



Off to the Races

Samuel Abt

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A writer who has covered a particular sport for a quarter century gains a certain perspective that a typical “beat” reporter seldom does. In this book, the author shares his intimate knowledge of professional bicycle racing, and twenty-five years’ worth adds up to produce a special treat. An associate editor at the International Herald Tribune and the author of ten books on bicycle racing, Abt has also written hundreds of articles on the sport. He has profiled the greatest riders and the idealistic hopefuls pedaling for fame, and he has caught a few on their way downhill, hanging onto the sport and the way of life they love for as long as they can.

Drawing from this incredible store of text, Abt provides in this collection a unique timeline of bicycle racing and its players and teams. He is not afraid to go for the jugular, and he doesn’t play favorites. In a 1992 article, Italian racer Claudio Chiappucci is profiled as he achieves star status in his native land and is described as a crown prince. But Abt’s tone changes in a 2001 follow-up article titled “Clown Prince.” A vain, publicity-hungry Chiappucci, long in the tooth in a young man’s game, is washed up. “What he seemed not to understand was that his time was over,” Abt writes. When Chiappucci reluctantly announces his retirement, most people are startled that “he had still considered himself a racer.”

Abt covers races that snake through hundreds of villages and cities in countries all over the world; those communities give each racing event its own distinct personality. Abt depicts that character by painting portraits of these landscapes with words. A French racer experiences a cultural awakening in Malaysia (not known for bike racing) when he sees “open-air shops selling dried cuttlefish and squid, star fruit and coconuts.”

For another article, Abt accompanies “the broom wagon” during the famous Tour de France, tagging along with the vehicle assigned to pick up the frustrated stragglers and the injured, sharing a view that most people never even consider.

Abt’s journal provides a ground-level look at a fascinating sport from the keen eye of a journalist who knows how to capture it all in an exciting way on the printed page.

KARL KUNKEL (May / June 2002)

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