

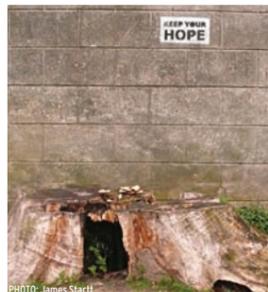


This was a success a long time in coming. To understand what the victory by Cadel Evans means, it's important to retrace some steps he took before reaching the top of the Tour de France's podium.

Words: Rob Arnold



FELICITATIONS CADEL... The sign (above) offers a sentiment most had for the winner of the 98th Tour de France. The stencilled note by the Seine (below) carried another poignant message.



On the left bank of the Seine lay a garden bed with the stump of an old tree. A rotting root snaked the length of a person's body before disappearing into the ground. Beside it lay a man with a dark mop of hair covering his eyes while he slept in the bright sunlight. His right arm hung loosely over the root and his leg was snug against it in the pose of lovers spooning. Just near his head, an open bottle of super-market *rouge* with only a finger's depth left. On the wall beside where he lay was a stencilled black word that had been painted over a white oblong and it carried a message that was a total contrast to the scene.

"Keep your hope."

Had he rolled over and opened his eyes, he could have seen the Musée de Louvre. But there was little life left in this soul. Only a gentle snore could be heard. And the vision was a sombre one, a reminder of where one may be if luck doesn't quite go the right way.

All around Paris that day people were managing hangovers and coming to terms with the end of another bike race.

It was the Monday after the Tour de France. This is no ordinary day. It's a time for reflection, an opportunity to take a breath, consider the events of the previous three weeks and – for those involved – begin to reintegrate into ordinary life.

The man spooning the tree root may well have stood on the Champs-Élysées only a handful of hours earlier surveying a mass of people swooning over the presentation of a jersey made of yellow lycra. Thousands of others had done so. And many travelled great distances to see this happen. The shirt represents a status many desire but few attain.

The *maillot jaune*. This is what transfixes a rare breed of bike rider. It's a symbol of success at the highest level of a sport with a long history and an event that is part of French culture. And it's now significant in distant lands. The face of the man who wore the yellow jersey on the final podium of the 2011 Tour de France is now known. Cadel Evans is now a household name in Australia. He is a recognisable figure, a person who attracts attention no matter what he does. And it's his ability on the bicycle that has made this happen. There are no others like him, for this is a true individual in every sense of the word. A driven personality with a yearning to excel in the profession he chanced upon because he discovered cycling at the start of his teenage years. He has taken the sport to the mainstream and made it something that Australians recognise as not only an enjoyable visual experience but a pastime with merit and positive attributes.

It wasn't always the case. This young man who has ridden a bike for a living for 20 years is now recognised as a winner, he's a champion of the Tour de France. It's a rare title bestowed only on the very elite of the cycling stratosphere.

"A few people always believed in me," he said within minutes of crossing the finish line of the 3,430km race that took him a little over 86 hours to complete, but it was a journey that lasted two decades. "I believed in me."

"Those few people – my family and a few others around me – are what matter the most. And here we are... we did it."

"I have to reflect on it a bit," Evans continued as he tried to conjure the words to explain what impact his result will have. "It's been such a focus – day by day – to get here. But not just this month; but month by month, year by year – it's been a long, long process and it will be a long realisation to take in exactly what has happened but it's been a real pleasure, this whole three weeks."

"For me, the real highlight of it all was the last three or four kilometres of the time trial. The hardest bits had been done until that point and coming into the finish [in Grenoble at the end of stage 20] but I knew we were on the right track."

Cadel Evans has been in and out of the yellow jersey before this year. For five days in 2008 he led the Tour de France. His advantage over Fränk Schleck in the general classification from the end of stage 10 to the start of stage 16 was just one second. And back then, one year on from finishing second overall by just 23 seconds to Alberto Contador, Evans' hope of winning was put on hold. At Alpe d'Huez in 2008, the 95th edition of the Tour, he lost the title. Hesitation cost him the win although he's blamed numerous other aspects – from injuries caused by crashes to a lack of team support to cunning tactics from rivals' formations with numerous leadership options and murmurings of other causes... he's got a long list of reasons. All of them are legitimate complaints in their own right. He can back up his claims and has done so often when reflecting on what might have been Australia's first Tour triumph, but Cadel prefers to forget his failures.

Looking back the 95th Tour de France – which, contrary to tradition, began without a time trial to establish a pecking order of those actually capable of aiming for victory – there was reason to be satisfied. He came close to winning stages in 2008 but never did, still he was the most regular performer of all in the general classification standings. Cadel is consistent. It's one of many strengths and he was the only rider who remained in the top 10 of the GC standings all the way through the race three years ago. In the general classification for three weeks his status was impressive. Broken down after each day it was remarkable: sixth, fifth, ninth, fourth, second, second, second, first, first, first, first, first, third, third, fourth, fourth, fourth, fourth, second... and, ultimately, *second*.

Damn it! While his luck ran out at the halfway mark he lost the Tour with just one day to go. But he never lost hope. >>

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