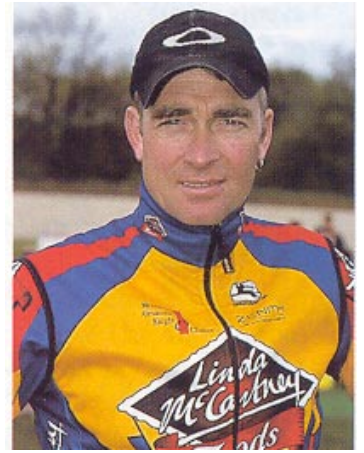
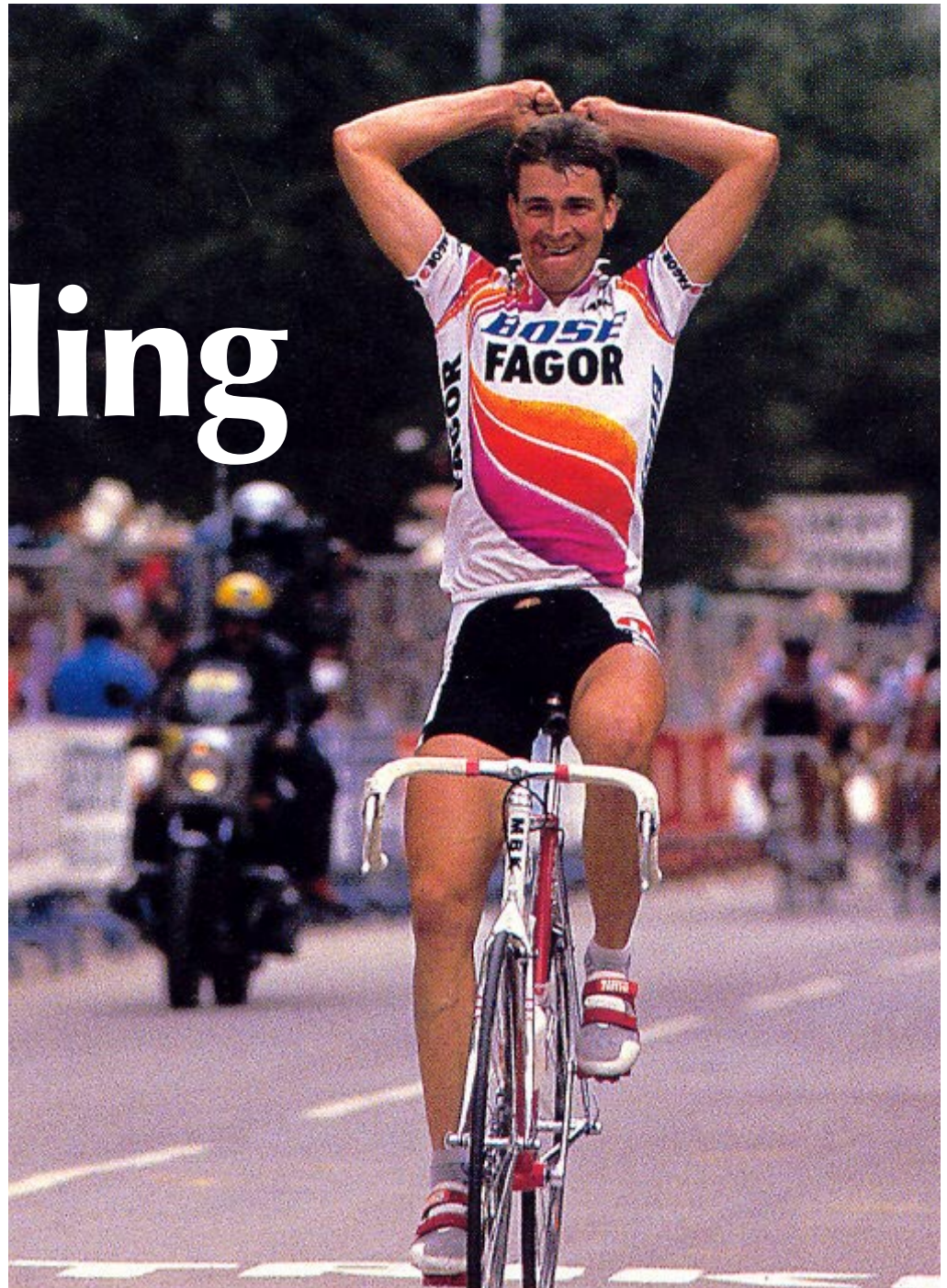


Association of British Cycling Coaches



# Sean Yates

on  
**Cycling**



## Sean Yates Talks

In November 1999 Sean Yates was the star guest at the ABCC's annual Coaches' Conference, Pedal Power. He was interviewed by ABCC Senior Coach Bob Hayward, and then answered questions. This booklet is a record of that interview.

Transcription, writing & design: Ramin Minovi

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*For 45 minutes before an audience of British cycling coaches Sean Yates answered questions put to him by ABCC Senior Coach Bob Hayward*



## Part 1: the Interview

# Sean Yates talks

*RH: When did you start?*

**SY:** I started quite late, in 1977, when I was 17. I'd been interested in bike riding, my father was interested in it a bit, and of course there wasn't much social life, we had nothing like computer games, no television at home, I always used to get out on my bike, with friends. We always ended up racing each other round the forest. It seemed like a natural progression for me to join the local club, and I was encouraged by my parents. I did practise sport before that, nothing serious, a bit of hockey at school, tennis, was in a football club. So cycling was my first strenuous activity, and I came to it relatively late. That first year I just did club tens on Wednesday evenings, and that was the start of my career. So yes, seventeen is late, but it didn't hinder me at the beginning ... or later on really.

*RH: You talked earlier about the importance of somebody's constitution ...*

**SY:** Obviously, to make it to the very top, by which I mean riding the classics and the Tour de France, you have to have a very strong constitution in order to support the workload. I was very lucky in that department because I was able to support the workload, and that's why I was able to progress so quickly, after coming to the sport relatively late. When I started quite serious training, I said to myself – because I was never involved with any coaches or anything – well, it's easy to be good, you've just got to go out there and train. Luckily I was in a position to do that, I just worked in the mornings, nine to twelve, I had plenty of time to train. I just went out and started hammering myself, and my performance went up in quite a steep curve. But part of that's due to my constitution. When I'm having this discussion I always quote my brother who was a much better athlete than me. He was good at tennis, football, running, you name it. But when he tried to rise to a higher level as a cyclist he could never support the workload. So I think that, if you want to make it to the very top, you've got to have a very strong constitution, which is inherited. I was lucky, I inherited my strong constitution from my mother.

*RH: I believe a difficulty you find with members of your team is that you can't determine whether they've been out training enough, or whether they're actually at the limit of their ability.*

**SY:** I've been managed by former riders who always seemed to harp on about the days when they went out and did six hours in the rain and were feeling great, and, you know, killing everyone, but they didn't ever seem to remember the days when they were suffering and had to pull out of a race and were miserable, so I was really trying to make sure that I wasn't make those mistakes. I do try to understand the rider. But I do feel that some of the riders don't train hard enough, and don't take the job seriously enough – and they've been given the chance of a lifetime, really. You've got fourteen different guys, and fourteen different ways of going about things, and to try and work out what each one is about is quite difficult. But I have to come to my own conclusions at the end of the season. It *is* difficult, but obviously you have to make decisions. The guys are really great, we've got on really well, but there's more to running a pro bike team than fourteen guys having a laugh.

*RH: How much of a gap do you reckon there is between our top riders, and where you'd like to see them being?*

**SY:** There is a big gap. There are some riders who I think will rise, and that's why we've kept on Matt Stephens, who I think has the biggest chance of riding like I'd want him to ride. Then you might have two other riders; one has a real strong constitution, and savvy on the road but is just not focused on riding a bike. Another might be 120% focused, but he just doesn't have the ability, can't ride in the bunch. My feeling is that if they're given a chance, that should be enough to motivate them, as long as you help them as much as you can.

*RH: So you're saying that the ability is probably there in the UK but it requires something else...*

**SY:** Yes. I think our guys here could make it with the right dedication and will to succeed.

**RH:** *Do you have any coaching within your current team?*

**SY:** No, not as such. The team is completely changed for next year, so I've not really got to grips with what each individual situation is, but 90% of pros do have some sort of adviser, coach, whatever you want to call it. There were some guys on the Performance Plan who had more like advisers; but there was no-one I knew apart from Julian Winn with the Welsh Federation, who had training plans drawn up for them, and so forth. So, no there weren't many guys with a structured approach, but then again when you're racing so much, most of the time in between races they were just sort of recovering. A lot of the work has to be done in the winter months, because that's the only time when you can train uninterrupted. I think a lot of guys think winter's the time to put your legs up.

**RH:** *We're coming into the winter now, this crucial time for all the riders. Things are starting to come almost full circle on the thinking here, the way you should ride in the winter, so it would be interesting to hear, when you were riding in the Tour de France years, how would you train from now on until early season?*

**SY:** When I was riding I always tried to keep going for as long as the racing programme would allow me to. About the middle of October I'd stop, and I would normally have two weeks off, and then start just building up, two hours a day, then three hours, and after about three weeks start throwing in a couple of long rides, and gradually build up to the beginning of January really. And then it would be the training camp...

**RH:** *Was that three hours every day?*

**SY:** I used to have days off. It was never three hours every day – it would be like three hours, two hours, four hours. I was never very scientific in my training, it was more a question of just getting out there and riding. 94 was one of my best years. I stayed in Belgium the whole winter, and then I went on my own to Tenerife at the beginning of January, and went out training with a lot of guys there, doing some hard miles. But also when I was in Belgium I did a couple of weeks of really hard

training in December – six hours every day for eight days, then a few days off, then another session, and that was one of my best years. When I was at the training camp, end of January, I was doing eight hour rides. That high mileage always was my thing.

**RH:** *Was that in company or by yourself?*

**SY:** By myself, apart from the training camp. Living down Sussex there was never anyone to train with, so I always trained on my own basically.

**RH:** *What sort of speed would you train at?*

**SY:** Not particularly fast – just basic miles. Now, looking back, with the knowledge I've acquired over the years, and also since I've stopped riding, I would have maybe approached it in a different manner, but for me it was easier for me to go out and do six hours than to go out and do two hours of intervals. I just got stuck in that sort of mode. Looking back, a lot of the time I think I was

overtrained, and when I look at how I can get by now, racing on the minimum amount of training...

**RH:** *and doing rather well...*

**SY:** ... and with all my years and background, I think I could have been more scientific in my approach. But basically in the winter our guys are just doing steady miles.

**RH:** *What about when you come towards the season. How do you ride the early races, trying to win, or tapering... how do you work that?*

**SY:** For our team this year, new team on the block, we've invested a lot of money so we need to make an impression. We've got some good boys on the squad. Our first race is the Tour Down Under, and I'm not going to be putting loads of pressure on our new signings. But at the same time I don't want them to be disgracing themselves, so we've got some of the younger guys who are coming through. One guy is riding his first six-day this week, so he's the type of guy that we'll push for the early races, get a bit of publicity, and hopefully some good results. Plus the fact that our first three races are Down Under, Langkawi and Rapport Toer. That's a long way from European cycling, which is where we want to make our impression, where all the organisers are looking. We've got 20 days' racing over there with hardly any pressure,

**I went out with £50, that was all I had, and I lived out there and came back in October, and we just lived on prime money.**

in good weather. Then when we come back to Europe that's when we've got to start. And our season basically finishes at the beginning of July when the Tour's on. We've got the second half of the season, of course, but the impression we make is going to be in that first three or four months.

**RH:** *So is your strategy to have people coming to form at different times?*

**SY:** Yes. Guys like Sciandri and Richard, they'll be coming on later, but other guys are going to be hungry and need to be able to make a mark straight away.

**RH:** *When did you yourself first go to France?*

**SY:** 1981. I started in 1977, in 78 I didn't really race, 1979 was when I started getting serious, I got on the track squad, was at the Track Worlds, so the next step on was the track Olympics. I'd been to France a couple of times to ride the Grand Prix des Nations, had good results, and made contact with the guys from the ACBB\*

They offered me a place in 81, so that's when I went out. I was lucky, my firm were behind me, they (the ACBB) offered me an apartment, I went out with £50, that was all I had, and I lived out there and came back in October, and we just lived on prime money. The prize money we didn't touch until the end of the year. The French Federation holds the prize money until the end of the season, but we could get an advance if we were running a bit short.

**RH:** *And then?*

**SY:** The ACBB had connections with Peugeot, so each year they liked to push a couple of guys into the pro scene and 81 was my turn, so in 82 I was professional, and that was the start of my career.

**RH:** *And your first Tour? Could you tell us a bit about it?*

**SY:** That was in 84, my third year as a pro. I had good form and a good start, fifth in the Prologue. In the team time-trial we were third or fourth. Alan Peiper had the Best Young Rider's jersey, so there were lead-outs for him to try to get him to hold it, or get the yellow jersey. I felt good in my first Tour, up until halfway. Then I had a big dip. I was very

tired. I was riding one stage and obviously you get tired towards the end of a stage, but this was a different thing entirely, the strength was just disappearing. It was inexplicable, something a manager would find very difficult to understand if it's not happening to yourself which is one of the reasons why when I turned to management I vowed to try not to be like the other one. This particular day I could feel the strength going away from my legs near the end of the stage, and the next day was 260 km in the Massif Central. From the start I was just like dead, hanging on. Up one little climb, I went off, got back on, got dropped again, got back on, minute hills, and after about 60 kms I got shelled. Paul Sherwen was also having a bad day, and we chased for 100 km, but luckily in the meantime Fons de Wolf had taken off, and the bunch just sat up and let him go, so he had 25 minutes lead, so we got back on. It was hot, and I was in hell, basically... On to the finishing circuit, I did get dropped, but I felt my strength coming back. It seems crazy to say it, but after 230 kms you feel your strength coming back when you're in

hell, but it was just a dip.

And then the next day I was flying. We went up some big cols. One was 15 km, not so steep but quite hard, and I felt like ten men, I was going up in the big ring, and Alan Peiper was in the first 30 or 40, and I sort of rode past on the outside, on the big ring, intentionally. And

yesterday I'd been 20 minutes down. And that did happen on a few occasions, that natural cycle, I guess.

**Eric Heiden was in the middle of an interview on an American channel and he just went, 'Excuse me' and threw up.**

**RH:** *What was the best Tour in your mind?*

**SY:** Probably 88, when I won the time-trial, that was the year when I was going strong, and I didn't suffer for one day really. In 89 I was going equally strong, and we all had food poisoning one day. That was a very bad day for me. Everyone else on the team was a bit dodgy. Eric Heiden, he's got the constitution of an ox and even he hit the deck that day. He was in the middle of an interview on an American channel and he just went, 'Excuse me' and threw up. I'd never been in that sort of situation in a mountain stage, just fighting for survival. And my parents were at l'Alpe d'Huez, and I knew I just had to keep going. The Croix de Fer is a long climb and it kicks up the last 10 km, with zig-zags. I looked up, and about three or four bends up was this huge gruppetto, and I thought, 'I've just got to catch that gruppetto'. And I caught them at the top. We hit the bottom of the Alpe and I'd got to time-trial to the top. I just killed myself. The illness

\*The Athletic Club Boulogne-Billancourt, a Paris suburb, produced many successful professionals.

had hit the other guys in the team later on, and I ended up second guy in the team. I remember crossing the finish line and collapsing on the floor, pouring water over my head. But the next day I was absolutely flying.

*RH: What about Paris-Roubaix?*

**SY:** Paris-Roubaix is a hard race. People said look at Andrea Tafi, he won Paris-Roubaix and he didn't do anything after that. But it's a race that if you're motivated for it, it makes a huge amount of difference. It's a race of truth, to a certain extent, there's a certain amount of luck, but there's no hiding. It's the only race I've ridden where I was motivated to do something for myself. When you're on song it's a good race.

*RH: Looking at what you're doing today, I think there's some lessons we can all learn; because you're absolutely flying even now, and you're obviously not doing these monster mileages that you used to do. What is it you're doing now?*

**SY:** Since I stopped my pro career and I just made up my mind to ride time-trials, I just thought I'd ride the turbo-trainer. I thought that would be the ideal preparation for doing tens and 25s, so literally I spent my first year on the turbo-trainer. I said 'I'll just do an hour a day'. I was doing loads of intervals and sprints, and I thought all this top end stuff would be good for me. And then I went to Mallorca to a two-week training camp, just doing lots of miles, and when I came back my power was up. So maybe it's not just doing the intensity that makes your power go up. And every time subsequently I've done a training camp with lots of long miles, my power's been up. It's quite obvious that you have to mix it. I've basically worked on the turbo for two years, more or less, and my structure would be: Sunday I'd race. Then if I felt good Sunday night I'd do a hard session – I always train in the evenings, eight, nine o'clock, and Monday I'd do a hard session. I'd move my training up to 1½ hours on those hard sessions, and cut down the intervals. So it's either 1½ hours at a high intensity or five minutes warm-up, ten minutes on, ten minutes off, that sort of thing, for 1½ hours. I've veered away from the really intense and made the intervals longer but less intense. I literally wouldn't touch my TT bike or get on the road from the finish of one TT to the start of the next. I'd go for three weeks without actually riding on the road. I did that for 1½ years

**My brother did half an hour every other day in plimsolls and in one month he got down to a 52-minute 25.**

up until the middle of last summer. Then I started going out on the road a bit in the evenings, and found it was just as good really, riding on the road, and my results were as good. I never train bigger than a 53/17, just concentrate on keeping the revs high and I always stay seated. If I have to change down to 42 x 23 I do, just to keep the cadence the same. You look at the two biggest and best time-triallists, Jan Ullrich and Indurain, the way they ride on the climbs, in the mountains, always maintaining a good cadence. And for that type of rider it's just the perfect training for time-trialling. To ride up a climb like l'Alpe d'Huez, seated, turning at 80 rpm or whatever, just requires so much power. And also that's what Armstrong's done this year. So that's what I do. This year I'm still going well but I've raced hardly at all. I've been doing a few more miles than I have done in previous years, more time but less intense, but I've found I've been going equally well. So it's a bit confusing really, all this evidence of how to go fast. But when I do train I train hard. I've also got a fixed wheel bike that I go out on a lot, and on that I do more like power work on 42/14, but I always stay seated. My brother decided to make a bit of a comeback after 10 years off the bike. He did half an hour every other day in plimsolls on 53/17 seated, uphill and down, and in one month he got down to a 52-minute 25. Obviously when you're getting below 50 minutes you've got to be producing a lot more power because the wind resistance comes up, but to do a 52 on the right day you don't have to be fit, you just have to have a bit of strength and know how to turn the gear. The main reason why I ride a bike is because I enjoy it. I love going out and every day I go out, rain wind or shine, really, because when I've done my thing I can be at peace with myself. I've done something, plus I enjoy it. That's the reason why I'm still riding my bike and still racing. It's my competitive streak.

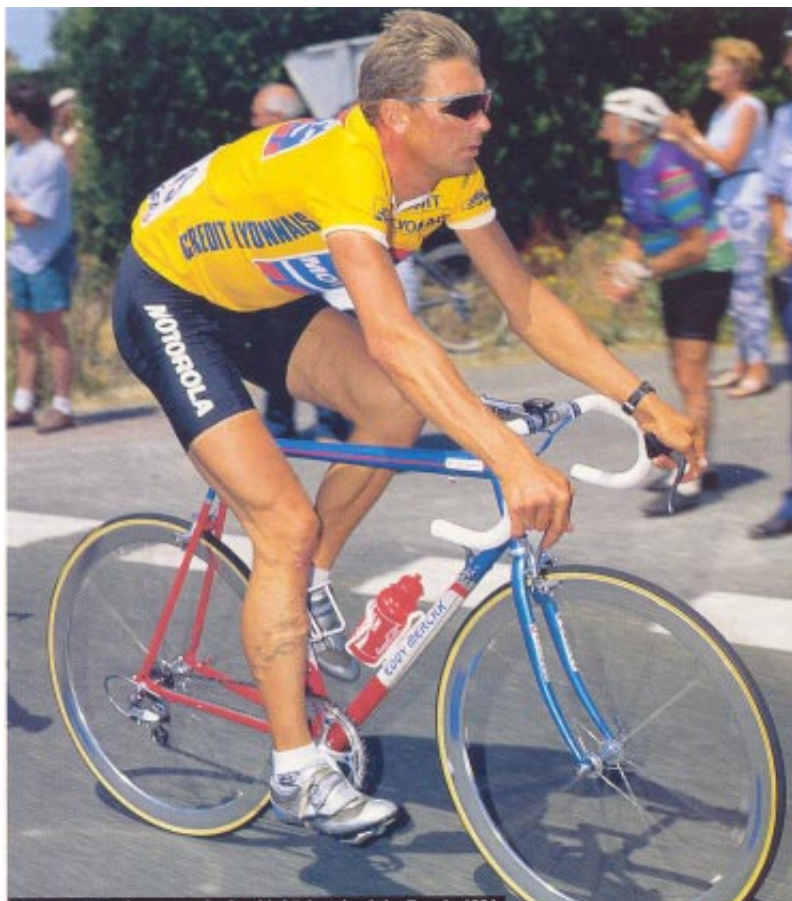
*RH: How come you could mix it with the best of them in the Bermuda Grand Prix, a four-day stage race? You ended up fourth in that, and that's not time-trialling. What had you done in the few weeks before that?*

**SY:** I guess it's because when you've ridden 15 years as a pro you build up a certain amount of knowledge and you've got to be psyched up for it. When I came to Bermuda I hadn't ridden a crit for six or eight years, but I was pumped up for it. I made sure I was in the right place at the right time and didn't have to make myself work too hard, and

that's half the battle. You've got to be pumped up and motivated to ride like you should do, and stay up there and make it easier for yourself. That's what I tell people time and time again: if you can hang on the back in the crosswinds you can sure as hell stay at the front because it's twice as easy at the front. It took me years as a pro to realise that. Often I'd say to myself, I've just got to get to the front *now* – because if I don't, in ten minutes time I'm going to be out the back and I'm going to be chasing for the next 50. And if I do get back on I won't have any energy, because I've been chasing, and I won't be any use to the team. That's one of the things that a lot of British riders have to work at, to do the job they're supposed to do. When I went out with the team to the Tour of Langkawi I didn't take the bike so I didn't train for two weeks, I did a bit of running and I went out a couple of times in plimsolls on Matt Illingworth's spare bike. And then we went to Benidorm for a two-week training camp, I was doing five to six hours training on the mountain bike, and I was dropping half the team. It's a bit frustrating. And my own riders down there just didn't want to train that hard. I get in more training when I'm away at a race. On the PruTour I was getting up at four-thirty and doing 2½ or hours before breakfast.

**RH: What sort of speed are we talking about here? I mean, could you carry on a conversation like this, or would it be just gasping out the odd word or phrase?**

**SY:** No, I wouldn't be able to talk as normal. I did an experiment the other day, went out for a one-hour training ride over lumpy ground and I tried to keep my cadence between 80 and 100, and I was amazed at how hard it was to keep your cadence above 80 – perhaps because I was doing about 40 km an hour on that particular ride. I didn't really know until I got a speedo last year, and found out I'm doing 22 to 23 mph, not really very fast, trying to maintain a cadence between 80 and 100 rpm, changing down on to the 42 to keep the revs up. You don't have to use enormous gears to go fast, and I've always been a big gear man. But when I started time-trialling the middle of last year and I first got my speedometer I found that each time I changed up my speed would drop. You look at Lance Armstrong this year in the Tour, he was revving at over 100, maybe even 110. I've changed my way of doing things. 🚲



*'When you've done it, you feel a sense of achievement': in 1994 Sean became the fourth Briton to wear the Yellow Jersey in the Tour de France.*

*After the interval Sean answered questions from the audience. Since then, of course, the Linda McCarney team has ceased to exist, but what Sean has to say remains up-to-date and relevant to racing in general.*

# Sean Yates talks back

## **Q: What do you think/feel about Lance Armstrong?**

I think it's great for sport and it shows what an athlete he is – we know he's a great natural talent, and also he had a lot of determination; but that was nothing compared with his determination in coming back after his illness. He wasn't doing it for financial reasons – he wasn't getting paid a lot and he had money in the bank, so obviously he was doing it because his life is cycling.

## **Q: Do our riders lack bottle, initiative or what?**

I look at myself now, I'm almost forty, been a pro for 15 years. 90% of the guys who've done what I've done say, Sod it, and start smoking & drinking. But I still feel I'm a bike rider, the whole time. When I look at the team I had this year I still feel I'm more serious than them, the way I go about things: I go to bed earlier, eat more healthily. To me it's a matter of what you want. I think it's education. England is not a cycling nation: it doesn't have the father to son kind of thing like you have in Belgium, where Dad says, 'When I was a boy, I did it like this', and it becomes a way of life. In England you don't have that. On the PruTour, for example, the whole team got wellied out, and whatever day it was, and then after dinner they're in the lounge having a beer sort of thing. There's no scientific evidence that having one beer down the lounge is going to do you one blind bit of harm, but I've never done that. The Americans, like Davis Phinney, when they came over, they used to call the life of a European cyclist the life of a 'Euro-dog'. You have your dinner, go up to your bed, sit with your legs up, and watch bloody French TV. I came along with no knowledge, straight into the European way. I transformed into a Euro-dog, I guess. Our guys were in the situation this year, the opportunity of making it, everything done for them. They'd been so used to not getting paid, just doing it as a hobby, 90% of them were used to working all day, it's not in their upbringing. I don't think it's a question of not being hard enough, there are guys who'll kill themselves for the team, but it takes a lot for them to get into that, they have to be forced into the situation. You might

have a guy, if he goes to bed later than 11 because, say, he's had to travel, he's 'Oh, I can't race tomorrow, I went to bed at half eleven', you know? A big part of the battle is you have to adapt. You've got to cope with the jet-lag, you've got to race the day after Milan-San Remo. The first year I finished the Tour de France, next day I had to be in Holland and I did 30 criteriums in a row. If you go through it, it makes you into a much tougher type of bike rider.

## **Q: You've now got a UK Development squad linked to the Linda McCartney team...**

It'll be made up of home-based riders. I'm employed by the team. The guy who runs the team, Julian Clark, is very ambitious, and he wants to go where cycling's at, and that's the Continent. That's why we've moved abroad, there's no point doing it half-heartedly if you want to make a success of things. This year was a sort of stepping stone, you might say, and we realised that to carry on in the same way with perhaps slightly better riders would be pointless. But now we want to make a real impression on the world cycling scene, so that's why we moved up a gear and got much bigger riders. At the same time we want to be seen to be doing something good for cycling in the UK, and rather than just be paying home pros X amount of money – which for them is easy money. We want to be seen to be putting something back into cycling, give some youngster the opportunity to have the good backing, and maybe one day he'll make it as a top-flight pro. They're going to have the same bikes, the same equipment, as our team. It'll be linked up with the Welsh Federation where they've got sports scientists and facilities for testing – and they're going to have that type of back-up. They're going to have WCU invites to continental races, so they can get to travel abroad, and get the taste of what it's like out on the continent. At the same time we've got to have them doing well in the UK before we think of going out – there's no point unless they're doing well over here. So our first concern is that they gel as a team and work as a team with the right advice, go to the Premier Calendars, ride as a unit and perform well. Then they can go on to race abroad. Looking after them will be Shane (Sutton), Keith Lambert, and

probably Chris Lillywhite who's going to be driving the car. People will be alternating between that programme and mine, and we're going to be pretty busy this year, including a lot of days away from home. When you're away, obviously there's a limited amount of work you can do regarding races and what have you, so ...

**Q: Why don't our riders attack? You see some who will attack and attack. But so many of them don't. Is it that they feel intimidated?**

I think they're intimidated – they think that if they do attack they'll get caught later and dropped. Guys like Matt have got the ability to attack and then stay with a group that comes up to them, because he's got a lot of talent. He's a good bike rider and he rides like a pro should do. If you're referring to some of the English guys in the PruTour – one of the only times they get to compete against top-flight pros – the reason they don't attack is because they can't. There's no point in attacking if you're going to get caught two km up the road. You could also say there's no point in just sitting there doing nothing. They'd rather all finish in the bunch with the rest of

the guys, so they're not seen to be slacking, than work 120% for the team. Which is not the right approach, because you want to see them doing the job they're supposed to do, that they're paid for, and then get dropped. Or go out and get some publicity, and then I

don't care if they get dropped. There *are* guys who do suffer when they're put in a situation, but they don't like getting themselves in that situation by attacking and then a group comes up to them. They don't like to be putting themselves on the line, and that happened a few times in the PruTour this year. It's the biggest race of the year for us, but they're not aggressive, not riding heads up enough. They're more content with just following and not getting dropped, than really participating in the race. My attitude is, if they don't do what they're told ten times, then they won't be on the team next year. It's easier said than done, to attack when you're suffering, but there's no point in being there and not participating in the race.

**Q: Your own racing plans for next year?**

I want to try to ride the track championships, do the Masters, that's about it really. But I intend to keep riding as much as I can. I do have this competitive streak in me and I think, Oh that'd be a good idea, to ride this TT, and then I'm driving up the A1 and I think, I must be mad, it's five in the morning, I've already been out on the road for two

hours. But then when you've done it you feel a sense of achievement, but those early morning starts are quite tough. I prefer almost to ride club tens in the evenings. On the other hand, the beauty of riding a TT in the morning is that you're home for ten o'clock, and the day's still there. Obviously if I'm away 120 days a year and I tell my wife I'm going to start racing again whenever I've got a break, then ... I'd have to be quite diplomatic! And then my wife's expecting another child, so there'll be three of them. But I'm definitely going to do the national track championships and the World's Masters which is also at Manchester.

**Q: You haven't suggested to Peter Keen that you might be on the WCPP? We need you...**

I did make a sort of passing joke, but obviously I'm not in a situation to train. If I didn't have this job I'd love to be on the track squad, I know that with the right training I can be as good as any of those guys, which is slightly disconcerting, but then again, you know, Zoetemelk won the World Pro Championship when he was 40 (*actually 38 Ed.*). I love the track and always have done.

**They'd rather all finish in the bunch with the rest ... which is not the right approach ... not doing the job they're paid for.**

**Q: Do you train with a heart-rate monitor?**

I've never really trained with an HRM, because they didn't come along until quite late, and anyway I think that I was always in a state of semi-fatigue, an overtrained state. And it psyched me

out, when I was suffering like a dog and I looked down and my pulse rate was only 148 or something. I used it when I was living in Nice. I'd climb some hills, and I'd look at the monitor, if it was high, then I knew I was fresh. But if I was trying, and it was 128, I knew I was tired and there was no point in forcing it. I have quite a low threshold, and it can vary so much, I ride more on feel. I did a KingCycle test at the NEC the other day, and I got my heart rate up to 178, the highest I've seen for about ten years. And when I've been out riding recently, riding as hard as I can, and it's been 150, that's 30 beats difference. It's very difficult to train at your threshold when you've got such a big difference in numbers.

**Q: Other training?**

I do a lot of squatting, just on free weights, done it for about two years now. I started off a couple of years ago with small weights, 30 kg of weights plus the bar. It's amazing how quickly you progress: within a couple of months I was using 150 plus the bar. Now I just use 100 kg and a lot of reps. Some nights I'll do 3 sets of 20, 3 of 30, 3 of 40 and 3 of

50, and that's about 40 minutes, just squatting. Four or five times a week. I like going out in the garage for a bit of peace. One of the reasons why I started was because Ferrari started doing it, when things started getting so fast, I think his line of thinking was that aerobically you can only produce a certain amount of power, then you become more reliant on muscle strength, so he had all his guys doing squats. Whether it had much effect on my performance on the road is open to debate. I always put my heel on a block of wood, like a plank. (demonstrates). You can certainly feel it afterwards. You lose it quickly, too, until you get back into the swing of it.

**Q: Do you take dietary supplements?**

It's such a big scene. I used once in a while to take vitamins, other times I'd go for months without taking any. The main thing I took was iron. There's so many supplements out there, if you took everything that's supposed to be good for you, you'd have a larder full of tablets. It's ridiculous, really, you only have to go to a health store and see. I think it's over-rated as far as performance enhancement goes. It's obvious that all these companies are making loads of money out of it, and it's not necessarily for the benefit of the consumers. It's for the benefit of the makers, not the consumers. I was a vegetarian until I was 20. If you suddenly start feeling tired, I don't automatically start thinking, I must be lacking this or that, but if you've been brought up from a very young age eating meat, then to suddenly switch to a vegetarian diet might not be advisable. I'm not a specialist in this field. If you've been a vegetarian since you were born I don't think there's any problem at all. I was a vegetarian until I was 20, then ate meat for 16 years, but since the start of this year I haven't touched it once. People say, Don't you miss the protein? But there's protein in every single food substance.

**Q: Thoughts on Peter Keen and the WCPP?**

I don't follow it that closely. It may not do cycling as a whole much good, but as far as I can see he's treating it as a business because he has to get results to secure funding, without it he's out of a job. So he's concentrating on a small group of people and trying to get the best out of them.

**Q: What about taking them out to Australia?**

I don't know why Australia, when it would have been just as comfortable in Southern Spain, much closer to home, cheaper. If he wants them to

succeed he has to put them in an environment that's friendly to cycling, and they know they're there for a reason, they're there for one thing, and that's riding the bike. He's trying to run it, I think, as a professional sponsor would run a pro bike team: give them all the aid they can, put them in the right location for training, take them to camps, then they've got no excuses – if they don't come up with the results it's because they're not good enough. I understand they were doing some crazy mileage down there. I guess his thinking is, if they've got it then they're going to show it, if they haven't then they'll fall by the wayside. The guys were saying they had a team out in Malaysia for the Tour of Langkawi, which was a pretty easy race I think, but all those guys came out of that, they were shattered and never to be seen again. I don't understand why, but I think he tried to put them in a situation where they're getting all the help they can, giving them a high workload and seeing whether they can take it or not. If they can take it, then they'll succeed. I think that's the principle behind it. Certainly the girls who went out there were doing 100 and 200 km rides – a bit of a jump

from riding down to the local café and they'll probably spend the rest of the year recovering from it, so perhaps it should have been more of a gradual introduction to serious bike riding.

**I don't know why Australia: it would have been just as comfortable in Southern Spain, closer to home – cheaper...**

**Q: Because your introduction to that level was over several years, wasn't it?**

Yes. But then people have these different approaches. Look at the East Germans, that Charlie Walsh, he applied the East German way of thinking to the Australians, the likes of Stuart O'Grady and the team pursuit squad. They were doing 40,000 km a year, they were going up to Mexico, doing 300 km rides, time-trials up these mountains having to sit down all the way on the 53/12, then having to do 160 rpm on the little gears, what the Russians and the East Germans used to do. And they had great results, and now they're tailing off, maybe because they haven't now got the calibre of rider who can support that type of workload. Obviously if you can support that type of workload you're going to be good in one area or another. So I think that's probably Keen's type of thinking. I know there are some guys with some funny ideas out there. We had a guy on our team this year, Heiko Szonn, who was trained by Peter Becker and he came to the training camp. He'd been riding all winter, building up to something like 38 hours a week, he came to the camp and did two weeks of 48 hours training each week, going



*'...and I think, 'I must be mad': Sean in the North Road Hardriders 25, March 2001*

up all the climbs in 53 x 12 sitting down, hands on the bottoms. That was apparently Peter Becker's method, and that's how Ullrich trains, a lot of power work. There's so much conflicting evidence, it's a bit hit and miss. One programme will suit one guy more than another. It's horses for courses. You can never say, 'This is the way to go, it's going to get results', because there's a lot of ways you can go and still get results. Going back to Szonn – he was training for the team pursuit – they were second in Manchester, I think, did a 4.02. And when I said, 'Well, how do you get leg speed?' They said, 'You just go on the track a few weeks before and start work on their leg speed'. then you look at Ullrich – when he time-trials he's always pedalling at high cadence, but when he's training he's riding these huge gears. If you watched the championships, on the final two laps when Ullrich

was at the front, he was riding with his hands on the bottoms on this huge gear, exactly the type of training they do, all power work, but there's a link between power work at low rpm and power that you can produce at high rpm.

*Q: What would you say is the big difference between the Tour scene and the top amateur scene? Is it average speed, is it the extra fitness, or is it the team discipline?*

The biggest difference is the power over the long distances, especially in the latter parts of races. You only get that by competing over a long period of time and adapting to those situations. When I went from England to France I thought there'd be a big gap between the amateurs here and the amateurs there, but there was hardly any gap. So I thought it would be similar when I went to pro racing, but the gap was just huge, because of the fact that these guys are riding races like the Tour de France, all the big Tours, all these races of 270 kms. By putting yourself through those events you become so much stronger. Look at Boardman, when he suffered through the Tour that year. It just brings you on in the long term. Somebody who's ridden the Tour will always have something more than somebody who hasn't, in their make-up as a bike rider. You only have to look at the World RR Champs, the amateurs are going up the climbs on the small ring, and the pros are doing another 100 kms and they're going up on the big ring. That's the power and stamina that comes from riding at a high level.

*Q: I noticed in 1982 that after 125 miles the pros hadn't gone any faster than the amateurs. Then the next three hours were ridden at 28 mph.*

It took me five years even to finish Paris – Roubaix, three or four years just to finish a classic. You've got to have the constitution to support the workload over the three-week period, and it takes a long, long time. 🚴

## The Association of British Cycling Coaches

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*Doing the job he's paid for: Ghent – Wevelgem, 1989, in which Sean finished second.*



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