



SKY'S THE LIMIT

BRITISH CYCLING'S QUEST TO CONQUER
THE TOUR DE FRANCE

RICHARD MOORE

SKY'S THE LIMIT

BRITISH CYCLING'S QUEST TO CONQUER
THE TOUR DE FRANCE

RICHARD MOORE



HarperSport

An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers

First published in 2011 by
HarperSport
an imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers
77–85 Fulham Palace Road,
Hammersmith, London W6 8JB

www.harpercollins.co.uk

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Text © Richard Moore 2011

Plate section images © Getty Images with the following exceptions:
p1 (middle and bottom) © Team Sky; p2 (middle) © Graham Watson;
p3, 7 (top) © Scott Mitchell; p6 (top left and top right) © AFP/Getty Images

Richard Moore asserts the moral right to be
identified as the author of this work

A catalogue record of this book is
available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-00-734183-2

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be
reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted,
in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical,
photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior
written permission of the publishers.



Mixed Sources

Product group from well-managed
forests and other controlled sources
www.fsc.org Cert no. SW-COC-001806
© 1996 Forest Stewardship Council

FSC is a non-profit international organisation established to promote the
responsible management of the world's forests. Products carrying the FSC
label are independently certified to assure customers that they come
from forests that are managed to meet the social, economic and
ecological needs of present and future generations.

Find out more about HarperCollins and the environment at
www.harpercollins.co.uk/green

SKY'S THE LIMIT

CONTENTS

<i>Prologue</i>	The Start of the Journey	1
Chapter 1	Critical Mass	13
Chapter 2	The Academy	32
Chapter 3	Goodbye Cav, Hello Wiggo?	57
Chapter 4	The Best Sports Team in the World	87
Chapter 5	Unveiling the Wig	108
Chapter 6	A Tsunami of Excitement	119
Chapter 7	Taking on the Masters	134
Chapter 8	Pissgate	153
Chapter 9	The Classics	177
Chapter 10	The Recce	204
Chapter 11	It's All About (the) Brad	230
Chapter 12	It's Not About the Bus	255
Chapter 13	So Far from the Sky	276
	<i>Acknowledgements</i>	303
	<i>Index</i>	307

PROLOGUE

THE START OF THE JOURNEY

'They'll use technology that we're all going to look at and go, "Woah, I never saw that before."'

Lance Armstrong

Rymill Park, Adelaide, 17 January 2010

It's a sultry hot summer's evening in downtown Adelaide, and, at the city's Rymill Park, a large crowd begins to gather. Families line a cordoned-off rectangular 1km race circuit, around the perimeter of the park, while the balconies of pubs fill up with young people drinking beer out of plastic cups.

The road cycling season used to start six weeks later in an icily cold port on the Mediterranean, with the riders wrapped in many more layers than there were spectators. But the sport has changed in the last decade: it has gone global. And no event demonstrates that to the same extent as the season-opener: the Tour Down Under.

This year, though, there is another harbinger of change. Possibly. Wearing a neatly pressed short-sleeved white shirt, long black shorts and trainers, rubbing sun cream into his shaved head as he paces anxiously among the team cars parked in the pits area, is a man who bears more than a passing resemblance to a British tourist. It's Dave Brailsford.

In his native Britain, Brailsford has gained a reputation as a sporting guru. Since 2004 he has been at the helm of the British Cycling team, which, at the Beijing Games in 2008, he led to the most dominant Olympic performance ever seen by a single team. But that was in *track* cycling, not road cycling. Road cycling – continental style – is a whole new world, not just for Brailsford but for Britain, a country that has always been on the periphery of the sport's European heartland.

There have been British professional teams in the past. But they have been, without exception, doomed enterprises, Icarus-like in their pursuit of an apparently impossible dream. The higher they flew – to the Tour de France, as one particularly ill-fated squad did in 1987 – the further and harder they fell. And the more, of course, they were burned in the process. In fact, it seems oddly fitting that after more than a century of looking in on the sport with only passing interest, and limited understanding, Adelaide in Australia, on the other side of the world, marks Brailsford and his new British team's bold entry into the world of continental professional cycling.

Bold is the apposite word. Everything about the new team, Team Sky – from their clothing, to their cars, to the brash and glitzy team launch in London just days earlier – screams boldness and ambition. They don't just want to *enter* the world of professional road cycling. They aspire to stand apart; to be different. And by being different, and successful, they aspire to change it, almost as the team's sponsor, British Sky Broadcasting, has changed the landscape of English football over the past two decades; almost as Brailsford and his team 'changed' track cycling, not merely moving the goalposts, but locating them in a different dimension.

Team Sky is Brailsford's creation, along with his head coach and right-hand man, Shane Sutton. Sutton, a wiry, rugged, edgy, fidgety Australian, is the joker to Brailsford's – with his background in business and his MBA – straight man. They are

as much a double act as Brian Clough and Peter Taylor, the legendary football management team. And similarly lost without each other. Here in Adelaide, an hour before the first race of the season, and the first of Team Sky's existence, Sutton is missing. Brailsford keeps checking his phone and finally it beeps. 'The eagle has landed,' reads the text message. Sutton's delayed flight from Perth has arrived. Brailsford looks relieved. 'Well, Shane needs to be here for this,' he says.

Sutton arrives. Has he brought champagne, ready to toast the occasion? 'Nah, none of that bullshit,' he replies testily. He is wearing the same team-issue outfit as Brailsford; but if Brailsford looks like a businessman on holiday, Sutton, in his white shirt and long black shorts, has the mischievous, scheming air of a naughty schoolboy. Brailsford reaches into the giant coolbox parked in the shadow of the team car and pulls out a couple of cans of Diet Coke, tossing one at Sutton. They open their cans, take a swig, and wait for the action, which is just minutes away.

Brailsford has hurried back to Rymill Park from the team's hotel, the Adelaide Hilton, where he gave the seven Team Sky riders – Greg Henderson of New Zealand, Mat Hayman and Chris Sutton of Australia, Russell Downing, Chris Froome and Ben Swift of Britain, Davide Viganò of Italy – a pep-talk. Earlier, the riders had been presented on stage by the TV commentators, Phil Liggett and Paul Sherwen. 'I never thought I'd see the day we'd have a British team in the ProTour,' said Sherwen. The ProTour is cycling's premier league of major events.

Though all experienced professionals, most of whom have competed for big teams, the seven Team Sky recruits find themselves riven with nerves as they prepare for their debut. The dead time between the presentation of the teams in the middle of Rymill Park and the start of the race acts as a black hole into which spill fears, doubts and anxieties. 'We were all

nervous, just sitting around, waiting,' Mat Hayman will recall later. 'Pulling on the new kit, being given this opportunity to be part of this new team ... We all know what's gone into this team: more than a year's work, so much thought and organisation. We're excited about it, too, because we've all bought into what Dave and Shane and Scott [Sunderland, the senior sports director] are trying to do. And we all said that it had been a while since everyone had been so nervous about lining up.'

Just before they left the hotel, to pedal the ten minutes to Rymill Park, Brailsford addressed them. 'This is a proud moment for me,' he said. 'And it's a unique occasion. We're only going to make our debut once. This is it, lads. It's a privilege. Enjoy it.'

Brailsford had been in Adelaide for 48 hours ahead of the big kick-off, with Sunday evening's circuit race followed, two days later, by the six-day Tour Down Under. He had checked into the Hilton late on Friday evening and then wandered into the hotel lobby. 'I'm a worrier,' he said. 'I always worry. I'm always wondering, what if we'd done this, or that. I'm sure that'll never change, but I'm confident that we've done everything we could to prepare. It's a huge moment. I'm excited.' But he sought to add a note of caution. 'You can't go from having a group of individuals come together in Manchester to an elite team in six weeks,' Brailsford pointed out. 'It's a process.'

Despite the late hour, Brailsford drank a coffee, then another. And he kept talking, stopping only to yell at Matt White, the director of a rival team, Garmin-Transitions, as White walked through the lobby. 'Hey, Whitey!' he yelled, though White didn't appear to hear him. 'Whitey!'

Brailsford seemed out of his comfort zone, which, for several years, has been the centre of a velodrome, surveying his riders as they circle the boards of the track, talking to his

coaches, in conference – arms folded – with Shane Sutton. With Team Sky, Brailsford's job title is team principal, which seems a bit vague (and, again, *different*), other than in one important respect: he's the man with overall responsibility. But on the ground, during races, the sports directors will call the shots. Here in Adelaide the man in that role is one of the team's four sports directors, Sean Yates, an experienced British ex-professional; indeed, a former stage winner and wearer of the yellow jersey in the Tour de France. Yates has been overseeing the team's training all week in Adelaide.

It is clear that Brailsford, having just arrived, isn't quite sure yet of his role. This is not his world; not yet. He wants to focus, however, on the bigger picture; on the many races in the early part of the season, and the spring Classics, all leading up to Team Sky's major target, the Tour de France, where they will be aiming to support their leader and homegrown talisman, Bradley Wiggins, in his bid for a place on the podium in Paris.

'People keep asking, "What would be a good race for us here, or what would make a good season?"' says Brailsford. 'The important thing is to try and not underperform. We're trying to create an environment in which the riders can perform to the very best of their ability. So if they underperform, we're doing something wrong.'

In Rymill Park the first-day-of-term feeling means an intoxicating sense of excitement combined with nervous anticipation; of new teams and new outfits; of glistening new bikes; of gleaming legs, unblemished by the scars and road rash that will disfigure them in the weeks and months to follow; of excitable Australian fans, who in previous years have only been able to watch the great European stars of the sport on television, and at night. Everything is shiny and new, except for

38-year-old Lance Armstrong, leading his new RadioShack team into the second year of his comeback.

In the pits, immediately after the first bend of the 1.1km circuit, the team cars are lined up, side by side, with the Team Sky vehicle – a Skoda, supplied by the sponsor, rather than their usual Jaguar – flanked by Française des Jeux and Astana, then Garmin-Transitions and HTC-Columbia. Brailsford and Sutton slap their riders on the backs and whisper encouraging words as they leave the shaded area behind the car and pedal to the start.

‘We’ve got a game plan,’ says Brailsford as he and Sutton perch on the bonnet of the car. Planning to the *n*th degree is what Brailsford is most famous for. But he and Sutton look apprehensive and on edge as they await the countdown and the firing of the gun.

In contrast is Bob Stapleton. As the owner of the rival HTC-Columbia team, Stapleton’s position is similar to Brailsford’s. Stapleton is the man in charge, but he has always appeared relaxed in that role. Typically, he can be found hovering around the fringes of his team in the mornings, chatting easily to journalists. Like Brailsford, Stapleton tends to be viewed as something of an outsider in a sport which has a reputation for being resistant to, and suspicious of, outsiders. He was a millionaire businessman in his native California before being parachuted in to clean up and manage one of the world’s top teams in 2006. But since then he seems to have overcome any suspicion or hostility. His manner is amiable and open: that must help. But it helps even more that his team, HTC-Columbia, is successful, and wins more races than any other.

Now, as the first race of the 2010 season gets underway, Stapleton wanders away from his own team car and strolls towards Brailsford and Sutton. But he doesn’t quite make it that far, stopping and sitting on the bonnet of the Astana team

car, whose staff, in animated conversation, are sitting on the tailgate, facing away from the action. (Such apparent disinterest among people working at this level of the sport can be fairly typical, if slightly unusual at the first race of the season. It suggests a certain complacency in some teams, which Brailsford has already identified as an opportunity.)

In his Columbia clothing – gentle beige and pastel turquoise – Stapleton, as he smiles and asks, ‘Mind if I join you guys?’, and settles on the bonnet of the Astana car to watch the action unfold, appears as laidback as a millionaire Californian cycling enthusiast who has been able to indulge his passion for cycling by running his own team. Which he is. His sports director, Allan Peiper, cuts a less relaxed figure by the HTC car, an earpiece and microphone connecting him to his riders, and making him look like a bouncer in a rowdy football pub. Sutton and Brailsford are sitting on the bonnet of the Team Sky car, with Sean Yates in close attendance. But Yates is not linked up by radio to his riders. ‘Our boys know what they’re doing,’ says Sutton.

What they appear to be doing, in the early part of the race, is remaining as invisible as possible. Attacks are launched – the young Australian Jack Bobridge is particularly aggressive – and brought back by a peloton that seems to be quickly into the speed, and rhythm, of racing. But at half-distance a break goes clear and stays clear. It includes Lance Armstrong. ‘He’s a guy with a lot going on this year,’ observes Stapleton cryptically (though also presciently).

Armstrong is joined by four other riders, and they work well as a quartet, building a lead that stretches to almost a minute over the peloton. Still Team Sky, in their distinctive, predominantly black skinsuits, are anonymous, hiding somewhere in the middle of the pack. Brailsford and Sutton remain perched on the bonnet of the car, apparently content that the plan is being followed, though there’s a moment of panic

when Ben Swift appears after the bunch has passed, the spokes having been ripped out of his rear wheel by a stray piece of wire. The young British rider is given a spare bike, pushed back on to the course, and quickly rejoins the bunch.

While Brailsford and Sutton focus on the race, Stapleton watches with what appears to be amused detachment. He wonders aloud whether, without ProTour status, this circuit race in central Adelaide – really only a curtain-raiser to the main event, the Tour Down Under – even *counts* as the first race of the season.

‘If we win, it is the first race of the season,’ decides Stapleton, with a twinkle in his eye, after giving it some thought. ‘If we don’t, it doesn’t matter.’

The Armstrong break is allowed to dangle out in front long enough for the crowd to start to believe that the American might win. But with four laps to go Stapleton’s HTC squad hits the front, a blur of dazzling white and yellow leading the peloton as they fly past the pits area, travelling noticeably, and exhilaratingly, faster.

‘Oh yeah, now we go,’ says Stapleton. Shadowing Stapleton’s team, though, are five Team Sky riders, packed equally tightly together. And shadowing is the word: in their dark colours they look sinister, menacing.

On the next lap HTC still lead, Sky still follow. But the next time, with two to go, the speed has gone up again, and the HTC ‘train’ of riders has been displaced from the front: now it’s Sky who pack the first six places, riding in close formation, with Greg Henderson, their designated sprinter, the sixth man. ‘That’s all part of the plan,’ says Stapleton with a chuckle.

True enough: HTC surge again, swamping Sky. And in previous seasons that would have been it: game over. But Mat Hayman leads his men around HTC and back to the front; then he leads the peloton in a long, narrow line for a full lap. Once Hayman has swung off, HTC draw breath and go again,

but Sky have the momentum now, and they're able to strike back. On the final lap, the two teams' trains are virtually head to head – they resemble two rowing crews, as separate and self-contained entities – until the final corner, when HTC's sprinter, André Greipel, commits a fatal error: he allows a tiny gap to open between his front wheel and the rear wheel of his final lead-out man, Matt Goss. It is a momentary lapse in concentration, or loss of bottle by the German, but the margins are tiny at this stage of the race, and there isn't time for Greipel to recover. Henderson has been sitting at the back of the Sky 'train', watching his handlebar-mounted computer read 73kph ('I thought, "Holy shit! I've never been in such a fast lead-out train"'), and now, as they enter the finishing straight, Henderson's lead-out man, Chris Sutton, dives into the gap created by Greipel's hesitation. And as Goss begins to sprint, Sutton and Henderson strike.

On the final lap Brailsford and Sutton leapt from the bonnet of the car as though the engine had been turned on. They sprinted to the first corner, where a big screen had been set up, and they watched as Henderson and Sutton sprinted for all they were worth up the finishing straight, passing Goss, and both having time, just before the line, to look round and sit up, their hands in the air, to celebrate a fairly astonishing one-two.

Brailsford and Sutton punch the air and embrace each other, before Brailsford disappears into a huddle of journalists. But Stapleton appears and stretches over to shake hands. 'You guys can see,' says Stapleton, 'I was the first to congratulate him. Congratulations, Dave, that was terrific.'

Even the languid, laidback Sean Yates is overjoyed. He high-fives the riders as they return to the car. 'I think other teams will look at that and think, they've just rocked up, put six guys in a line, they looked fucking mean, and they won the race,' says Yates.

'Textbook,' says Sutton. 'But I've never seen Dave so stressed. With a lap to go I gave him my stress ball. He was pumping it like nobody's business. Look, I'm here because Dave wanted me to fly over and be here. We shook hands at the start of this race, and said this is the start of the journey, but this is about other people's expertise. They've done the hard yards. But being part of this,' adds Sutton as he turns to embrace his nephew, the second-placed Chris, 'is absolutely fantastic.'

Brailsford and Sutton also know the value of a good start to any campaign. They think back to Beijing, to day two of the Olympics, when Nicole Cooke won a gold medal in the women's road race. It was a performance that galvanised the track team, inspired them and injected momentum, before they themselves went out and won seven gold medals. But what is most encouraging about the one-two in Rymill Park – for all that it is *only* a criterium; for all that it is only the *hors d'œuvre* to the Tour Down Under – is that it involved the execution of a plan; and that, in taking on HTC-Columbia in setting up a bunch sprint, they had beaten the world's best exponents of this particular art.

It was encouraging. But Brailsford was more than encouraged; he was buzzing. Already aware that there had been some sniping, and lots of scepticism over his stated plans and ambitions, not least his intention to do things *differently*, he now hits back: 'Some people seem to think we ride round in circles [in velodromes] and don't know what we're doing, but we know what lead-outs are, and we know what sprinting is about from the track.'

'Some people are saying this team's all about marketing, flash and razzmatazz, and all the rest of it,' he continues. 'But we'd talked that finish through. That's what we do. The race was predictable. Not the win, but the pattern the race would follow – a break going, and being brought back at the end. We

knew what was going to happen, and that it'd come down to the last couple of laps. So you plan for that. You have to have a plan.'

And nobody could argue: day one had gone to plan.

