THE TOUR IS WON ON THE ALPE

ALPE D'HUEZ *and the* CLASSIC BATTLES *of the* TOUR DE FRANCE

By Jean-Paul Vespini

Introduction by Jean-Marie Leblanc

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Translated by David V. Herlihy
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Boulder, Colorado

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To Fabienne

It is good to follow one inclination as long as it rises.

—ANDRÉ GIDE

In 1977, I experienced the greatest joy of my career
when I kept the yellow jersey by 8 seconds.
I could have died happy that day on my bike.

—BERNARD THÉVENET

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Foreword

The Tour de France is part of France's national heritage. This epic sporting event includes a cultural dimension that has not escaped the interest of educated people—a bonus that naturally appeals to the organizers as well.

Those who celebrate the Tour's virtues love to point out that it is a much better teacher of geography than schoolbooks. Moreover, the Tour offers added advantages: It reveals the true face of France's heartland, invites fans to share in this discovery or rediscovery, and promotes the cities along its route.

This exposure is particularly valuable when the stop happens to be a mountain resort such as L'Alpe d'Huez. This alpine ski mecca owes some of its fame to the bicycle. It has now entered the Annals of Cycling History (La Légende des Cycles) so dear to the French writer and sports columnist Antoine Blondin, taking its place alongside the famous peaks of the Galibier, the Tourmalet, and the Ventoux.

The formidable challenge of the Alpe, and others like it in the Alps and Pyrénées, has greatly enhanced the prestige of the Tour. With its especially severe hardships, the famous climb of L'Oisans occupies a privileged position. It foments epic battles among the climbers and shakes up the standings of the race.

In fact, the Tour's first mountaintop finish was witnessed on the Alpe. To put it there, Élie Wermelinger, at the time the general commissioner of the Tour, reconnoitered the Alpe's sinuous road months in advance aboard a Panhard Dyna motorcar that had to clear its own way through the snowdrifts.

It fell to Fausto Coppi to inaugurate the tradition of Alpe d'Huez, and his great victory in the dizzying heights of L'Oisans belongs to cycling legend. It evoked the fervent admiration of Jacques Goddet, the Tour's director from 1936 to 1986, who made a spontaneous association between

the man and the mountain in an editorial published in *L'Équipe* that began as follows: "Facing us, on the other side of the enormous crevasse which forms the valley of La Romanche, rises the Pelvoux chain, which majestically dominates all of its neighboring peaks, just like the great and solitary Coppi towered over his adversaries."

Over the years, the incomparable Campionissimo, and the equally impressive Lance Armstrong, are the only two who have won the Alpe stage and the Tour in the same year. That may seem surprising, yet this high point of competitive cycling has always shaken things up, producing unexpected and unforgettable moments such as the breakaway of Hinault and LeMond; the repeat victories of Zoetemelk, Winnen, and Bugno; and the triumph of Lucho Herrera, who sent all of Colombia into a frenzy.

One cannot speak about the Alpe without commenting on its surroundings, its ambience, its twenty-one turns, its boisterous crowds, and its inevitable Dutch contingent, which has led to it being called "Dutch Mountain"—the Low Country's highest peak. Today Dutch fans are no longer the only foreigners who flock to the Alpe for the big event. German, Belgian, and Danish campers amass along the road days ahead of time, joining the French aficionados and attesting that the climb up Alpe d'Huez has become a de rigueur stage in the Tour. This is a place of sport, celebration, and passion that fosters the formidable popularity of cycling and forges a worldwide community of fans.

All these images, all these exploits, have inspired our good friend Jean-Paul Vespini to write this book with love and skill. It is a unique contribution, faithful to reality and well-documented. It's the work of a journalist who should be complimented and thanked for his remarkable accomplishment and for the tribute he has paid the Tour de France.

—Jean-Marie Leblanc
Director of the Tour de France, 1989–2005

Prologue: The Pinnacle

The Tour de France and Alpe d'Huez have become such inseparable icons that their union transcends the race's everyday logistics. It's virtually an unwritten rule, for example, that if the Tour goes through the Pyrénées, it must traverse the Aubisque; if it passes through the Alps, it must make an ascent of the Galibier. An ascent of Alpe d'Huez, however, is another matter altogether: It sets the bar much higher and has become part of the very essence of the Tour. Today the question is not whether the Tour de France will include the Alps, and with or without them Alpe d'Huez, but simply whether or not the Tour will include Alpe d'Huez. The difference is significant.

The imposing peaks of eras past still have our utmost respect. But they are more or less wedded to their particular regions, with the possible exception of the treacherous Mont Ventoux. Today these strategic cols of yesteryear, vestiges of a distant era and commemorated feats, are practically steamrollered by pelotons that cross them largely intact. That's not true of the stubbornly selective Alpe d'Huez.

Great traditions take time to develop. In 1952, when the Tour made its first stop at the summit of the Alpe, no one could have predicted that the world of professional cycling had just discovered its Fenway Park, its Wimbledon, its stadium of reference.

Oddly enough, this first ascent, dominated by Fausto Coppi, the Campionissimo, who donned the yellow jersey following his stunning performance, was quickly forgotten. A few venomous pens even dared suggest that the Tour organizers were crazy to have sent the racers up there in the first place. And yet, without knowing it, the Tour had laid the foundation for cycling's modern temple.

Following the 1952 Tour, the riders and the organizers would forget Alpe d'Huez for eighteen years. Then, in 1976, Alpe d'Huez returned, this time to win the hearts of the masses. It was something of a revelation:

The entire cycling world began talking about this terraced spectacle of a climb, its every switchback numbered.

Since then, it has been referred to simply as the Alpe, known on this first-name basis throughout the cycling world. It is difficult to imagine a Tour without it, much as there could be no ski World Cup without Kitzbühel, no Formula One sans Monaco.

This devotion of the cycling faithful is shared by the riders, who go there in search of their Holy Grail. For them, winning atop the Alpe's lofty peak means as much as a world championship or a yellow jersey. It brings them closer to paradise. In times past, the Tour's heroes rode into the Casse Déserte of the prestigious Izoard. Today they set their sights on victory at L'Alpe d'Huez, chasing the imaginary wheel of Coppi, their great predecessor.

Alpe d'Huez has become the rite of passage, the key stage, the queen of all climbs, and the day of reckoning on which the Tour is won or lost. That is the true secret of the Alpe's success: It is a climb that delivers a verdict—absolute, impartial, and final.

Simple statistics do not reveal the Alpe's true stature. After all, how many riders have prevailed at the summit of Alpe d'Huez and gone on to win the Tour in the same year? So far, only two: Fausto Coppi in 1952 and Lance Armstrong in 2001 and also 2004, the year the stage served as an uphill time trial finish.

Should we therefore conclude that Alpe d'Huez rarely determines the eventual winner of the Tour? Definitely not. To truly gauge the significance of this climb in determining overall victory, we must focus our attention on the yellow jersey. By so doing, we see that in seventeen of twenty-five ascents, the winner of the Tour was in yellow following Alpe d'Huez.[1] In general, Tour winners must make a supreme effort there to either save the jersey or consolidate their lead. And as you will see in the following chapters, even in years when the Tour is not decided on the Alpe, the race can certainly be lost there.

Alpe d'Huez is known by many nicknames: the Platform of Huez, the Fortress of L'Oisans, the Mountain Temple (in fact, a splendid church near the summit made of wood and mortar has long offered journalists a makeshift pressroom; it once even hosted a boxing match before the building was completed). The Alpe is also referred to as Dutch Mountain,

not because the parish priest happens to be Dutch but because, paradoxically, riders from the Netherlands' endless expanses of flat country distinguished themselves on the Alpe's climbs at the beginning of this modern era. Dutch riders claimed six victories between 1976 and 1983 and have amassed eight victories in all. That might not seem sufficient to warrant the nickname, but there is no denying that the Batavians[2] have shown a strange affinity for this ascent. Joop Zoetemelk, Hennie Kuiper, Steven Rooks, and Gert-Jan Theunisse all found their wings here. They come, it seems, to rise majestically and dominate the competition in the Tour's most decisive stage. On behalf of an entire people, they make up for the lack of hills in their own country and proudly demonstrate that the Dutch know how to spin more than just windmill blades.

This passion draws scores of rabid Dutch fans to the Alpe each year, where they overrun every twist in its twenty-one switchbacks days before the actual stage. It is a pilgrimage that also attracts fans from all over the world, transforming the Alpe into cycling's Tower of Babel. At night, hundreds of cars, campers, and motorcycles cruise the road in an effort to nab the best spots. In the pale beams of their headlights, the most fanatical paint the names of their favorite stars across the road. Others stake out their territory with signs proportional in size to the admiration they feel for their champion so that they can be certain to keep their spot.

From the first to the last of the twenty-one turns, each deserves mention, but three in particular stand out:

Turn 16, at Garde: A flat section enables the fans to see the racers recuperate a bit.

Turn 8: A massive inscription of "Holland" in the rocks sets the tone, ambience guaranteed.

Turn 7: At the entrance of Huez, next to the small cemetery on the left, this spot offers an ideal view of a section of road with an 8 percent grade.

These five-star vantage points are hard to come by, but they are where you can see the racers best. Proud fans are up late into the night, looking forward to the craziness of the next day.

At Alpe d'Huez, cycling disciples enter their sanctuary. Exactly how many will be there on race day, jumping and yelling as the riders pass? At least 200,000 and perhaps as many as 300,000 as passions in the world's largest natural stadium, this overheated cauldron, come to a boil. From

switchback to switchback, the crowd will chant the name of the first rider to pass, the chosen one.

The Alpe bubbles with emotion as all eyes focus on the passing riders to gauge their positions and prospects. Meanwhile, cars in the caravan honk their horns incessantly at the imprudent and irreverent fans who have strayed into the champions' path of glory. The fans holler and gesture. This grand, colorful spectacle celebrates the mountain in a ritual that has become legendary. The public relishes this epic struggle, and the racers draw enough strength from the delirium to will themselves up the mountain.

Marco Pantani, the stage winner in 1995 and 1997, remarked, "I climbed it without ever seeing the road. The crowd guided me. I only had to listen to the fans who, meter after meter, watch you and yield just enough room to let you pass through a narrow opening. They show you where to go. In 1995, I did the entire climb without ever seeing any pavement. All I could see in front of me were thousands of boisterous fans who yelled out my name. I ascended like a blind man in the middle of a sea that opened up for me."[3]

Andy Hampsten, the winner of the 1992 stage, recalled, "People didn't clear a path until the last second. I felt like I was going 60 kilometers an hour. The sensation of passing through a narrow opening in the crowd was the most beautiful and emotional thing I've ever experienced in my life."[4]

What are the key elements that make this such a sacred cycling ritual? For starters, it's the geography. The 14-kilometer (8.7-mile) climb is truly hellish as the elevation rises from 800 meters (2,625 feet) at Bourg d'Oisans to 1,860 meters (6,102 feet) at the summit. The grade averages 8 percent, a rise of about 50 meters (164 feet) from one hairpin to the next. The brutal slope becomes especially taxing after the bridge at Romanche, where some sections reach a 14 percent grade before the hamlet of La Garde. For the uninitiated, it's a voyage into the depths of hell.

The inspired concept of numbering the turns helps riders keep track of their time, provides a countdown, and heightens the suspense. For some years now, a new aspect has come into play, similar to the hour record: the winner's time, both overall and at each switchback. It was always a close match between Pantani and Armstrong.

There is history in the turns as well. The climbs up Alpe d'Huez have generated great drama: surprising surges by the raging bull Joaquim Agostinho, a yellow-jersey-driven Ronan Pensec, an angelic Andy Hampsten, a haughty Laurent Fignon. And there have been moments of great triumph: the soaring breakaway of the Colombian Lucho Herrera; the dominating performance of Bernard Hinault and Greg LeMond, hand in hand; and Joop Zoetemelk's act of defiance.

Of course, there have been low points as well, such as the stunning defeats of a dehydrated Eddy Merckx, an exhausted Jean-François Bernard, or a tortured Gianni Bugno.

There have also been plenty of memorable misadventures, like Lucien van Impe's fall after an automobile clipped his bicycle, Michel Pollentier's drug bust, and the arrival of an exhausted Jean-Marie Leblanc outside the time limit.

Alpe d'Huez is a place that demands great emotion and sacrifice. Theunisse, for one, was obsessed with it. After a suspension, he went there to revive himself, repeating the climb over and over as if doing penitence. He scaled it something like twenty-four times in just a few days.

Every July, all eyes focus on this dream stage. And if by chance the organizers neglect to include it in the program, the fans let them have it. Even the racers protest; they were more upset when the Tour bypassed Alpe d'Huez in 1993 than when the Pyrénées were omitted altogether the previous year.

You just don't mess with the Alpe. It is irreplaceable. In 1993, at the finish in Isola 2000, each of the imposter's twenty-one turns was numbered and given the name of a cycling great as if to make up for the appalling absence of Alpe d'Huez. Immediately thereafter, Isola was all but forgotten and has not reappeared on the Tour itinerary.

There is only one Alpe. This is its story.

CHAPTER ONE

Birth of a Legend

TWENTY-ONE SWITCHBACK TURNS, FOLDED AND DRAPED ACROSS A forested mountain face. Almost 14 kilometers—about 8.6 miles—of relentless climbing up an average grade of 8.1 percent. A finish in thin air at 1,860 meters (6,100 feet). Who could conceive of putting mortal cyclists on such a monster?

Who, in fact, but a local hotelier, searching for a way to fill rooms at his ski lodge in the off-season.

Although virtually unknown to the public, Georges Rajon is a celebrity in the ski-resort village of L'Alpe d'Huez. Ask any native how to get to his home, and you'll be quickly directed to a distinctive chalet with hunting trophies proudly displayed above the balconies.

In 1950, Rajon built a hotel at the foot of the Alpe's future ski trails, calling it the Christina in honor of his daughter. An ardent promoter of the resort, he did everything he could to support its development. He became so influential and widely respected that he surely could have appointed himself mayor at any time. Instead, he chose to limit his public service to a six-year stint as a town council member. "I was never much of a diplomat," he explained. "I'm too accustomed to speaking my mind, holding nothing back."

Still, Rajon was so active in town affairs that many assumed he really was the mayor. Thus, it's no surprise that when Élie Wermelinger, the

onetime general commissioner of the Tour de France who was in charge of mapping out each edition of the race, came to L'Alpe d'Huez in late 1951 to scout a potential stage, he made the same assumption. "I was riding along in a Dyna Panhard with [André] Renard, a veteran of the 1911 Tour, at the wheel," Wermelinger later told *L'Équipe*. "At the Bourg d'Oisans exit, we had to stop to put on chains. Meanwhile, up at the summit, the mayor of L'Alpe, Rajon, waited for us."

Of course, Rajon—innkeeper, not mayor—was just trying to get the Tour to pass through town. In his view, the visit would inject some cash into the local economy and help promote the budding resort. He also had a selfish interest: He loves sports. Built like a lumberjack, with an iron constitution, he was once an Olympic-caliber skier. He is also a huge cycling fan who has never missed an Alpe stage. When the peloton arrived at the Alpe for the first time, in 1952, he was the official scorer, scribbling the names of the racers on a large chalkboard as each crossed the finish line.

The idea for hosting a Tour stage was first proposed by the late Jean Barbaglia, a painter and artisan from nearby Bourg d'Oisans who was also a lover of cycling and winter sports. "Jean came to see André Quintin [another hotelier at L'Alpe d'Huez] and me one day in 1951," Rajon told *L'Équipe* some years later. "He asked, 'Why don't they bring the Tour to the Alpe?' That's how it all began."

Together, Rajon and Barbaglia approached Wermelinger, who happened to be a close friend of the painter. The Tour architect was intrigued and promised to consider the idea, which appealed to his sense of adventure and his nose for business. In 1952, he published the first edition of his famous annual guidebook for Tour enthusiasts, *Le Petit Wermelinger*. He continued to publish it until his death in 1993. It was so practical and informative that copies were always hard to come by. Jacques Goddet, the longtime director of the Tour, once admitted that he lifted passages regularly from *Le Petit* for his columns in *L'Équipe*. "Many of my colleagues like to sprinkle a few factoids here and there for the benefit of their readers, or plunk an opportune quote in the middle of an article, just to show off their erudition," Goddet confessed. "I do that a lot myself—thanks to Élie, my faithful collaborator."[1]

Still, finishing a stage atop a mountain was a radical proposition, even to Wermelinger. Nothing like it had ever been done before in the history of the Tour. In fact, the first time racers would finish at a summit was in

1952 atop the Alpe, which barely beat out Puy-de-Dôme, another summit destination during the same Tour, for the honor.

As quirky as the proposition sounded at first, it began gaining favor with other local hoteliers, who were among the first to grasp the magnitude of the Tour and to appreciate its potential impact on the local economy. They realized that the Tour offered a unique opportunity to market their beautiful resort to a broader public. Although L'Alpe d'Huez offered up-to-date skiing amenities, the French were not yet bitten by the winter sports bug, and the town could not afford to ignore a potential boost.

It was a different era, the early 1950s. Dwight Eisenhower was about to be elected president of the United States, Raymond Kopa led the French soccer team to victory over the Germans, and the English biochemist Jack Drummond and his wife and daughter were brutally murdered in the French Alps, a sensational case that became the subject of a movie, *L'Affaire Dominici*, twenty years later. Skis were still generally made of wood—hickory for the most fortunate. And there were just a handful of sleepy ski resorts in southeastern France catering to a fortunate few.

So the prospect of bringing the Tour to town struck many local businessmen as a welcome shot in the arm. To be sure, the Tour at that time did not command the worldwide coverage it receives today. But it was already captivating all of France, thanks to the magic of radio. Every July, thousands sat with their ears glued to their transistors throughout the Tour as they strained to hear the commentary of Georges Briquet on the French channel or Alex Virot on Radio Luxembourg.

Although L'Alpe d'Huez was still a comparatively young resort, it was already sufficiently developed that it could seriously entertain the thought of hosting a Tour invasion. Since the construction of the Bel Alpe almost twenty years earlier, the number of local hotels and inns had surged to more than thirty. The primary catalyst was the opening of the Grand Hôtel in 1935. With its sixty rooms and excellent services, it sparked the construction of other splendid establishments, especially after the war, including the Trois Dauphins, the Edelweiss, and Rajon's Christina. Travelers could also stay with local entrepreneurs who had transformed their private chalets into comfortable guesthouses.

High society was already frequenting L'Alpe d'Huez to take in its charm and fresh mountain air. Among the favorite haunts was the famous Ménandière, which opened its doors in 1947 (today it's a restaurant with

a piano bar). Its comfortable and elegant ambience, featuring sumptuous bedrooms, attracted some of the biggest names in show business—stars such as Charles Aznavour and Elizabeth Taylor. Artists and politicians also came to L'Alpe d'Huez. Jean Monnet, the architect of European unity, often retreated there to escape the public's eye. The French president, Albert Lebrun, was a regular at the Ours Blanc, whose famous chef, Raymond Olivier, had trained at the Grand Véfour in Paris (and, a few years later, would teach cooking to millions of television viewers).

The resort also boasted a marvelous road, a veritable boulevard compared to the deadly paths of the Pyrénées. Ah, the road to the Alpe! It deserves a chapter unto itself. As late as 1881, according to town documents, the summit road was nothing more than a mule path. By the early 1930s, the road from Bourg d'Oisans to Huez measured a good 4 meters (13 feet) across. But the continuation to the summit was still just a narrow strip of earth, barely 2.5 meters (8 feet) wide. That was not enough to support a Tour stage, let alone the development of a major winter resort. Yet at the time, the local economy, though growing, could not support the cost of constructing a real road.

Fortunately, the situation would soon take a turn for the better, permitting not only the inaugural ascent of 1952 but also a construction boom in the 1960s. The guiding light was a man named Joseph Paganon.[2] Born in 1880 in the nearby region of Isère, this chemist and freemason became a deputy of the district. He loved L'Alpe d'Huez so much that he built a chalet there. When he became minister of public works in 1933, he initiated the construction of a new road from Bourg d'Oisans to the summit of the Alpe that would measure a full 7 meters (23 feet) wide. In 1966, when the Olympic Games came to Grenoble, some sections were widened another 1.5 meters (5 feet). The section between Huez and the summit, however, is still the original road. Tour racers go left at the upper fork.

"Paganon was a true visionary who anticipated the ski resort boom," affirmed Rajon, adding with a chuckle, "but to finance the project, he had to draw from funds earmarked for the Pyrénées." Fourteen firms participated in the project, with each covering the costs of paving exactly 1 kilometer (a little over .5 mile). Collectively, they completed the road within the 1935 calendar year.[3] That, along with the concurrent introduction of the first ski lifts, cleared the way for the Tour and unprecedented development.

The Town Didn't Pay a Dime

Although local businessmen were keen on bringing the 1952 Tour to town, local officials were markedly less enthusiastic. There was, after all, the small matter of paying Tour organizers 2 million French francs ($4,000 today) for the privilege of hosting the affair, and August Chalvin, the real mayor, had little in the way of discretionary funds. But he was not oblivious to the potential payoff. "We can't pay anything," he bluntly informed the steering committee. "But if you folks want to bring the Tour here, be my guest."

Three men took it upon themselves to negotiate a deal with Tour organizers and oversee the entire event: Jean Barbaglia, the mastermind behind the idea; Georges Rajon, who would also orchestrate the second ascent in 1976; and André Quintin, the owner of the Ménandière.

"We met with all the local shop owners and hotel managers," Rajon recalled, "and put it to them straight: 'You will have to pay, but you will earn it all back, and then some!' We also got the Tour organizers to agree to a rest day immediately after the stage, to ensure a significant influx of cash. The town didn't pay a centime, and it worked out perfectly for everyone."

When the inaugural climb finally concluded at the summit of the Alpe, Fausto Coppi had registered a victory for the ages. Still, another twenty-four years would elapse before the second ascent established the great love affair between the Tour and Alpe d'Huez. Perhaps that was because in Coppi's time, a vital element of the Alpe's full magic was missing: the famous markers that enumerate in descending order all twenty-one turns of the summit road. Here's how that ingenious idea came about.

An Idea from Yugoslavia

Rajon has always loved the great outdoors. Not surprisingly, given his athletic makeup, he is partial to vigorous exercise. Over the years, he has traveled throughout the world—Alaska, Canada, Africa—to hunt a wide variety of animals. In his living room, he proudly displays an assortment of wildlife trophies, notably a gigantic bearskin. He is also fond of fishing and has reeled in some remarkable prizes.

In the summer of 1964, Rajon made his annual trip to Slovenia to hunt chamois. Jacques Anquetil had just won a record fifth Tour—his fourth in

a row. Rajon was hoping for good results too. But as he began the drive up Mont Vrsic, 2,700 meters (8,860 feet) high, his thoughts were far from the Tour. Since the first ascent, the Tour had never again set foot on the Alpe. Rajon was simply looking for chamois and focusing on the beauty of the countryside near the borders of Italy and Austria.

But as he climbed the fifty-three turns of the Vrsic Pass, Rajon began to think about the future of the Alpe and its development as a tourist destination. The turns he was negotiating were numbered in increasing order. What a brilliant idea! “Why don’t we number the switchbacks from Bourg d’Oisans to the Alpe?” he asked himself. Better yet, number the turns in descending order so that visitors would know exactly how many remained before the summit.

Upon his return from Yugoslavia, Rajon encountered little difficulty selling the idea to his friends. Later that same year, for the first time, the 14-kilometer road to L’Alpe d’Huez labeled its curves, starting with number 21 at the base and ending with number 1, just 2.5 kilometers (1.6 miles) from the summit. Little did Rajon realize at the time that these markers were also destined to benefit future Tour contestants.

A dozen years later, when the Tour finally returned to the Alpe, the racers could, for the first time, gauge their progress on the summit road as soon as they began their ascent. They could even pace themselves according to the amount of work left to do, as indicated by the markers. Ever since 1976, in fact, racers have focused on those markers as if they were part of a giant hourglass.

At present, each marker indicates, in addition to the number of the curve, three numbers set against the backdrop of the French flag: 1,450, 1,860, and 3,350. These correspond to the altitude, in meters, of the town of Huez (4,760 feet), the resort (6,100 feet), and the mountain peak (10,990 feet). Each marker also gives the altitude at that particular spot as well as the distance to the nearest emergency phone. That last bit of information is useful for tourists but for Tour riders provides an endless source of jokes.

Today those twenty-one markers add an element of magic to this high destination of the Tour. Every year a few overzealous fans go so far as to dig up and cart off markers as souvenirs of their summer pilgrimage. For obvious reasons, the town should erect a monument to the glory of Georges Rajon. After all, many Legion of Honor medals have been issued for less deserving contributions to a country’s national heritage.

CHAPTER TWO

1952

Fausto Coppi Climbs to the Heavens

IT WAS THE AFTERNOON OF JULY 4, 1952, AND THE 266-KILOMETER (165-mile) stage to the Alpe was nearing its climax. Just past Bourg d'Oisans, an important tourist center about 15 kilometers (9 miles) from the finish line where the road begins to rise to the summit, Jean Robic of team France took off. Raphaël Géminiani, his teammate, followed close behind. But "Gem" quickly faded, partly asphyxiated by the brutal pace. Meanwhile, Robic, nicknamed "Leatherhead" (though he was not wearing his trademark helmet that day), continued his furious charge. The car carrying reporters from *France-Soir* followed in his wake.

Three kilometers (1.9 miles) later, Fausto Coppi, who had complained that boisterous fans outside his hotel had disturbed his sleep the night before, burst forward like a bolt of lightning and joined the Frenchman. The road got steeper, the gaps widened, and on the otherwise quiet mountain, where an occasional "viva" was shouted by his compatriots, Coppi set the pace.

He drove his bike through every turn, his torso upright as he concentrated on his work, without giving the impression that he was really pushing himself. While Robic stood on his pedals to hold the Italian's rear wheel, the Campionissimo pedaled in the saddle, caressing the top of his handlebars. The little Breton panted, his muscles taut, his eyes fixed on the asphalt, as if he had already accepted his imminent defeat.

For 7 more kilometers (4.3 miles), Coppi turned his large chainring, pulling Robic behind him. The spare tire wrapped around the Frenchman's neck was looking more and more like a yoke. Finally, 6 kilometers (3.7 miles) from the summit, Coppi decided to take off, leaving Robic behind. Jacques Goddet, director of the Tour, recalled the moment in *L'Équipe:* "Coppi was unyielding and untouchable, thanks to his extraordinary biomechanical dexterity. Robic kept trying to attack, but Fausto simply accelerated without ever turning back to gauge his lead, as if he were oblivious to any other rider. And when Coppi sensed that Robic was at a breaking point, he accelerated even more. Before anyone knew it, he had a 25-meter lead, and that was that."

A powerless Robic let the Campionissimo go. As Coppi confided later, "I knew he wasn't there anymore, since I no longer heard his breathing, or the crunching of his tires on the ground behind me." He added, "I prefer not to look behind me. It's an exercise of will that I often practice when I find myself at the front in the mountains. I only allow myself a quick sideways glance at turns in the road. I could have dropped my French rival earlier, but it would have meant making a bigger effort than I did when I finally decided to go."

In *Miroir-Sprint*, Charles Pélissier, winner of sixteen Tour stages between 1929 and 1935, wrote in his weekly chronicle, "Coppi didn't seem to exert any extra effort at all. Going up the mountain, he even kept enough energy in reserve to direct traffic, signaling to the cars when to pass or wait. That was really amazing!"

André Leducq, winner of the 1930 and 1932 Tours, was equally stunned. Writing in the weekly print newspaper *But et Club*, he said, "I watched Coppi accelerate through the turns of Alpe d'Huez while Robic, whom he had just caught, was still in his slipstream. Coppi had rosy cheeks, bright eyes, and supple legs. Everyone else looked like they were suffering. It must be a wonderful feeling to soar like that, to have everyone at your mercy."

Perhaps Carlo Perioni summarized Coppi's mastery best in his cartoon published in the Italian biweekly *Il Guérin Sportivo*. In it, his main character, Marino, suggested that Robic try a radical new approach the next time he had to chase Coppi up a mountain: Ride a motorcycle.

War of the *Miroirs*

The postwar period was a wonderful time for cycling fans, and the sports press was at its best. Two French weeklies were particularly focused on cycling, and they were bitter rivals. One was *Miroir-Sprint*, later replaced by the monthly *Miroir du Cyclisme*, directed from the start by Maurice Vidal (sadly, it folded in 1994). Billed as "the best-selling sports weekly," it was known especially for its cartoons by René Pellarin, known simply as Pellos. The other journal, directed by Gaston Bénac, was called *But et Club: Le Miroir des Sports*. Bénac, a prominent reporter for the more mainstream publications *France-Soir* and *Paris-Presse*, was also the creator of the famous Grand Prix des Nations time trial, held annually from 1932 to 2004. *But et Club*'s editor-in-chief was Félix Lévitan, who was also codirector of the Tour. He would later direct *Parisien Libéré*.

Miroir-Sprint and *But et Club* shared the same format and price (35 francs) and were surprisingly similar in other respects. In particular, the color of their pages alternated between tan and green, and they both dedicated ample space to the Tour, with superb photographs. Each review employed a former Tour champion to provide commentary—Pélissier in the case of *Miroir-Sprint* and Leducq in the case of *But et Club*. Many of their contributors eventually wound up writing for *L'Équipe*, notably Pierre Chany (formerly with *Miroir-Sprint*) and Marcel Hansenne (formerly with *But et Club*). Both reviews featured flamboyant prose and evocative headlines. "You can't stop a meteor" was how Bénac summed up Coppi's dominance that day.

Television Arrives

The Italian did indeed put on a beautiful show on the slopes of the Alpe—not only for the fans who were there to see it live but also for television viewers. For the first time, a cameraman filmed the actual race close-up, from the back of a motorcycle. Bernard Gensous, a television technician who began his career in 1941 and ended it as a director with TDF1, recalled, "That year, thanks to Pierre Sabbagh [an early French television reporter] and the birth of daily televised reports, we covered the entire Tour. Every evening, we sent the day's footage to Paris, where it was developed, edited, and broadcast with the commentary of Georges de Caunes."

That was quite a leap forward when one considers that only four years earlier, in 1948, television coverage of the Tour was limited to the finish at the Parc des Princes in Paris. Three television cameras covered the race, and the images were sent to a truck where all the reporters huddled. The images were then relayed via an observation balloon to the Eiffel Tower for public broadcasting.

Certainly the cameraman who followed the stage that day had no shortage of interesting images to capture. There was Coppi, alone and airborne, and Alfredo Binda, the Italian team's director. Binda stood in his car to assess Coppi's position before turning his attention to the beauty of the countryside. At the summit, where the crowd was finally able to cheer for Coppi, the champion was awarded a bonus of 1:40 (which he didn't need!). He then donned the yellow jersey, sponsored by the wool manufacturer Sofil. Jean Masson, the French minister of sport, who had come to follow this key stage, extended his congratulations.

Behind Coppi emerged Robic, who had held up remarkably well under the circumstances, conceding "only" 1:20. As a collective reward for their respective efforts to conquer the mountain, Coppi and Robic split the 100,000-franc prize ($285 in 1952, or about $2,500 today) for combativeness offered by the French sugar industry.

In third place, 3:22 behind Coppi, was the Belgian Constant "Stan" Ockers, who would finish second overall in this Tour. His technical director, Sylvère Maès, the winner of the 1936 and 1939 Tours, pushed him hard, going so far as to simulate with his hands the pedaling rhythm he demanded from his racer.

Coppi's faithful and astonishing *gregario*,[1] the eagle-nosed Andrea Carrea, finished sixth, 3:29 behind his leader. The evening before this stage, in Lausanne, Carrea had temporarily claimed the yellow jersey, almost by accident. Like a good teammate, he had immersed himself in a breakaway to keep his leader in the race. But by the end of the day, his advantageous position had catapulted him to number one in the overall standings. Embarrassed, he had apologized profusely to the Campionissimo. "He didn't know what to say," Coppi recalled. Coppi quickly reassured his teammate. Half a century later, when Carrea spoke of this sublime moment from his home in Novi-Ligure, one could detect a certain pain in his voice: "He told me, 'Tomorrow, we will be the *domestiques* and you will be the champion.'"

Another standout that day was Jan Nolten (eighth), a 23-year-old who was competing in his first Tour de France. As it turned out, he would be the first in a long line of Dutchmen to distinguish himself in this stage, setting a precedent for Joop Zoetemelk, Hennie Kuiper, Steven Rooks, and Gert-Jan Theunisse. Nolten also won a prize for composure, awarded by the maker of an aperitif. Later in the Tour, he would prevail in Monaco, depriving Jean Dotto of a beautiful victory, and would also stand out on the slopes of Puy-de-Dôme, finishing second behind Coppi.

A subpar Géminiani (13th) temporarily fell behind the Spaniard Antonio Gélabert, the 4th-place finisher, in the best climber classification. Although there was as yet no distinctive polka-dot jersey to designate the leader in this discipline, the St. Raphaël Quinquina Trophy awaited the eventual winner in Paris—who turned out to be none other than Coppi.

As for Gino Bartali (12th), he fell twice in this Tour, losing any shot at the overall win. The first fall took place in Switzerland, near the French border, when he collided with the Luxembourger Bim Diederich. The second occurred when a car in front of him stalled and began to roll backward, knocking him off balance. As a consolation, he received the prize for least lucky rider, worth 20,000 francs ($57 in 1952, or about $550 today), offered by an insurance company.

Rounding out the pack was Jean Delahay. He finished last in 23rd place, having lost over half an hour over the final 14 agonizing kilometers (8.7 miles) of this crucial stage, which had begun that morning in Lausanne.

The Crazy Plan to Climb the Alpe

The pen manufacturer Bic, which awarded a prize based on overall performance in what it considered the toughest stages of the Tour, promptly added the Alpe to its list. Still, many observers did not look favorably upon its inclusion. In *L'Équipe*, Claude Tillet complained, "This day comes down to just 15 kilometers at the end, and it doesn't really reflect who the true 'top' finishers are." Jean Denis, writing in *Le Méridional*, offered even blunter criticism of Tour officials: "What a strange idea it was to schedule a rest day up there. Those people should have their heads examined."

By 1993, forty-one years later, the prevailing attitude had changed considerably. When the Alpe d'Huez stage was omitted from the Tour that year, cycling journalists howled in protest, as if some vital appendage

of the Tour had been severed, rendering it meaningless. Still, the widespread misgivings about the inaugural ascent are understandable in retrospect. Never before had racers faced such a steep climb as the Fortress of L'Oisans. And this daunting prospect, after the accumulated fatigue of ten days, raised serious concerns—even among the racers themselves.

Breakaways Threatened with Frame Pumps

The day after the stage, Tour organizers summoned a number of riders to the Grand Hôtel and demanded an explanation for their bizarre behavior the previous morning. The accused included some of the most prominent competitors: Bim Diederich and Jean Goldschmidt of Luxembourg; Géminiani, who had been a great force in the Vosges and would shine again at Mont Aspin; Lucien Lazaridès; and Raoul Rémy, who would go on to win the stage at Aix-en-Provence. The charge: that they had brandished their bicycle pumps in the early part of the stage to prevent anyone from launching a breakaway. The consequences were potentially severe; at that time the organizers showed little tolerance for tomfoolery. The Swiss racer Carlo Lafranchi had just shelled out a fine of 200 francs after he had swiped a tall hat off a spectator and worn it while leaving Geneva.

If the peloton indeed conspired to save its energy for the climb, it succeeded. During the initial flat stretch from Lausanne to Bourg d'Oisans, the racers cruised along at a leisurely pace, falling a full 40 minutes behind official predictions. The 332 journalists and photographers who covered the route, meanwhile, spent much of their time admiring the countryside. The public, for its part, was free to devote its attention to the twenty-four vehicles that formed the publicity caravan, and the forty or so cars and trucks that were transporting race-related equipment. Even then, the Tour was an impressive spectacle, a colorful cortege moving through the French heartland.

But the loafing would not last. As some critics had predicted, the stage would indeed hinge on the final 15 kilometers (9.3 miles) leading to the summit of the Alpe. And that final stretch loomed as one of the most trying ordeals in a difficult Tour that captured magnificently the contours of France, from the cobblestones of the north to the canal paths of the south to the mountains of the Vosges, Alps, and Pyrénées. Included in the daunting series of climbs were the Ventoux, Peyresourde, Aspin, Tourmalet, and Aubisque, and even the Puy-de-Dôme.

"This edition scares me," confessed Maurice Vidal to the readers of *Miroir-Sprint* the day before the Alpe stage. "Even if these guys are truly giants of the road, they still have their physical limits." Vidal complained that the route was excessively severe and had imposed an insane pace ever since its start in Brest. "Every day," he asserted, "numerous racers finish the stage demoralized, declaring that they have reached the limits of human endurance. Whether or not he is victorious, Coppi's face is so worn that one must wonder, despite all his heroic efforts, if even he will reach a breaking point."

As if the steep climbs and blistering pace weren't enough, the weather was taking its toll as well. This superhuman Tour began on the June solstice in sweltering heat. It was so hot, in fact, that road tar stuck to tires. The riders gulped down bottles of water—one fellow from Bordeaux reportedly drank forty in a single day! Others doused their faces and necks with beer and lemonade from glass bottles. The riders could barely eat in the stifling heat. According to Chany, the temperature "subjected the caravan to extreme devastation."

Pellos, the cartoonist for *Miroir-Sprint*, depicted the brutal conditions in a memorable cartoon titled "The New Enemy of the Racers." It showed the sun god Phoebus transformed into a devil as he mercilessly cast his rays onto the backs of the wilting riders. Meanwhile, the peloton's traditional foes, fatigue and bad luck—personified respectively by the "hammer man" and the "witch with green teeth"—looked on incredulously.

And the heat continued. As the Tour unfolded, newspapers carried dramatic headlines: "40 degrees Celsius in Italy. 18 dead. Heat wave invades all of Europe." And to think that the organizers had gone out of their way to design an excruciating course! Their intention was to spark a battle among the top contenders, but as it turned out, many were missing out on the fun. Absent from the start were Louison Bobet, who would win the next three Tours; Hugo Koblet, the previous winner, who suffered from back pain; and Ferdi Kübler, the hero of the 1950 Tour. The Tour's torrid pace soon claimed more casualties. Rik van Steenbergen, the first in this race to wear the yellow jersey, suffered a mechanical breakdown and then sunstroke on the road to Metz. More dropouts followed in subsequent stages, notably Robert Chapatte, who suffered a throat infection and would therefore never tackle the Alpe as a racer, and Louis Caput, Poulidor's future *directeur sportif*, who injured his left arm.

The contest was increasingly shaping up as a duel between France and Italy, for it was the golden age of national and regional teams. The French favorites, from the national team coached by Marcel Bidot (who had taken over from his brother Jean), were Géminiani (2nd in 1951) and Robic (27th in 1951). The Italian favorites, coached by Alfredo Binda, were Coppi (who had been ailing since the death of his brother the previous year), Gino Bartali (4th in 1951), and Fiorenzo Magni (7th in 1951).

The Campionissimo, despite the high expectations, was barely in fourth place when the Alpe stage began in Lausanne, 5:04 behind teammate Carrea, the surprise leader. Yet when the stage ended on the summit, it was Coppi who wore yellow, now ahead of Carrea in the overall standings by 5 seconds, Magni (in third) by 1:50, and Lauredi (in fourth) by 5:01. Alpe d'Huez had allowed Coppi to make up his entire deficit.

Usually modest and reserved, a beaming Campionissimo made no effort this time to conceal his pride. "I don't really understand why we, the climbers, were not attacked more violently before Bourg d'Oisans," he mused. "No one approached me asking for permission to get a head start. I guess they could see from my face that I wasn't about to let anyone get ahead of me." Then Coppi explained his winning strategy. "I had promised myself that I would not be the first to deliver a deadly blow; rather, I would wait for the attackers. That would give me a triple advantage. First, I would not have to break my rhythm. Second, I could see who my top rivals were that day. Finally, I could demoralize them by jumping on their wheels, if possible."

When the Tour resumed with a stage to Sestrières, Coppi delivered an impressive encore. He would go on to dominate the 1952 Tour. Well before the end of this epic race, the organizers decided to classify the Italian as untouchable, "beyond category." They then increased the prize for second place, with the runner-up, Ockers, ultimately collecting almost as much as the winner.

Coppi Prefers Room 28

When Robic crossed the finish line of the Alpe stage, falling to 10th place in the overall standings, he was eager to call it a day and get to his hotel room. Of all the racers staying at the Christina, including teams France and Italy, he was the first to reach the front desk. Behind it was Rajon's

good friend Marchusio, who had agreed to fill in while regular staff assisted race officials. Robic was still wearing his sweaty Colomb jersey, with his shorts hiked halfway up his thighs and his spare tire dangling from his neck. With his tired face, he looked like someone who had just given his all in a losing battle. He nevertheless summoned up sufficient strength to ask for his room key in a firm voice. Marchusio, as it happened, knew nothing about bike racing, nor could he recognize any of the sport's stars. He eyed Robic with thinly veiled disdain, as if the grubby individual before him were some hapless amateur out for a Sunday spin.

"And you are, sir?" Marchusio responded politely but firmly.

"What?" barked a stunned Robic. "You mean you don't recognize me? Why, I'm Robic of course."

Unfazed, Marchusio opened the large reservation book and took his time looking for Robic's name. "Ah . . . here it is," responded Marchusio at last. "Robic, room 6."

Robic grabbed the key and stormed off to his room, grumbling all the way.

A few minutes later, another tired racer made his way to the front desk. "I would like room 28," intoned a calm voice. It was Coppi. When Binda had visited the Christina in preparation for this event, he had asked Rajon to reserve that room for his star. Curiously, it was far from being one of Rajon's best rooms, all of which featured a bath, balcony, and stunning view of the mountains. It was a small room on the third floor facing the back of the building, with no elevator access.

"It was the least requested room in the entire hotel," Rajon remembered. "But Fausto wanted peace and quiet, not frills, especially since he had the next day off to rest. So he positioned himself as far away from his fans as possible, so as not to hear their shouts. He was happy to give up his view in return for greater privacy, and no doubt he hoped his relative inaccessibility would stem the steady stream of visitors."

A Walk around Lake Besson

The next day, before the stage to Sestrières via the formidable Galibier, the racers had a chance to relax. The Campionissimo, true to form, spent most of the morning in bed resting his legs, receiving an occasional visitor. At one point Aldo Zambrini, the owner of Bianchi, dropped by, and he

persuaded his star to join him for a drive to Lake Besson along a dirt road. A few teammates went along as well, including the faithful Carrea, who looked like a tourist with his shorts and checked shirt. Coppi wore a polo shirt and slacks and held a cap in one hand, as if ready to shield his head from the sun. Through his dark glasses, he admired the surrounding snow-capped mountains and the crystal-clear water that sparkled under the sun like the yellow jersey he had worn the evening before—an exploit that had earned him, once again, a pile of congratulatory letters and telegrams.

Miroir-Sprint produced a marvelous post-stage edition with a host of unusual snapshots capturing the scene at the Alpe. Team doctors, far from resting, were busy tending to tired legs. One photo depicted Robic looking rather worried as his wife served him breakfast. The Bordeau sisters did their best to enliven the atmosphere for team France. Pierre Molineris, a local boy from Voiron, stretched his legs in a tub of tepid water as his wife and young son lovingly looked on. Jean Dotto, who was driving around town in his Citroën, caused a sensation when he stopped at the local cobbler to get new metal plates nailed to the soles of his cycling shoes.

But et Club offered much the same fare, including photos of Coppi and Bartali as they signed post-Tour contracts under the watchful gaze of general manager André Mouton. There was also a portrait of Géminiani and Lucien Lazaridès seated in an official Tour vehicle, taking in some accordion music.

The ambience at the Christina that evening was likewise relaxed as both the Italians and the French tried to recover from their recent ordeal and prepare for the next. Marchusio, a gifted professional magician, dutifully entertained the French team in the hotel dining room. When the Italians, led by Bartali, descended for their meal, they too were amused by Marchusio's wizardry—especially Bartali. After all, Gino "Il Pio," a devout Catholic, was a firm believer in miracles.