

The Moment of the Cycles: The Tour de France, Transforming a Village ...

By Michael Dobbs Washington Post Foreign Service
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The Moment of the Cycles

The Tour de France, Transforming a Village as the Racers Whiz By

By Michael Dobbs

Washington Post Foreign Service

SCHIRMECK, France, July 12—Members of the local fire brigade have been up since dawn, erecting crowd control barriers. Church bells are ringing. Red, white and blue French flags flutter from half-timbered Alsatian houses.

Michel Sturm, who owns the little patisserie on the corner of the Place de l'Hotel de Ville, is shaking hands with all and sundry. This is his big day. Elected president of the town council two years ago when the old mayor

died, he has the duty of welcoming the Tour de France to Schirmeck.

More than just a 22-day, 2,500-mile bicycle race, the Tour de France is one of France's national obsessions. It is a traveling caravan, built around the 200 fastest cyclists in the world and made up of several thousand race officials, advertisers, police officers, sales clerks, journalists, doctors and nurses. Every summer, towns and villages all over France, from Brittany in the northwest to the Alps in the southeast, vie with each other for the privilege of watching this curious procession go past.

The Tour is also a meeting point of two nations: the frenetic,

competitive France of the race and the placid, very traditional country through which it passes. For a few brief moments, the two cultures come together. Inhabitants of la France *profonde*—"deep," rural France—feel their pulses quicken at the sight of exotic beings from a different world. Then the caravan moves on and they sink back into their accustomed tranquillity.

This year, it was again the turn of Schirmeck, population 2,780, in the Alsace, a region in eastern France that was once part of Germany. The mixture of French and German cultures is reflected in

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In Schirmeck, Robert Taurand and women racers about to start the Tour de France.

BY MICHAEL DOBBS—THE WASHINGTON POST

The Tour de France Obsession

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the names of the residents and the guttural Alsatian dialect.

The village square next to the mayor's office has been commandeered by Tour organizers and turned into a temporary command post. Up-to-the-minute reports of the progress of the race are being brought to Robert Taurand, a retired French army colonel who runs the Tour de France with a mixture of military efficiency and patriotic, almost evangelical, conviction.

"There is a whole mystique about the Tour de France," says Taurand to an audience of respectful local dignitaries. "It's a national celebration, a social celebration, the only sporting event that brings together people from all classes, all ages, all regions of France. People don't just come to watch the cyclists. They come for a day out in the country with their family and friends. It's a form of ecology."

To keep track of the competitors, the man who describes himself as "chief of staff" of the Tour de France has jotted down the times of the daily race itinerary in ballpoint pen on his left palm. His right palm is reserved for shaking hundreds of hands a day as the Tour moves from one village to the next. It concludes July 21 in Paris.

Rattling off figures he knows by heart, the colonel goes on: "Just think of it. Our annual budget is 5 billion centimes [equivalent to nearly \$6 million]. We use 850 cars, 250 motorcycles. Every year 40,000 gendarmes have to be mobilized along the route of the tour. We get 14 million spectators a year."

There is a slight pause as the civic leaders of Schirmeck ponder the scale of the organizational achievement that is about to engulf their quiet corner of France. By the time Taurand reaches the culminating point of his argument—"we are bigger than the 14th of July [Bastille

Day]"—they can only nod in agreement.

The tour is not due to reach Schirmeck for a couple of hours yet but the village already seems transformed into a kind of movie set. Roads have been cordoned off, traffic is being diverted and gendarmes are busy murmuring into two-way radios. Caricatures of French families—*maman*, *papa* and two kids fully equipped with deck chairs and large picnic baskets—are streaming toward the main street from cars parked on the edge of town.

Maurice Dischler, recognizable as the village butcher by a girth the circumference of a bicycle wheel, is selling herb sausages as fast as he can barbecue them. Laurent Weinling, who opened a photography shop in Schirmeck because he found the pace of life as a newspaper photographer in nearby Strasbourg too hectic, is busy taking pictures of the festive crowds.

"*Une animation exceptionnelle*," marvels Raymond Bildstein, mathematics teacher at the local high school and assistant mayor, surveying the scene.

The impression of having wandered into a film by mistake is heightened by the smart blue uniforms of the local *pompier*s, or firefighters, which resemble the kind of outfit worn in a James Bond movie by the private army of an evil despot. On acquaintance, the *pompier*s turn out to be well-intentioned volunteers who devote their free time to putting out fires, removing wrecked cars from the Route Nationale, and rescuing cats from the tops of trees.

In the village square, women cyclists from half a dozen countries including the United States and the People's Republic of China are warming up for the start of their daily stage. The distance the women cover is roughly 60 percent of the male Tour de France, leapfrogging ahead of the men every morning, serving as an appetizer for the bigger spectacle to follow.

As mayor of Schirmeck, Sturm has the privilege of waving the checkered flag at the beginning of

the women's race. The colonel is waxing eloquent about the pleasures that await him.

"You are going to liberate 69 beautiful girls all at once. *Quelle harmonie! Quelle grace!* It's not often you get such an opportunity."

The mayor laughs appreciatively.

It is midday and the women's Tour de France has departed. So has Col. Taurand—leading the way in an official-looking car marked "Secretary-General." Sturm, Bildstein, and François Moser, the mayor of the neighboring village of La Broque, repair to the Café du Centre to await the arrival of the men.

Sitting in the sunshine outside the café, the three sip Alsatian beer and swap anecdotes about the last time the Tour de France came through Schirmeck—15, 16 or was it 20 years back? The chances of local boy Alain Vigneron, now 38th in the overall classification, are analyzed and dissected.

"What were you doing with all those women cyclists?" shouts the wife of one of the town councilors as she searches for her husband in the crowd.

All of a sudden, the tranquility of Schirmeck is shattered by a cacophony of car horns, jarring music and urgent loudspeaker announcements. A sports car banked up on two wheels, apparently driven by a stuntman, screeches through the village to applause from startled onlookers.

"The publicity caravan has arrived!" shouts a disembodied voice from a loudspeaker. "The cyclists are coming! Bernard Hinault is wearing the yellow jersey!"

Information about the progress of the race is drowned out by loudspeaker appeals to "drink Coca-Cola, the official beverage of the Tour de France," which give way in turn to jingles for "coffee from Colombia." A squad of Michelin men, the publicity symbol of France's Michelin tire company, glide past the Café du Centre, entertaining Sturm and his companions by rapid jerks of their rubber arms and feet.

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See full page image or
microfilm.

Seated on the back of pickup trucks, somewhat bored-looking young women are showering the villagers with free gifts as the publicity caravan moves past. There are cardboard-cutout eyeglasses for the kids, guides to the Tour for the grownups.

A plastic bag lands with a thump in the hands of Isabelle Innocent, a young housewife, who squeals with delight. "Nothing like this has ever happened to me before," she explains. The bag turns out to contain a magazine published by the Force Ouvriere, one of the largest trade unions in France, and advertisements from a matrimonial agency.

"Here we are in Shmirck," a breathless voice shouts over a loudspeaker, provoking howls of laughter at this hapless visitor from another world who cannot even get the name of the village right. There is more laughter as the motorcade grinds to a halt before a cat that has

strayed into the middle of the street.

"This is the last car before the Tour de France. Your last chance to buy official race souvenirs," proclaims another voice.

Villagers crowd around the car, buying Tour bags and Tour caps for 10 francs (\$1) apiece. The tail of the publicity caravan disappears up the hill that leads out of the town. Excitement mounts as the cyclists get nearer.

Headlights flashing and sirens blazing, a phalanx of police motorcycles appears around the corner, a worthy enough escort for the president of France. They are followed by cars full of race officials, journalists and television cameras. The crowd begins to cheer.

A lone cyclist is out in front of the rest of the pack, surrounded by still more motorcycle outsiders. Sweat pours off his forehead as he glances

back at his rivals, concentration burning in his eyes. It is Bernard Hinault, France's latest cycling idol.

"*Allez Hinault!*"—Go Hinault, shouts the crowd as he flashes through Schirmeck, another 60 miles still to go, having pedaled furiously for 50 miles.

A pack of some 20 cyclists is close behind. They curb past the Bar du Central, where the mayor and his friends have bestirred themselves from their pavement table and are clapping wildly, past Dischler the butcher, who looks up from his barbecue, past Weinling the photographer in his Charles Bronson-like toupee, past Lucien Gagliardi and his team of *pompier*s, past old Antoine Hermann, who saw his first Tour de France in 1929, disappearing as swiftly as they came in a haze of car exhaust.

For a few seconds, Schirmeck is the cycling capital of the world.

The crowds are melting away. Mayor Sturm says he has to be getting back for his midday lunch—delayed by an hour in view of the Tour de France. Bildstein, the assistant mayor, has vanished. The *pompier*s are already taking down the metal crowd-control barriers and loading them into trucks.

Surveying the remains of 500 sausages, sold for 10 francs apiece, Dischler remarks with a smile: "The Tour should come here more often."

François Moser hangs around for a final beer. He has no regrets about living in the countryside. In fact, whenever he goes to Strasbourg, he is always in a hurry to get back to the peace and calm of village life. Living in Paris, he jokes, is an endless round of "*Metro-Boulot-Dodo*" (Metro-Work-Sleep).

And yet, now that the caravan has moved on, he admits to a sense of something missing. It is a feeling that is difficult to describe in words. Eventually, he thinks of a suitable comparison.

"It's like a funeral," he says slowly. "There's a gradual buildup of expectations as everybody follows the funeral procession. Then the coffin disappears into the ground and, all of a sudden, you feel empty."