



TEAM 7-ELEVEN

HOW AN UNSUNG BAND OF AMERICAN CYCLISTS
TOOK ON THE WORLD—AND WON

GEOFF DRAKE
WITH JIM OCHOWICZ

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After I won five speed skating gold medals in the 1980 Winter Olympics, I knew I wanted to stop skating and race bikes full time. I'd always trained on bikes in the summer, and I loved bike racing.

In 1980, my old friend Jim Ochowicz told me he wanted to put together a team. I was getting a lot of publicity for my Olympic medals at the time, and that helped secure a deal. The 7-Eleven cycling team was born.

I had no idea how far we'd go or how much we'd accomplish. Early on we won a lot of races in the United States—mostly criteriums. But Och, as we called him, had bigger aspirations. He wanted to take a U.S.-based pro team to Europe.

And so he did. That first year abroad, 1985, saw a lot of trial and error. We were in way over our heads, and most of the other teams were pretty skeptical of us. If there was an accident, they blamed us first. And they were probably right!

But pretty soon we started winning. First it was stages in the Tour of Italy and then in the Tour de France. All of a sudden the Europeans started thinking, "Hey, these guys are okay."

Now, when I look back at the amazing victories that U.S. riders like Lance Armstrong have had on the world stage, I realize that the

7-Eleven team helped lay the groundwork for that—Americans are now accepted and common in the pro peloton. It's hard for some people to imagine that there was a time when that wasn't true. But we experienced it firsthand, and we helped overcome it, paving the way for the fantastic U.S. successes that continue to this day.

And we had fun doing it. Even now, my 7-Eleven teammates are some of my best friends. The strong bonds continue for all of us. In some ways, I still can't believe all that we accomplished. For me personally, it was like a second life in athletics. I loved every minute of it. Even after I retired, I stayed connected with the team as a physician. And today, I practice medicine with Max Testa, who was our first team doctor.

This book tells the story of that grand adventure. I hope you enjoy reliving those days as much as I have.

—Eric Heiden, M.D., Park City, Utah

I started my bike business in 1980, three years after I stopped racing. Soon after I became aware of the 7-Eleven team, thanks to excellent riders like Andy Hampsten. I was also in contact with the manager, Jim Ochowicz. Jim was a good manager, the team had good results, and I liked the riders. I knew America was an important market for my business, and I became interested in sponsorship. So in 1989, when I had the opportunity, I became the bike sponsor for 7-Eleven (and later, the Motorola team).

The 7-Eleven team was the first U.S. pro squad to make a big impression in Europe, and I noticed right away that it had a good atmosphere, like a big family. These guys were good riders, they adapted well to the types and distances of races we have in Europe, and they were accepted in the European pro peloton. Plus, by the time I was involved, the team wasn't made up of just American riders like Hampsten and Davis Phinney—it also included Europeans like Jens Veggerby. It was a complete team.

I had a special relationship with the 7-Eleven team. They were happy to have somebody with my racing and frame-building experience. I took measurements of the riders and fit all the bikes. That was important. Everyone asked me for help, and I tried to assist

them all. In particular I worked with Andy. We made a lot of changes to his bike, and I think he was happy with the results.

We had a lot of memorable experiences together. I remember being at many of the training camps and races. The guys were very professional.

What's more important, in a bigger context, is that the 7-Eleven team also influenced the sport and made it more international. The fact that there was an American team in Europe made cycling more popular worldwide. It was a great thing that Jim brought the team to Europe and was so successful. And there's no question that the team was an inspiration for cycling in the United States. What came afterward was the Motorola team and then the U.S. Postal team. The 7-Eleven team was the foundation for those later teams.

For me the relationship remains a great memory. I was glad to help them be more successful in Europe, and to see the positive influence they had on the sport as a whole. If I had to do it over, I would make the same choice straightaway!

—Eddy Merckx, Meise, Belgium

In 1992, a week after placing 14th in the Olympic amateur road race in Atlanta, Lance Armstrong rode his first professional cycling race. He did so as a member of the Motorola Cycling Team. Just a year earlier, Motorola had assumed sponsorship of Team 7-Eleven after the famed convenience store chain had been forced to end its 10-year backing.

While Armstrong never rode for the 7-Elevens, at that moment he stood on the shoulders of all they had done. Team 7-Eleven had been the first U.S.-based pro squad to race successfully in Europe. It was the first American professional team to win stages in a major tour and the first to have worn the coveted yellow jersey of the Tour de France. And in a sport dominated for decades by Europeans, the team had paved the way for a new generation of North American cyclists to find their way into the professional ranks.

This is the story of the 7-Eleven team and its contribution to world cycling. Though the book focuses on the men's amateur and pro teams, 7-Eleven reached into almost every corner of the sport during its tenure, sponsoring a women's team, a track team, and numerous junior development teams. To this day, the women's squad is considered to be one of the most successful in history, with stars

like world and national medalists Rebecca Twigg, Connie Paraskevin, and Inga Thompson. The track team, likewise, can claim world and Olympic medalists in its ranks. While these talented athletes are no less deserving of a book, these pages focus on the men's road teams as the genesis of a new generation of American riders who would come to prominence in the 1980s, upending the European hegemony of the sport.

Jim Ochowicz was the person who propelled the whole enterprise forward. He assembled the initial 7-Eleven team, a ragtag collection of amateurs who, in a few short years, completely dominated domestic bike racing. In 1985, aided by an uncanny business sense, sheer tenacity, and more than a little luck, Jim took the whole endeavor to Europe, making significant and long-lasting inroads into what had been, until the arrival of 7-Eleven on the scene, a profoundly insular sport.

Of course, it could be argued that someone of Armstrong's prodigious talent did not need 7-Eleven or any other team breaking trail for him as he blazed his way to the top of the sport. But would he have achieved so much, so soon? Likely not, as Armstrong himself would surely admit.

Such is the prominence of the team that, while only in existence for 10 years, it is still celebrated by cyclists today. On most recreational rides in America, you can still see the iconic red, white, and green jersey of the 7-Eleven squad, and cycling magazines, blogs, and websites never tire of retrospectives on the team's halcyon days.

More than anything, the time of the 7-Eleven team was one of innocence and possibility, in which the vision of one man, and the talents of his riders, could tilt the axis of an entire sport. This is their story.

Chapter One

IN 1980, THERE WERE EXACTLY FOUR PROFESSIONAL BIKE RACERS IN AMERICA. This was not surprising, given that there were no professional events for them to compete in.

Professional cyclists in Europe came up through a series of amateur teams, eventually earning a coveted spot on a prestigious international squad like Renault-Gitane or TI-Raleigh. But to become a pro in America, you didn't need a team. In fact, you didn't even need a bike. You only needed to fill out a one-page form. Nowhere on the form were you required to state your qualifications, race wins, or years of experience. In a few weeks' time, a hand-typed piece of paper would make its way through the mail from a small office outside Philadelphia. For a fee of \$35 and the cost of a stamp, you could become a pro cyclist.

This document would state, in essence, that you were eligible to compete in the Tour de France. That is, if you could find a team willing to have you.

No one would ever claim that cycling in America was a lucrative career. Amateur riders, while more abundant than pros, lived in a state of near poverty; if they earned too much, they would be classified as professionals, making them ineligible for prestigious

events like the Olympics. The very best riders—those who placed consistently in, say, the top five—could expect to make at most \$250 per race. In the course of a long season, a top rider could expect to make \$3,000. These meager winnings would often be accompanied by supplemental prizes, typically samples of the local fare—a jar of honey, apple cider from a nearby farm, a gift certificate to a local shop.

Overhead was considerable. One handmade racing tire, made of silk and latex, cost about \$30, and a rider would need 15 to 20 of those tires to get through the year. Then there was clothing (\$300), a bike (\$1,500), food, travel, lodging, and of course the mountainous quantities of food needed to sustain 20 to 30 hours of training per week. All told, for an investment of 10,000 miles of training and an equal amount of driving, a rider would enjoy the annual earnings of a gas station attendant.

But this was not an equation that a top rider computed or even cared about, for he was doing the thing he loved best. He would train 750 hours a year, ride in every kind of weather, and undergo inestimable pain. He would wash his own clothes, maintain his own bicycle, drive through the night to get to the next race, or suffer the ignominy of sleeping on a friend's floor or in the back of a van. While his body, ravaged by a burn rate of 10,000 calories a day, yearned for wholesome food, he would eat at McDonald's to save a few dollars.

Nor could he expect much in the way of fame or notoriety. While professional riders in Europe were feted as national heroes and celebrated on the front pages of prestigious sports newspapers like France's *L'Équipe* and Italy's *La Gazzetta dello Sport*—papers with hundreds of thousands of daily readers—bike racers of any kind in America were an oddity, members of an esoteric fraternity that existed on the weird fringes of the sporting world. Instead of putting

a race in public view, the emphasis was on reducing the potential nuisance to traffic and inconvenience to the community. It was not uncommon for races to take place at 7 a.m. Sunday in the parking lot of an industrial park. The few spectators were most likely friends and relatives of the cyclists. Cycling in America was the quintessential never-heard-of-it sport.



For a young Davis Phinney, pro cycling was something exotic and alluring, a sport he had read about in coveted issues of *Miroir du Cyclisme*, a famous French racing monthly. As a teenager, he stacked the dog-eared magazines like cordwood in his bedroom, poring over them late at night, trying to divine the essence of the handlebar-banging style of his hero, world champion Freddy Maertens. It was nearly all he could think about.

Phinney's attraction to cycling had come in an epiphany. When he was 15, he went to see a bike race with his father in downtown Boulder, Colorado. As he leaned on the race fencing, his experience was visceral, like nothing he had ever witnessed, a symphony of color and noise that prompted a simple, life-changing declaration. "I just got on my 10-speed and said, 'I'm going to be a bike rider,'" Phinney said. He was very nearly alone in his obsession. "I was the only bike racer in a high school of 200 students."

Ron Kiefel, of nearby Wheat Ridge, Colorado, also felt the gravitational pull of cycling, but for entirely different reasons. As a teenager he struggled with the typical frustrations of adolescence and had tried all the usual sports—baseball, basketball, track—with disheartening results. His father owned a small bike shop, and Kiefel started riding for pleasure and escape. Soon he found himself going out for a trip around the block and coming back six hours later. At

these moments, the world seemed large and limitless. Cycling was an easy pleasure, an elemental source of enjoyment unlike anything he had known, and it helped him overcome the social awkwardness he had been feeling. It was, in short, a form of salvation. “It kept me out of serious trouble,” he said. “All of a sudden I wanted to take care of my body—and *race*.”



Phinney and Kiefel were typical of a new generation of athletes competing in the late '70s, a group of ingenuous and energetic riders on the cusp of something larger than themselves. Bike racing, at that time, was the most improbable path to athletic stardom that could be imagined. Although cycling had been a national passion at the turn of the 20th century, packing Madison Square Garden to the rafters with spectators for six-day track races, it seemed no more popular than lawn bowling by World War II. By the postwar era, cycling had been thoroughly eclipsed as a means of transportation by the automobile and as a sport by America's homegrown big three of baseball, football, and basketball. To be sure, there were a few particularly driven and talented American athletes who left their marks on cycling in the intervening years. Jack Heid, a track racer from New Jersey, won a bronze medal at the world championships in 1949. In the '60s and early '70s, American riders like Sheila Young-Ochowicz, Audrey McElmury, John Howard, and Jackie Simes III won medals at the Pan American Games and world championships. While these riders were deserving heroes to their brethren—the people who knew and raced bikes themselves—they were utterly unknown to America at large.

Meanwhile, the sport thrived in Europe. Bike racers were feted as heroes, and tens of thousands of cheering fans lined the roads for

three-week-long races, called “grand tours,” in France and Italy. For cyclists in America, the Tour de France was unimaginable. Its fantastic dimensions—a 21-day race over thousands of miles of city streets and country roads, through vineyards and villages, in heat and cold, from the sea to the Alps—fomented an irresistible attraction. In the late ’70s, when American riders like Jonathan Boyer and George Mount went off to try their fortunes as European pros, they might as well have been going to fight in a foreign war, far from the view of their native country. In general, when American riders arrived on the scene in Europe, they were considered interlopers and returned home chastised and exhausted.

But the irony and beauty of the bike rider’s circumstances were that poverty and anonymity would not deter him. Quite the contrary; it would make him stronger, hungrier, more willing to submit to the pain that is the constant currency of racing. For elite American racers, these many sacrifices put a fine edge on their existence, defining their lives against a backdrop of convention and normalcy.

When young riders like Phinney and Kiefel took up cycling as part of a new generation, they were propelled by a feeling as powerful as anything they had ever experienced, though they hardly understood it: a simple and uniquely American love of riding the bicycle. They immersed themselves in an insular and ritualistic world, helping to resurrect a sport that had languished for decades in the United States. While these riders were aware and respectful of what had come before, it was a sport they would necessarily remake in their own image.

European racing, for decades, was a proletarian discipline, an exit ramp from the hardscrabble existence of being a shopkeeper, miner, or farmer. But this new generation of American riders came from circumstances of comfort and convenience. Their parents were

academics, lawyers, engineers. If these young men were to forgo college for racing, as many of them did, it would be an act of volition rather than necessity. They were prepared to work hard, to be sure. But it would be hard work of their choosing, and it would be viewed through a uniquely American prism of enjoyment and even indulgence. They were the progenitors of a new sport, stewards of a pastime that was waiting to be reborn and popularized in a way that had not occurred since the earliest days of the bicycle.

For these athletes, the thought of a career in cycling seemed improbable at best. For the average rider, contemplating the road ahead, there always seemed to be another level, just out of reach. In the United States, cyclists are divided into “categories,” based on accumulated placings. A good rider is a Category III or II. Above that is Category I—essentially national caliber—of which there are only a handful in any given state. Beyond that lies a select group of U.S. professionals. And beyond that are those professionals who might be able to stake a claim in Europe. Even today, their numbers are small. Before 7-Eleven came on the scene, they could be counted on one hand.



Phinney, Kiefel, and their contemporaries did not stop to contemplate past failures or the preposterous odds against making any kind of career in bicycle racing. It didn’t seem like there was any road that could get them there, but that didn’t matter. In bike racing, if one confronts the enormity of what lies ahead—if you look at the endless switchbacks that snake to the top of an 8,000-foot pass—the task seems impossible, too large to even consider. So they did not. They loved the act of riding a bike, drew pleasure from the discipline and the pain. They put their heads down, and they raced.

But inborn talent and youthful bravado were not in themselves sufficient for success on the world stage. Even the most gifted athletes cannot will themselves to victory. While isolation and independence drove the athletes, there wasn't a single one who thought, at some point, that his efforts shouldn't be worth more, that sacrifice and physical prowess should amount to something in this world. Hard work was always a tool they had at their disposal, but it was not sufficient.

Cycling, perhaps even more than other sports like running, did not exist in a pure and unfettered universe. The sport required money, and lots of it. The athletes needed coaching and organization to channel—and, in the case of many of them, to rein in—their exuberance. They needed the best equipment and the wherewithal to travel and compete.

It wasn't so much that *they* deserved it, as athletes. It was that the *sport* deserved it. Surely, the beauty, pathos, and pain of bicycle racing could appeal to anyone. Someday, they thought, it would get the attention it deserved.

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In 1980, there were exactly four professional bike racers in America. Six years later, an American cycling team would capture the coveted yellow jersey of the Tour de France. That same team would go on to win Italy's greatest race—the Giro d'Italia—in 1988. *Team 7-Eleven* is the extraordinary story of how two Olympic speed skaters, Jim Ochowicz and Eric Heiden, pulled together a handful of amateur cyclists and turned them into one of the greatest cycling teams the sport has known. From humble beginnings in a Pennsylvania barn to soaring victories in the French Alps, *Team 7-Eleven* is the complete history that has never been fully told—until now.

