

# Project Rainbow

How British Cycling Reached  
the Top of the World

ROD ELLINGWORTH

*with*  
*William Fotheringham*

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# Contents

|                                   |      |
|-----------------------------------|------|
| Foreword                          | ix   |
| Shouting at the Telly             | xiii |
| 1 All I Ever Wanted               | 1    |
| 2 First Blood                     | 16   |
| 3 Man with a Plan                 | 37   |
| 4 Keeping Tabs on the Guinea Pigs | 61   |
| 5 The Guinea Pigs Come of Age     | 84   |
| 6 The Italian Job                 | 105  |
| 7 Beijing and Beyond              | 126  |
| 8 Our Leader Steps Up             | 145  |
| 9 The Stripes in the Frame        | 166  |
| 10 Growing Pains                  | 182  |
| 11 Turning Points                 | 207  |
| 12 Rainbow in the Air             | 225  |
| 13 Get Me to the Mall on Time     | 251  |
| 14 Aiming for the Stars           | 270  |
| Index                             | 281  |

## Shouting at the Telly

*Copenhagen, 25 September 2011*

There were three of us in the Great Britain race car that day, for seven hours and seventeen laps of the circuit in Copenhagen. In the front with me was Brian Holm, Mark Cavendish's *directeur sportif* at the HTC team; Diego Costa, a mechanic with Team Sky, was sitting behind us. Normally a team car in a professional bike race has a television in the back for the mechanic, as well as one in the front for the DS, but we had only one, so the thing that sticks in my mind is Diego's hot breath down my neck as he looked over my shoulder at the screen, hour after hour, all the while clutching a pair of spare wheels in the back-seat space.

I'd thought long and hard about who to have with me in the car. Brian was there because being a *directeur sportif* isn't my forte and he's been full-time at it for over a decade in professional cycling. I had to drive the car because I was managing the team, but it made sense to have someone of his experience there. Brian is Danish but he does love Britain with a passion – that was why he had found common ground with Cav when he began working with him in his first full year as a pro. It made sense to have someone in the car in whom Cav had built so much trust over the years. Brian had won a lot more races sitting in a car directing Cav than I had, and there might be a moment when that made the difference. Plus we were in

Denmark, and Brian is a national hero in his native country. Cav was proud to have him in the car. There was a personal side to this for Brian as well: I knew Cav was going to be changing teams at the end of the season; for the first time in five years they would no longer be working together.

Brian hadn't been part of the build-up to the Worlds, but his years of experience mattered. That shone through when we were talking through the tactics for the day, about when the team would start to ride hard behind the day's main break, whenever that happened to form. They wouldn't start chasing from a set point whatever happened, say fifty or sixty kilometres out; they would get down to it when the break had formed and had got a certain number of minutes ahead. We discussed it with the riders: it was to be about four or five minutes, and we knew it was going to be a big group. I had been a bit uneasy with that – I didn't want to intervene as it was the riders' decision – so on the morning of the race, when Brian said he thought it was about right and there should be no panic, I thought, 'Perfect.' That kind of thing really bolsters your confidence.

And then there was Diego, an Italian, from Piacenza. I'd chosen him because although we've got plenty of British mechanics, he's the best I know in the race car. You have to think about it – what's the mechanic's job in the car? He's got to study the race and help the two guys sitting in the front work out which riders are in which group. That's down to listening to the short-wave race radio. Diego speaks perfect French, Italian and Spanish, and he'd learnt English in two years. He's very particular about his work; not a great person in a team, but good on his own. And I've never seen anyone as fast at getting out of the car and fixing a puncture; just being very confident about it – no panic,

just gets it done. That alone could be the difference between winning and losing.

Diego was going through a rather particular time in his life. He had just got a new girlfriend and was constantly on the phone to her. So when we got in the car at the start of the race and I said, 'OK, guys, unless there's a major crisis, no phones now,' he was pissed off and wouldn't talk to me for the first two or three hours. I didn't give a shit; he still did his job. That's something I always do – I wouldn't answer the phone to my wife when I'm in a race car unless it was an emergency. It's our job to make that clear to our other halves. I remember years back I was in a race, on the radio to one of the riders, and he couldn't hear me because someone in the car was on the phone. It makes a difference.

We'd thought about the telly as well. Chris White, the performance analyst who had been working with us since the start of the road Worlds project, had hired it and had made sure it was going to work. He'd done a load of checks around the course to see where the signal dipped in and out. So you would go under some trees and you'd know you were going to lose it. That in turn meant you didn't start fiddling with the dials, because there was no panicking that you were going to lose the channel and how would you get it back? You're ready for the picture to come back at a certain point, and then you're straight back on it again. It all helps you keep calm.

We had good reason to be nervous. We'd been working towards this one day for the last three years, since I'd gone public with the idea that Great Britain could build a team with the aim of winning the elite world road race championship, the biggest one-day race in the sport, the one that rewards its

winner with the right to wear the rainbow-striped jersey for the next twelve months. Britain had only won it once, with Tom Simpson back in 1965, and had never looked like winning it since. This could be our once-in-a-lifetime chance: this might be the only time in Cav's career that he would get the flat course that suited him. The build-up hadn't been straightforward, but we knew he was ready, and that might not happen next time. We also knew the team had bought into the idea, in a way that no British team had done since the day that Simpson won it nearly half a century ago.

The project had got under way in 2008, but it had been seven years since Mark Cavendish had first told me that he wanted to win the Worlds, back in 2004, when we started working together. It sounded unlikely then, but a few years later it had begun to look like it might be possible one day, as he'd landed his first big win – the Scheldeprijs – started his first Tour de France and won some smaller races. He'd ridden the 2007 Worlds just to get in amongst it, to feel it, to experience how the Italian and Spanish teams worked, how teams come together from their day jobs working for other outfits and have to race as a unit from scratch on that one day. That was the key to the whole project. Assembling a team for the Worlds is like English footballers playing together for their country in the World Cup after kicking the stuffing out of each other in the Premiership all season – you have to work hard to get it right.

It might not have crossed many other people's minds, but it was clear to us back then that no one in cycling was faster than Mark Cavendish – and that made life a lot easier when it came to winning a one-day race like the Worlds – plus we knew the riders had the engines to ride as a unit and keep the

race together for him on a flat course. I felt we had the talent, so the question was: how do we do it? It helped that the bulk of those cyclists in the team that day had come up through the Great Britain academy which I had founded – riders like Ian Stannard, Geraint Thomas, Cav himself, of course – so they all understood how I worked and how Cav operated. And the older guys like Steve Cummings, Bradley Wiggins, Jeremy Hunt and David Millar were all smart and had always got the picture too.

Before the start of a one-day race there is a lottery for the car's position in the convoy; we had been given a really bad draw – nineteenth – and were supposed to be sharing the car with the Irish, although Great Britain were in the top ten in the world rankings. I said there was no way we were going to share with Ireland if we were out to win the Worlds; I've got nothing against the Irish – I am half Irish myself – it was the pure principle of it. So Dave Brailsford, the GB Performance Director, protested against it, and did a bloody good job. He managed to get us moved up the order, but we were still well outside the first ten, which meant that if anyone needed a wheel change or a fresh bike, it would take us that little bit longer to get to them. For most of the race that wouldn't matter, but at the end it could cost us everything.

We knew that even if Cav had a problem right up to the last five or six kilometres, he would still be on for the win; he could crash or puncture, and we could still bring him back, but if he did have a problem after that, there would be no use being car eleven or twelve. We'd have to be right there behind the bunch if something happened. It had taken a bit of planning to get round that one, but we had worked out that with a bit of front

we would be able to do at least half a lap as car number one in the convoy. This was where Brian had come into his own. Just before the end of the lap there was a right-hand corner, then the finish straight, and after that the road narrowed to go past the feed zone; no cars would be doing any overtaking there, and then there was a fast section where the peloton was flat out and the cars would all be split up.

Brian said to me, ‘Right, when I say “Go”, you go with all guns blazing, horn blaring, making a big noise – and time it so that the second you hit that right-hand corner before the finish straight, you’re car number one in the convoy.’ So we were flat out, screaming past the other team cars. I was hanging onto the wheel, Diego breathing down my neck all the time as he kept his eyes on the telly. And as we flew past the other team cars, everyone was looking at us, thinking, ‘What do they know that we don’t? Why are they moving up now?’

So we got to the front and stayed there through the narrow section, right up to the foot of the next climb. At that point there was a chance the other cars might try to push past us and put us back in our place right down the pecking order. But then Brian came into his own again: ‘Right, let’s go and talk to my mate in the doctor’s car.’ Being a legend of Danish bike racing, Brian knew the guy who was driving that car, which spent the race sitting right behind the peloton, ahead of car number one in the convoy – Italy or Spain. So we went and talked to him for ages, looking quite worried, as if we might actually have a reason for talking to the race doctor. I remember the Italian team manager Paolo Bettini coming past in his car at one point, and he was clearly thinking, ‘Oh yes, I know what you’re up to.’

We got to a certain point in the race – I think it would be with a good hour to go – and I said, ‘Right, guys, no stopping for a piss from now on.’ It’s hard to stop anyway at the Worlds: you’re on a circuit, it’s all barriers, and there are people everywhere. I was clenching and twisting my hands on the wheel all day. I was literally just watching that telly for seven hours. You’re not meant to watch it as you drive, but it’s hard not to. There’s nothing else you can do; you’re just sitting there, hoping.

I don’t think I’ve ever felt so nervous. I’d gone through the full gamut of emotions since I started working with Great Britain. You start out with the riders, you go to your first race with them, they’re starting to win . . . There had been nervous times – the Commonwealth Games in 2006, when Cav won the scratch race, and the world track championships in 2005, when he won the Madison, and in 2008 in Manchester, when he and Bradley Wiggins were taking a lap on the field in the same event and the whole stadium was on its feet cheering them on. This was way bigger than any of them, but there we were in Copenhagen in this little car, all on our own, not a sound apart from the race radio and the three of us yelling at that little screen.

## I : All I Ever Wanted

I first went to the road Worlds when I was nine. I'm right there in the video footage of the 1982 pro championship in Goodwood, Sussex, but I'm not riding my bike. I'm standing in the middle of the road along with my brother Richard and my best mate Simon at the very moment when Bernard Hinault retires from the race. How the hell I got there I still do not know, but what I do know is that on my head is a Sem-France-Loire racing cap, as worn by Sean Kelly, who was my hero when I was a kid, partly because my mother is Irish.

Cycling has always been my life. All I can remember is wanting to be a cyclist or a fireman. My dad was a cyclist, one of the founder members of the Clayton Velo Cycling Club in Burnley, where I was born. All our holidays were centred around our bikes: the Cyclists' Touring Club's New Forest cycling week, the Harrogate cycling festival. We never went abroad; if we had a break, it was always in the UK so we could ride our bikes. Goodwood, the second and up to now last time the world road championships came to the UK, was another one of those trips: we camped out the whole weekend, watched Mandy Jones win the women's race for Great Britain and watched the amateur race on the Saturday. Shortly before Giuseppe Saronni flew up the rise to the finish to win the pro race on the Sunday, we swarmed into the grandstand. We didn't have tickets or anything, so everyone just stormed in.

## Project Rainbow

I grew up with cycling. After we moved from Burnley to Grantham in Lincolnshire in 1976 or 1977, Dad would take us to watch the city-centre criteriums in Nottingham and other places. He was the organiser of the town-centre races in Grantham, and my granddad was the one who did the time-keeping at the local ten-mile time trials for our club, the Witham Wheelers. They still run an annual road race named after my great-granddad, the GT Ellingworth, in late May. We were constantly at bike races.

After my parents split up in 1979, I stayed with Dad. It was a cycling house; life there revolved around it. It was where the lads would come and meet before going training or riding the evening chain gang. We had a VW camper van, and that was the centre point at races – all the guys would come over, sit around and have a cup of tea while they were putting their numbers on. Richard, who's older than me, began racing before I did – my dad made me wait until he thought I was old enough – so every weekend we were off supporting him in whatever schoolboy circuit race he was riding. I rode my first race in one of those circuit events, run by the English Schools Cycling Association. I was mad about road racing and the Tour de France. We used to get *Cycling Weekly* magazine every week – it was at the time when they had really good front and back covers, so my whole room was covered with them, and they were all over my school books as well. There was no 'Do I like it or not?' It was everything to me.

I was lucky that my granddad was really good at getting us to go out and do things, to ask for stuff. There were two moments when this made a real difference to me as a young bike rider. The first was in 1988, when he persuaded me to ask

the headmaster at my school to fund me for a youth-training week run by the ESCA during the holidays. It was a week when you would learn the kind of stuff that British Cycling's Talent Team do now – skills, race tactics, and so on – but it cost about £150 and it wasn't something we could afford. I remember my granddad saying, 'Why not ask at school?'

At that point cycling was nothing as a sport. I was doing a sport which wasn't really recognised, which had no presence in schools, and no one there knew anything about it. When you do that kind of sport, you're always seen as a bit different. You're the one who bangs up and down the A1 in those stupid time trials. But I wanted to go on that youth weekend, so I went into school, aged fourteen or fifteen, sat down with the headmaster to show him all the information and asked if they could put up the money. And they did. They even bought me a cycling jersey, got the school name printed on it and presented it to me in front of the whole school at assembly. I was super-embarrassed. But getting that jersey was massive for me. I went to the races and pushed a bit more, so that I could go back to my headmaster and tell him how I'd done.

The other thing my granddad got me to do was write to the local council, because they had started doing a grant scheme called 'Gifted Young People', under which they would give funding for people to do arts, sport, whatever. So I went for that and got £50 for 1987, and the grant ended up going all the way to 1996, when I was getting £5,000 and a car. One way or another, that relationship lasted all the way through until I finished cycling in 2001. I was lucky the school and the council took an interest in me, but it only happened because my granddad asked me to approach them. There are times when

if someone doesn't point you in the right direction, you don't know what to do.

So cycling was my life. As soon as I started riding in the local club runs, I was one of the ones who would finish with the fast group, and they'd all be asking, 'Who's this kid?' I always remember I did twenty-nine minutes five seconds for my first club ten-mile time trial, because my dad had said he wondered if I would get inside thirty minutes, which is the big barrier for anyone riding their first 'ten'. I was thinking, 'Too right I can get inside thirty minutes.' And I started riding track leagues on Tuesday and Wednesday at Nottingham and Leicester, alternating with the club tens and schoolboy criteriums on Saturday and Sunday. At that time there were loads of city-centre races, which always had kids' events; if you look at the calendar now, there are about a third the number of races there were then.

I enjoyed going to school because I loved the social side of it. At that time I was flicking back and forth between my parents. One minute I was living in one place, then in another, and that's a crucial time in your school life when you begin secondary school. I couldn't really be bothered with the studying. I just wanted to go cycling. There were three things I wanted to do at school: study French, because I wanted to go to France and be a cyclist; technical drawing; and PE. I was in the first year that took GCSEs, and at that point PE wasn't one of the options. There was no exam.

If there had been, my life might have been different, because although I wasn't smart at school, doing that might have pushed me to do other doings, such as sports science. I loved PE. Every subject we did they would give us monthly marks out of four,

and I always got four out of four in PE. I always wanted top marks in it. I was captain of the team in every sport we played, but there was nothing you could do with it. It was a different story with maths and so on, where I'd be below average because I was talking all the time in class. I wasn't a troublemaker, but I couldn't be bothered with things like that. After the third year at secondary school, they only let the top two classes in the school do French. I was so pissed off about that. I remember thinking, 'Sod them. Why should I bother if they won't let you learn what you want?' We were restricted in what we were allowed to learn. The things I wanted to do weren't there, so I couldn't be bothered.

But there was always cycling. The Witham Wheelers were a good group, and my dad was a big character among them. He was a fiery type, always arguing with people, and he ran the club runs in a disciplined way, something that's been lost a bit now. If you were mucking about and he shouted at you, you'd be back in twos and riding sensibly at once. You weren't allowed to get away with swanning along, never doing a thing and then sprinting for a village sign. We would sprint for all the signs, and there was no way you could sprint and then just go to the back – you had to keep doing your turns at the front.

As my mother wasn't there waiting for us to go home at the weekend, we'd go cycling on a Sunday and stay out all day. There would be me, Dad and Dave Strickson, who is a bit of a legend in Grantham; he'd be out twenty-four hours a day riding at the same pace, so now if I'm with Dad and we see a cyclist, we say it has to be Stricko. We'd stop at a cafe with the club, and then the three of us would cycle to a pub for dinner and ride home in the dark. So we'd be out all day, on our bikes

the whole time. When I was eleven or twelve, Dad lost his licence for drink driving, so we cycled everywhere for a whole year: down to the shops; out to a time trial on a Saturday, stay overnight, back on a Sunday; off to a youth hostel for the weekend. It was old-school cycling, where you lived on your bike, and it was fantastic for a kid.

There were a good few kids at the club – my brother lived with our mum, but was still out on his bike – and the club activities continued through the winter. There would be roller-racing sessions – where you race on stationary bikes, pedalling like hamsters on a wheel – and if guys had been on cycling trips in the summer, we would sit there and watch their holiday slides. The club coach, Bob Howbrooke, had a circular slide projector and used to show us his snaps. He had been on a few courses, but back then we used to take the mickey out of him a bit. Everyone had the attitude of ‘What’s a coach?’ He had some good ideas, but because there was no coaching background in cycling, we never really listened. And the same two ladies – Janet East and Christine Edwards – would always do the teas and coffees. At the end of the club ten in the summer, you would hand in your number, and one of them would give you your cup of tea.

This was the British cycling world at the time, pretty much as it had been since the 1950s, and I thrived on it. At the time, racing in France – or anywhere abroad – was a million miles away. The people we admired – Sean Kelly, Sean Yates, all those stars – seemed like legends. The racing they did was way beyond anything we could do. There was no commitment there, no belief that what they did was something we could do. When I think how British cyclists are now – we are really

pushy, we think big, we believe that everyone has two arms and legs just like the rest of us. But that's something we have grown into; back then the attitude was, 'You'll never make it into that kind of racing. No one from Britain is ever that good.'

I think that things must have been tough for my dad. He was made redundant one year and he was living on his own with me. We certainly didn't go on family holidays abroad, although I did go to Malta once with my mum. Perhaps Dad wasn't overambitious, and as a result of that I wasn't that sure about going off and racing abroad and making it as a European pro like Kelly or Yates. And at that time there was a good little professional racing scene in Britain. In a way, it held a lot of people back – riders like Chris Lillywhite, Chris Walker, Rob Holden – because they could earn a bit of money without going abroad, and I got drawn into the tail end of that.

I was never among the very best. I would win races, get a decent result here and there. I could always handle my bike and get in the right place. But I never looked at how to train properly, how to eat the right things, how to race to your full potential. When I think now of what I did, perhaps I wasn't smart enough to look at everything and break it down. But I was in there, racing was my life, and I just enjoyed it. I went with it.

There was one evening in October 1988, when I was sixteen and had left school. The phone rang; Dad answered it, and I remember him speaking a little bit posh, a bit proper. 'Who the hell is that?' I thought. Dad came in and said, 'It's Doug Dailey on the phone.' You think of people with radio voices, and Doug is one of those. He has a very distinct, powerful voice; he just bellows it out. Doug was involved with British Cycling from the mid-1980s to 2012, and at that time he was

national coach. He never changed; he remained a key part of the national team for all those years, fully committed, and was just the same then as when I worked with him later.

‘Doug Dailey here, Rod,’ he said. ‘I’m very happy to tell you you’ve made the national junior team.’ And what got me was that he added, ‘You’ve not just made it onto one – you’re on both the road and track teams.’ It was brilliant. I got a letter telling me to go for a medical in Edgbaston, and I’ll never forget the journey there, clutching the letter all the way. So I rode in the junior world championships in Moscow in 1989, and then in Middlesbrough in 1990. It was all a bit of an experience. At Middlesbrough we were going OK in the team pursuit, heading for about fourth, when Matthew Charity crashed, and that split us up.

After that I started racing in Europe a little. There’s a guy called John Barclay who took groups of riders to race in Belgium. He’s a bit of an institution in British racing – he’s been doing it for years and is still taking guys out there. He had a bloody great Peugeot estate which could hold six or eight of us, bikes on the roof, bags in the boot. You’d be asked to go through word of mouth. You’d meet at a service station on the M25 on a Friday afternoon, get the ferry, stay in a youth hostel or a barracks or something, pay him a bit of petrol money, race your race and then be dropped back on the Sunday evening.

There were trips with the local Centre of Excellence – regional set-ups which received small grants to help their riders progress, with racing abroad and training camps at home – with riders like Mark Dawes, Mark Armstrong, David Standard, Paul Spencer, Lee Burns and Andrew Roche. When I think of what I’ve seen since, some of them were definitely world class

– Mark Armstrong won the junior Liège–Bastogne–Liège in 1990, for example.

On one of the trips I realised how the Great Britain team worked back then. The guy who managed us there told me that at the end of each season there was a meeting where they went through the invitations for the next year's international races. They would ask, for example, 'Who wants to do the Tour de l'Avenir?' and whoever wanted to be team manager would just say, 'I'll do it.' There was no experience in the management, no coaching structure, no pathway for the riders to follow. As far as full-time employees went, there was only Doug. There was help for those at the top leading up to the Olympic Games, but nothing for the people below that. I did quite well when Alan Sturgess was the junior coach, but there was no long-term development pathway. You couldn't see where it might take you if you weren't part of that elite group.

British Cycling had no real base – it was run out of Jim Hendry's place in Kettering. There was no money. They were doing all the races off the back of nothing. There was no question of 'Ride these four races to get ready for this next one.' You would do one race at random, then another, then the world championships. I remember watching the Worlds one year and seeing a rider I knew called Steve Farrell always sitting last wheel in that massive peloton because he didn't have the skills. They wouldn't bring in riders who could help the team, put other guys into the right position; it was all about who was best at smashing each other over the Yorkshire Dales in the Premier Calendar races – riders like Farrell or Mark Lovatt, who were as strong as an ox. And the guys who did have the skills, the strength and the knowledge – Chris Lillywhite, Chris Walker

– never rode for the biggest pro teams, so they never got to use their ability at the highest level.

By 1993 I was riding for Dynatech, which was an amateur version of the Raleigh professional team. I was pushing for a place in the Olympic and Commonwealth Games but never quite made it. There weren't that many options. There were plenty of lads from the UK trying to make it abroad – in Belgium, France or Holland, even Italy – but you never heard of them. There might be a little write-up in *Cycling Weekly* now and then, but otherwise they would just be lost. There was no level you could aim for in between racing in the UK and racing abroad, which was a long way above British racing. You couldn't just race to improve, and there was no advice to be had. So I decided to be a professional. I wasn't in the Olympic clique for the road or the track, so it seemed that I might as well.

The key influence for me in the mid-1990s was Shane Sutton, an Aussie who was still racing as a professional with Keith Lambert's teams, which had been sponsored by Banana Group and Falcon. Shane went on to coach Wales and played a big role with Great Britain from about 2003 onwards. I was about twenty-one or twenty-two when I got to know him well. He was a huge influence on me in terms of how a team works, how to respect your teammates. He was a very good racer, a very good tactician, and I learnt more from him than from most of the people I ran into. He was always very, very disciplined, unbelievably strict. We would go on trips to Australia, and if you were late for a training ride or late leaving for a race, you'd go home.

By 1995 I was racing for a team sponsored by Ambrosia Desserts and run by an ex-pro called Mick Morrison, who'd

been part of the pro scene back in the 1980s. The team had a proper professional licence – which ruled me out of selection for Great Britain – and sometimes we would go racing in Belgium when there was a gap in the UK calendar. There was one particular spell when we went and stayed in Mechelen in a house owned by Tim Harris, a pro from Norfolk who lived out there – and still does – and who was giving a bunch of guys a bit of an opportunity. The guys living in that house were trying to get noticed by the Belgian teams, and they were living pretty rough. They were doing it the hard way, living off what they could earn in the bike races, and I had total respect for them. I was sharing a room with a thin, blond guy from Yorkshire called Rob Reynolds-Jones, who was nicknamed Log, and Ben Luckwell, an older lad from Bristol.

It was a three-storey house above Tim's furniture place. It was freezing, with about eight or nine of them living in there, but they had a whale of a time. The toilet was in a big bathroom with a curtain across it. I was sleeping on a mattress – Rob had the bed – and next to it was a mineral-water bottle with the top cut off. I was lying there looking at it; it had marker-pen lines on it, with one about five millimetres from the top. I said, 'What the hell is that?' And Rob said, 'You don't want to be going down the steps to the toilet in the night. If you tried going down there in the dark, you'd break your neck.' So the bottle was what they would piss into. I said, 'OK, so what are the lines?' 'That's the world record.' That's what they'd got to one night – I don't know how on earth they'd have got it down the stairs in the morning without spilling a load of it.

Then there was one night when I woke up going, 'What the heck is that?' Something had run over me, just below my

neck, something a bit furry. And Rob just said, cool as mustard, 'That's Ratty.' 'Oh my God, are you joking?' But he wasn't.

This was in 1995, about a month before the world championships, which were in late August. They were in Colombia that year, and most of the better pros in Europe weren't going because the course was too hard, so they were all riding the *kermis* races – the little events they have in conjunction with village fairs over there – that we were riding to prepare for the Commonwealth Bank Classic in Australia. One of the guys in the team was Glenn Holmes, who I knew well from back in England, and we would both get completely and utterly smashed to pieces in the races. Basically, we couldn't keep up. Sometimes I would make it into the front group. You'd be in there with riders who had won the Tour of Flanders, riders like Steven Rooks, Johan Museeuw and Jelle Nijdam; I'd get in because I could ride my bike well in the crosswinds, but I'd then get dropped because they were going so fast. I was thinking, 'Oh my God, what is going on?'

Glenn and I got back to Tim's house one night, just shattered. He looked at us and said, 'Not as glossy as it looks in the mags, is it, lads?' We were getting our heads kicked in week in, week out. I rode the Tour de l'Avenir that year, and there were riders there who'd ridden the Tour de France a few weeks earlier. I was going in with Boots multivitamins and couldn't work out what the hell was going on. I remember Glenn saying to me on that trip, 'I thought the goalposts were here, and now I can't even see them.' He was a good bike racer back in the UK, and it was a massive blow to him. I don't put it down to him not being good enough; it was a matter of not having the right structure going into the racing. And there was the doping culture out

there: we had no idea what the hell we were up against. Back then, you were in the UK, on your island, and you had no clue what the rest of the world was doing. You could earn a reasonable wage in the UK without going through the hard times that Tim and his lads went through. People would knock them, but I'd tell those people they should be out there.

So I thought, 'Sod it, I'll go and race in France.' There was a guy from Newark called David Miller, who'd been national criterium champion in the 1980s; I knew him well, and knew he raced for a team called UV Aube in the town of Troyes, in eastern France. I got in touch and said I'd had enough and needed to go out there. I had a routine to my year: race the Australian season over the winter; then work at a training camp in Spain with Graham Baxter, who ran holidays for club cyclists and liked to have pros along to lead the rides and give advice; and finally the British season. I felt I needed to go and race in France just for the experience. Perhaps I had realised that I was never going to make it at the highest level.

France was fantastic. I loved every minute of it, even though it was hard: there was no phone to call home, I didn't speak the language to start with, and there was no coaching. It was simply a matter of 'Just be there at this time. We'll pick you up and go to the race, then we'll drop you off.' But my attitude was that I was going there and I wanted to live the life. I couldn't afford to go home anyway. I was working in the winter doing little bits here and there, but I wasn't getting paid to race in France. After three months I was doing OK: I wanted to learn the language and I managed that, and I started making some prize money. Then the club started to pay me £20 a week, which meant I could afford some food. In 1998 I met Jacques André, who was

the real force behind cycling in Troyes and ran the rival club to UV Aube, UVC Aube. He'd run UVCA since the 1960s, and had had some very good British riders who had gone on and done well as pros: Vin Denson, Alan Ramsbottom, Derek Harrison.

Jacques was a barber who had his own shop in a suburb of Troyes. He loved the Brits. He told me one day that he thought we were fighters, that we never gave in, but on the other hand, when it came to cycling, we had no idea how to train and race. He was a strong character. He would send me home in the winter with a handwritten training plan of what to do every day until I came back to Troyes. We had a fair few arguments because we're both very opinionated people – for example, he didn't approve of me going to Australia in the winter – but it always felt as if we respected each other. He'd drop in most days to the flat above a newsagent's where I lived – he'd come to buy his paper, pop in and open the fridge to see what I was eating. In that part of France the roads are made for motor pacing – rolling roads, very straight, lots of steady climbs – so he'd take me out for hours and hours and hours behind the car.

The club had a minibus, and we'd all cram in to go to the races. I had my own seat, right behind Jacques in the second row. Over the years Jacques had learnt a few words of English, and he thought he was really good at it – but he talked too fast, so it was hard to understand. The way it worked was that each generation of foreign riders at the club would introduce the next, so after me came Dan Lloyd, who went on to ride the Tour with Cervélo, Yanto Barker, who is still racing, and Jon Tiernan-Locke, who is now at Sky.

I was winning ten or twelve races a year, always getting in

the group who made the money in the criteriums. But it wasn't about the money; it was about going and doing it, about the whole experience. So from 1997 to 1999 I was lost to the GB system. I'd missed the boat earlier because of the pro thing with Ambrosia, and I knew I wouldn't be a pro with a career like Paul Sherwen or Robert Millar, both of whom had gone abroad as young amateurs and ended up with long, successful spells riding the Tour de France.

I came home in the winter of 1999 because I had heard they were taking on firemen in Grantham. I had thought I would go on cycling until I was about thirty, and then think what to do with the rest of my life. I didn't have a clue what to do, but I had always wanted to be a fireman, so I won my last race in France and came home. I went into the fire station, with no interview set up, and spoke to the station officer. He turned me down there and then. He said they weren't going to train up someone who had been swanning around the world for the last ten years. He said, 'We'll commit to you, and then you'll go off again.' I just thought, 'This is great.' I hadn't been successful and I hadn't made any money, but that hadn't meant I wasn't committed to what I was doing. And it didn't mean that I wouldn't be committed to the fire service if they let me join.

I sat down on the wall outside the fire station in Grantham and wondered what on earth I was going to do.