

Prologue

I'd like to think that Jules Verne would have laughed and loved the audacity of someone powering himself around the planet on a bicycle in fewer than eighty days.

The 145-year-old fiction of *Around the World in 80 Days* has now become a reality in a way Verne's Victorian readership wouldn't have believed possible. But it has to be said that an audience in the first half of 2017 remained hard to convince, even though the plan, on paper, looked simple enough.

To get around the world in 80 days, I needed to average 240 miles a day. Imagine pedalling from the Forth Road Bridge to Liverpool, or London to Plymouth, or more than New York to Boston, every day for two and a half months. To make this sustainable, every single day you'd have to be in the saddle for sixteen hours and get about five hours' sleep.

My team set about obliterating the previous 18,000-mile circumnavigation world record of 123 days. And we came full circle in a time of 78 days, 14 hours and 40 minutes, working off a plan of seventy-five days' riding, three days of flights and two days' contingency – we just didn't use the entire contingency.

Now that I have written the conclusion on the first page, we can get down to business. Behind the headlines and the hype, and before I have told the story a thousand times, I want to catalogue what this project actually felt like, how glorious but terrifying it was – and that was before I turned a single pedal. I also want to acknowledge properly that, like the front man in a band, I get the lion's share of the profile and credit for what was actually an amazing team performance.

As I write this prologue, just months after the finish, there is already a sense of inevitability about the 80 Days, as if it were always on the horizon, the next prize to be claimed in endurance cycling. No, it wasn't. People thought it was a crazy ambition. Success only looks inevitable with the privilege of retrospect. There was no reference point for riding this fast, nothing in the history of endurance cycling that people could latch on to and say, 'Well, if that was possible, this should be possible.' I was asking people around me to believe in a massive leap in performance, and that takes a quiet confidence in your ability, a healthy dose of obsession and a bloody good plan.

The romantic notion of record-breaking is that you throw everything at 'the impossible' and figure out what is possible. You figure out physically what you are capable of and mentally how strong you are in the heat of battle. The reality is that after years of planning, we read a plan from a script. That rather mundane description doesn't seem to account for all the rotten luck, including four crashes, serious storms and delays on borders, not to mention the uncertainty of even getting to the start line. Being more objective, we must have had as much 'good luck' as 'bad luck'.

Let me say up front, I will not be cycling around the world a third time. This is the first time in my career I feel like I have nothing to prove to myself in terms of endurance, that the 80 Days was not a stepping stone to 'what's next'. Despite the self-limiting logic of our target, this really does feel like my personal best. I suffered hugely, and my team's commitment to the task was incredible to witness. Furthermore, I would happily mentor anyone who wants to break my record. I am not precious about it in the slightest. In fact, I applaud the audacity of whoever comes next.

Since my return to Paris on 18 September 2017, the reaction from the world's press and the public has been extraordinary. After living in a performance bubble for months, to stop and appreciate the wider perspective on my team's furious progress, and the interest in it, has been incredible. But why would so many people care how fast I can ride a bicycle around the world? And I am not talking about the cycling press. Why would the *Financial Times* write five features on this human endeavour, and why would the finale be watched by over 300,000 people

on Facebook? Maybe because we are all fascinated by human aspiration, with one eye on the mirror, wondering what *we* are capable of. It's a perspective on our own personal milestones.

Peddalling the planet in under eighty days makes our world seem both gigantic, when I remember the endurance and suffering, and somewhat smaller than before, when I zoom out to consider the entire race. I certainly hope it is a journey that gives people confidence of their own to be bold, to be disruptive (in a good way), to attempt to redefine what is possible.