

“The Great Moral Crusade of Cycle-Sport”

So blathered its founder, but in fact, the world's greatest bicycle race started as a competition between two newspapers that was fueled by the bitterest of political scandals

BY CHARLES HOWE

Today, there is widespread recognition of the Tour de France, not merely as the world's greatest bicycle race, but as an international sporting event of the first order, ranking with and in some ways even surpassing the Olympic Games and the World Cup of soccer in scale, grandeur, and drama. It is easy to forget, however, that as late as the 1980s, it was viewed away from the Continent (when notice was taken at all) as an obscure European curiosity, however passionately it may have been followed there. Always, though, the Tour has been, and remains, the supreme test of human athletic endurance, throwing all others into eclipse, and as such it has brought forth many unforgettable performances.

Perennial complaints that it has become overly commercialized may have merit, but the Tour de France – like much of bicycle road racing itself – was not started simply for its own sake, but for commercial ends, as something of a publicity stunt for the sporting newspaper *L'Auto* during the era of the Dreyfus affair, with a political motive thrown in as well.

Captain Alfred Dreyfus was a career officer in the French Army, of Jewish descent, and from the province of Alsace, which had been stripped from France by Germany in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. Dreyfus was arrested in 1894 for selling military secrets to Germany, subsequently convicted at court-martial, and sentenced to life imprisonment at the notorious Devil's Island penal colony. Army documents implicating him were later discredited as forgeries and he was finally exonerated in a civilian court in 1906, but by then the case had polarized much of French society, altered its politics, reverberated through its art and literature, and left wounds which would take a generation to heal.

With a circulation of over 80,000, *Le Vélo* was France's largest and only daily sporting newspaper at the turn of the century, and was run by Pierre Giffard, a left-wing Dreyfus supporter who had been news director of *Le Petit Journal*. In need of advertising after a falling out with Giffard, Comte Dion and a syndicate of ultra right-wing, anti-Dreyfus bicycle manufacturers founded *L'Auto-Vélo* in 1900, with the added incentive of putting Giffard out of business. As editor, they chose Henri Desgrange, a former law clerk and editor of *La Bicyclette*, a cycling newsletter, who had set the first unpaced hour record in 1893.

Though well-edited, *L'Auto-Vélo* had trouble competing with *Le Vélo*, which made effective use of the races it sponsored, including the quadrennial 1200 km Paris-Brest-Paris, as well as the yearly Bordeaux-Paris and Paris-Roubaix one-day classics, to boost its circulation. Desgrange and his assistants decided not just to compete with *Le Vélo's* races, but to trump them altogether with an event of 2428 kilometers over 19 days, which would circle France clockwise in six segments linking its largest cities: Paris, Lyon, Marseille, Toulouse, Bordeaux, Nantes, and finally back to Paris, each leg interspersed with 1-3 days rest. The stage race was born, Desgrange's assistant Géo Lefèvre getting credit for the original idea and the name, although some sources attribute the latter to Desgrange himself. Naturally, it received criticism and ridicule from numerous quarters when announced in January 1903, especially Giffard, who had sued *L'Auto-Vélo* for copyright infringement and won, forcing Desgrange to truncate the name to simply *L'Auto*.

The first “Tour de France Cycliste” started at 3:16 the afternoon of July 1, 1903, from the Café Réveil Matin (“Morning Call,” or “Alarm Clock”), in Montgeron on the outskirts of Paris, at the T-shaped junction of Melun and Corbeil roads, after the planned downtown start from the Place de la Concorde was nixed by the prefect of Paris police. (Largely unchanged, the Réveil Matin still operates today, and now includes an inn as well.) Lefèvre was the organizer-referee-judge-timer-statistician-publicist (!), and his plan was to ride with the *peloton* to monitor the early portion of each stage, then keep pace by periodically hopping a train to selected points along the day's route. Now, professional road racing had got going in earnest in the 1890s, with the advent of the diamond-framed “safety” bicycle, chain drive, and pneumatic tires, and it already enjoyed broad popularity, but all of France immediately went *fou* for *le Tour* like nothing else before, as the idea of a man traveling around the entire country by the power of his own two legs caught the fancy even of the upper social strata.

An estimated 100,000 were spread along the route of the final stage from Nantes to the new, 666-meter velodrome at the Parc des Princes, where the 21 finishers were greeted by another 20,000, and crowds actually lined the backroads of France in the dead of night just for a passing glimpse of the leaders going by, illuminated by the headlights of support cars. Numerous other competitors, however, rode into ditches or lost their way in the dark, and half the starting field of 60 was gone by Toulouse. Even so, this first Tour characteristically produced a worthy champion in Maurice Garin, a pre-race favorite and the most accomplished rider of the era. In a self-congratulatory mood that was in no way hindered by *L'Auto*'s more-than-threefold circulation increase to 65,000, Desgrange exulted “. . . we have given cycle-sport its finest, its greatest competitive event,” unconcerned about a sabotaged drink here, a little broken glass spread on the road by the leaders there, and the excessive responsibilities placed on Lefèvre. All seemed of no consequence as he basked in the glow of the new creation and savored sweet revenge.



STAGE FINISH AT THE INAUGURAL TOUR

Instant, uncontrolled popularity, followed by near-disintegration.

Self-satisfaction would come back to haunt Desgrange the next year, as things got completely out of control in what is still the most controversial edition, 1904 notwithstanding; just to summarize the incidents of sabotage, cheating, and outright chaos is a challenge to brevity. (Indeed, an entire book has been devoted to the subject, *The Tour Which Was To Be the Last*, by Jacques Seray.) Riders' drinks were spiked. Their shorts were contaminated with irritants, and one rider's frame failed after being partially sawn through, causing him to fall heavily. Not 70 km into the first stage, the pack rounded a corner at Nemours and crashed *en masse* into local police mounted on horseback, who were trying to keep the crowd at bay. On stage 2, leaders Garin, Lucien Pothier, and Giovanni Gerbi were harassed for 6 km and nearly run off the road by a carful of fans for local rider Antoine Faure, then confronted and beaten up with rocks and clubs by a mob of over 100 on the col de la République, while Faure was allowed through. The crowd dispersed when Lefèvre drove up and fired a pistol into the air. Garin and Pothier were bruised, but able to continue, while Gerbi had to retire. The stage after that, a crowd of 2,000 brawled at Nîmes with police and riders, unhappy that their hometown favorite Ferdinand Payan had been eliminated the first day; thereafter, his 'fans' had exacted their revenge by spreading nails and broken glass on the road.

Even on the final stage, the route was blocked by farm equipment and trees felled across the road. Throughout the race, Lefèvre made extraordinary efforts to reestablish order, including changing the route and the race schedule, but all was in vain. He was assigned elsewhere the following year (*L'Auto* covered numerous other sports), and would never be involved with the Tour again.

Fearing public reaction, the *Union Vélocipédique de France* waited until November 30 to release its report and take action: the first four finishers (Garin, Pothier, César Garin, and Hippolyte Aucouturier) were disqualified for 'irregularities' which were never publicly specified (most likely, they hopped a train), and another 25 riders were disciplined in some way. Additionally, Garin received a two-year suspension, bringing his career effectively to an end, while Pothier was banned for life. Garin denied any wrongdoing, but admitted to cheating in later life, even though legend claims he maintained his innocence until his death in 1957, just short of his 86th birthday.

Desgrange, an idealist who saw the Tour as "The great moral crusade of cycle-sport," was initially distraught, declaring it a victim of its own popularity and vowing that the second edition would be the last, but of course he reconsidered, since the race had proven so successful in its original purpose that Giffard was already out of business. Ultimately, disaster only made him more determined to straighten things out the next year, when Lefèvre, as previously mentioned, was reassigned, five stages were added (including two in the mountains for the first time), night stages were eliminated, and to prevent cheating, the overall classification would be decided according to points awarded to the top finishers of each stage. Some problems recurred; the race was briefly cancelled when nails were scattered over the road the very first day, causing all but one of the 60 starters to puncture, but organizers relented and nullified the stage results instead. The Tour would survive its bout of *fièvre juvenile*, and was on its way to becoming an annual rite of the French summer. Already, it was bigger than the riders themselves, and to Desgrange, bigger than France itself.