

# Bikie

A Love Affair with the Racing Bicycle

Charlie Woods



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Only the gaze that is turned backward can bring us forward, for the gaze that is turned forward leads us backward.

*Novalis*  
(1722-1801)

# 1. Equipment Fetishists

Chris Brown rode a 'Dilecta', it was electric blue with white box-panelling; the tubing wasn't 531 double-butted and the lugs were nondescript; it didn't have a wrap-over seat cluster or even Simplex ends, but it was undeniably French and that made it a hothouse bloom amongst the hardy perennials of '50s Shepherd's Bush. To gild the orchid further, he had Bartali brake levers with finger indentations on South-of-France bars, and his wheels were secured by Huret wingnuts of phosphor bronze - details which itched the palms of schoolboy covetousness.

The fabled machine wasn't new of course, chance had delivered it to him second-hand and this element of good fortune conferred the aura of a minor miracle. We would gather round it, parked against the hedge, and worship its form and substance; divine providence had sent us this emblem of a higher, more magnificent design. The old chipped transfer with its stars, and the tiny lettering in the bottom corner: *marque déposée*, was like the primitive script on a sacred icon, words of such profundity that they were taken completely on trust - never questioned, never even discussed. It was a favour to be allowed room at these gatherings and by my regularity and fervour there I rose to the position of chief acolyte. And my dedication did not go without its indirect rewards. At school I was able to let drop that my friend owned a French bike and the name alone carried sufficient weight to boost my standing. We were all, of course, brothers of the wheel.

Chris was a year older so naturally I was in his shadow anyway. Our tyre tracks had crossed in the Cubs when I

needed every glimmer of reflected glory that I could soak up. All that stood between me and shanks' pony was an old sit-up-and-beg with rod brakes that I'd rescued from a bombsite. Anything like status was out of the question until the arrival of my first new bike, a Dawes Clansman with three-speed Benelux, GB brakes, Williams chainset and Lycett saddle. My Dad, recently returned from Australia wearing a large fedora and a gaberdine mac, asked me where we might make the purchase.

'Newton's,' I said without a moment's hesitation. It was the Holy of Holies of local cycling; the sort of place we would hang around on a Saturday afternoon just to see the clubmen come and go, examine their 'irons', and then pop down to again on Sunday to get a thorough look in the window.

We were tireless window shoppers. There was Algurn's and France-Sport in Chiswick, Les Scales' on the other side of Shepherd's Bush Green and then back up to Acton for the boss's emporium - it was a good afternoon's work to get round the lot. They didn't change much, those windows, but we always found something fresh - just the glimpse of a cotterless chainset or a CO<sub>2</sub> pump would be enough to lift us for the day. Newton's window was probably the least changed of all, but he was renowned as a frame-builder and it was the evidence of his handiwork that held out an irresistible attraction. One display would be reserved for an example of his bespoke skill, a single frame shining in its unadorned brilliance like a diamond. We were especially drawn to its lugwork; the sleeves which served as joints to the tubing brought together high technology and decorative flourish, they were the crowning glory of the builder's art. Long study had made each one of us a connoisseur of lugs.

A red-letter day had dawned when you could actually go into Newton's to make a purchase, but to buy a whole bike was tantamount to an audience with the mayor.

W.P. - Bill to the elect - was very unlike a civic dignitary however, more of a sergeant major. He tended to march around and shout which was difficult since his shop, although big on the outside, was so cluttered with bikes and counters that there was barely room for three people to gather. He did his spiel - more for my old man's benefit than mine admittedly - but I'd heard it all before anyway. I wanted to talk curly stays and scroll lugwork, I longed to plumb the mysteries of that notice which offered: 'Frames built to customer's own specifications.' I dreamed of the spells to be woven around angles and fork-rake and measured them against what met my ears: the burdens of the small businessman, the unpredictability of trade.

My Clansman was a pleasing enough colour, bright yellow (evidence in later years that I shared the same taste as one of the deities of the sport), but it only had twenty-six-inch wheels - and not even high pressure. It did, though, put me on an equal footing with Chris and his friend John McGrath. John had a Dayton, which were rumoured to crack at the head tube and deposit riders onto the tar and pebbles (the way they renewed the roads in those days). He scorned these libels by shuddering his bike with his straight handlebars just to show that for all its whippiness it would not break. These - the handlebars - were the only blemish on an otherwise impeccable profile. He had the great distinction of a four-speed gear, a Simplex, the nearest you could get to that vast divide where the gauge narrowed and you steamed away to the fabulous heights of a five block and that heaven of heavens - a double clanger. He even sported high pressures, but nothing could budge his adherence to straight handlebars. Drops were, of course, *de rigueur* for a serious aspirant, but no argument or chiding could dissuade him. We had to fall short of open derision because he was formidably hefty and could beat us hollow at any of the competitive disciplines: sprinting, hill climbing and slow-bicycle races.

We began to go out on a Sunday, exploring the Great West Road until we reached the airport, and then on to Windsor; after which the Sunday run was firmly established.

Somewhere along the road McGrath fell by the wayside – the prophecy of his handlebars fulfilling itself – while Chris and I pursued our explorations until we hit upon Guildford, and that became our favourite excursion. At Thames Ditton you really felt that you were in the country, and a few testing climbs began to rear up, culminating in the narrow high street with its strange, almost medieval clock. On then to Lyon's Teashop where you could recuperate at leisure, putting handfuls of sugar lumps in your tea and savouring the company's Individual Fruit Pies as if they were the zenith of a pastry chef's art.

But however pleasant our runs were, they became increasingly clouded with a feeling of exclusion. Everywhere we went we were confronted with the presence of that fuller, grander world of organised cycling – the club. Long crocodiles of cyclists young and old, male and female, crossed our path wherever we went, tantalising us with the possibility of becoming part of a larger plan. There were boys of our own age in there, we had watched them romp and cheer with their elders as the clubs saluted each other. Our own timid efforts at the same thing were met with stony indifference. We would tag along with a trio of racing men, hoping to gain their attention by a demonstration of valour, but this brought little reward except more hostile stares. We were outsiders, pariahs, condemned by the very obviousness of our desire and the pitiful shortcomings of our production-line mounts. After so many rebuffs we would never have the nerve even to approach a club unless we sat astride a handbuilt lightweight. Our innocent little fetish had grown into a monster to haunt us.

Then Chris discovered a coterie of 'gen men' just a few doors down from his own; two brothers who were the centre of a circle of road-racers all belonging to a club called the

Westwelve. Ron, the elder, had a Cinelli, and Harold another rarer Italian make that he had brought home from National Service in Trieste. There could be no doubt about their pedigree: they rode tubs and packed double clangers to a man. I ached to pay homage to the reality of this heady litany, so it wasn't long before we were out in Chris's back garden, peeping over the fence at these paragons as they lolled and sported like a pride of lions fat from good hunting.

Such brightly burning enthusiasts could not exist side by side for very long without attracting each other's attention. Chris's ardour was recognised and we were rewarded by an invitation to watch them race out at High Wycombe. Happy day. Would we get there, though? It was the furthest we had ever attempted.

Come the Sunday morning we set off into the unknown with a firm resolve and a full bottle of lemonade which only my saddlebag would accommodate.

We managed the run quite easily of course, and found the changing-rooms. This was our first exposure to that odd phenomenon, 'massed-start racing on public roads'. Mudguardless bikes were strewn everywhere, and figures in peculiar costume strode about with surprising composure given the eccentricity of their attire: shorts that verged on the indecent (a mixture of swimming togs and girls' gymknickers); sagging jerseys weighed down at the back by a strange lumpy bustle. Then there was the Little-Lord-Fauntleroy primness below the knee: white ankle socks and dainty black pumps; and on their heads, a skimpy covering which crossed the knotted handkerchief with a jockey's cap to nobody's advantage. But there was another even more disturbing element. The unfamiliar expanses of flesh on view seemed curiously unused to such disclosure; there was a strange bruised baldness about it, like plucked chickens in a butcher's window.

We came upon Harold, our host, pumping up his racing tubulars on a grassy bank. His jersey was black with yellow-

and-red rings and fitted him snugly; he was also reassuringly hairy. (It was quite some time before we made the unsettling discovery that the plucked-chicken effect was achieved with razor and shaving brush.) His head was crowned by a great dark-brown mop which fell about like windblown corn. He greeted us warmly but he was intent upon really hardening his tubs and our attention was drawn naturally to his bike. It was something special - a beautiful deep maroon with contrasting head. 'Julia', it said on the down-tube, a very un-italian ascription but one automatically revered. The lugs were rather plain, almost perfunctory in comparison to the more ornate English or French style which we were used to; the front forks seemed made for the track, they were so stocky, so curtly raked. Here was a robust uprightness, stripped for action, all its muscles showing. But then, for some reason, the handlebars veered towards us and there were these breathtaking amber-covered levers, as full and sturdy as the frame, the cables sweeping back in perfect unison to connect with an exquisite little caliper so finely drawn so delicate that you were reminded of silverware - and indeed, it had its own hallmark sunk into the leading edge: 'Universal Milano'. All the accessories - the hubs, the gear levers, the wrinkled filigree of the Campagnolo *dérailleur* - were so finely wrought beside the columnar stateliness of the frame that the whole spoke of dynamism and refinement; of a culture which managed to blend strength with grace. This couldn't be a product of the burlesque land of pneumatic starlets and endless spaghetti, it must surely go back to that spirit which conquered the world - Imperial Rome. The man with the pump was subtly transformed into a classical legionary - his jersey a breastplate, the unmanageable mane of hair a plumed helmet; he was infantryman and gladiator both; a warrior athlete. In an instant he had won that special approbation which wells up so bountifully in a boy's heart: he had become a hero.

But where was he at the top of Marlow Hill? We had decamped in advance of the 'off' with the rest of the crowd to a vantage point on the outskirts of the town - a long, straight climb stretching away for nearly a mile below us. The ceremonial start was to be given outside the changing-rooms, but any racing would be 'neutralised' until the start proper at the top of our hill. We had heard this word 'neutralised' but failed to really grasp its meaning. It seemed to be linked in some impenetrable way to the sight of these 40-or-so riders packed tightly together and steadily eating up the road towards us. We had never seen such a phalanx of cyclists spread so far across the road. En masse and at a distance, they had ceased to be individuals but were transformed into a strange, rather threatening entity. They could have been the advance party of some sinister invading army, or even a monstrous caterpillar on a forest of metal legs with a knobbly, multicoloured back all seething and rippling - such was the incongruity of their presence on that peaceful Sunday morning in the foothills of the Chilterns.

The closer they approached, however, the more their strangeness receded; at short range their individuality was reconstituted. But there was no sign of Harold in that heaving throng. The mystery yawned in the wake of the last stragglers as they trickled out of sight. And then it was resolved - there he was, still down at the bottom, lost and struggling on his own. For a while it was like watching an ant hoist itself out of a mixing bowl, but then the man emerged. He was throwing himself at each succeeding ramp, out of the saddle, head bobbing urgently. Here was real racing at last, not the limp procession that we had just witnessed. An age seemed to elapse before he drew near.

'Come on, Harold,' we implored.

'Up, up, up,' shouted the gallery.

'Punctured on the line,' he gasped as he launched himself into the forlorn emptiness of the road ahead.

Teatime found us watching an official draw a finishing line across the road with a lump of natural chalk. We had had no guide to point out any other part of the course but the start and finish, so the burden of the afternoon still weighed upon us: would he make it?

Quite a crowd was gathering and each new arrival was greeted with ironic cheers. A rider in racing gear pedalled lackadaisically up to the line, dismounted and dived immediately in amongst the spectators, cutting short any such welcome. Then a shout went up to herald the arrival of the race. First there were two, then just one black figure thrusting down the middle of the road. The hair and desperation were unmistakable, it was Harold. And just as prompt as the recognition came the gagging, hissing cacophony of a body in violent throes. The intensity of his effort was frightening. He was all over the bike: stamping, heaving, wrenching; every last sinew coerced into flailing motion as he hurled himself towards the line. No challenger could live with this human locomotive, they fell back in dismay. With one final, convulsive kick he was home. He had won, our man had won. We swept after him with all the others. But even as we approached, the baleful news began to filter back.

'Pete Meredith went away up Stokenchurch. We never saw him again,' said the hero of the hour. That lone rider whose arrival had been so self-effacing was the real winner, he had tricked us with his casual victory.

But nothing could detract from the impressiveness of that sprint; man not machine had been the lesson of the day. There was more, much more, to aspire to than Nervex lugs or Stronglight cranks; we had been called away for ever from our narrow allegiance to the golden calf of good equipment.

## 2. Another World

By the early '90s my passion for the sport had cooled to the warm glow of a TV screen. I decided that I could not let another season pass without the luxury of Eurosport which shows all the single-day classics as well as the universally popular Tour de France 'live'. I had become an armchair aficionado. Years of watching borrowed videos and crawling round to perch awkwardly on other people's upholstery had primed me for complete control and unimpaired access. The pleasure was too intense to share.

Competitive cycling was made for TV, it provides the perfect vicarious experience. You are ushered into the previously undisclosed heart of the action; there, with the inimitable David Duffield talking it through, you get a pillion-ride with the gods. Those live transmissions carried me back to the days when I used to drool over the illustrated sporting press from France which was our only worthwhile contact with the great spectacles unfolding on the Continent. Such magazines were a revelation of another world, a vision scarcely credible set against the drab backcloth of the domestic scene. During the intervening years, however, technological advance had managed to telescope the whole process into moving pictures *en direct* - a triumph which was more than enough to re-ignite those teenage ardours.

A lot of the control I demanded was over the video recorder. What I wanted was an immaculate recording, as free as possible from those interminable ad-breaks; my dream was of a library of instantly retrievable pleasure. But I found, after a while, that I was simply collecting the little black boxes; they lay there so long, some of them, that my

son was pinching them to record over with his Kung-Fu dramas. It was one thing to draw the curtains and settle down for a live transmission and something else entirely to give up the same time for a re-run. The original dynamic was lost; even the most indolent of family men could not afford such indulgence.

Then I hit upon the scheme of actually riding while I viewed. What better way to finish off the evening's anti-ageing exercises than by catching a clip from the saddle?

'A home trainer,' my good friend Mario said, 'you can have mine. I couldn't stand it, too boring.' Thus after years of only desultory practice, I was back turning the pedals again on a regular basis - even if it was in my own front room.

What was tagged-on as a final flourish, however, became more and more time-consuming as I found that I couldn't mount the bike in the ordinary clothes I wore for the standard Canadian Air Force exercises, but must change into racing gear. After all, I had to put on cycling shoes, why not the full Lycra? Good form seemed to require it. Then there were the stretching exercises afterwards which were mandatory according to the experts - essential or an excuse for lingering before the video?

A competitive element soon made itself felt, as it was bound to, I suppose. Riding a bike is inherently competitive, you always want to go further and faster. I began to fix on the digital clock as intently as on the screen; the workouts became something of an evening time-trial. But however engrossing the session there was no mistaking the ersatz quality of the actual cycling; the home-trainer experience only vaguely approximated a real ride. The call of the open road sounded through every one of those dead pedal strokes.

Now this was dodgy territory, I had to be careful. The fitter I became the greater the risk, because one of the penalties I had incurred from a lifetime's cycling in and around the Smoke was a bad chest - specifically the sinister COAD,

which spelled out means: Chronic Obstructive Airways Disease. Lung-searing efforts tended to have prolonged and nasty consequences. I had to pedal gingerly even behind closed doors. But the old fever was rising, there was no doubt. As soon as the cold weather abated, the bike and I would be nosing out into the smog for a spin around Richmond Park.

The course of my debility had seen many such resurrections and also many renunciations. The vehicle of so much delight had, on occasion, been an instrument of horror never to be touched or set eyes upon again. There was no mistaking, however, that my career had reached a bizarre pass with these regular pantomimes before the video screen. They gave rise to gentle misgivings about my state of mind, but past 50 you know that most of the world is as nutty as you are. What did begin to concern me, though, was the power of this so-called 'pastime'. Weren't similar absurdities being perpetrated all over the country? Wasn't a turbo trainer the in-vogue winter-training aid? Which begged the question: what possessed us all, what demented whim of human nature drew us to such a peculiar rapture?

This preoccupation took me through '93 and '94 without any resolution but a steady accumulation of miles both on and off the home trainer. Something of an answer came in early '95, however, with an article in *The Economist* surveying the coming season on the Continent under the headline: THE TOUGHEST SPORT? It was surprisingly perceptive and well informed, especially about the rigours of the early-season classics and the big Tours, but it was the final paragraphs that made me sit up. The anonymous writer quoted the results of a questionnaire completed by 100 French professionals in 1983:

The poll was especially moving when the riders were asked why they entered the sport. Some 15 per cent said they had primarily sought glory, 12 per cent money and 3 per cent social mobility . . . Their overwhelming first choice? Nearly 40 per cent listed love of the sport as the main reason

they turned professional; 30 per cent more listed it as their second choice.

One would have expected these tough road-men to be a bit more hard-headed, but they were obviously strong enough to admit the truth. It was love that made the wheels go round, even across the cobblestones in Paris-Roubaix – especially in Paris-Roubaix.

These findings were confirmed in a wonderfully downbeat picture of winter training Doncaster-style in an interview with John Tanner, the country's leading professional, later that year in *Cycling Weekly*. The local elite *grupetto* would be reduced in number that autumn because Wayne Randle was working in Halfords and Martin Maltby had acquired Don Valley Cycles. A bleak off-season was in prospect, but Tanner and Gary Speight would be getting in the miles for '96 in their usual dogged fashion and Tanner, the epitome of the gritty Yorkshireman, signed off with: 'You keep going because you like riding your bike . . . Nobody is doing it for money round here, it has to be love more than anything else.'

Love had bared its heart even in this most far-flung outpost, but love of what exactly? Just riding the bike, the thrill of racing or the companionship of like-minded souls? Did watching old videos from a home trainer qualify? Of course it did – love's bosom is notoriously ample. That was the trouble: as an explanation 'love' was too blanket, too all-embracing; it was ultimately unsatisfying. My hunch told me that there had to be something more. The heart was too large, too floppy – I wanted the lifeblood.

Then, just as the '96 season got under way, I turned my telly-watching into work experience. I persuaded Colin Coe, the editor of *Cycle News* (now sadly defunct) to take me on as TV critic; and in documenting the splendours and miseries of Eurosport I was forced to reconsider the attraction of the sport from a more specific angle. What was