STICKY BOTTLE

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The Cycling Year According to Carlton Kirby

CARLTON KIRBY

BLOOMSBURY SPORT
LONDON • OXFORD • NEW YORK • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY SPORT
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK
29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, Ireland

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First published in Great Britain 2023
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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication data has been applied for

ISBN: HB: 978-1-4729-9459-2; eBook: 978-1-4729-9461-5; epdf: 978-1-4729-9456-1

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Typeset by Deanta Global Publishing Services, Chennai, India
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

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FOREWORD
BY SEAN KELLY

He's only gone and written another book . . .

I've told you before that Carlton Kirby is a man few can shut up. I was wondering if his first book might be his last, but it clearly tickled many. He has quite the memory and a certain way about him when telling a story. Call it his Irish genes.

Now he's at it again, Lord help us. Of course I've got my own stories to tell: having spent my lifetime on the road, first as a professional rider and then as a commentator. And all those weeks, months and years that I've spent on the road in the good company of my many cycling friends live long in the memory.

They're a useful treasure chest when I'm commentating, helping to 'dress the day', especially on the longer, quieter stages when there's not much happening in the peloton. Plus, I hope it shows that I know my stuff when it comes to this fabulous sport. Cycling has given me a lifetime of enjoyment and a fair amount of success. I love it to its very bones.

As for Carlton, he can indeed tell a fine story – even if sometimes, on occasion, you might find yourself detecting just the faintest whiff about them.

This book is a window into a world we both share and love. Sure you may find yourself opening that very window to air the room a bit, but you'll be laughing all the same.

Enjoy!

Sean Kelly

INTRODUCTION

Over the past 35 years of calling races for the willing and the witless, I have passed through many borders. Beyond the bounds, some might say (but we will ignore them). This book is a journey through a cycling season of seasons. I've taken the calendar and given you a year of events and experiences, offering a few ideas you might like to try. Some of the races will certainly take a real effort to get yourself to; others no longer even exist. But as the months go by, I fondly remember them all – like they were yesterday, today and tomorrow once more.

I have been broadcasting on cycling since my days of running the sports desk at TV-am, the first breakfast station for ITV. It closed in 1992. I was left wondering what I'd do next when my colleague Jeff Stelling asked me if I could fill in for him on a weird gig in Paris. A new channel called Eurosport.

Off I flew – and the first person I met there was the amazing David Duffield. He walked into the office and shouted with a chuckling roar: 'MORNING, CAMPERS!!!!' I had found a new friend and a new home. You know the rest.

The cycling season is a remarkable thing, and these days it covers much of the planet for much of the time. There is more racing than ever before, and via GCN+ you can enjoy the action from anywhere there is an internet signal. Yet there is nothing quite like actually being there, drinking it in.

Wherever you live there will be a race nearby and there is no reason why you should not get involved. You see, cycling is a way of life – it's been my life – and I know that to live it you have to get off your backside (even though it's a sit-down sport).

Yes, to fully appreciate this crazy majestic intoxicating world of cycling, you have to be there in person.

Hopefully a time will come when watching the racing with me yammering at you will not be enough. You will simply have to go and experience it for yourself, live and on site. And I hope you do.

This book will give you a template to plan your very own personal calendar. Cycle racing is not just about Alpe d'Huez and the Champs-Élysées. There are a thousand events, other than the Tour de France both on and off the official calendar. So start assembling your own season. I have. My best ever. It's in your hands right now.

Sean Kelly once said to me: 'What you take away from cycling is a sore arse and a million memories.' The man is a genius and doesn't even know it.

I hope you enjoy my memories.

CK xx

CYCLING LEXICON

Sticky Bottle: An extended hold of a water bottle offered up from the team car while it accelerates – thereby propelling the cyclist at a pace to regain time lost due to a racing incident.

JANUARY

ONE

GRAND PRIX LA MARSEILLAISE
GANGSTER DASH

The rooftop observers watched me run for my life. I was sprinting.

By the time I reached the midway point of the bridge, the assassins were charging me down. I heard the gunfire before the cars, and turned to see them speeding along Boulevard de la République towards Pont d'Issy. They were travelling at such a rate that all four vehicles slammed into the bridge ramp so hard they nearly got airborne. And still the machine-guns blared – *ratatatatatat!* – matched by the rotor chatter of the helicopters.

I looked back to see the cross-flashes exiting from the Uzi barrels. It was terrifying; I was done for.

I knew I had no chance of making it over cleanly, so I slowed to a walk as the gunfire stopped and the cars, one white and three black, cruised past. At the end of the bridge they made a U-turn and came back my way slowly.

One of the black cars crawled past me and a Japanese guy hanging out of the passenger side window with his machine gun shouted what was clearly an

obscenity at me. I had royally screwed up their little game; quite a big game actually. But hey, I was late for work. Due on-air in 20 minutes for goodness' sake!

Half an hour earlier, I had been stopped trying to move a barrier. 'Arêttez!! Vous ne passez pas . . . ARÊTTEZ!'

What looked like a combat-hippy was standing by the obstruction. She wasn't happy.

'I need to get to work. How long will the bridge be closed?' I asked.

'I don't know, who knows such things? It is art. For art you must wait . . .'

What I had just stumbled into was a film shoot. The bridge over the Seine to Boulogne-Billancourt in Paris was closed. The Eurosport offices were on the other side and in a short while I was due to be commentating. This was not good.

As I looked around, I could tell this movie was a big budget affair. Cameras on rooftops, one helicopter filming another helicopter and more combat-hippies guarding roads to the bridge; all radios linked to the director's team.

'Lots of money flying around here. What's the film?'

'*Taxi 2*,' she said with a tone that added *please shut up*.

'Ahhhh, I saw the first one. Shot in Marseille, wasn't it?'

'Oui, chez moi.'

'I know Marseille: I love the Grand Prix.'

'Le quoi?'

'Un course de cyclisme. Pour les sprinteurs.'

'Phuff . . . Not as fast as this,' she said.

That was our conversation closed for the moment. But time was ticking and my programme was going to go ahead, with or without me. Negotiations were not going well.

'Look, I have to get to work.'

'Well, we 'av to film, so you must wait.'

'For goodness' sake, call your team and ask them when this scene is going ahead. It will take me no more than five minutes to get clear. I

am a television commentator at Eurosport over there and my race begins shortly. Please!!'

She scowled at me before wandering off a few paces and thumbing the radio. She grudgingly asked if I could pass. Holding her earpiece, she headed back my way. It was obvious from her expression that this was not going to be good news.

'You must wait.'

I gave it another five minutes before I hit sod-it mode.

Over the barrier I clambered and started running.

'*Noooon!!!!!!*' shouted the combat-hippy just as her radio crackled: 'Action!'

I don't know how many blank bullets they had on set, but they must've used most of them in the next 90 seconds or so.

Of course, *they* could reload and go again . . . *I* could not. I had only one take available to me. It's a bike race – and what could be more important than that?

Clearly plenty of folk felt differently.

As the cars made their way back to the starting position, I cleared the bridge to be met by another art student with a radio. He began his speech from a distance as I approached. 'You 'av just ruined a very expensive take. Do you realise what you 'av done? You 'av —'

'Piss off . . . Thank you!' I barged past.

The crowd watching was much happier, hoping to see the whole sequence again. The bored drivers in the cars, backed up in the traffic jam, less so.

Taxi 2 came out the following March in 2000 and was a huge hit. Somewhere on a cutting room floor is the famous lost sequence simply marked 'fat bloke running – please cut or frame out'.

The original movie *Taxi* was filmed on the hilly streets of Marseille. The premise is a guy who runs a souped-up taxi that is entirely illegal but used in honourable

missions to help people running late and in need of a great deal of speed. It showcased the edgy but fun nature of the ancient city perfectly.

The film naturally highlighted the majestic folds of a place that lies upon a semicircle of limestone hills tumbling towards the shoreline. A better venue for a sequence of car chases you will be hard pushed to find. The same applies to the bike race.

Marseille rests upon the Étoile Chain of mountains that head off northwards towards Montagne Sainte-Victoire and Aix-en-Provence, a more snooty rival for 'capital of the region' status. But Marseille is *much* more interesting. It has the Grand Prix, after all.

The race began in 1980 and immediately came to mark the start of the European cycling season. Since then a couple of other races have butted in on the calendar a week or so earlier, but for most in France, and particularly for most of the world's top durable quick men, this is where the season begins. It is also the opening round of the highly competitive and brilliant Coupe de France series. These are the finest regional French races brought together in a calendar, with a championship table and great kudos to the overall champion. Open to cyclists of all nations but founded upon the best races in France, it is spectacular. The GP La Marseillaise is the opener, and very special. The racing is always competitive; often bordering on brutal.

Run over a distance of around 180km (112 miles), it may not be particularly long, but there are virtually no flat roads. We are not talking real mountains here, yet there are so many hills to take on that there is a gain of around 3000m (9840ft) of altitude on the average edition. This makes it properly selective by the end, and it will have shaken the will of many pure sprinters by the time the course heads home for a reduced sprint among the hardest of fast men. You can't help but love it.

The Col de la Gineste has often been chosen as the final climb. It's not the toughest, having a gradient of only around 3% over 7.5km (4.6 miles) – but

how this is attacked is what makes the difference. It's usually a frantic finalé. Over the top of this last peak there remains around 11.5km (6.8 miles) to the finish next to the Stade Vélodrome football stadium. Built in the 1930s, the old velodrome surrounding the pitch was eventually taken over by seating tribunes and disappeared. Good that the race finishes here to remind everyone that the world's greatest sport is on bikes.

The peloton is usually made up of a vast array of the world's finest quick hard men. And there have been many occasions where French riders have had to hand over the coveted trophy to those dropping in from abroad. But just as in the national anthem of the same name, they are always ready to come back fighting. A stanza from the fourth verse seems appropriate:

> If they fall, our young heroes,
> Will be produced anew from the soil,
> Ready to join the fight against you!

It is an amazing race and well worth a visit . . . but I'll be honest with you, I have not had the most comfortable relationship with Marseille over the years. It all began when I was a young traveller, just 17 years of age and found myself a little confused in the city's main bus terminal. I saw a driver with his elbow hanging out of his open cab window and wandered over. He knew I was there but didn't acknowledge me standing just below him and carried on smoking. Gathering myself, I asked in perfectly acceptable French: 'Excuse me, sir, where do I find the bus to Toulon?'

He took a moment to remove the tab from his lips. Then blew a jet of cigarette smoke at the windscreen he was staring out of and said coldly: 'Je ne parle pas Anglais.'

I walked around the front of the bus to see the destination card above the still smoking driver. It read: TOULON.

I went to Menton instead.

Marseille is a remarkable place founded in 600 BCE by the Greeks. It is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities on earth.

For centuries Marseille has had cultural and economic links to the Middle East, North Africa, Asia and, of course, the entire Mediterranean. The Brits have been here a while too: for both good and ill.

In these parts, the action in the port of Mers-el-Kébir still resonates. After the Fall of France, in June 1940, the British government feared that the ships of the French Navy would fall into Nazi hands. Repeated requests that the fleet should sail for the French West Indies and out of reach, or alternatively place itself under British control, were ignored. Admiral Darlan was convinced by Nazi assurances that his fleet would remain under his orders. Finally, Churchill ordered the destruction of vessels based in the French Algerian port of Mers-el-Kébir. The action took place on 3 July, 1940.

Most of the crew on board the cruisers and battleships destroyed by the British that day were from Marseille and Toulon. There are memorials to the 1300 sailors who lost their lives that terrible afternoon. Churchill called it 'the most hateful decision, the most unnatural and painful in which I have ever been concerned.'

The people of France were, of course, outraged. In the rest of occupied Europe there was more understanding. Britain was now alone in the war against Hitler and clearly going to fight on. The attack revived Anglophobia, particularly in the Mediterranean ports, and such sentiments can still crop up in Marseille. So beware. If it bothers you, just say you're Irish. You'll have a ball.

Roads down towards the harbour descend in steps. At every junction on your journey, you will find bars and cafés of increasing bawdiness. This place rocks – and if you don't roll with it, you will not enjoy yourself. So get immersed. You can find cuisine from all points of the Mediterranean. In a month you can enjoy a different meal at every sitting, in surroundings that will leave you both energised and a little exhausted. It is almost illegal

to get bored in this city. It is always on the go; particularly on race day. Magically so.

CARLTON COMMENTARY

'Like an overcooked piece of spaghetti dropped onto the floor.'
An extreme winding mountain road