RICHARD MOORE

Heroes, Villains & Velodromes

Chris Hoy & Britain's Track Cycling Revolution

INCLUDES THE STORY OF THE GAMES

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Heroes, Villains and Velodromes: Chris Hoy and Britain's Track Cycling Revolution

«HarperCollins»

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Heroes, Villains and Velodromes: Chris Hoy and Britain’s Track Cycling Revolution / R. Moore — «HarperCollins»,

Fully updated to include the extraordinary scenes at London 2012, where Hoy won two more gold medals to bring his total to six and overtake Sir Steve Redgrave, this is the story of Britain's greatest ever Olympian.Chris Hoy has been instrumental in British track cycling's remarkable transformation from also-rans to world superpower. Now, having rewritten the record books as Olympic champion in four different cycling disciplines, and with six gold medals, Hoy has become a householdname and established himself in the pantheon of sporting greats.This is a fly-on-the-wall account of Hoy and his team as he prepared for the Beijing Olympics, where he became the first Briton in a century to win three gold medals in a single Games, and it has now been fully updated to include the extraordinary scenes at London 2012, where Hoy won two more gold medals, to bring his total to six and overtake Sir Steve Redgrave as Britain's greatest ever Olympian.The story begins with Hoy's introduction to cycling as a BMX racer and his progression to Olympic champion, and explains the origins and evolution of Britain's world-beating team. It includes a bizarre visit to the world's highest velodrome in Bolivia and a spellbinding journey from the razzmatazz of theEuropean six-day circuit to the craziness of the Japanese keirin races.Award-winning writer Richard Moore tracks Hoy throughout a season in the saddle, explores his motivations and mentors from a young age, and provides an unblemished insight into the mind of a champion and the largely unknown world of track cycling. It's a story that is fully updated with the remarkable events in Beijing in 2008 and London in 2012, two successive Olympic Games that were dominated by Hoy and the British track cycling team.

Heroes, Villains & Velodromes

Chris Hoy and Britain's Track Cycling Revolution

Richard Moore

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Thank you to Chris Hoy, whose cooperation and support for this book has been – a bit like Chris himself – exemplary. *Heroes, Villains & Velodromes* is not Chris's story, but Chris is the principal character, and, as he has so often been in the last decade, the star of the show.

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'Excellence is an art won by training and habituation … we are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit.'

Aristotle

INTRODUCTION

A Righteous Kick up the Arse

Palma de Mallorca, March 2007

The scent of drying concrete fills the air; scaffolding is everywhere; workmen go about their business with a sense of urgency, adding bits to the Palma de Mallorca Arena here, painting bits there. The impression is unmistakable, and not in the least encouraging. The 2007 Track Cycling World Championships begin here tomorrow, in a place that currently has the atmosphere, smell, appearance, sound, and ubiquitous dust, of an unfinished building.

However, deep in the centre of the arena, in what feels like its core, far from the madding construction, there is a rather surreal spectacle: a perfect oval of varnished wooden boards, glistening and shining as they reflect the bright spotlights – a bit like crashing through a waterfall and entering a peaceful, serene hideaway. In the case of the Palma Arena, the sight is that of a beautifully finished, brand new cycling track: 250 metres all the way round, with steep, wall-of-death-style banking at each end, sweeping into short straights, then quickly curling into the next banked bend.

And in this oval, burling around the bends, thundering along the brief straights, the British team, comprising eighteen riders – with twenty-eight support staff looking on – are going through their final training session before the championships. They are slick, organized and thoroughly impressive to watch; they also present a neat juxtaposition to the chaos outside, the only reminder of which is the occasional sound of a drill or some piece of machinery wafting in when a door opens.

But … hang on. Twenty-eight support staff to eighteen riders: did I hear that right? Are twenty-eight people really necessary? I suggest to Dave Brailsford, the British Cycling performance director, that this seems 'a healthy ratio'. 'It's a winning ratio,' smiles Brailsford, a man who manages, somehow, to appear simultaneously intense and relaxed as he watches his men and women whirl around the velodrome in a blur of red, white and blue.

I am here in particular to see one of Brailsford's 'blue-chip' athletes, and a man regularly described as the ultimate athlete – the Olympic and world champion Chris Hoy. Chris and I were team-mates once. We were in the same Scotland team at the Commonwealth Games in Kuala Lumpur in 1998, but in many ways we belonged to different eras. For him, the Commonwealth Games were the start – they provided a springboard. For me, they were the end, the Commonwealth Games being as high as the bar of my ambition – I use the word advisedly – was set. In my case, a springboard with a malfunctioning spring – more like a trapdoor, really.

Back then, Hoy tended to be a little in the shadow of another rider, slightly older than him – Craig MacLean. The two of them came as a package: they were both blond, they were similar in appearance, they seemed inseparable and were constantly mistaken for each other. Craig used to sit in the apartment in the games village strumming his guitar. Chris didn't play the guitar but he was, in other respects, Craig's mini-me. There was something that set these two apart from the rest of the team, though. It was clear they were going places. The bar of their ambition was set fairly high; precisely how high, no one – not even them – could have imagined.

I was at those games, if I am honest, for the T-shirt (and three polo shirts, tracksuit, sweatshirt, shirt, tie, smart trousers, kilt and sporran, brogues, kit bag, racing and training kit … and yes, it says it all that I can reel that list off without really thinking about it).

'That [Kuala Lumpur] Commonwealth Games,' Hoy said to me on one occasion, 'was the last games where the Scotland team had the attitude of being second-class citizens, and of thinking, "We're gonna get humped here, but at least we've got the clothing."'

Our team returned from these games, according to one report, 'burdened by highly embarrassing statistics'. Which could be translated as: no medals. Again. Not that such humiliating return journeys were restricted to Scottish teams; at UK level, Britain's cyclists repeatedly travelled to the Olympics, and returned – one or two notable exceptions notwithstanding – similarly 'burdened by highly embarrassing statistics'. We were British: that was what we did. We got humped, as Hoy might put it.

Oh, but how times change. In Palma a new era is upon us – but more on Palma in a moment. This is the story of how that has happened: how the British team reinvented itself, and how Chris Hoy – who has been at the vanguard of this revolution, and is the central character in this story – is the embodiment of this new era in British cycling.

In one sense, Hoy was fortunate to find himself in the right place at the right time. In another, he is the perfect athlete to act as flag-bearer – because Hoy epitomizes all that is successful about British cycling. His finest hour up to that point was on a stifling hot evening in Athens in August 2004. The kilometre time trial at the Athens Olympics: Hoy's event. As reigning world champion, he was last man to go – a mixed blessing. As he awaited his turn, he was forced to watch no fewer than three riders break the existing world record, knowing that he would have to step up and go faster than all of them – and faster, of course, than he had ever gone before.

Each new world record inevitably made Hoy's task appear more and more difficult – impossible, even. Watching it unfold on TV, I found myself making excuses for him. Whatever happened in the next few minutes, he had done well to be crowned world champion. He, however, was not thinking along such lines. Finally, it was his turn to step up to the plate, as they say, and Hoy, looking like a man about to face the gallows – albeit clad in his unlikely 'death suit' of lycra – stood up, and walked awkwardly to the track in his cleated cycling shoes. And hurriedly, since a mistake with the timing device meant the countdown began early.

That technical glitch – possibly even more than the three world records he had just witnessed – was the moment when panic should have taken over. But if he was rattled, it didn't show. Instead, he sat on the wooden boards, looking confident rather than pensive, while the mechanics fitted his bike into the starting gate. Then he climbed aboard, took several deep breaths, as if inflating his body down to his ankles, and settled forward, wrapping his fingers carefully around the handlebars, standing up on the pedals, waiting for the clock to finish its countdown. And when the last five seconds had cranked up the tension to an almost unbearable degree, he went off like a bomb, releasing enough power to illuminate a small village.

As Hoy started his ride, cheeks puffed out, legs pumping, I watched in a pub in Edinburgh, where the atmosphere was close to that of a football match. We roared at the TV, and when, after four laps, he flashed across the line in a world record time, we cheered, and I turned to a friend and said, 'Did I mention that he and I were team mates …?'

Something else that happened in the build-up to Hoy's ride in Athens was telling. While he was warming up, a medal presentation from another event got underway; but when it came to the national anthem, while many continued what they were doing, Hoy stopped, dismounted, and stood in respectful silence for the duration of the anthem, before remounting his bike and resuming his warm-up for the biggest race of his life.

Back to Palma. The stakes are high as we near the end of another four-year Olympic cycle and the 2008 Beijing games loom on the horizon. Hoy is in action on the first night of the world championships, in the team sprint, a thrilling three-man race that, like many of the track racing disciplines, can appear utterly bamboozling to the outsider. But it is actually very simple. In a nutshell: three men start, one finishes. Opening that nutshell and examining the contents: the trio line up together on the start line, side-by-side-by-side. On the opposite side of the track their opponents do the same. On the inside is the lead-out man, who rides the first lap flat out and then swings up the banking; next to him is the rider who, having followed an inch behind him on the first lap, will hit the front on lap two; and on the outside is the rider who will finish off the job, completing the third and final lap alone. For Team GB, the experienced – that sporting euphemism for 'old' – Craig MacLean is the lead-out man; the young pretender Ross Edgar is number two; the dependable Chris Hoy is the anchor. Hoy makes a comparison with athletics to explain their specific roles: 'Man one needs the pure speed of a 100 m sprinter; man two has the speed and staying power of a 200 m specialist; man three needs the speed and endurance of a 400 m runner.'

The British trio qualifies fastest. It puts them into the final, against the French, where MacLean – billed as 'the world's fastest man over one lap' – explodes out of the start gate, all popping eyes and pumping arms and then, after a lap, swings up the banking, allowing Edgar to come past, with Hoy remaining in Edgar's slipstream. They are 0.290 seconds down on the French after a lap; Edgar reduces it to 0.281 after two, then swings up the banking as they approach the line. Hoy hits the front.

And now, not for the first time, we are treated to a head-to-head between Hoy and his old rival Arnaud Tournant. Hoy puts in a stunning lap, or perhaps Tournant slows down – it is difficult to tell. They are neck-and-neck on opposite sides of the track, and as they cross the line it is impossible for one pair of eyes to separate them.

The clock can, however. Just. The French have completed the three laps in 43.830 seconds – a world record; the British in 43.832 – also a world record, had the French not gone two-thousandths of a second quicker. So it's silver for Hoy, Edgar and MacLean.

'There wasn't much else we could do,' says MacLean. 'But I'm sure when we look at the video we'll pick a few things out. There's always room for improvement.' 'Tonight the French were outstanding,' adds Hoy, 'but at least we got that ride out the way before Beijing. We'll be better then.'

The following evening in Palma is the keirin, a discipline with its origins in Japan, where it forms a betting industry worth $7.5 billion a year; 'kei' means bet in Japanese, 'rin' means wheel.

Many seem to be under the impression that 'keirin' means fight – which it doesn't, though it would be fitting if it did.

The keirin is a sprinters' event where six of them fall into line behind a motorcycle-mounted pacer, who over several laps gradually winds up the pace. There can be jostling for position, but generally the cyclists form an orderly line behind the motorcycle pacer and remain in order until, with two-and-a-half laps remaining, he swings off. Then, with the speed up to around 30 mph, it becomes a straight fight for the line, or as straight a fight as you can expect with six sprinters – who by definition are muscle-bound, (naturally produced) testosterone-fuelled alpha-males – competing with each other for the most advantageous position, which is generally held to be third or fourth man in line, where you have the benefit of shelter plus the advantage of surprise should you choose to launch an early attack.

But in Palma, Hoy doesn't ride the keirin like this. He opts for a different tactic altogether. In the semi-final he tucks in behind the pacer, as first man in the string of six riders. When the pacer disappears Hoy stays there, ramping up the speed with deceptive ease, and effectively making it impossible for his opponents to come past him. His is a victory based on sheer power rather than tactical acumen.

In the other semi-final his team-mate Ross Edgar takes the opposite approach. With a lap to go he is last man, placed sixth and seemingly out of it. Yet, despite the fact they're now travelling at around 40 mph, the compact, stocky Edgar manages an extraordinary surge, injecting enough speed to propel himself around the outside of the five flying bodies, to cross the line first. More of a pure sprinter than the powerful Hoy, Edgar has just demonstrated why, at twenty-four, he is tipped as one of the world's hottest prospects. It is a performance that is destined to become a YouTube classic.

So to the final, and a fascinating contrast in styles – but it is not just about Hoy and Edgar. There are another four riders, most notably Theo Bos, the rapid Dutchman. Bos – or 'The Boss' – is the fastest man in the world, the undisputed king of the sprint – up to this championship, at least. Is he still the same awesome force? There are whispers and murmurs that he might not be – that chinks have been spotted in his previously impenetrable armour. Since being voted Holland's sports personality of the year there are even rumours that fame might have gone to his head, that he might have been afflicted by the potentially fatal condition for a sportsman – that of believing that he really is as good as everybody is saying.

Thinking about Bos, and speculating about his form, I am reminded of something Dave Brailsford has told me. 'We've banned the C-word,' said the British performance director. 'That's something we insist on.' But I wasn't looking at Bos and thinking that he was the most offensive word in the English language. 'Complacency' Brailsford had elaborated. 'We've banned it.'

As in his semi-final, Hoy tucks in behind the pacer. Bos sits behind Hoy. Edgar sits behind Bos. It is a good tactic: a British sandwich with a Dutch filling. When the pacer swings off, all hell breaks loose, as it always does in the keirin. As they hit 40 mph there is jostling, bumping, barging, but, as in the semi-final, Hoy appears quite serene at the head of affairs – all the frenetic stuff is happening behind him. Bos, try as he might, cannot quite find the strength or the speed to come round him: Hoy is too fast, too powerful. Holland's golden boy and defending world champion crosses the line second, with, emerging from the melee behind, Edgar holding off the challenge of Mickaël Bourgain of France to claim bronze.

'I had no pressure on me today,' says Hoy, who couldn't have been more imperious in winning the gold medal, but for whom it was, nevertheless, an unexpected bonus. 'Jan [van Eijden, the GB sprint coach] told me to relax, and in the final I used my kilo strength to lead out from a long way. It couldn't have gone any better. But it's a big surprise.'

And still to come, on the final night of the championships, is Hoy's main event – the kilo, in which he is Olympic champion, three-time world champion and sea-level world record holder. In

six weeks, at the altitude of La Paz in Bolivia, he will go for the absolute world kilometre record, currently held by his great rival Tournant.

As reigning world champion, Hoy is once again the last man to go. The kilo – he insists this will be the last time he will contest this event in a major championship – also gives him the chance to draw level with the two kilo kings, both of whom have four world titles to their name. Ahead of him in the table are Lothar Thoms and – who else? – Tournant.

Another British rider, Jamie Staff, the second man to start, is the early pacesetter. He tops the leader board for the best part of an hour, until the penultimate rider – another Frenchman, the youthful François Pervis. In Manchester, just a few weeks earlier, Pervis placed second to Hoy in the World Cup kilo – and gave him a real fright in finishing just thirty-five-thousandths of a second slower. Now, in Palma, it all comes down to Hoy and the clock. He races through the first of the four laps marginally up on Pervis, but down on the time set by fast starter Staff. Hoy has to lift it and he does; at half distance he is a tenth of a second ahead but it is in the second half that he makes the difference, accelerating to cross the line in 1.00.999, almost a full second quicker than Pervis. It is Hoy's second fastest kilo and the second fastest time ever recorded at sea level.

It puts the icing on a generous cake: the championships have been an astonishing success for Hoy and for Team GB. In fact, Hoy's haul here in Palma means that he is now the most successful British cyclist of all time in terms of gold medals won at world championships, with seven golds, one silver, three bronze, to add to Olympic gold and silver, not to mention two golds and two bronzes at the Commonwealth Games He can now be hailed as Britain's most successful track cyclist ever. The debate over whether he is the best ever can rage in internet chat rooms.

Yet there is a sour taste in his mouth. It had been his final championship kilo, but not out of choice. The decision had been effectively forced on him by cycling's world governing body, the UCI, who, in an act as bizarre as it seemed perverse, responded to the most exciting kilo of all time – at the Athens Olympics in 2004 – by dropping the event from the Olympic programme.

'I'd love to do the kilo at the world championships in Manchester next year and go for a fifth title,' Hoy tells the press in Palma, 'and obviously I'd have loved to go to Beijing and defend my Olympic title, but I really have to draw a line under this event now and focus on an Olympic event. But it's frustrating because I don't think the powers-that-be really understand certain facets of the sport. I don't think they realize the implications of what they've done.'

The challenge now for Hoy is to try his hand at new disciplines – the sprint and the keirin. His surprise victory in the keirin in Palma gives him confidence but Hoy is under no illusions: he knows he has much to learn. He also knows that, at thirty-one, he doesn't have much time. He is a (comparatively) old dog having to learn new tricks if he is to have any chance at all of fulfilling his ambition of a second Olympic gold medal. Imagine Michael Johnson, at his peak, being told the 400 m was being scrapped; or Ed Moses being told to switch to flat racing. This is the scenario Hoy has been presented with thanks to the scrapping of the kilo. The next twelve months will tell him if such a transition is possible – he is acutely aware that it might not be.

But otherwise the taste in Palma is of sweet success. 'Being here at the world championships with the British team has been great,' says Hoy after his kilo victory. 'We're really unified. There are no cliques, no divides. We go into every event thinking we can win medals. We have a winning mentality.'

As he is talking, the opening bars of 'God Save the Queen' fill the Palma Arena (again), and Brailsford can be seen deep in conversation with a member of his four-strong senior management team – Britain's 1992 Olympic pursuit champion Chris Boardman. Both are standing with their arms crossed. They uncross them and cease their conversation for the national anthem, then immediately recross their arms and renew the discussion. It looks like they're plotting something.

They are. But eventually they part and Brailsford offers a review of the championships. Or, rather, he doesn't. Instead, he looks forward. 'Tomorrow,' he says, 'I will be at my desk in the Manchester Velodrome, relentlessly planning our pursuit of medals in Beijing.'

In the final reckoning, the British team has claimed eleven medals in Palma, including seven gold: 41 per cent of all the available world titles. The other squads retreat from the arena licking their wounds. 'We've just had a righteous kick up the arse,' admits the Australian coach, Martin Barras. 'That was the best performance by a track team, period,' he elaborates. 'It's as simple as that. And Chris? What can you say? His win in the keirin was something else, and I'd put his kilo here in Palma above his performance at the Olympics. It was phenomenal. As a professional coach, never mind the coach of a rival team, you just have to go: "Wow."'

Brailsford can well afford to be satisfied, then. The Olympics are the overriding goal, as he keeps stressing, but with every medal his stock – and that of the British team – rises. The unprecedented success in Palma means it has never been higher, and it was already pretty high before Palma, when it was reported that various performance directors from other sports had been beating a path to his door, to pick his brains and learn from Britain's most successful team. Apparently, the people charged with running athletics, rugby and rowing had all been to visit Brailsford in recent weeks. Brailsford is coy on this.

In talking to Brailsford, however, there is one subject that looms ominously and lurks malevolently in the shadows. This being cycling, there has been a gathering cloud of suspicion, rumour and innuendo, whispered in the past, but inevitably set to be more explicitly stated the more successful they become. In the Italian camp there have been accusations that the secret to the British team's success must be doping – organized, systematic doping.

When asked about this, Brailsford doesn't sigh in exasperation. He doesn't fix you with a withering stare. He doesn't point out that it is impossible to prove a negative. In short, he doesn't dodge the subject. And what he says, though it may look almost naive, contains an irresistible logic. 'We create an environment in which athletes don't want to dope,' he says. Ah. Okay, then. But how? 'Come and have a look at what we do,' shrugs Brailsford. 'We have nothing to hide. We look at aspects of performance that have nothing to do with doping. But anyone who wants to check us out can come and have a look at our anti-doping programme and draw their own conclusions.'

But if it isn't a highly sophisticated and organized doping programme, then what is the secret? Is there one? Still hanging around the track centre is Boardman, whose remit, as director of coaching, includes 'research and development'. The man who was once famous for winning the Olympics on a machine christened 'Superbike' is now – appropriately enough – charged with sourcing and developing the latest, most cutting edge equipment, from clothing to bikes. Boardman is leaning over one of the barriers that segregate the teams, in their 'pens', when I approach him. He looks furtive. Nothing to hide, eh? Yeah, right – not according to Boardman. While Brailsford stresses that the anti-doping programme is open for inspection, Boardman makes it clear that the equipment bunker – the 'Secret Squirrel Club' he calls it – is strictly off-limits. So the implication is clear. Effectively, what they seem to be saying is: 'You can come and watch our athletes piss into a bottle; just don't ask them about the fancy saddles they use in training.'

'We have kit we've been using in training but we haven't used it here,' confirms Boardman. 'We produced some really sexy handlebars for the sprinters last year, but at last year's world championships the Germans came along and took some pictures of our handlebars, and now they've got them.' It is easy to see how this could happen. At a track meeting, where the teams occupy their pens in the centre, separated from each other only by metal fencing, equipment is easily visible. All kinds of people are sniffing around. And some, says Boardman, are spies. 'If you leave stuff lying around the track centre,' he points out, 'then people will see it.' It is fairly important, then, to keep the top Secret Squirrel 'stuff' hidden – and note, incidentally, the deliberately frivolous, almost Orwellian sounding,

moniker assigned to Boardman's 'club'. 'We're paying a lot of money to develop this stuff,' he points out, 'so next year we'll use it in competition, but it'll be too late for anybody to copy.

'And a lot of it you won't even be able to see,' he adds, looking satisfied. As well he might. He knows that, if nothing else, such talk will score points in the psychological war. Consider this: if it is frustrating for the opposition to look enviously at the state-of-the-art machines belonging to their rivals, then how frustrating must it be to know that you can't even see half of what makes it state-of-the-art? It is the sporting equivalent of Donald Rumsfeld's infamous 'known unknowns' argument. 'There are known knowns,' said the then US secretary of state for defense, speaking of the War on Terror. 'Then there are known unknowns. But there are also unknown unknowns.' Some of the stuff in Boardman's Secret Squirrel Club comes into this category. As far as the opposition is concerned, it is an unknown unknown. How much of a mind-fuck is that?

This, mind you, is a game that goes on between all the teams, with psychological warfare a big part of track cycling for all kinds of reasons – the riders rub shoulders in the track centre, they warm up in full view of each other, the racing itself is gladiatorial; there are no hiding places; image and appearance is (almost) everything. Boardman doesn't criticize other teams for 'sniffing around.' Far from it.

'Oh, we do it,' he says. 'I don't do it myself, because that would be too obvious. I have somebody doing it for me, and I can assure you they're not wearing a GB T-shirt. I heard about one bike manufacturer sending guys who looked like cycling groupies in long hair and long shorts. They'd look daft and ask stupid questions and the mechanics would just stand there and tell them everything.' Boardman shakes his head. 'You have to be clever.'

What is remarkable about all of this – the confidence, the gold medals, the ample resources, the subterfuge, the aura of invincibility, the sheer ebullience – is that this is a British team we're talking about. A British *cycling* team. Ten years ago British cycling teams were the designated whipping boys, and girls: that was their role. To other nations it must have seemed their raison d'etre. Yet now it is they who do the whipping, kicking the collective arse of the once dominant Australians. *The Australians!*

To fully understand how far the British track cycling team has come you must first understand where it was. It was nowhere. Over the decades there have been exceptions – outstanding individuals such as Reg Harris, Beryl Burton, Hugh Porter, Graeme Obree and indeed Boardman himself – but each succeeded despite the system, not because of it. Because there was no system.

In 1997, when Hoy began to be a regular member of the British team, he was given a racing outfit, 'told to feel grateful for it', and lent a bike, 'a state-of-the-art bike – from the 1960s', and told to feel grateful for that, too. In 1996, when he was selected for his first international event – the European Under-23 championships in Moscow – he was one of three riders, with no support staff. They could only afford to send three people, so they decided not to bother with a mechanic or a team manager. Compare and contrast that to the twenty-eight support staff in Palma.

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of what has happened over the last decade – the development of a system every bit as efficient and effective as the old East German system, without the systematic doping – is that it just seems so unBritish. We don't really do success – or not systematic success, at any rate. According to the December 2007 issue of the *Observer Sports Monthly* magazine, we are, in fact, 'ritually accustomed to defeat'. According to Simon Barnes of *The Times*, we 'have no contingency plan for excellence, no strategy for dealing with the calamity of victory'. When we win, we go off the rails. Whatever it takes to build on success, or even sustain it, we just don't seem to possess it.

That *Observer* article (entitled 'Born to Lose') concluded by claiming that is not that we do not want to win: 'We want to win as much if not more than anyone else. We just do not want to do what is necessary to win.' *We do not want to do what is necessary to win.* Which raises the question: what *is* necessary to win? Well, if anyone knows the answer to this question it is Chris Hoy. And the British cycling team. How has this happened? And why in track cycling?

What struck me in Palma, as the British team dominated event after event, and my old – ahem – team-mate Chris Hoy confirmed himself as one of the all-time greats, was the realization that there was something – beyond winning – that was very special, and very unusual, about this team. There was planning, and attention to detail, and athletic talent – all these things, of course. But there was something else – a unique and very potent chemistry. And there were secrets – intriguing, closely-guarded secrets, from Boardman's Secret Squirrel Club to the team's employment of a clinical psychiatrist – someone whose previous work had been with inmates of a high-security hospital, but who, in 2002, had made the surprise career switch to work with Britain's top cyclists. The success of his work with certain members of the team prompts Brailsford to say that he is 'the best person I've hired – and I've hired some great people'.

Sporting success, skulduggery, psychiatry, suspicions of systematic doping, in a world of heroes, villains and velodromes … there could be a hell of a story here, I thought.

A couple of weeks after Palma, a month before he was to travel to Bolivia to try and set a new world kilometre record, I sat down with Hoy in a bar in Edinburgh and gave him my spiel: 'I'd like to write a book – about you, and about this incredible year you have in front of you, taking in Bolivia, the World Cups, the crazy keirin circuit in Japan, the madness of six-day racing, the world championships in Manchester … and looking ahead to Beijing. Only, it won't really be *about* you, as such, well it will, and it won't – it'll be part your story, your BMX-ing as a kid, that sort of thing, but it'll also be the story of the British team – the revolution there's been over the last ten years. I mean, it's an incredible story, really, when you think about it … what do you think?

'Okay,' said Hoy.

PART 1

Portrait of the Athlete as a Young Man

CHAPTER 1

BMX Bandits

Ile de Ré, France, August 1992

Though he wasn't to know it at the time, a seminal moment in Chris Hoy's career occurred while he was on a family holiday on Ile de Ré, La Rochelle, western France, in August 1992. He was sixteen. And he had hired a bike for the holiday – a mountain bike.

At the same time, several hundred miles south of Ile de Ré, in the Spanish city of Barcelona, the Olympics were taking place, and a remarkable thing was happening there. It was remarkable if you were British, and a cyclist. Because a British cyclist by the name of Chris Boardman had reached the final of the men's pursuit, and appeared to be on the verge of winning Britain's first cycling gold medal in eighty-four years, when the quartet of Leonard Meredith, Ernest Payne, Charles Kingsbury and Benjamin Jones were victorious in the 1,810.5 metre team pursuit at the 1908 London Olympics. Boardman's breakthrough was like Eddie the Eagle winning the ski jump – or seemed like it to many people.

And the British media responded accordingly – which is to say that, rather than focus on the athletic achievement, or any physical talent that Boardman may have possessed, they discovered a quirky angle: the fact that Boardman was riding a space-age Lotus bike, promptly christened 'Superbike'. Super*man*, meanwhile, was all but ignored.

Boardman says now that he didn't mind – that in fact it worked in his favour. 'It was part of the package; it was a ploy if you like,' he says, hinting that he was as devious – or clever – then as he is now, in his current role as the man who holds the keys to the Secret Squirrel Club. 'That bike had actually been to more than one World Cup before the Olympics,' reveals Boardman. 'But I hadn't ridden it – Bryan Steel had. But because Bryan only finished eighth on it, nobody really noticed. In the end, yes, the bike got lots of publicity, probably more than me, but people still remember it and talk about it today. So I don't regret that at all.'

In Ile de Ré, meanwhile, the sixteen-year-old Hoy, fanatical about cycling, and by now becoming interested in track cycling, genuinely was interested in the fact that a British rider – and not just a space-age bike – was in the final. 'I remember being so excited about the Olympics,' recalls Hoy. 'The final was in the evening. We didn't have a television where we were staying so I'd been listening to Boardman's progress on the radio thanks to the BBC World Service. I remember calling my dad to come, because the final was on. And I remember listening to the final, hearing Boardman win, and being so inspired that I went straight out on the mountain bike I'd hired. I did ten miles flat out on that bike every day, and I'd already been out earlier in the day. But I went out and did it again.

'It's funny, I've watched that Olympic pursuit final since then, and it bears no relation to my memory of it. The images don't remind me of how I felt at the time.

'After that holiday we went straight to the British track championships in Leicester. I'd just started riding the track. But Boardman was there with his Lotus bike. I rode round behind him for a few laps and sneaked into a photo. I remember being completely in awe.'

Boardman's Barcelona success acted as the launch pad not only for Boardman, who was propelled into a professional career on the continent, but also for his coach, Peter Keen, and, ultimately, you could argue, for the sport in the UK. What Keen did with Boardman he eventually replicated, on a far bigger scale, with the British team. In 1997 he was appointed by the British Cycling Federation to devise a 'World Class Performance Plan', which – in a revolutionary development – would receive millions in National Lottery funding. For the sport of cycling, things were about to change, and Hoy would be one of the main beneficiaries – indeed, he would be integral to the programme that Keen established. But no one – perhaps not even Keen – could have foreseen how dramatic the change would be.

Back in 1992, although Hoy had only just started riding on the track, he had actually been a competitive cyclist since the age of seven. Like so many children of the Eighties – he was born on 23 March 1976 – it was BMX-ing that provided the introduction.

The BMX bike was a child of the 1980s, just as Wham! or *Grange Hill* were. (Indeed, to emphasize how closely associated with the Eighties it was, the first official BMX race in Britain was staged in August 1980, and the international body set up in 1981.) But the sport was also treated as a child by the sporting authorities, being so far outside the mainstream that you would have thought it was a different sport: a BMX might as well have been a horse as far as cycling organizations were concerned. While thousands of kids competed up and down the country, and millions were inspired by the film *BMX Bandits*, not to mention the BMX chase scene in *E.T.*, the conservative bodies that ran cycling ignored it, and them.

It was *E.T.* that snared Hoy. As he told his school magazine in 2004: 'I saw the film *E.T.* and became hooked on the BMX craze.' The film's famous BMX scene, with Elliot and friends smuggling E.T., wrapped in a blanket and sitting in a handlebar-mounted basket, epitomized the appeal of the BMX. The scene, in which the kids evade their adult pursuers, summed up what the BMX represented: namely, freedom and escape – escape from adults, that is.

The adults are made to look silly, relegated as they are to the role of car-imprisoned spectators while the kids flee over what looks suspiciously like a purpose-built BMX race track. And then, of course, comes the serious 'air' – they take off. It provides the most famous image from the film: BMXs being ridden by a gang of kids (accompanied by an extraterrestrial creature) into the night, silhouetted against the moon. 'This video makes me wanna' ride my BMX again,' is one comment below 'E.T. the chase scene', which inevitably features on YouTube. 'Anybody who says they don't hum the theme [to *E.T.*] while riding their bike is lying,' says another. Absolutely.

But for Hoy it wasn't all fun and games. The BMX racing scene was deadly serious and furiously competitive. So was he. 'My first bike was one I got at a jumble sale,' says Hoy, though his mother, Carol, corrects this. '*I* got him his first BMX at a jumble sale,' she says. 'I'd gone on the bus, so I couldn't take it home – I had to get a friend to put it in her boot. It cost £5, I think.' Hoy remembers

that the first bike was 'stripped down by my dad, who sprayed it black and put BMX stickers and handlebars on it. I snapped the frame after a month or so, doing jumps off planks of wood on bricks. I then got another bike, which was a neighbour's daughter's old bike. My dad gave it the same spray treatment and put on the same bars. But I bent the frame of that one.'

When he started racing – 'I was second in my first race,' says Hoy – a better bike became a priority. He spotted the machine he wanted in the window of an Edinburgh bike shop: a black and gold Raleigh Super Burner. It cost £99. 'Too much,' said his mother. She explains: 'I said, "When you've saved up half the money, your dad and I will pay the rest." He did it in no time. He was very clever. If we had people round for dinner, then Christopher would come in to show face, and then he'd talk about his BMX-ing, and how well he was doing, and he'd say, "There's a bike I want but I have to pay half myself …" and the uncles and aunts would feel sympathetic and slip him a fiver.'

'I waited until they'd had a drink or two,' reveals Hoy, with evident pride.

Hoy's father, David, was a great supporter of his son's first outings as a BMX racer with Edinburgh club Danderhall Wolves. 'He had a great start in Scotland, but then we went on holiday to the south of England and all these kids turned up on their £500 bikes,' says David. 'Chris was still on his Raleigh Super Burner. He got hammered. He was really pissed off. I thought, well, if he's going to be serious about this then he should be on a better bike. The Burner was a toy, really.'

With a serious bike – a 'SilverFox' – he decided to join a 'serious' team. David Hoy explains: 'There was a shop in Edinburgh, Scotia BMX, which had a wee team which Chris joined, and they contested races all over the country – in England too. With Chris at first it was the case that the further he travelled the more he got beaten and the harder he worked.'

David says he wasn't a pushy parent, just a supportive one. It would be difficult to imagine him as a pushy parent – his enthusiasm is tempered by a zen-like calm. 'I learnt a lot about child psychology from travelling with him and seeing other kids and their parents,' he muses. 'The Italians were especially interesting. If their kids came over the line and they hadn't won, they got beaten – literally. I didn't think that was the way to get the best out of them.

'I didn't put any pressure on. BMX was just a wonderful sport for kids. He did the cycling bit and my hobby was to look after the bike. On a Wednesday night I'd have the bike on the kitchen table, stripped, bearings out, the works, and then rebuild it for the weekend. I always loved taking bikes to bits.'

Carol Hoy, a bubbly woman with a sparky sense of humour, was sanguine about the weekly transformation of the kitchen table into a workbench. 'I just thought that it was a lovely thing for a father and son to do. They spent whole weekends together, travelling mainly, and I used to only get involved in the local races, when I did the catering. I made burgers – BMX burgers, I called them. I told them they'd make them go faster. They were very popular.'

George Swanson, whose son raced with Hoy, was the man in charge of the Scotia BMX team. 'We must have been one of the most hated teams in the history of cycling,' he laughs. 'I mean, Christ, talk about parochial! We were accused of signing up all the good kids – cherry picking. We sponsored riders from all over Scotland – Craig MacLean was one of our riders – and we took them down south to race. But when they raced in Scotland they rode for their local track. The idea was not to concentrate on the Scottish scene but to venture further afield, set our sights a wee bit higher. We had a yellow Bedford minibus and every weekend we had them away racing: Preston, Crewe, Bristol, you name it.'

'People used to say, "You're mad, how can you possibly take a kid 1000 miles at the weekend?"" says David Hoy. 'But actually Chris used to get more sleep on a race weekend. If I was taking him, we had a big Citroen estate car. I had a bit of foam cut out, and we laid that in the back of the car. What happened then was that he'd go to bed at 8 p.m., just like normal, then I'd wake him at 1 a.m., and carry him into the car. He'd go back to sleep and sleep all the way, while I drove. The furthest we went in a day was Bristol. We'd get there about 6 o'clock on the Sunday morning and he'd go out

and practise for a couple of hours – the other kids would have been practising on the track on the Saturday. He would race all day. Then we'd leave about five; stop for a meal; he'd get in the back and go to sleep – and when we got home I'd carry him up to bed. So he used to get two twelve-hour sleeps.'

'I didn't get any. I was usually pretty tired on a Monday,' David adds.

Swanson is interesting on the young Hoy-as-competitor. 'The Chris you see now is nothing like the Chris we saw back then,' he says, smiling. 'He seems very calm now, totally in control and great in the high-pressure situations, but back then there was a kid from Musselburgh [near Edinburgh] who put the fear of God into him.

'His name was Steven McNeil. McNeil always beat Chris in Scotland, though he never went south of the border. But I remember on one occasion we turned up at Chorley, after leaving about three in the morning. Chris and my son Neil went to register and Chris came back almost in tears. "Dad, Dad, Dad!" he said. "What?" says David. "He's here." "Who's here?" "Steven McNeil's here!"'

Swanson laughs: 'He'd seen a red helmet – McNeil always wore a red helmet. But we went and checked – it wasn't McNeil. It was strange, because Chris didn't get involved in the mind games or worrying about his other competitors – apart from one: Steven McNeil. He was his nemesis. If he was there he cracked up. That time at Chorley, Chris didn't want to race. But as soon as we told him he wasn't there he was okay.

'I saw Steven McNeil a couple of years ago,' continues Swanson, 'and I said to him: "If you ever run into Chris, tell him you're thinking about making a comeback and taking up track racing, and watch his face go white."'

Swanson had first spotted Hoy on a BMX when he was seven, and still on his Raleigh Burner. 'He was out of place; everyone else was on proper BMXs, but you're looking at this kid, and he stood out because he was actually keeping up with kids older than him. I went over and spoke to Dave and said, "Do you mind if we try him on a proper BMX bike?"' He became a regular member of the Scotia party that travelled down south. 'They were long weekends,' says Swanson, 'but bloody enjoyable.'

Hoy's competitiveness was apparent to Swanson, which didn't make him unique, but Hoy did stand out in one respect. 'He was a ferocious competitor,' says Swanson, 'they all were. There were lots of tears, tantrums, but what made it worse was you had a van load of kids aged from about seven to ten, and it was fine and dandy if they all won, but if only one or two of them won, then you had a problem. You're trying to be happy for the ones that have won and at the same time not go overboard because of the poor buggers who are sitting there with their noses out of joint. It was a difficult balance.

'Chris's reaction to defeats was interesting, though, because he was different to the others. If my son won, he was hyper. If he was beaten, he wouldn't talk to anybody, especially not me, and he wouldn't be in a mood to listen. Like most kids, it was one extreme or the other. But if Chris was beaten he would have a discussion with his dad about *why* he was beaten: whether he'd made a mistake in the start gate, or Dave geared him wrongly, or he got the line wrong going into the corner – whatever it was, there was always a rational conversation with his dad on the way back up the road, even at eight or nine years old, about why he was beaten. I remember being struck by it at the time. His reaction to getting beaten, or indeed winning, wasn't the reaction you'd get out of other kids of that age. I think some of it was down to Dave. He's not your pushy parent. You'd see a lot of parents getting torn into their kids, shouting, "What happened? I've driven 200 miles to bring you here and you made a complete arse of it!" Dave was always very calm and rational. He's quite technical and logical. He's also one of these great theorists, which could be more a hindrance than a help – sometimes he got carried away with his theories about gear ratios and so on.'

Swanson can only recall one occasion when Hoy became upset and emotional. On the occasion in question they were returning to Scotland following a triumph: Hoy had won, and the handsome gold trophy sat in pride of place on the dashboard of the van. Slowly, though, as they travelled north, the trophy's shape became distorted – it melted. 'The heater was on,' explains Swanson. 'It was plastic,

of course, with a BMX rider on top. Chris was crestfallen when he saw this piece of molten plastic. He was eight and it was like the bottom had dropped out of his world.'

While in Scotland Hoy was 'head and shoulders above everyone' – apart from McNeil – in England it was a different story. There was another nemesis there: Matt Boyle, British champion an incredible twelve years in a row, European champion, and a silver medallist in the world championships. Younger still, and an even bigger player in the BMX scene, was the prodigious David Maw.

Everyone I talked to about BMX-ing mentioned Maw. He was a big star, and a three-time world champion, with an eight-year-old ego – it seems – to match. 'In one race they were all at the start gate, up on the pedals, ready to go, when David Maw sticks his hand up,' recalls Swanson. 'So all the riders have to come down off their pedals, and David Maw starts doing stretching exercises! He was eight years old! The other kids were looking at him, rattled – which was his intention, of course. But he knew how good he was, and it worked. He was unbeatable, huge – there was a BBC documentary made about him.'

Tragically, Maw was killed in a car crash in 2000. And it seems he wasn't the only one – a remarkable number of former BMX prodigies have met untimely deaths. 'It's quite an eerie world,' says Hoy's former rival, Matt Boyle, who continued to race BMX as a professional in America until 1999, when he was twenty-three. 'A lot of people have been and gone.'

Another top rider of the 1980s, who like Boyle went across the Atlantic to continue racing into adulthood, was Jamie Staff. Staff reckons 'you had kids who obviously liked speed, and a bit of danger, when they were young … a few of them certainly got into fast cars.' Staff, like Hoy, persisted with bikes rather than cars and eventually transferred his talents to the velodrome, becoming a mainstay of the British team, alongside Hoy, from 2002.

But the vast majority of the BMX generation were lost to cycling. 'It was booming,' says Staff, 'there were tonnes of tracks, especially in inner cities – Slough, Surbiton, Hounslow. It was a huge scene and anyone could do it. In the late Eighties the nationals at Hounslow would have thousands.'

And then, abruptly, the BMX boom ended. 'It stopped dead,' says Swanson. 'My view is that it never recovered from the recession in the early Nineties,' suggests Staff. 'It was very much a sport that depended on volunteers and families. Everyone's purse strings tightened in the early Nineties and it hit BMX-ing hard. In my age category there was so much talent. I didn't win much – there were about ten guys as good as me, but most of that talent was lost. Only the die-hards remained.

'It's a shame,' continues Staff, 'because I'll argue with anyone, all day long, about the merits of BMX. It's the hardest bike to ride. If you can race a BMX then you can jump on any other bike, in any other discipline, and it's dead easy. It's ironic because we were seen as unprofessional, as kids, to the cycling establishment, but we were very professional. I trained four or five hours a day on my BMX.'

And not only was it good at honing bike-handling skills, for 'it turned what were basically shy kids into fairly outgoing, confident kids,' according to Swanson.

But by the early 1990s there was a new bike on the mass market. The mountain bike was seen as the grown-up version of the BMX, and it threatened to force the BMX into extinction. Yet even in the face of this competition, and while sales of new BMXs plummeted, the race scene survived into the early 1990s. Hoy raced until 1991, switching teams again, trading up, joining the GT Factory Team, and enjoying personal sponsorship from Slazenger and Edinburgh-based exhaust specialists Kwik-Fit.

His sponsorship deal from Kwik-Fit offers another illustration of Hoy's entrepreneurial flair, following the successful fund-raising for his first bike. 'He wrote to Tom Farmer, the Kwik-Fit owner, asking for sponsorship,' says Carol Hoy. 'The headquarters were just down the road from the house. He got a letter back, inviting him to come and meet Mr Farmer.

'His dad went with him and they were ushered into the office. David started to speak, but Tom Farmer interrupted him with, "That's lovely Mr Hoy, but Christopher, tell me why you want this money. Sell it to me."' He did, and was rewarded with a cheque for £1,000 to assist with equipment

and travelling expenses. Sir Tom Farmer, as he is now known, has kept in touch since, writing letters of congratulation to Hoy after the 2002 Commonwealth Games and 2004 Olympics. The owner of one of Edinburgh's two big football clubs – Hibernian – obviously doesn't hold it against Hoy that he is a confessed supporter of the other one, Hearts.

In his new team, Hoy cut a dash in his yellow and blue outfit, emblazoned with GT, Slazenger and Kwik-Fit. But that wasn't a universal opinion. 'I remember Chris because he had dodgy race gear,' says Boyle. 'I was reminded of how bad it was when I looked at some old pictures the other day. There aren't many with Chris in them, but he's always behind me, which is nice.'

In the end, Hoy's BMX career, which spanned 1984 to 1991, and took him from the age of seven to fourteen, saw him ranked number one in Scotland for five years; he was Scottish champion, British number two (to Boyle), European number five and world number nine. Holland, France, Germany, Denmark and Belgium were all race destinations, giving him an early taste of travel and international competition.

David Hoy believes this also helped his education, in the widest sense of the word. 'I remember standing at the Berlin Wall with him before it came down,' says David. 'In some of the big races in Europe there were teams from behind the Iron Curtain, on rubbish bikes, dressed in rags, really, and Chris used to be quite affected by that. I remember him saying, "It's a shame for them Dad, because they're good riders and if they had decent bikes they'd be really good."'

As well as BMX-ing, Hoy declares his other early interests as maths and chess. On his first day at school – George Watson's College in Edinburgh – the head teacher asked whether he had any questions. 'Do you have a chess club?' was his response. He describes maths as 'a hobby' – albeit an unusual one for a five year old. 'When we went to my auntie's I'd ask her to give me sums to do,' says Hoy. 'She'd write down a whole page of them and I'd sit there quite happily doing them. Then I got the Star Wars figures, about 130 of them altogether, and each one had a number next to the figure on the back of the packaging. I memorized the numbers. If you said "Forty-seven" I'd say "Imperial Storm Trooper!" Or you could say "Obe Wan Kanobi" and I'd say "Twenty-three!" I was about five or six at the time. I had weird little autistic tendencies.'

But it could be argued that maths and chess were compatible with BMX-ing: it, too, represented a puzzle that needed to be solved. Chiefly this concerned the start. It was the area that could be improved with thought, analysis and practice – three things that Hoy, even as a youngster, seemed to love. 'The start is what I was known for,' says Boyle. 'My dad taught me at a young age not to wait for the gate to drop – then you're using your eyes. He taught me to look ahead and use my ears – to listen to the command of the starter. And I could tell Chris started doing the same, because he was very quick out of the gate.'

'Chris went out to the track in Livingston, about twenty miles away, twice a week, just to practise his starts,' says David Hoy. 'He'd go over it again and again. It's very similar to the kilo, really. But Chris has always been into the technical side, the minutiae of it. He was always like that, looking into every little thing.'

Hoy senior agrees that BMX racing couldn't have offered a better introduction to sport, and to cycling, from 'learning to ride and race a bike, how to win and how to lose,' and so there are certainly no regrets in the Hoy family about the seven years spent driving up and down the motorways of Britain, often in the company of other kids of different ages and backgrounds, or with Chris sleeping on a piece of foam in the back of the car, while plastic trophies melted on dashboards, with a bike that would be dismantled and rebuilt by dad on the kitchen table in midweek, before the routine was repeated the next weekend.

They were good days, says David – good for Chris, good for Dad, certainly good for father–son bonding. The strength of their relationship now probably owes much to the old BMX-ing days, and their ability back then to calmly, and rationally, analyse the different aspects of performance

together, and to be gracious in victory and in defeat. 'That was the deal with his BMX-ing,' states Carol Hoy unequivocally, 'that if he got beaten he didn't lie on the track and throw his bike away.'

In fact, his father admits that he has only one regret. 'It's a tough, tough life being a cyclist, for very little reward. I wish I'd given him a set of golf clubs when he was a baby.'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.