



“Come on then, mate, what are you going to do with your life?” the question posed by one hung-over 18 year old to another, the morning after a particularly heavy Saturday night out. “All right then. I’m going to ride in the next Olympics” comes the response. The remarkable thing is that the teenager, having not been a real cyclist before (if you discount a paper round when he was about 13), did just that. The year 1960? the cyclist? Colin Lewis.

Fast forward nearly five decades and I find myself with two days to go, too many tasks to think straight; from getting the pool into action to preparing all our rental bikes. Oh and did I mention riding a hundred kilometres to make sure I can keep up with Colin Lewis? Its not every day you meet an Olympic athlete, let alone get the chance to ride with one on your own cycling holiday. That’s exactly what we’re about to do, and I’m keen to show Colin and my fellow guests that since leaving the rat-race I’ve done more than just enjoy the *croissants* and *vin rouge*.

I live in the South of France, near Avignon with my fiancée Lynn. We’ve been running cycling holidays, mainly with the UK’s CTC, from our villa ever since we left our London jobs about 6 years ago. The un-crowded limestone countryside here is perfect for cycling with a diversity of flora and fauna to keep even the most lycra-averse cyclist interested. However nothing has quite prepared us for the excitement of hosting a couple of weeks with an ex-pro on the guide team.

I’d heard a lot about Colin, even seen him on a TV programme about Tom Simpson. Known for his no nonsense attitude, competitiveness and straight talking, Colin was a junior pro-rider in the ill-fated tour in ‘67 when Simpson died on the ascent of Mt Ventoux. He was one of only 3 British riders to finish the gruelling tour that year. He has raced all his life and competed and won in just about every age bracket you can think of. But when I got to meet the man behind the name I was struck by his warm smile and jovial attitude. He’s normally the one cracking the gags and jumping to help anyone with the slightest technical problem, from punctures to *dérailleur* difficulties.

Our big day comes, and our guests arrive, keen but apprehensive, like myself. All want a chance to experience what its like to ride alongside a top athlete. The funny and wonderful thing about cycling is that just about anyone can do it, and that even holds true for riding alongside an ex champion. I don't think the same could be said of other sports; if you gave me half an hour on court with John McEnroe, or a few holes on a golf course with Greg Norman I don't think any of us would be smiling for very long! But until the hills get a little steep, or the pace gets a little rapid you can ride alongside this ex-champion and let him indulge his second favourite past time; storytelling. Colin is a great and natural storyteller, no doubt honed through years on tour with the boys. Its not that he's short of material either, gathered from over 45 years in the cycling business, one minute he might be telling you about a crazy motorcyclist who chased him down and hit him off his bike with a bit of 4 by 2, the next minute about how during the commonwealth games in Kingston, Jamaica 1966, the peloton came hurtling round the corner only to meet a donkey sleeping in the middle of the road. I can't help but smile to myself as I hear his stories realising that I'm just pedalling along with a commonwealth games cyclist, chatting as we cruise past the new leaves bursting to life on the spring vines.

Our guests this week are a pretty hardy collection of cyclists, who have not been put off by the prospect of riding with an ex-pro and tackling the likes of Mt Ventoux and Les Baux de Provence. I guess the average age would be around 40, but with some notable exceptions like our 27 year old serving infantryman Rob. Most have done either club cycling or some form of racing, though cycling holidays remain a novelty to a few.

Our first ride is a 93km ride to the wonderful medieval village of Montclus. As we reach the first hill I look back to see an impressively tight group of riders two abreast trailing out behind me. Colin sits patiently on a wheel mid-group. No one wants to be the first to show any signs of weakness and drop off the back. I note no-one is talking however. Half way up and we have some damage to our peloton as the first riders slip off the front and back. Colin loves the role of tour-guide and will stick with whoever he thinks might need a little support or encouragement.

After forty five kilometres and some wonderful Provençal villages we arrive at our lunch destination of Montclus, and after riding under the portcullis we settle down by the riverside to enjoy the sandwiches we had made for us in the previous village. Like an excited boy Colin sprints over the narrow, heavily cambered bridge in search of ice-creams on the other side of the river. He's disappointed but we enjoy the spectacle as we tuck into our baguettes.

Day two sees us ride the “hilly hundred K(ilometers)”, including the local legend Mt Bouquet, with its brutal twenty percent sections. Colin has quickly earned the respect of all the riders, young and old. In fact he took a hefty five minutes out of our unofficial time trial up the Mountain. That's quite something when you consider most of these guys are no strangers to some form of competitive riding. At the top we split the group into two groups, the fired-up “rocketman” group speed off with Colin, whilst I lead the more leisurely “hang on, man” group back to base. In fact I thought Colin's speed up the mountain was impressive, until I saw the speed at which he tackled the descent! The front wheel blow-out he gets on the way down is no big drama for him, as he un-clips to stabilise himself and quickly brings the bike under control. I don't think I've ever seen a puncture repaired with such speed and efficiency, but then I guess he's done a few! Back at the villa, enjoying a post-ride beer I see that he's clearly given the fast group a run for their money as I ask them about their afternoon. The guys are now not only respectful but more than a little wary of him; “Oh he's pretty punishing on those climbs, we soon learnt to watch out for his left hand, one quick click and he's up onto that big ring and away.”

Day three, Les Baux de Provence the destination, and a little more hill racing the order of the day. As the week progresses a certain pecking order has developed based on the speed and ease with which riders make it over the various hills we encounter. I find myself somewhere in the middle, and am pretty happy given the present company. On this particular day I feel a little more zing in my legs and am soon surprised to find myself keeping up with the big boys on a climb up to Les Baux de Provence. Four riders reduces to three, then finally just two of us. To the leader's surprise, and indeed mine, I break on the final bend and beat John to the first mini-peak. A quick congratulatory tap on the back from Colin as he cruises past a few seconds later is the icing on the cake. But what's this ? John sprints off again, Colin says "ah yes, this isn't really the top, you should do that next one" pointing to the next hill. Still weary and gasping for air I hesitate as John sprints on ahead, too late I think, then my legs sprint off and I follow. Adrenalin running now I'm thinking can I catch him? I reel him in and finally get him within 20 yards, but I'm cooked. Then I hear whisper in my ear "go on Doug, don't let him get away". The buzz of having my own personal coach sitting on my wheel is all the boost I need as I crawl myself back onto John's wheel. Again I sprint for the summit, only to find myself pipped at the line by the more experienced racer in John. Of course I just had the benefit of Colin's coaching for this little hill, but I know he's been sharing his expertise around the other riders all week. In fact Colin has been a professional Association of British Cycling coach now for 10 years and some of his current talent includes Jeremy Hunt.

Day Four and the main event arrives, an eighty kilometre ride to Bedoin, at the base of Mont Ventoux, followed by an afternoon ascent of the Giant of Provence; Mt Ventoux itself. The honour of riding with a man who was room-mate to Tom Simpson on that fateful day on July 13th 1967 is not lost on me, nor my fellow riders. Of course its full of memories, good and bad for Colin, and just to ride alongside him and hear some of his stories is an immense privilege. However as soon as we're out of the foothills its down to business. Colin needs to attack a mountain like this, and attack he does pushing his Colnago C40 up through the endless and steep woods, on past Chalet Reynard, the Tom Simpson memorial and finally to the last gruelling bends of this Provençal beast. A very respectable 1hr 31minutes his time, which while perhaps nearly half an hour slower than his peak is still a good 15 minutes faster than our next fastest rider. Back at the hotel in Malaucene that night we reflect on the day, the week, and our latest victory; the ascent of Mt Ventoux. We tuck into platefuls of pasta washed down by delicious local red wine and contemplate our leisurely ride home the next day.

The ride home on the last day offers a crucial warm down for those mountain-weary legs, and a chance to bathe in the warm glow of personal achievement. It has been an inspirational week in many ways, not just riding with an ex-pro but hearing all the stories that shaped Colin into the rider and man that he is. Perhaps most inspirational of all is the story of how it all began for Colin with one young lad talking to another and deciding to lead a very extra-ordinary life.

The week over, the riders pack up their bikes exchange addresses and say their goodbyes. About 500 hard kilometers ridden, and some great friendships made. Meeting Colin has made me re-evaluate my on-the-road assessments of fellow riders. We've all done it, cycling around the corner and up ahead you spot a rider. "Bing" goes the competitive alarm and you start to close him down. Not always successfully. So the next time you're cycling on your favourite hill and a grey haired veteran comes streaming past you without so much as a grimace, just remember he might be an ex Tour de France rider.