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## Cycling in Transformation: Industry, Recreation, Sport, 1980–2000

France in the 1980s was marked by the political change of having a socialist president and socialist government for the first time in the history of the Fifth Republic. Coming to office in May 1981, François Mitterrand and his governments were faced with economic challenges they inherited from the mid- and late 1970s, when inflation, unemployment and a generally uncompetitive economy threatened to definitively end the economic success story that France had enjoyed since 1945. As the *Trente glorieuses* were replaced by what commonly became known as the *Vingt rugueuses* ('twenty years of rough times'), socioeconomically France was under pressure from inflation, unemployment, public sector austerity and, increasingly, industrial and commercial rivalry with emerging international competitors. As well as being too apt to import Far Eastern consumer electronics and, indeed, Taiwanese bicycles and Japanese cycle components, France also remained open to the importing and adoption of sporting and recreational practices from the United States. We have seen earlier how, especially post-1945, it was the US, more than the UK, which was France's significant Anglo-American 'other', and alongside sports such as rollerblading and skateboarding, the 1980s saw a considerable uptake in mountain-biking in France. The Tour de France during the late 1970s and early 1980s was the scene of French domination, in the persons of national hero Bernard Hinault (winner in 1978, 1979, 1981, 1982 and 1985) and Laurent Fignon (double champion in 1983 and 1984), before, significantly, they were dethroned by the US rider Greg Le Mond (1986, 1989, 1990). However, even their accomplishments pale in comparison with those of a much less well-known French cyclist, the multiple Olympic, world and national champion Jeannie Longo.<sup>1</sup> Longo was also a key figure in the women's Tour de France which was first run in 1984.

We shall start this chapter with an analysis of how the French cycle industry was being forced to adapt to new realities of consumerism, foreign competition and evolving tastes for bicycles among the French

cycling public. We shall see how the French state's concern – expressed by socialist governments from the early 1980s – to improve French competitiveness through fostering high technology also found resonance within the cycle industry, in coexistence with other more traditional and still enduring techniques of bicycle design. Secondly, we will discuss how the new vogue for mountain-biking affected French cycling in terms of the federal structure of cycling (previously divided between racing and touring), as well as everyday practice, and discuss how the new recreation and sport of triathlon – another sport imported from the US – fitted into federal structures of cycling and its other component sports and the ecology of French sporting activities. Finally, since the topics complement each other as studies of the place of women in cycle sport a century and more after the early female racers of the *Belle Epoque*, we discuss the career of Jeannie Longo and the troubled history of the women's Tour de France.

### The cycle industry: adaptation and resistance

In 1980 the famous small arms and cycle manufacturer *Manufrance* was declared bankrupt, ending almost a century of production of cycles from its Saint-Etienne factories (as we saw in a previous chapter, the company was founded in 1885, becoming the *Manufacture française des armes et cycles* de Saint-Etienne in 1892). The death throes of the company continued until the late 1980s, as various attempts – including millions of francs of government subsidies – were made to find solutions to keep this major employer in activity. The demise of *Manufrance* was exemplary of the growing difficulties the traditional French cycle manufacturers had in remaining competitive with new imported products from the USA, Japan and Taiwan, both in terms of price and model range. The reaction of some in the French cycle industry was to withdraw from production entirely or to collaborate with foreign producers, thus either ending often very long-standing traditions of French craftsmanship and commerce or losing their independence. Other French manufacturers tried to specialize in the higher ranges of cycle production: finding that they could not compete on price with imported cycles for the mass commuting/leisure market, they identified the sector of specialist racing and leisure cycles as an opportunity to exploit the generally growing prosperity of consumers and the passionate attachment of many serious leisure cyclists to high-tech componentry and frames. At the same time, new methods of distribution began increasingly to modify how cycle

products were made available to the public: the continuing long-term decline of small-scale cycle retailing in local town centre shops was exacerbated by the arrival of mass-market distributors selling affordably priced imported machines. In an attempt to give a synthetic account of how the French cycle industry – for decades one of the strongest in the world – was forced to adapt itself to new conditions in the 1980s and 1990s, here we examine the rise of the Décathlon sports superstore, the success of Look and Time, two representatives of the high-tech specialist sector of cycle manufacture, and finally, the enduring but fragile story of the traditional cycle workshop and retailer Cycles Follis in Lyon.

*The rise of new distributors/manufacturers: Décathlon*

The expert on the economics of sports entrepreneurialism Dieter Hillairet points out that the French sports industry is essentially characterized by small and very small businesses, and that it is in the distribution of sports goods that the major companies such as Intersport, Go Sport and Décathlon are to be found (Hillairet, 1999; 2002: 11–12). The now worldwide chain of Décathlon sports stores was started in 1976 with the establishment of a single shop in Lille in north-eastern France, and the firm's website provides a useful summary of the company's irresistible rise towards near-domination of the French sports-goods industry.<sup>2</sup> For the first ten years of its operation Décathlon restricted its activities solely to the distribution of sporting goods manufactured by established companies such as – in cycling – the traditional giant of bicycle production, Peugeot, but in 1986 Peugeot's withdrawal from cycle manufacture led Décathlon to initiate its own production of bicycles, eventually leading to the creation of its own brands in 1996. Décathlon, with its extensive network of inner-city and retail-park stores and superstores selling wide ranges of sporting equipment as well as cycles and cycling equipment, has accompanied and accelerated the decline of the traditional model of cycle production and retail based on major mass-manufacturers, small expert frame-builders and thousands of local specialized cycle shops catering for utility, leisure and sport consumers.

As well as changing the nature of cycle retail through its marketing strategies aimed at high-volume, generally middle-range products, Décathlon's move into the production of sports goods has also transformed the cycle industry. Since 1996 the range of Décathlon cycles has gathered increasing approval from consumers and the specialized media – popular cycling magazines, for example – that exercise a strong influence on cycling enthusiasts and manufacturers alike. Early Décathlon cycles used cheaply manufactured low- and middle-range frames and

components, but as the market for higher specification high-technology cycles for both leisure and sports use grew (a kind of conspicuous consumption, perhaps), carbon-fibre frames and high-range finishing components were introduced. The most expensive Décathlon cycles now receive accolades from cyclists and the cycling media, although there is an ongoing debate over the nature of the relationship between customers and their supplier: the higher the specification of the bike the greater seems to be the need for the kind of personal service generally only found in small cycle shops. In 2001 the Décathlon bicycle design *B'Twin* was given a special commendation by the *Agence de l'environnement et de la maîtrise de l'énergie* (the French environment and energy conservation agency) and the *Agence de promotion de la création industrielle* (APCI) in its annual design competition *Prix Observateur du Design*, marking the firm's successful efforts during the 1990s to create products that were competitively priced and of sufficiently high-quality design to stand favourable comparison with overseas competition and even with products from the smaller-scale domestic manufacturers such as Look and Time, which catered for the top end of the cycling market. As early as 1986, when the first Décathlon-branded articles were produced, the company had an R&D department (in Villeneuve-d'Ascq) employing over 1,000 designers, engineers and other product developers. Components are generally sourced from overseas, but products (from mountain bikes to tents, kites and clothing) are assembled in France, generally by a range of small and medium-sized contractors in the Nord-Pas de Calais region around Lille.

Décathlon's strategy was increasingly to concentrate on products with high added-value and a significant component of high technology (either in terms of bicycles, or sports clothing). Apart from bicycles, which as the key prestige product of the company are always marketed under the name of Décathlon itself, the firm has created a wide range of brands such as Quechua (technical outdoors clothing), Tribord (for water sports), Kipsta (team sports) and Inesis (racket sports). From 100 shops in France in 1993 (and four abroad), by the late 1990s Décathlon had nearly 300 stores in France and approaching 100 overseas (principally in Spain, Italy, Germany, Belgium, Denmark and the UK), and has continued its expansion during the 2000s. As Hillairet, Richard and Bouchet have suggested (2009), using the term 'passion-brands', Décathlon has been extremely innovative and successful in maximizing the public's enthusiasm for sport in general and cycling in particular during recent decades, catering both for mass-market practice of cycling as leisure, but also increasingly targeting niches of more expensive and

higher-tech equipment otherwise dominated by firms such as Look and Time.

*The rise of French high-tech cycling: Look, Time*

Look and Time (both principally located in Nevers, in the Nièvre department south-east of Paris) figure among the most recognizable brand-names of the French and European cycle-component industry. After the dominant firms such as Shimano (Japan) and Campagnolo (Italy), which specialize in whole ranges of components and accessories but not frames, Look Cycle International and Time Sport International, which produce selected ranges of components, accessories and frames (and increasingly offer complete bikes), have a strong visibility and reputation in the French, European and world markets. They represent the dynamism of the French bicycle component sector, which since the early and mid-1980s has been able to relaunch itself after the more difficult times of the 1970s. They also represent, in the wider context of the French economy and manufacturing, a French success in the development and use of high-technology processes and materials within the small and medium-sized business sector.<sup>3</sup> Just as the cycling industry in the 1880s and 1890s drove France's industrial development, companies like Look and Time have helped stimulate the French economy in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

The technical and business successes of Look and Time reflect ongoing trends in French society and culture since the 1970s. Technically and technologically, these two medium-sized firms have epitomized the French state's drive since the 1980s to foster high-technology processes, material and products outside of France's traditional high-tech sectors led by national-champion state-owned companies. The business and commercial success of the two firms has mirrored the rising enthusiasm among French consumers for leisure cycling during the 1980s and 1990s. During this period, government policies were implemented to encourage the technological development of medium- and small-sized companies throughout France's industrial fabric. Look and Time (and other cycle component manufacturers) have benefited directly and indirectly from this change in approach, as their growth has been accompanied by a supportive attitude from regional and national government.<sup>4</sup> In particular, Look and its products have achieved various awards recognizing their high levels of innovation: the Economics, Finance and Industry Ministry INPI *Trophée* for the most-innovative SME (2008), the *Le Cycle* magazine 'Vélo de l'année' (1994, 2002, 2008, 2012), the French Industry/Culture Ministries' APCI *Etoile du design* (2004, 2007, 2009,

2011) and the German IF Design award (2010).

Look and Time's dynamic innovation during the mid- and late 1980s and 1990s capitalized on, accompanied and catalysed social and cultural developments in French leisure and leisure-sporting practices. The sociocultural watershed of 1968 in France – when under the pressures of demographic change, political tensions and economic change, new aspirations for work and leisure gained a legitimacy that had been denied during the previous decades of forced modernization – created a growth during the 1970s of interest in the environment, in sport and leisure for their own sake and in a healthy lifestyle. Greater prosperity, improving standards of living and the swelling of the French middle classes brought about changes in the practice of cycling, shifting the locus of bicycle use away from a working-class means of transport and an essentially proletarian sport towards a fashionable leisure pastime indulged in by those who had the time and means. The fullest development of cycling as a form of 'green' transport was to come in the 2000s, but it was most strongly in the 1980s and 1990s that a number of trends combined to encourage innovation in the cycle industry. The 1980s saw the introduction into France of new forms of cycling, such as mountain-biking, downhill racing, and other 'fun' ways of enjoying the bicycle, and combined with the rising awareness of environmentalism, these 'Californian' sports stimulated consumer interest in cycles and cycle equipment.<sup>5</sup> The French cycle industry, hitherto comfortably accustomed to producing either mass-produced traditional cycles (increasingly threatened by Far Eastern imports) or high-quality traditional racing machines (for a small French market and discerning American and other foreign customers) found itself challenged by the demand for innovatively styled and high-tech mountain bikes. During the 1980s in particular, the enthusiasm for MTBs was mainly but not exclusively confined to the moneyed middle classes, who could afford both the purchase of a machine and the free time to enjoy its use, and so French manufacturers responded to demand for these expensive cycles, in a trend that exemplified how cycling was increasingly again become a sign of 'distinction' through technological innovativeness.<sup>6</sup>

The distinction conferred by the possession of an MTB and by the espousal of the healthy new Californian-inspired sporting activities found a counterpart in the more traditional sector of racing bikes in the drive towards technological innovation that also occurred in road racing at around the same time. The French public's interest in professional racing had been growing during the early 1980s, encouraged by the successes of five-time Tour de France winner Bernard Hinault, and the

increased 'visibility' of the sport coincided with technological developments in a field where, for quite a period, equipment and frames had remained essentially the same. Indeed, one of the earliest injections of high technology into the cycle industry came in the early 1980s through the use by Hinault and the Renault-Gitane team of the wind-tunnel facilities at the Ecole aéronautique de Saint-Cyr (Hillairet, 2002: 213), which led to the setting up of the Hinault cycle company. Pressures for change came from Far Eastern firms such as Shimano and Suntour, to which established European manufacturers such as Campagnolo reacted as best they could, but other, smaller French companies such as Look were also aware of the opportunity to redefine cycling for consumers as a leisure/sport pastime that was no longer old-fashionedly proletarian, but innovatively technological, expensive and distinctive. The highly innovative clipless cycling pedal developed by Look in the mid-1980s was a key example of this link between sport, society/leisure and industry. Originally a ski equipment manufacturer, Look had great expertise in the clipless boot attachments used in skiing, and when the company was acquired during the early 1980s by the entrepreneur Bernard Tapie who was sponsoring the Vie Claire professional cycling team in the Tour de France, Look seized the opportunity to develop a *pédale automatique* for cycling that was safer, easier to use and more efficient than previous pedals, cleats and straps.<sup>7</sup> Hinault's successful showcasing of the technology during the 1985 Tour launched the product, and the technology has since come to dominate pedal design. In 1986 Look produced the first carbon-tubed frame, used by Tour winner Greg Le Mond, and throughout the late 1980s and 1990s continually developed their carbon-frame expertise.

A significant trend in the cycle industry during the 1990s (and also in the early 2000s) was for unit sales to remain relatively stable, but for the overall value of sales to increase (reflecting the importance of 'high-end' demand). The French cycle industry was thus surviving during this period on the strength of two or three different kinds of interest in cycling: firstly, the French seem increasingly enthusiastic about using bikes as part of an ambition to promote sustainable development (cycling to work, cycling holidays and so on); secondly, the passion for new kinds of cycling in the form of MTBs, downhill and so on is sustaining sales; thirdly, racing cycles – and by trickle-down through manufacturers' ranges, almost all bikes – are becoming increasingly technologically advanced, and therefore more costly.



*The resilience of small frame-builders: Cycles Follis*

The celebrated Lyon cycle manufacturer and retailer Cycles Follis was founded in 1903, and was thus as old as the Tour de France. Its small old shop and cramped adjoining workshops were – until its final closure in July 2007 – still situated in a shabby quarter of central Lyon, the location and style of accommodation both contrasting sharply with the nearby outlets of Go Sport and Décathlon, for example, which are housed in Lyon's glitzy principal shopping mall.<sup>8</sup> Through a mixture of good fortune and resourceful strategies, Cycles Follis managed to survive throughout the twentieth century, in the face of competition both from the domestic and foreign giants of cycle manufacturing and the companies of the French 'new wave' of frame and component makers such as Lapierre, Look and Time. There are examples of small frame-builders surviving in various locations in France – Angers, for example, which has a history of the trade going back to the 1870s – and serving specialized niches of various kinds in the cycle market, but the uninterrupted longevity of Follis makes it a particularly interesting case-study. Although the future of the company in the early 2000s was ultimately dependent on the date of retirement of its then owner-managers, over the period since the 1970s of rapid change in the cycle industry, Follis had met the challenges posed by cultural and technological changes in cycling practices. Founded in 1903 by Joseph Follis, who was succeeded by his son François and then by his grand-daughter Myriam in 1973, Follis always remained a family firm, closely focused on high-quality touring and racing frames and built-up cycles, as well as their particular speciality of the tandem. In the terminology of French cycling and French employment, Follis provided frames made by *artisans-cadreurs* (for the market of *randonneuses/cadres de course d'artisans* – the importance of the term 'artisan' is obvious, reflecting the 'capital' of traditions and skills developed since the earliest days of French bike manufacture, and the independence and individuality of a self-employed skilled worker).<sup>9</sup> The reputation and success of the company flourished especially in the post-war years of the late 1940s, 1950s and 1960s: in the late 1940s, one of the firm's employees, riding a Follis bike, was remarkably successful in a number of 'cyclotourist' competitions, thus creating considerable trade-media interest in the marque, which steadily acquired publicity in Britain and even the United States.<sup>10</sup> Before the changes to cycling brought about by new attitudes and new technologies in the 1970s and 1980s, Follis successfully served the niche market of high-quality, bespoke, handmade, steel-tubed racing and touring cycles and racing and touring tandems. As the French market began to weaken in the 1970s, Follis even managed

to exploit the US bike-boom, providing – in an intriguing reversal of the normal cultural and geographical directions of influence and trade – traditional ‘continental racing frames’ fitted with European componentry to those American cyclists who still saw machines from the country at the heart of professional racing as the *nec plus ultra* of style and quality. As frame-construction in the 1990s increasingly moved towards the use of aluminium tubing and even titanium and carbon fibre – whose characteristics require costly processes and machinery to master – the small-scale in-house expertise of Follis, where everything was done in the central Lyon workshop, made a virtue of their long experience of working with steel tubing by carefully courting customers worldwide who preferred the more ‘old-fashioned’ ride-quality and design of steel frames. As tube-producing companies such as Reynolds, Columbus and Dedacciai progressively refined and lightened their steel tubes in the face of competition from the new materials increasingly used in frames, Follis and other traditional constructors were able to continue to build frames themselves that were almost as light as competing, mass-produced items from Korea, Taiwan, the USA, or French high-tech firms such as Look. As late as 2005 Follis was still able to offer a range of four steel-framed racing cycles, four steel fast-touring cycles, two steel racing tandems and three steel touring tandems, with prices ranging from €2000 to €5000.

The closure of Cycles Follis in summer 2007 thus marked the end of more than a century of quality bicycle production by a small-scale artisan frame-builder whose techniques and organization were little changed in essence from the earliest days of French cycling. Having resisted market pressures throughout the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s through skilful marketing and niche strategies, the retirement of its owners unfortunately brought the tradition to an end. The traditions are still alive, however, as on a smaller scale, the *artisan-cadreur* Daniel Guédon is continuing a frame-building business in premises near to the old Follis workshop.

The cycle industry has thus adapted to the changing demands placed on it by evolving demand for bicycles, international competition and state promotion of high technology in small and medium-sized businesses. More traditional artisan-manufacturing has in some cases been able to resist modernizing trends, maintaining skills and artifacts that reflect the long history of cycling.

### VTT, triathlon and ‘militant cycling’

In a study undertaken for the French Ministry of Tourism in the mid-

1990s, Jean Gamond concluded from the surveys of cycling attitudes and styles that he had undertaken that there were essentially five types of cycling in France. These kinds of cycling practice together represented some 20 million cyclists overall. The first category (9.5%) identified was that of *Vélo solitude*, representing an individual sports-oriented activity, practised alone outside of any organization by 1.9 million citizens. The second category was *Vélo promenade* (21.1%), reflecting a family-based, non-sporting leisure use of cycling by 4.2 million people. The third category was *Vélo passion* (27.3%), covering the experience of cycling of those 5.4 million people who were members of cycling clubs and sporting associations. The fourth category was *Vélo pépère* (16.6%), meaning the lowest level of ‘no-hassle’ interest in cycling, expressed by 3.3 million occasional riders. The final category was *Vélo détente-découverte* (25.6%), representing the use of cycling (by 5 million people) for family trips to visit the countryside, see landmarks and make short tours (Gamond, 1995). A number of things can be seen from these basic statistics that give us a better idea of what people’s everyday relationship to cycling was in the early and mid-1990s: of the approximately one-third of the French population who declared an interest in *la pratique du vélo*, 36.8 per cent cycled as part of an interest in physical exercise (*solitude + passion*), and 46.7 per cent (*promenade + détente-découverte*) cycled for leisure, relaxation and tourism. The fact that the study specifically excluded analysis of high-level professional or amateur competition makes the figures for the ‘sportier’ relationships to cycling all the more significant: as well as being, quite understandably, a highly popular form of leisure relaxation and holidaying growing strongly under the influence of mountain-biking, cycling in France was heavily influenced by sport. In this section we do not propose to examine the more traditional sporting dimensions of everyday cycling (essentially the structures of amateur road racing), but rather to consider in more detail the new directions being taken during the 1980s and 1990s by new forms of cycling that were catching the attention of the French public and renewing the experience of cycling in general. One of these new forms of ‘doing’ cycling has an intrinsic competitive element: triathlon; one is purely relaxational in character: leisure cycling; and the third combines elements of leisure and competition: mountain-biking. It is with this combination of sport and leisure – *le VTT* – that we will start.

#### *VTT: a new leisure-sport?*

According to the Ministry of Tourism’s study of 1995, 35 per cent of France’s approximately 21 million bicycles were *Vélos tout-terrain*

(VTT), and VTT represented 35 per cent of total sales of bikes in France in 1990, and 71 per cent of sales in 1994 (Gamond, 1995). It is clear that the renewed popularity of cycling in France during the 1980s and 1990s that has continued into the 2000s is in considerable part due to the impact of mountain-biking from the early 1980s onwards. After the declining interest in cycling as a practice during the 1960s and 1970s caused by more affordable motorized transport and the rise of more middle-class sports pastimes such as tennis and skiing as French society grew more prosperous, the ‘glamour’ of the VTT craze introduced from the United States in the early 1980s, combined with the increasing realization of the importance of regular physical exercise for health, led French citizens of different age groups to adopt the mountain bike, preparing the ground for future expansion of cycling as healthy transport and leisure in the 2000s.

As we have discussed in a previous section, some claims can be made for the ‘invention’ of mountain-biking in France, in the form of the activities of the *Vélo-cross club parisien* in the 1950s, but it is generally accepted that mountain-biking was another example of an ‘imported’ sport, brought to France from the United States in the early 1980s and taken up by the French in enthusiastic appropriation of a form of cycling that both intrinsically and organizationally (at least initially) represented ‘freedom’ and fun. Gamond reports how in the mid-1990s, his respondents still associated mountain-biking with *la défonce* (‘high on life’), *s’éclater* (‘having fun’), *sensations fortes* (‘adrenalin rush’), *plaisirs ludiques* (‘playful pleasures’) and *convivialité* (‘togetherness’), even after the activity had, to a certain extent, been taken over by the French sporting federations. When VTT arrived in the early 1980s it represented precisely the kind of breath of fresh air that the rigid structures of the cycling federations inherited from the 1890s and early twentieth century, locked into internecine quarrels over differences between cycle sport and cycle touring, needed to boost flagging public interest in the practice of cycling (rather than the ritual watching of France’s national sport during the Tour de France, and the hard-core activities of amateur racing and club riding).

The 1980s ‘godfather’ of French mountain-biking is generally acknowledged to be Stéphane Hauvette, who was instrumental in importing bikes to France and who – with Peugeot and the La Plagne ski station authorities – organized the first VTT competition to be held in France (August 1983) and was the founder-member and president of the *Association française de mountain-bike* (AFMB, created 1983). The fact that Hauvette saw the running of a competition as the best way to popu-

larize the nascent activity of VTT, otherwise presented as individualistic *défonce* and *plaisirs ludiques*, as well as reflecting the need for a high-profile event to attract media attention, also demonstrates how necessary it was for this new kind of cycling to possess an identity as ‘competition’ in order to be reported, and to have an administrative structure through which it could exist in relation to the sports federations, Sports Ministry and other public bodies with oversight of leisure and tourism. Interviewed in the very first issue of *VTT Magazine* in 1987, Hauvette explained that by coordinating all VTT activities in France, the AFMB enabled the pastime not only to organize French (1987–), European (1988–) and world championships (1989), but also to administer recognized training courses for VTT instructors and other requirements demanded by the state.

Throughout the development of mountain-biking in France during the 1980s, an apparent tension is visible between the activity’s claims to be ‘free’, individualistic and essentially non-competitive and the necessity to organize administratively, often in accompaniment to the running of competitions. As Hauvette himself stated in April 1988: ‘Parier sur le VTT, c’était prendre en compte trois facteurs. Premièrement: la tradition du cycle en France. Deuxièmement, le développement des sports de nature: randonnée équestre ou pédestre, 4 x 4, moto ou golf, et troisièmement: le vélo devait lui assui suivre ce retour à la nature.’ But equally, he was aware that the activity needed to be publicized as attractive and associated with existing trends in French sport/leisure. It was thus that he linked VTT to ‘sports de glisse’ in order to ‘l’associer à un mouvement, un état d’esprit: l’image du VTT devait être “fun”’ (Hauvette, 1988). *VTT Magazine* was similarly keen to emphasize the ludic and return-to-nature dimensions of mountain-biking: ‘Là où la voiture s’arrête, le royaume du vélo tout-terrain commence. Il a donc un horizon sans autres limites que celles de son utilisateur. Chacun peut ainsi adapter l’engin à ses aspirations’; (in an explicit reference to the aspirations of May ’68) ‘Sous la roue, l’évasion’; and ‘Le VTT est un vélo “open”, le machin des chemins creux, des fleurs bleues ou de l’émotion, façon “glisse”’ (*VTT Magazine*, 1988).

Hauvette’s clever emphasis on the ‘fun’ characteristics of mountain-biking, and the consequent stressing of the nature of VTT riding as leisure, was naturally effective in attracting the general public to try the new kind of bicycles, but, paradoxically, it tended to adversely affect the recognition of VTT by the *Fédération française de cyclisme* to which the AFMB wished to affiliate. The FFC was heavily oriented towards cycle sport (leisure riding/touring was the responsibility of other federations)

and so was unsure how suitable it would be to incorporate such a 'fun'/*glisse* activity into its supervisory oversight of cycling competition. Nevertheless, the AFMB's tireless promotion of VTT races during the mid-1980s demonstrated the strongly hybrid sport/fun-leisure nature of mountain-biking sufficiently clearly for the FFC to eventually accept the VTT 'discipline' of cycle sport into the federation in 1988, with the AFMB becoming the *Commission nationale du VTT* (CNVTT).<sup>11</sup> In 1987 the president of the FFC agreed to award the prizes at the French 'national' championships run by the AFMB, suggesting thereby that a rapprochement was imminent.

In 1987 the French cycle industry had produced two new mountain-bikes in the form of the *Peugeot Alpine* and the *MBK Tracker*, whose predecessor the *Ranger* (1984) had laid claim to be the first French VTT bike; and in 1991 the dynamic French company Décathlon marketed the first in a long and developing range of VTT bikes, the *Mach 2*. During the 1990s, supported by the FFC and by industry, mountain-biking developed rapidly in France in terms of sales (although the vast majority of bikes were imported) and activities (although respondents in the 1995 survey conducted for the Ministry of Tourism [Gamond, 1995] still wished for the federations to cater for the widest possible range of practitioners of VTT, and not just racers). The 1990s also saw attempts by Stéphane Hauvette as head of the CNVTT to collaborate with the *Fédération française de cyclo-tourisme*, who were initially dismissive of mountain-biking, although later in the decade the FFCT accepted affiliation to it by increasing numbers of VTT clubs (*Mountain Bike International*, 1991).<sup>12</sup>

#### *Triathlon: new sport, new cycling, new federation*

The difficulties experienced by mountain-biking as a new 'mixed' leisure/sport practice in gaining acceptance by the established cycling federations were also encountered by the new sport of triathlon, which also made its initial development in France during the 1980s and 1990s. Although intrinsically much more clearly a sport than a purely leisure practice, and thus less confusing to hidebound organizations such as the Sports Ministry or vested federal interest-groups, the composite nature of triathlon as swimming, cycling and running meant that it would have analogous problems in finding its place within the organizations and structures of French sport.

Perceived by the public and generally presented by its promoters as yet another sport imported from the USA, triathlon reached France in the early 1980s, where the first high-profile competition was organized

in Nice in 1982.<sup>13</sup> In 1983 the amateur triathlons of Hyères (Var) and of La Grande Motte (Hérault) were staged, and during 1984 a score or so competitions were run, the season opening with a startling 400 triathletes taking part in the Mureaux triathlon (Yvelines). The Nice–Côte d’Azur race in 1982 had been covered by the television channel Antenne 2, and interest from television for this visually spectacular sport was strong enough for Antenne 2 to follow the season of races during 1984, creating a virtual ‘Coupe de France’ that was planned to reach its finale at La Grande Motte.<sup>14</sup> Although the Grande Motte triathlon was cancelled because of adverse weather, those present decided to attempt the creation of a new sports federation exclusively devoted to triathlon and in October 1984 the *Comité national pour le développement du triathlon* (Conadet) was created. Conadet was obliged to counter attempts by the national federations of swimming, cycling and athletics to take control of the sport.

Just as in the 1890s French national sports bodies had been instrumental in creating the international organizations governing various sports, the inchoate state of the international stewardship of triathlon in the 1980s allowed French initiatives to develop their own governing body in the form of a national federation to lead the search for a world triathlon organization. In November 1984 the *Commission de coordination du triathlon en France* (CCTF) was created, working with the French national Olympic committee (CNOSF) and composed of representatives of the three existing sports federations involved in triathlon (FFN – swimming, FFC – cycling and FFA – athletics).<sup>15</sup> In June 1985 Conadet – associated with CNOSF – was officially recognized by the Sports Ministry, and by the 1986 season there were more than 50 recognized clubs, nearly 90 events and a recognized national round of competitions. When in 1989 the International Triathlon Union (ITU) was set up, its founding congress was held in Avignon during March and April, in advance of the organization of the initial triathlon world championships, also organized in Avignon in August of the same year. France and the nascent *Fédération française de triathlon* (FFTri) instituted in October 1989 were thus at the forefront of the new sport’s institutionalization. Just as the public-sector television channel Antenne 2 had contributed to raising awareness of triathlon in the early 1980s, the 1989 world championships in Avignon were broadcast live by the dynamic and innovative private channel Canal Plus, in a concerted move to cover sports. By 2000 the FFTri had almost 17,000 licensed triathletes (*licenciés*) registered, representing the huge development of the sport in the intervening decade.

*'Militant cycling': the Mouvement de défense de la bicyclette, and La Rochelle, the first 'ville cyclable'*

As we shall see in following sections, during the 2000s, leisure, utility and 'fun' cycling developed strongly under the influence of greater interest in environmentally friendly everyday transport or leisure (either on extended vacation or as a daily health exercise); a reaction of rejection among some more militant bicycle users towards cars and their stranglehold over urban planning; initiatives from the state to foster the use of cycling; and innovative use of the heritage of cycle sport to commercialize cycle leisure-sport. During the 1980s and 1990s the bases for these trends were laid by the craze for VTT, but also by the developing trend in French society towards environmental sensitivity, and one town in particular was at the forefront of moves towards environmentally responsible transport through the use of bicycles: La Rochelle.

French environmentalism developed initially in the 1970s, building on the foundations of the movement laid in the 1960s and profiting particularly from the protests of May 1968, which focused public attention on – among other things – the ways in which modern consumer society was exploiting the environment for financial gain. Especially during the presidency of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, whose efforts to foster a *société libérale avancée* of tolerance and unity allowed dissenting voices on all kinds of topics greater freedom than they had enjoyed during France's years under de Gaulle and Pompidou, environmental pressure groups publicized the dangers posed by industry in general, and especially by the French nuclear power programme. Famous struggles between the state and environmental protesters – often linked to extreme left-wing political movements born from May '68 – brought environmental issues to the attention of an often uninterested general public, but some seeds of future political success were sown.<sup>16</sup> The 1970s and 1980s also saw the rise of initiatives and movements based around cycling that linked new interests in environmentalism and some of the new aspirations towards personal freedom and self-expression that had been given voice in May '68. Just two of these early ecology-inspired developments in the cultural and social history of cycling in France are the creation of the *Mouvement de défense de la bicyclette* in Paris in 1974, and the launch in 1975–76 in La Rochelle of a system of free municipal bicycles.

The *Mouvement de défense de la bicyclette* (MDB) was launched in 1974 by Jacques Essel, who thus became one of the first French militants for the role of the bicycle in urban transport. Essel had been run over by a car while cycling in a bus lane, and launched a libertarian-inspired campaign to improve cyclists' safe access to public space. Active both



practically and through writing in favour of cycling's role in society and culture, Essel and his MDB were instrumental in launching and maintaining the visibility of everyday cycling for the general public and the authorities in Paris during the 1970s and 1980s (Granger, Essel and Lafaurie, 1977). Essel became distanced from the organizing committee of MDB in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and a year before his death in 2004 – at a time when both central government and municipal authorities were becoming genuinely interested in the potential of non-polluting transport – the *Mouvement* was renamed *Mieux se déplacer à bicyclette*. Under its new 'management', MDB became a more standard lobby working in favour of better facilities for cyclists in Paris and the better integration of cycle transport with public transport in general.

Also during the mid- and late 1970s, the coastal town of La Rochelle (Charente-Maritime) was the pioneer in France of a system of free bicycles provided by the town council to facilitate the short-range urban travel of its inhabitants and tourist-visitors. Initially launched in 1976 with the encouragement of the town's mayor, Michel Crépeau, who was an ecologically minded member of the *Radicaux de Gauche*, the *vélos jaunes*, available to be borrowed by anyone, have become a symbol of how local authorities, ordinary citizens and environmental transport lobbies can work together to successfully improve urban transit. Throughout the 1980s and the 1990s La Rochelle maintained and improved this system of 350 bicycles and 11 racks, and was central to the setting up in 1989 of the *Club des Villes Cyclables* (Huré, 2009). In the 1980s and 1990s La Rochelle instituted plans to facilitate pedestrian access to the centre of the town, initiated the use of electric vehicles for municipal services and created 20 km of cycle paths (Tallut, 1989).

Later initiatives introduced in Strasbourg, Lyon and Paris in the 2000s learned much from the pioneering and successful projects in La Rochelle, which have over a period of thirty years gradually evolved, increasingly integrating bike-use and the protection of the environment into municipal policy and citizens' everyday lives. In a fuller section in the following chapter, we will discuss in more detail the urban-cycling schemes based around self-service bicycles that evolved in France during the 1990s and 2000s in emulation of La Rochelle's pioneering example.

### Jeannie Longo: a sporting giant treated as a sporting dwarf?

Jeannie Longo is a figure who has inspired strong emotions in France, both within the sporting community and in society more widely. First

and foremost, she provoked debate over the place of women in contemporary cycle sport and progressed the cause of female competitive cycling. Secondly, she called into question accepted norms for the behaviour of sporting champions and challenged the relationship between athletes and sporting federations in France. Thirdly, she provided a startling example of longevity and professionalism in a gruelling sporting discipline, and demonstrated how athletes could prepare for their professional lives after competition. Longo was a sporting superstar whose career mirrored and helped initiate changes in French sport and society: in 1989, when she broke the world hour record for a third time, the doyen of French cycling reporters, Pierre Chany, commented on Longo's phenomenal success by saying that 'Cette sacrée bonne femme aura vécu avec les records comme d'autres vivent avec les rhumatismes' (Rodeaud, 1996).

Born in 1958, Jeannie Longo is France's most successful ever woman cyclist. She can also lay claim to being the most successful female cyclist in the history of competition. Over her long career (1979–2004), during which she participated in six Olympic Games, she won 944 races in all disciplines of cycle racing, from hill-climbs through the whole range of road racing, cyclocross, track racing and mountain-biking to the world hour records for traditional bikes and outright performance. She was world champion 13 times and Olympic champion once (but won 30 Olympic and world championship medals), she was French national champion in different disciplines 49 times, and held 38 world records. She currently holds the outright world hour record at 48.159 km (Mexico, 1996) and the athletes' world hour record at 45.094 km (Mexico, 2000). She won the Tour de France *féminin* three times (1987, 1988, 1989) and was placed in the top three on another five occasions (1985, 1986, 1992, 1995, 1996). Her contributions to sport have been recognized by the sporting community as well as by the French state: in 1989 she was elected European Sportswoman of the Year and in 2000 she was named Sportswoman of the Century; she is a Commander of the *Légion d'Honneur* (1986, promoted 2011) and Commander in the *Ordre du Mérite* (2000). Her celebrity in France is such that she has a waxwork figure at the *Musée Grévin*, the French equivalent of Madame Tussaud's.

### *Longo, women and sport*

The French Foreign Ministry presents Longo as 'a champion who takes your breath away' and as 'a paragon of independence, determination and longevity' in a sport that – as is emphasized by the ministry – is still traditionally dominated by men. Longo herself seems to accept that she took on the challenge of succeeding in a sport in which women's competitions

were not taken seriously and for which the extreme physical exertion required sits uneasily with many widespread assumptions about femininity. As her English-language profile by the Foreign Ministry states: ‘She has a charming answer for her detractors: “There are still people who don’t like to see a woman get wrinkles through effort. Personally, I think certain wrinkles can be rather attractive.”’ Sponsorship for Longo was hard to come by, as she was regularly informed that women’s cycling did not correspond to companies’ corporate images, although one small business – Ebly – has courageously supported her throughout much of her career.

Longo is an example of the acceptability/non-acceptability debate that has accompanied women’s competition in various sports, which we have touched on in the context of nineteenth-century women’s cycling in France in an earlier chapter. Much of this debate revolves around the enduring Victorian ideal of femininity, and the notion of acceptability/non-acceptability (although much discussed since the birth of modern sport in the late nineteenth century) was introduced by Eleanor Metheny in 1965 with the suggestion that there were some sports in which it was ‘acceptable’ for women to compete and some where female participation was ‘categorically unacceptable’ (Metheny, 1965). Inherent in this view of women and competition is that sport can involve women in contradictory role expectations, where attributes such as risk-taking, aggression, self-confidence and independence of mind that have traditionally been viewed as male are deemed incompatible with traditionally ‘female’ traits of passivity, dependence, intuitiveness and submissiveness. Endurance cycling, for Metheny, would have been categorically unacceptable as a female sport. Where women take part in sports that seem – in relation to Victorian ideas of gender traits – ‘unfeminine’, criticism and innuendo tend to arise about the sexuality of the athlete involved. Perhaps curiously, there has been little such sexual innuendo surrounding Longo, although she is accused of lacking femininity. The close unit formed by Longo and her trainer-husband Patrice Ciprelli perhaps protects her from innuendos about her sexuality that might afflict other female athletes.<sup>17</sup>

The sociologist Catherine Louveau has described Jeannie Longo as a counter-example of any claimed feminization of French sport (Louveau, 2000). Despite Longo’s great media visibility, for instance, less than 10 per cent of the membership of the *Fédération française de cyclisme* is female, and Longo herself is treated by the media in a way that reproduces and underscores traditional social constructions and prejudices about male and female roles. At its simplest, the standard division of roles

in sport between men and women is that men ‘do’ and women ‘appear’: men are expected to indulge in action whereas women are supposed to appear attractive. Examples of this prejudice, which is perpetuated by frequent media commentaries on the physical attractiveness of female athletes, are numerous in almost all sports, but Louveau cites the scandalous example of the 1999 Tour de France *féminin*, when the riders were actively encouraged to demonstrate their femininity as well as their sporting abilities by wearing make-up, nail varnish and coiffeured hair (Louveau, 2000: 25).

Longo’s long career spanned the 1980s and the 1990s (and the 2000s), decades during which French sport, society and feminism evolved considerably. As an athlete, Longo personified the idea of ‘une France qui gagne’, but her success often seemed to come at the cost of popularity, both with followers of cycling and her fellow competitors, who found either her prickly attitude or the mere fact that women were competing in the sport of *les géants de la route* disturbing. Longo’s image and self-presentation also seemed to find difficulties in establishing a working compromise between aggression and competition on the one hand and femininity and charm on the other. Just as female cyclists of the early years of the bicycle in the late nineteenth century often struggled to find a ‘respectable identity’, as discussed, for example, by Simpson (2001), it seems that Longo, in the much more liberated late twentieth century, also found the creation of her identity as a female cycle-racing champion hard to maintain.

‘Et nous, nous sommes des naines?’ was her response to people who think female cycling is different to that of the (male) *géants de la route*. Asked in 1997 what her greatest regret was, she replied that it was ‘Que le cyclisme féminin ne soit pas mieux reconnu’ by the media and by officialdom (some spectators have always taken an interest). She went on to say:

Oui, je regrette que l’on considère le cyclisme féminin comme un concurrent du cyclisme masculin. Comme nous les filles, nous montions les mêmes cols que ces messieurs, cela ne plaisait pas à tout le monde. Bref, il semble que les géants de la route ne doivent pas être concurrencés par des naines. (Hessège, 1997)

#### *Longo, male champions and (male) sports federations*

Naturally, the cycling role-models who were available for Longo as she built her career were male, although as she has pointed out, her background in skiing gave her another set of references. At the start of her participation in racing, the dominant male cyclists were champions such

as the recently retired Eddy Merckx, nicknamed the ‘Cannibal’ in tribute to his all-consuming hunger for victory, and the rising French star Bernard Hinault, who was nicknamed the ‘Badger’ in recognition of his ferocity and tenacity in competition. Longo has herself been christened ‘Longo la Cannibale’. In 2005 a TV commercial for Andros fruit jams featuring Jeannie Longo was singled out by the anti-sexist advertising feminist organization *La Meute* (‘The Pack’) as giving a strong example of non-sexist advertising. The awards ceremony for the ‘Prix Femino’ competition organized by *La Meute* gave first, second and third prizes to adverts for electrical goods and soap products, but commended Andros for using the slogan ‘Le plus grand sportif de tous les temps est une femme!’ Jeannie Longo was present at the event – held in the Hôtel de Ville in Paris on International Women’s Day – and was warmly applauded for the role she has played in demonstrating women’s possibilities in sport.<sup>18</sup>

As we have discussed in a previous chapter, one of the first documented instances of women in cycle sport was in Bordeaux in 1869, when women competed in a very early race held in one of the public parks. During the 1870s, 1880s and 1890s debates raged in France, as in other countries, over the social, cultural, medical, sexual and political advisability of women’s adoption of cycling as either recreation, transport or sport. Many studies have been made of women and cycling in these early years, and one recent analysis suggests that by about 1914, the realization by manufacturers that the market for female cycling was an untapped goldmine, combined with the drive for women’s liberation, had finally won the right to cycle for French women (Thompson, 2000). The realm of competitive cycling, however, remained difficult for women to access on equal terms with men, as those women-only races that existed were more often regarded as curiosities than proper examples of true sport.

With the creation of the female version of the Tour de France in 1984, however, it could have been assumed that attitudes and prejudices had moved on, but Longo’s difficulties with the cycling authorities perhaps suggest that the male-dominated sporting establishment of the federations and the sporting media find it difficult to accept a female ‘Cannibal’. Throughout her career she has suffered from a conflictual interaction with the *Fédération française de cyclisme* over a variety of issues including her reliance on her trainer-husband Patrice Ciprelli in races when she is representing France (rather than official state-appointed coaches and *directeurs sportifs*), her difficult relationships with teammates in the French squad, her refusal to use the bikes and equipment

provided to the FFC by its official suppliers, her positive drug test in 1987 (which was quashed), or her demands always to be selected for the French team, even when younger riders needed to gain experience. Even as late as 2005 the FFC's selecting of two younger riders to compete in the Madrid world championships in September, despite Longo's strong season, led to threats that the FFC would be taken to court for age discrimination.<sup>19</sup>

Longo's individualistic and dismissive attitude towards team-mates is doubtless based on her awareness of her own innate physical superiority, but her competitive persona as a rider who is 'aggressive, bornée, parano' (Rodeaud, 1996) clashes with the need for collaborative tactics in those cycling disciplines where success is achieved through teamwork, such as road racing. Her defence against criticisms that she is egotistical and flouts the usual sporting codes of team sport is varied, but includes her beliefs that top-class athletes are by nature not egotistical but 'corpocentriques', and thus more attuned to themselves than to the needs of team-mates, and that the organization of women's international road racing, for example, in which national teams may have only very few riders, is less a team sport than one in which it is each rider for herself.

Commenting on Longo's world hour record, established in Mexico City in October 1996, the sports journalist Michel Chemin described her in terms that summarize the way she is perceived by the media, federation, public and fellow competitors: 'Longo la rebelle individualiste, dont on ne saura jamais si elle plus misogyne que misanthrope', or '*La Longo, fière et orgueilleuse jusqu'au cale-pied*' (Chemin, 1996b). A fortnight earlier, Chemin had used the terms 'trublion', 'hors-la-loi' and 'chiraquienne emmerdeuse' in reporting her failed first attempt at the hour record and 11th world championship victory in the Lugano time trial (Chemin, 1996a).<sup>20</sup> Part of Longo's animosity towards the FFC is doubtless born of the fact that women's teams are frequently managed by men, and that the FFC is almost entirely staffed by men, who have opposed her wish to assume responsibilities within the federation. One woman who became vice-president of the FFC – Félicia Ballanger, who had won two gold medals at the Sydney Olympics in 2000 – resigned after 18 months of frustration at the divorce between thinking in the federation and the realities of cycling both as a sport and leisure pursuit (Hennion, 2002).

#### *Longevity, training and life after competition*

One of Longo's most famous self-descriptions is 'Je suis dure au mal' ('tough and resistant to suffering'). She seems to attribute her phenomenal success to a combination of factors drawn from, firstly, her

upbringing and nature, secondly, her intrinsic capacity for work and training, and thirdly, the highly organized nature of her approach to sport. Her 'psychological profile' or mindset blends a highly developed awareness of the natural world, weather, seasons, fresh air and the solitude of human effort with an iron will never to give up and to succeed at almost any cost, and a logistically efficient scientific organization of training and competition. Much of this mindset is summarized in her book *Vivre en forme*:

J'ai eu la chance, dès mon enfance, de m'épanouir dans un environnement privilégié, au cœur du massif du Mont-Blanc. Les valeurs enseignées par la nature m'ont détournée de l'artificiel. Une alimentation saine, des activités sportives et l'air montagnard ont sûrement été à la base de la solidité de mon organisme. Plus tard, ma volonté d'atteindre des objectifs sportifs mondiaux m'a incitée à prendre en compte tous les paramètres qui mènent à la performance: la programmation de l'entraînement, le choix des compétitions, la recherche technologique, la maîtrise psychologique, mais aussi les atouts qui permettent au corps d'offrir le rendement optimum, la réponse immédiate aux sollicitations dans l'effort: la nutrition et l'hygiène de vie. (Longo, 2002)

Longo is vegetarian and produces much of her food herself in order to monitor its quality – although her parents were not farmers, Longo's interviews are strewn with references to her chickens and an almost peasant-like attention to the details of hard work and effort.

Longo has not, of course, been immune to accusations of drug-taking in the paranoid context of late 1990s cycling and given her overwhelming superiority, but essentially she was considered to be a clean athlete. Two issues that arose concerned her positive testing in 1987 for use of an ephedrine-related stimulant and subsequently, in 2004, her apparent support for the use of the muscle-building dietary supplement creatine. In 1987 she was absolved of taking a prescribed substance, as she claimed it had been contained in a proprietary drug she had taken of whose contents she was unaware. In 2004 the daily paper *Le Parisien* accused her of promoting the sale and use of creatine through her personal website, and after a court case in 2005, the newspaper's claims were upheld, although Longo subsequently appealed. In late 2011 and early 2012, however, significant doubts over the ethics of her husband and trainer Patrice Ciprelli arose, as he was arrested for suspected purchases of the performance-enhancing drug EPO.

Longo is an exemplar of another trend in contemporary professional sport, namely the relatively new concern to ensure the livelihood of former athletes when they have retired from competition through attention to education and training while they are still active. Whereas professional riders of the past might have hoped to open a cycle shop

trading on their former fame, or more rarely to continue in the sport by managing a team or commentating for the media, new frameworks of support created to facilitate the integration of elite athletes into 'normal' employment have widened the range of careers for retired racers. Although as obviously exceptional in terms of her drive to acquire qualifications as she has been to win races – she holds a postgraduate qualification in sports management and another in sports law and economics – Longo has nevertheless demonstrated to other athletes that successful reconversion to non-sporting life is possible, and that preparation for a future after sport begins while an athlete is still active.<sup>21</sup> As well as co-authoring books on training, health, diet and other related topics and running a website summarizing her career and current business activities, Longo has been employed as a technical advisor on cycling by the French Sports Ministry, a role that made her claimed support for creatine even more damaging.

Longo's political commitment to the neo-Gaullist RPR (Jacques Chirac's party) in the 1990s sometimes aroused comment, especially as she was not averse to flaunting her politics and her political friendships. As a municipal councillor in Grenoble until 1995 she supported the RPR mayor, Alain Carignon, who was later to fall from grace and serve a prison sentence for fraud, and during the period of political 'cohabitation' in 1986 she ostentatiously avoided receiving her *Légion d'honneur* from President Mitterrand, choosing instead to be decorated by the then RPR prime minister, Jacques Chirac.<sup>22</sup> Even in politics, however, she is independent, claiming that although she feels more in tune with the sports policies of the Right, she would happily support any party that she felt defended the right values.

The experienced sports journalist for the left-leaning newspaper *Libération*, Michel Chemin, has compared Longo and Marie-José Perec, two sporting champions whose rebellious natures served them well in competition, but suggests that their behaviour has little to teach us about society in general, such is the conventionality of their life and thought outside sport:

Ni Jeannie Longo, ni Marie-José Perec ne recevront jamais le prix Orange pour le prix de la camaraderie. [...] En ces temps d'austérité et de rigueur où la dialectique est soumission ou démission, Jeannie Longo et Marie-José Perec ont ouvert avec succès une troisième voie: la rébellion. Il ne s'agit pas ici de chercher le sens de leur comportement au-delà du champ sportif, tant par ailleurs elles peuvent être d'un conventionnel affligeant. (Chemin, 1995)

Such a view must be taken as representing precisely the 'establishment position' on an athlete whose career has challenged accepted notions of



the normal and the acceptable. Overall, Jeannie Longo is a complex example of a modern female sporting hero whose private and public personas fit ill with what the public, fellow athletes and the sporting establishment have traditionally experienced. She is, however, unquestionably an important figure of French cycling, society and culture.

### The women's Tours

The Tour de France *féminin* (invented by the *Société du Tour de France*) was first run in the summer of 1984. In a sport that had been dominated for decades by a traditionally macho attitude towards female participation – even as recreation, in many cases – a women's Tour was a significant event. As is detailed in subsequent discussion, since the early 1990s a variety of 'women's Tours' have been organized by competing organizations, with occasional years where no significant women's national stage-race was run, as cycle competition of this nature has struggled to establish itself in the face of gender bias, commercial difficulties and the institutional constraints of the international governance of cycle racing.

The innovation of a women's Tour was opportune. The Tour de France in the late 1970s was struggling to negotiate its way through a number of problems: doping was beginning to emerge as a serious issue; the transition between the Merckx era and what was to become the Hinault era was taking place in a peloton where real stars seemed lacking; and the economic sponsorship of professional cycling was uncertain, as companies hit hard by economic recession in the 1970s withdrew their financing of teams. Hinault's domination of the Tour during the period 1978–86 helped to renew interest in the race among sponsors through his uncompromising attitude towards racing and undeniable charisma. Indeed, Hinault's team sponsors Renault and later La Vie Claire were emblematic of the renewed health of pro-cycling sponsorship in the early and mid-1980s in a period when media coverage of the Tour was strong, and when the reorganization of French television in particular was allowing the organizers of sporting events to tout their products to a growing range of competing state and private television companies. The climate was one of change and opportunity, and the organizers of the Tour were keen to maximize the attractiveness of the race by opening it to amateurs as well as professionals and by encouraging its 'internationalization' through the encouragement of riders hailing from outside the confines of 'old' Europe.

*The genesis of the women's Tour*

It was in this context of change and opportunity that Félix Lévitan (administrative director of the Tour de France and head of sport at the newspaper *Le Parisien libéré*) launched the idea of a women's Tour in 1983 (Thompson, 2006: 132). Outside the world of the *Société du Tour de France*, the sporting community worldwide had been recognizing that women had the right to compete in the widest possible range of events, regardless of previous biases against the 'weaker' sex's participation in endurance sports, and as Thompson (2006) points out, preparation for the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics had included both a women's marathon and a women's bicycle road race for the first time. Although in some ways it therefore seemed almost natural for the Tour to reflect such developments in international sport, especially at a time when media interest in covering the innovation was likely to be highly enthusiastic, there were structural and cultural obstacles to any immediate success for the *Tour féminin*. Culturally, French society in general and the world of cycling and of the Tour in particular were still not wholly at ease with the idea that women could (or should) compete in a sport traditionally deemed to be enormously demanding and, indeed, whose entire image had been manufactured around the notion of 'extreme' male physicality and suffering. Conventional interpretations of gender and gender roles still saw the *Tour féminin* as a difficult reconciliation of – albeit evolving – ideals of femininity and sporting effort and suffering. These issues will be discussed below in more detail, but structurally female cycling in the early 1980s was also still some way from a position of strength. Although women's cycling had been recognized by the UCI and the FFC as a competitive sport since the 1950s, its development had been slow in the 1960s and early 1970s, and even by 1982 only 1,500 women were signed up as members of the FFC (out of a total membership of over 56,000). Because of the slow growth in numbers of competitors, the range of women's races had likewise remained relatively limited, and outdated UCI regulations governing such issues as obligatory rest periods for female riders in stage-races had not been changed. So despite the feeling that the time was right for a women's Tour to be tried, its success was far from guaranteed.

*The inaugural women's Tour*

Rémy Pigois (1986) has provided a simple account of the early years of the women's Tour, allowing us to present the main features of the event. The inaugural Tour de France *féminin* in 1984 attracted a starting field of 36 women, who competed in six national teams representing coun-

tries – France (two teams) and the Netherlands – where cycling and riding the Tour had long been strong male traditions, and Anglo-Saxon countries – the United States, Canada and Great Britain – where female sporting emancipation had progressed far enough and quickly enough to encourage women to participate in a version of the world’s hardest cycle race. In fact, the first women’s Tour should have seen a field of riders twice the size of that which took the start, as numerous potential entrants could not compete because of commitments in races elsewhere, or were keen to prepare quietly for the Olympics that followed the *Tour féminin*. The two strongest competitors in women’s cycling in the 1980s – Maria Canins of Italy and Jeannie Longo of France – were noticeably absent from the field and the race was eventually won by the American rider Mary-Ann Martin, who beat Hélène Hage of Holland and Deborah Schumway of the USA into second and third places respectively. The race was run in 18 stages and covered a total of 1,080 km (approximately a quarter of the length of the men’s Tour) at an average speed for the winner of almost 36 kph. Only one rider failed to complete the course, and the remaining 35 competitors were quite closely bunched, as the *lanterne rouge* took only 49 minutes longer than the winner’s 29 hours and 39 minutes.

Organized between 30 June and 22 July, the women’s Tour ran in parallel with the Tour de France, partially covering the route of the male professional teams. Because the women’s itineraries generally used only the last 60 km of the daily route set out for the male riders, the stage-finishes of the men’s and women’s Tours coincided, but the start-towns differed. In addition, the women’s racing was broken by five rest days – two more than permitted for the men – which were planned to allow the riders to recover from their efforts. The average stage length was 61 km, and the timings of departures and finishes were carefully arranged so that the women’s race would serve as an innovative sporting distraction for the crowds lining the roads in anticipation of the passing of the *Tour masculin*. The women’s race was thus in effect an ‘opener’ for the *caravane publicitaire*, itself carefully sandwiched between the two races, and this role as advertisement for the men’s Tour (as well as being in general a novelty attracting media attention and debate) was somewhat reflected in the fact that the *Société du Tour* agreed to take on the financing of the women’s race, in the absence of sufficient funding from the national cycling federation, the FFC.

### *The women’s Tour: changing formats*

The women’s Tour in various formulations has now existed for more

than thirty years. As has been suggested, its history has not been completely straightforward. The women's Tour changed formats, organizers and names in reflection of the complex interplay of stakeholders involved in professional cycling and differing views on what women's racing should be. From 1984 until 1989 the *Société du Tour de France* organized a women's race around France called the *Tour de France féminin*, but from 1990 to 1993 the race's format was significantly changed to include countries other than France, being renamed the *Tour de la CEE féminin* (Tour of the European Community), though still organized by the *Société du Tour*. This race was withdrawn from the cycling calendar after its last running in 1993. From 1992 to 2009 another women's race around France was organized by the *Racing Club olympique de Toulouse* (thus running in competition with the *Société du Tour*'s *Tour de la CEE féminin* in 1992 and 1993), called first the *Tour cycliste féminin*, then from 1999 the *Grande boucle féminine internationale* (GBFI). The GBFI was last run in its full form in 2003 (it was not run in 2004) and from 2005 until its final iteration in 2009 it was a less significant race with fewer stages, smaller fields and a lower rating from the UCI. From 2006 to 2010 an alternative *Route de France féminine* was also on the calendar of women's stage-races, organized by *Route et Cycles* magazine. The cancellation of the *Route de France féminine* in 2011 seemingly deprived women's cycling in France – and internationally – of its last remaining major competition, but in 2012 the race was again planned for 4–12 August, with 13 teams of six riders aiming to cover ten stages in the north-east of France.

In the early 1990s the women's Tour was thus organized not by the *Société du Tour* (which had ended its running of the female Tour in 1989 in order to stage the short-lived Tour of the European Community) but by the competing *Team France Organisation* (TFO) of Jean Boué, in conjunction with the Toulouse-based sports club *Racing Club olympique* (RCO). Because of the curious ways in which different organizations can hold different and conflicting rights to the staging of specific races (a situation that dates back to famous rivalries between newspapers over the running of Paris–Brest–Paris in the 1890s and early 1900s), RCO held the rights – allocated by the UCI – to the dates in July allotted for the *Tour (cycliste) féminin*, but TFO was the actual organizer of the race in practice.

During the mid-1990s the women's Tour de France organized by TFO–RCO was repeatedly pursued in the law courts by the litigious *Société du Tour*, which saw the naming of the race as either the *Tour cycliste féminin* (until 1998) or as the *Grande boucle féminine* as an abuse

of intellectual property rights. In addition to these legal problems, TFO–RCO encountered other difficulties in staging the race. In part these vicissitudes were caused by the intransigent hostility of the *Société du Tour*, but the inherent complexity of running a race on the scale of the women’s Tour also proved problematic. The fields of riders generally varied from 60 to 90, competing either as national teams, commercial teams or mixes of national and pro-teams. Because of the impracticality of running the race at the same time as the men’s Tour, the TFO–RCO’s women’s tour was staged in August, sometimes conflicting with preparation and recuperation for other competitions held in the autumn. Logistically and financially, too, the women’s Tour proved to be something of a challenge for a hybrid organization lacking the practical expertise, political influence and commercial power of the *Société du Tour*: over the years, the TFO–RCO Tour acquired something of a reputation for mismanagement, with riders complaining regularly about lengthy stages and time-consuming and tiring transfers between stages (occasioned in part by the difficulties in finding interested host-towns), as well as unpaid prize money. Tensions between TFO and RCO came to a head in 2002–04 when a court case centred on a dispute over the payment of prize money for the 2002 race split the partnership, leaving TFO with the rights to the race in 2003, but with no confirmed dates. The 2003 race was eventually run – by Boué’s new company Vélo-Féminin – in difficult circumstances caused by the late notification of new dates from the UCI. In 2004 no race was organized, but in 2005 the competition returned in abbreviated form as a much shorter stage-race (five days). At the same time, the (equally truncated) competing race proposed by the magazine *Routes et Cycles* in the form of the *Route de France féminine* was hotly contested in the courts by RCO, which deemed the race to conflict unfairly with its own planned challenge to Vélo-Féminin’s competition, the *AuTour des Féminines*.

*Les géantes de la route: suffering and femininity?*

The women’s Tour de France in its various and confusing forms has, partly because of its high visibility, been a primary site of the renegotiation of French attitudes towards elite sport and gender roles. The discussions and debates that arose around the first Tour *féminin* in 1984 about women and endurance sport (which have continued to some extent ever since) have summarized much of France’s enduringly macho attitudes towards femininity. In many ways, the fact that consideration of gender roles in sport and society in general was focused through the somewhat distorting prism of the world’s hardest, most macho, most

atavistically physical sporting event has perhaps distorted the discussion. Elite competitive cycling is indisputably one of the most demanding endurance sports, and the traditional rhetoric of the Tour itself and of its media commentators through the decades has been of male effort, male sacrifice, male bravery and male survival: in the context of such a tradition of discourse and representation the women's Tour raised many questions.

Media commentary on the first women's Tour focused on the one hand on the competitors' physical abilities (speed and strength) and on their psychological qualities (willpower, courage), and on the other hand, on their appearance and general behaviour. In the first case, most of the coverage trod an uneasy path between machismo and feminism, oscillating between the traditional misogyny of those who felt that women had no place in the hard world of competitive cycling, and those who deemed that women racers were performing athletically and morally in ways that equalled male exploits. In the second case, discussion centred on the femininity of the riders' appearance and behaviour in an attempt to determine, essentially, whether it was possible to combine (traditionally) feminine appearance and domesticity of behaviour with the extreme physical effort and fatigue and competitive instinct required to succeed in racing. As has been pointed out by Thompson, the terms of the debate had scarcely changed from those of moral panics in the late nineteenth century over the 'indecent' of women cyclists and their attire (Thompson, 2000). In his brief but incisive treatment of the first women's Tour Thompson (2006: 132–39) describes how one potential difference was that some commentators were extremely positive about the sporting quality – both moral and physical – of performances in the 1984 Tour, claiming that the riders knew how to suffer agony in the same ways as men did, praising the apparently high average speed and the fact that all but one of the racers made it to Paris. With the benefit of hindsight, it could seem that such praise was motivated at least in part by an early French form of 'gender-correctness', and was born of the desire of everyone – promoters, managers, journalists – to make the inaugural event appear a success. In fact, in comparison with not only the male Tour of 1984 (4,020 km at 35 kph, admittedly EPO-assisted) but with subsequent *Tours féminins*, the race of 1984 was short and not particularly fast or competitive, so praise of the very low attrition rate (one retiree, because of a broken collarbone) as evidence of female abilities to resist pain was perhaps not really justified.

Overall, the women's Tour has been an example of what Terret (2007: 300–08) has described as a situation in which 'performance

féminine' often occurs within a context of 'séduction et plafond de verre'. The history of the *Tour féminin* (in all its forms) has been marred by obstructiveness from the Tour de France itself, by difficulties in obtaining finance, and by the problems of overcoming gender stereotyping. It remains, nevertheless, an intriguing case-study of the ideology and practice of cycle racing in France, more than a century after the invention of the Tour de France upon which it is modelled.

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Setting to one side the signal success of male French professional riders (Hinault, Fignon) and teams (Renault, La Vie Claire) in France's national annual cycling race during the early 1980s, people's experience of the bicycle and cycling in France during the 1980s and the 1990s was much coloured by high-profile *female* cycle sport and by changes in the nature of the cycle industry and cycling as a recreational pastime. Apart from, and separate to, the final flourish of male French dominance in the Tour, the changing social and cultural values of the 1980s and 1990s included high-profile women's emancipation in sport. Jeannie Longo's example as a female *Campionnissima* whose exploits equalled, if not surpassed, those of the most celebrated male racing cyclists will long endure as a subject of wonder and admiration, as well as for the contribution that she made to furthering the cause of women's competitive cycling and emancipation overall. Admittedly, the future of the women's Tour de France seems less assured, but it remains an intriguing case-study of the difficulties that surround female elite professional cycling and of the philosophies of women's involvement in sport in general and endurance sports in particular. In terms of the cycle industry, although Cycles Follis in Lyon closed in 2007, the tradition of artisan frame-building is maintained there by a former employee, and high-tech top-of-the range frames and components are produced in ever-increasing numbers and diversity by the flourishing companies Time and Look, as well as by a growing high-tech sports sector in general, which develops new and more efficient styles of retailing and distribution. During these decades, cycling overall was indeed in a process of transformation, not only in terms of gender, technology and commerce/industry, but also in the ways in which new uses and meanings of the bicycle and of cycling were developed in mass-participation leisure and sport (VTT and triathlon) and, more radically, in the growing identification between cycling and ecology.

## Notes

- 1 Hinault is one of the key figures of the contemporary Tour de France and of French sport in general in the late twentieth century – for more discussion, see a forthcoming study by Hugh Dauncey and Geoff Hare, ‘Bernard Hinault: national champion or sporting celebrity?’, currently in preparation. Hinault and Fignon are still, at the time of writing, the last French winners of the Tour de France, and arguably represent the end of French and even European dominance of the Tour as it has internationalized so successfully in the 1990s and 2000s, with multiple wins for the American rider Lance Armstrong and, in 2011, the Australian Cadel Evans. 2012 saw a British winner, Bradley Wiggins.
- 2 [http://www.decathlon.fr/ecfr/m/zip/37351\\_1\\_3.zip\\_dir/entreprise/histoire.html](http://www.decathlon.fr/ecfr/m/zip/37351_1_3.zip_dir/entreprise/histoire.html) (accessed 9 March 2012)
- 3 The discussion that follows is based on interviews undertaken by Paul Benneworth and Hugh Dauncey in April 2006 with the managing directors of Look and Time, on-site in Nevers. Originally founded in 1951 as a single company, in 1987 the company split into two with the creation of Time. Since 1987 the two firms have led parallel existences in the high end of the French, European and world cycle component industry. Both companies attach enormous importance to innovation, new technologies and products.
- 4 Look, for example, has been supported in its development of high-technology carbon-fibre frames for bicycles by the Oséo organization, set up by French government to help foster the adoption and use of high-technology processes by small and medium-sized businesses. Oséo is a partnership between the French national agency for innovation (ANVAR) and the public-sector development bank for small/medium sized firms (BDPME). The ‘585’ carbon frame developed in the mid-2000s benefited notably from this support. See: [http://www.oseo.fr/a\\_la\\_une/paroles\\_d\\_entrepreneurs/archives\\_reportages\\_lci/lci/look\\_cycle\\_international](http://www.oseo.fr/a_la_une/paroles_d_entrepreneurs/archives_reportages_lci/lci/look_cycle_international) (accessed 28 February 2012) and [http://www.pce.oseo.fr/a\\_la\\_une/paroles\\_d\\_entrepreneurs/autres\\_temoignages/look\\_cycle\\_international](http://www.pce.oseo.fr/a_la_une/paroles_d_entrepreneurs/autres_temoignages/look_cycle_international) (accessed 28 February 2012)
- 5 The term *sport californien* in French perhaps most strictly refers to physical activities that reached France in the 1970s and 1980s from the US, and whose ‘playful’ and individualistic nature rendered them problematic for assimilation by the rigid structures of French sports federations. Typical sports in this category were skateboarding, street basketball or football, surfing or rollerblading. Mountain-biking, as a sport whose origins are generally thought to have been in California, seems to qualify as well, although to a lesser extent. See Loret (1995) and Loret and Waser (2001) for discussion.
- 6 The French company that capitalized perhaps most directly and successfully on the boom in demand for high-quality mountain bikes was probably Lapierre Cycles, located in Dijon, a family firm that, although originally founded in 1946, was able to predict the boom in MTB riding in the 1980s, sponsoring riders with their bikes from 1988 and dominating the market niche.
- 7 The PP65 pedal was designed in 1984. For more details on the innovative approach of Look and Time to cycling componentry and on the links between elite cycle sport and technological innovation, see a forthcoming article by Paul Benneworth and Hugh Dauncey, ‘“It’s all about the bike”: French Innovation policy and Cycle-sport’, currently in preparation.
- 8 The discussion in this section is partly based based on conversations with the manager of the Follis workshop, M. Jean-Claude Cholet.
- 9 *Une randonneuse*: a touring bike; *cadre de course*: racing frame.



- 10 The Follis mechanic Roger Billet won the Poly de Chanteloup in 1946, and also beat the record for climbing Mont Ventoux set by the professional racing star René Vietto. He became known as the 'Roi des cyclotouristes' (*L'Equipe*) and the 'Champion des cyclotouristes' (*Sport-Vu*).
- 11 After La Plagne in August 1983, it would seem that VTT in France went through a period of 'incubation' until essentially 1986, as the AFMB lobbied manufacturers (especially Peugeot, who through their presence in the US were more aware of MTBs than other French constructors), raised awareness by participating in cycle industry trade fairs and tried to convince public and para-public authorities such as the Sports Ministry, the FFC and various regional chambers of commerce of the importance of the new *sport-loisir*. In 1986 the spectacular *24 heures d'Auvergne* race raised awareness further, and combined with the break-through of sponsorship from the *Chambre économique de la Loire* for the Saint Etienne–Clermont race, heightened industry, federation and government attention on VTT.
- 12 FFCT officials reportedly described VTTs as 'vélos de cirque'.
- 13 The American sports-management group IMG-McCormack was instrumental in bring the sport to Europe, thereby furthering the careers of US stars such Mark Allen, who won the Nice race in 1982 and many others that year.
- 14 Antenne 2 produced a documentary on the 1982 race in Nice entitled 'Voyage au bout de la souffrance' which naturally stressed the 'extreme' nature of the sport. Rather than discouraging people from adopting the sport, this doubtless served as positive publicity. Antenne 2 also sponsored a 14-race round of triathlons during 1984 (the Antenne 2-Sportus-Coq Sportif-Wander-Jogging International series).
- 15 Seven members of the CCTF represented Conadet, two each for the swimming, cycling and athletics federations, and one representing CNOSF. Conadet was thus placed 'in charge'.
- 16 The now emblematic campaigns of the Larzac plateau in southern France (where protesters set up to farm on land earmarked by the Defence Ministry for a military base) or at Plogoff in Brittany (where demonstrations against a nuclear power station were brutally dispersed by riot police) set the tone for the development of French ecology in the 1970s and 1980s: groups of activists lobbying – sometimes violently – an indifferent state.
- 17 The Billie Jean King case in the US in the early 1980s was a prime example of this kind of gender intolerance. The French lesbian tennis player Amélie Mauresmo has in the 2000s attracted less unfavourable comment on her sexuality, perhaps partly because of French laws and customs regarding the private life of celebrities.
- 18 For the website of *La Meute*, see <http://www.lameute.fr> (accessed 18 March 2010).
- 19 In 1992 Longo won a court case against the FFC which had wanted to oblige her to use Look pedals and official supplier wheels for the Barcelona Olympic Games. She subsequently agreed to use the wheels, if not the pedals.
- 20 The terms can loosely be translated as 'trouble-maker', 'outlaw' and 'trouble-stirring female follower of Chirac'.
- 21 She holds a *Maîtrise de Gestion* and a *DESS in Droit économique du sport*.
- 22 In January 2011 she was promoted to the rank of Commander in the *Légion d'Honneur*. And in June 2011 she won her fourth French national time trial in a row (2008–11) at the age of 52.