to win the Tour for at least thirty years was completely outlandish, more outlandish than the notion the race might one day start in the British county of Yorkshire. On the grass verges around the criterium circuit in Lisieux in 1985, either suggestion would have drawn derision, but the idea that the French would still be waiting for another home Tour winner in 2015 would have been unthinkable. The French won lots of stages in the Tour, and they won lots of Tours. Between Eddy Merckx's last win in 1974 and Hinault's last in 1985, the French nailed nine Tour wins out of a possible eleven, five for Hinault and two apiece for Fignon and Bernard Thévenet. The eight years between Thévenet in 1975 and Roger Pingeon in 1967 looked like a big gap, but it also seemed an aberration – down to the exceptional ability of Merckx – given that the late 1950s and 1960s had seen French victories aplenty

As French sportsmen love to say, the truth of today is not that of tomorrow. Things change fast. By 1990, the first Tour I reported on as a journalist, home dominance was already looking shaky: Fignon had been bedevilled by injury, but his near-miss in 1989 meant he was still to be included in a list of Tour contenders, and there was no one else of his stature in France. From then on, the decline was so rapid that by the 2000s, French stage wins became exceptional events.

The Festina doping scandal in 1998 rocked the sport in France to its core; the top team in the country led by the national darling Richard Virenque was proven, humiliatingly, to be founded on institutionalised doping and a swath of other squads and riders were implicated. Amid the uncertainty, tales of the decline of cycling at the grassroots in France abounded, from bike-shop owners who complained that no youngsters raced bikes any more to

race organisers – from the area of Normandy where the calendar had been so prolific when I raced there only twenty years earlier – standing by the Tour de France route brandishing placards complaining that the national federation had no interest in local events. Understandably, there were pessimists who felt that cycling in France was in long-term, permanent decline. The leading commentator at *L'Équipe*, Philippe Brunel, and the writer Jacques Marchand were among those who claimed that the French public would desert cycling in the same way they had quit boxing since the days of Marcel Cerdan and Jean-Claude Bouttier.

Cycling in France clearly isn't dying out and probably never will, but French cycling's tortured search for Hinault's successor – not a five-times Tour champion, merely a one-time Tour winner – is far from over. That in turn means that Hinault's story is not yet quite complete. Hinault's succession matters, and not merely in France. Why? Because in what is now cycling's showcase event, 'the France question' is a key part of the plot and by the 2000s it was disturbing outsiders as well as locals. That's partly because, unlike the great stadium events, cycling's showcase is largely defined by its location. Whatever brief excursions it makes beyond the borders, the Tour can only take place in France, but that backdrop in turn impacts on the race to an extent that say, the location of Wimbledon or Roland Garros does not. The race travels through Brittany so the fans and media look for Bretons. Because the Tour is rooted permanently in France, French success enhances it, bringing out fans, bringing in sponsors, oiling the wheels of officialdom. People from outside France are drawn to the Tour because of its quintessentially French qualities, and having French cyclists performing well is part of that picture.

Back in France, the national soul-searching is understandable. Success or lack of it in the Tour has

implications right down the cycling food chain to the Livarot cycling club, the Lisieux criterium and the smallest races. But more broadly, there is what the British referred to – pre-Andy Murray – as Wimbledon syndrome: the frustrating sense that a nation has created a great international sporting event but can't succeed in it. The Tour's media profile and duration means that for thirty years, that absence has been rammed home for thirty days a year. So while Belgium has moved on from the post-Merckx succession crisis with a gradual realisation that there won't be a second Cannibal, France is still desperately seeking its second Badger.

The crowd in Lisieux on that balmy evening thirty years ago hadn't come to see a throwback to the golden age of French cycling, the last champion from the 'amateur' era, or a champion who epitomised a sport in full transition from parochial backwater to international mainstream, or *le dernier patron*. Not even the most pessimistic would have come to watch a French Tour winner on the basis that it wasn't going to happen again for a very long time. We took Hinault on his merits as a champion, and they were many.

By 1985 his record was largely complete: those five Tour wins, plus three in the Giro d'Italia, two in the Vuelta a España, the brace of Giro–Tour doubles and the 1980 world championship. The welter of major one-day victories, sometimes several in a season, now largely forgotten amid the obsessive interest in the Tour: Giro di Lombardia, Liège–Bastogne–Liège, Paris–Roubaix, Amstel Gold, Gent–Wevelgem, Flèche Wallonne, the Grand Prix des Nations.

Beyond the bare results – not as extensive as those of Eddy Merckx – was the manner of some of those wins: the epic Liège win in the snow of 1980, the three-week duel with Joop Zoetemelk in the 1979 Tour, and of course the clinical brutality of the world title at Sallanches. Some of

Hinault's results were simply eccentric because of their utter recklessness: a bunch sprint win on the Champs-Élysées in 1982; an outlandish attack with Zoetemelk to sprint it out man for man on the Champs at the end of the 1979 Tour; a cycling version of who could piss highest up the wall with Francesco Moser that got out of hand in the 1979 Lombardy.

For the French, Hinault was more than a mere cyclist. He was also a symbol of '*La France qui gagne*' – a Winning France – in an era when France lived through all sorts of doubts outside the sporting world. The Badger was part of a golden generation of French sportsmen, all of whose careers ran roughly parallel through the late 1970s and early 1980s: Michel Platini between 1976–87 including the World Cups of 1978, '82 and '86; Alain Prost, who broke through in 1979 and would win his last Grand Prix in 1990; Yannick Noah, who turned professional in 1977, and won the French Open in 1983 and Wimbledon in 1985; Jean-Pierre Rives, the blond, blood-spattered rugby rebel who reigned from 1975–84 and who received his Legion d'Honneur from François Mitterrand at the same time as Hinault.

Such success came at a difficult time for France, believes Sam Abt. 'From the late 1970s through the '80s there was a crisis of confidence – a big flight of capital, no one was sure what France's place in the world was or what the socialists would do. When I moved here in 1971, it was a second-world country – my concierge didn't have a refrigerator and put milk outside to keep cool. Not many had cars. So someone who was a true champion stood out so much. Hinault was Teflon-coated; nothing stopped him.'

Hinault's mentor Cyrille Guimard was not a Merckx fan – the pair never really hit it off – and he places both Anquetil and Hinault above the Cannibal, and believes Coppi would be above him as well. Those who competed with Hinault also placed him on a pedestal, by virtue of what he inflicted

on them on the road. 'Merckx was the greatest, but Bernard was the most impressive,' reckoned Lucien Van Impe, who contested victory in the Tour with both the Cannibal and the Badger. 'I've never seen inner anger like his. He had the ability to take command of a situation in a fraction of a second.'

'Physically superior to Merckx', was the verdict of Joop Zoetemelk, another rider who contested the Tour with both men. 'Eddy wanted to win everything – criteriums, small races, six days – but Bernard was more reasonable, started the season more steadily, but anything Bernard wanted to win, he could. Bernard wouldn't want to win eight stages in the Tour; Eddy would want everything – stages, green jersey, mountains. He was *trop gourmand* for my taste.'

'He had a totally different character to the riders who came after him – Miguel Indurain, Pedro Delgado, LeMond,' said Robert Millar who saw Lance Armstrong in his early years, and Hinault in his prime. 'They didn't race the way he raced. Hinault either cared or he didn't. When he didn't care about winning he'd bumble round and hurt you now and again just to remind you he was there – you wouldn't know Greg or Miguel were in some races, but Hinault, you always knew. He was the most impressive of all the guys I raced against, even Lance,' believed Millar. 'Lance had the aggression but Hinault had the edge in physical ability. He'd probably have found a weakness in Lance and beaten him.'

Hinault only gained true popularity by the time I saw him in Lisieux, after he had been through the mill of a potentially career-ending injury and that 1984 defeat. Early in the 1980s, he was in a state of cold war with the French media, one of whom described the Tours of 1978–82 – which included Hinault's first four victories – as 'the most boring of the entire post-war period'. He was pilloried at times for failing to play the media game, for adopting the role of the anti-champion, downplaying what he did,

‘reducing international cycling to the dimensions of a medium-sized provincial business’, according to the writer Olivier Dazat.

Guimard’s belief is that the greatness of a sportsman depends on the way he or she plays on the emotions of those who look on; his case is that Hinault stimulated a greater emotional response than Merckx, which may well be true among the French. ‘Sporting logic doesn’t create heroes. From a certain level upwards, when you want to be loved, the volume of victories and the value of those victories cease to count, but what matters is the emotions that they evoke, the way the plot pans out and the side you choose to take.’ If the true gauge of greatness in sport is whether or not you are talked about years after you stop competing, Hinault qualifies by virtue of his part in perhaps the most talked about Tour of all time: 1986, his ‘fratricidal’ battle with LeMond.

That race followed a pattern: throughout Hinault’s career there were times when he would put logic to one side and let emotion take over. He would bin the plan and race for the sheer hell of it, as amateurs do. Sometimes, he looked to have the unalloyed joy of the fat man sprinting with his teenage son for a road sign; to that, all cycling fans could relate. It transcended statistics.

‘Standing at a machine with the same piece of metal in front of me, doing the same thing to it, that was work. What we do – you as well as me – is a game,’ he told me in 2014. ‘Cycling is a game. *C’est du bonheur*. Competing for me was always a game. It can be painful, but it hurts because I want to hurt myself, that’s all. If I don’t want to do it, I don’t do it.

‘If you play poker, that can get serious, because there can end up being a significant financial side to it, but for the rest, it’s *du bonheur, du plaisir*. Even when it doesn’t work. When it doesn’t work, you analyse why it hasn’t worked. Why didn’t I win today? Because I did something stupid,

because I raced poorly, because I didn't train enough. It's down to you, not to other people. I never blamed any defeat on anyone else. It would be down to me. Even when I was a schoolboy, a junior, I always had that pleasure.'

Asked if that joy stayed with him, Hinault just says, '*tout le temps*', adding, 'The game is winning, as well. It's about demonstrating that you are capable of doing something different.' It is different, he maintains, from the absolute need to win that – most notably – drove Eddy Merckx. 'I didn't see things in precisely the same way. Eddy wanted to win everything. For me, I would give myself four or five objectives in the year and that would be enough. And then, if I didn't hit those objectives, I wouldn't be very happy. I would ask myself questions: why didn't you win? What mistakes did you make? I won a lot of races outside [those objectives] because I wanted to have fun.' His point is that what counted was the enjoyment of what he was doing, not winning per se. 'You are in the race, you are with your rivals, you're keeping an eye on them, left, right, all round. If someone isn't placed right, bang, you attack and eliminate him. The victory is what comes at the end of the day.'

'What motivated Hinault wasn't his *palmarès*, but turning a situation around, fighting with an adversary,' believes Philippe Bouvet, who reported on the Hinault years for *L'Équipe*. That's why he could fairly be called 'the last cyclist with real ardour', as Philippe Bordas wrote in the book *Forcenés*. 'The paradigm of larger-than-life. The last to justify cycling as a way to be different.' And that is why Bordas concluded: 'Cycling history ends with Hinault.'

CHAPTER 2

ON THE EDGE

> *'Tout champion d'exception porte la croix ou l'étendard de sa marginalité' – 'All exceptional champions are outsiders; it's a burden and a badge of honour'*
>
> – Cyrille Guimard

In Goscinny and Uderzo's Asterix books, the village of the indomitable Gauls is drawn in the far west of France, in Brittany. There is the faintest hint of huts gathered behind timber-stake walls as Bernard Hinault's cousin René joins up the dots on a sketch map of the outskirts of the Breton village of Yffiniac, near Saint-Brieuc on the northern coast. 'Lucie and Joseph Hinault lived in this cottage with Bernard and his brothers and sister; Joseph's parents were here, Lucie's sister – she was a Guernion – and her ten children were in this house, and another Guernion sister, my mother, was here.'

The four cottages on the outskirts of the village of Yffiniac – La Clôture, La Tenue, La Rivière and Levauriou – stood cheek by jowl, spread across 500 metres on a shallow hillside or so; a hamlet called la Fraiche. Between them, in the 1950s and 1960s, they housed some twenty children from the four branches of the Hinault–Guernion clan. It was a small community of its own, where everyone knew what everyone else was up to, where various members of the family – the children in particular – would help out their relatives at harvest time, and where the children lived in and out of each other's houses. La Clôture, home to Joseph

and Lucie Hinault and their four children – of whom Bernard was the second oldest – was relatively new. Joseph had the house built not long after Bernard was born in November 1954, prior to which the family had shared La Tenue with Joseph's parents and an uncle.

The holdings were small – the largest, Lavouriou, was only about thirty hectares, substantial enough for Brittany at the time, but not large – and the plots of land were all mingled with each other. There was a constant tug of war between the requirement for hands to work the land, and the need the youngsters felt to forge their own identity away from the village and learn a trade before coming back, perhaps. 'If you were strong as a teenager, you were put to work early on. All our parents had to count their pennies,' says René Hinault, who had to leave school at fourteen to work the land so that his juniors could gain their education in their turn.

They were a close-knit group. As often happened, Bernard's parents had met at a family wedding, that of René's parents, where they were bridesmaid and usher; tradition dictated that they should also be godparents to the firstborn, and the rest was history. 'We are all *un peu tête de cons*,' says René. 'A bit pig-headed. When we make our minds up, it takes a hell of a lot for us to change them.' In his various memoirs, Hinault makes much of his rebellious youth even if at times he verges on self-parody. 'I was the most terrible scoundrel that Yffiniac has ever known …' he said. 'Donkey, Mr Angry, Little Stubborn Breton – there were plenty of nicknames during the first twelve years of my life as I piled one prank on another, big and little, with an insouciance and an hyperactive nature that I didn't try to conceal.' Bernard and his three siblings rarely sat still – there are few photographs of them, because, as he observed, they weren't the kind to wait and 'watch the birdie'.

Bernard was the most hyperactive of these four livewires. 'He was more disruptive [as a child] than any I ever knew,' his mother Lucie told the writer Jacky Hardy. 'I often called him, "little hooligan". He wasn't bad, he just wouldn't stay in one place.' Young Bernard's favourite game was letting the chickens out – and, one writer claims, killing one with a stick if he could manage it – but the beatings and tellings-off that ensued didn't leave him cowed or bitter. They were part of the deal. 'He didn't hold grudges,' said his mother. 'You'd stop scolding him and he'd leap into your arms.'

Letting out the hens meant trouble, because in the economy of *La France Profonde*, every egg mattered, and Hinault's was a classic rural upbringing. Joseph and Lucie had moved around in search of a living: first they quit Brittany for Normandy, where they worked on a farm before they became aware that agriculture wasn't going to pay. That realisation took the couple to the outskirts of Paris where Joseph earned the professional qualification to become a platelayer for the national rail company SNCF, before returning to Yffiniac.

The country lad who seeks a career on two wheels rather than till the soil has been a constant theme in cycling since people began racing bikes in the nineteenth century, right up to the last five-times Tour de France winner, Miguel Indurain, a few years after Hinault. Both Hinault and his mentor Cyrille Guimard emphasised their rural roots, in particular the way they made a man strong-willed and independent, attached to the earth and its values. Like most rural working-class families, the Hinaults had a big garden with hens and rabbits, and – typically for Brittany – an onion patch to raise a few extra francs.

'Simple people,' wrote Guimard. 'Everywhere, from morning to night, one fixed idea obsessed the entire family: work, work first, work always. My family could kill pigs, grow potatoes, gather corn and build walls. No more. And no less.' As a teenager, Hinault liked to work in the field