

## Honour in pedalling for all you're worth

Date July 21, 2012     Tony Wright     National affairs editor of *The Age*

OF ALL the sporting events splashed across our television screens these days, the most mesmerising is the Tour de France. It is not simply the sweeping shots of gorgeous French countryside, rustic villages so seductive that they infect the viewer with a yen to leap on a plane right away and hire a Renault. It's not even the hijinks of over-enthusiastic spectators lining the winding roads, frantically flapping flags and running alongside the riders, yelping in all manner of languages.

It is the tenacity evident on the faces of the bicyclists gulping great lungfuls of air as they grind up apparently endless mountains in the Pyrenees.

Those faces twist into portraits of agony on the longest and hardest climbs, and melt into a mix of determined terror and euphoria as their machines rocket down the other side, the riders fearful of using their brakes too much lest the rims of their wheels heat to the point that the glue binding their tyres liquefies, leading to disaster.

So unwavering are these madmen that even after a fall that would have most of us carried away to hospital, they remount and summon doctors perched on the pillion seats of motorcycles who lean across at speed, patch their wounds, scrape the gravel from torn legs and stem the flow of blood, the rider all the while pumping away, trying to make up for lost time.

It goes on for three weeks, the riders covering around 3200 kilometres, their every muscle and heartbeat straining beyond ordinary imagination.

There is prestige at stake, and money, and much esoterica: the yellow jersey for the leader, the white for the best young rider, the polka-dot for the king of the mountains, the number printed white-on-red rather than black-on-white for the most combative rider. Drugs, too, here and there, the busted cheats dishonoured, though it seems hard to imagine that a human body could withstand the sort of thrashing handed out by the Tour de France without assistance.

The tour, though, is surely more metaphor than mere sporting event.

Here is the human condition both stretched and condensed to its extreme: the requirement for adaption to all manner of conditions, from blazing heat to freezing fog, from deep valley to mountain top, from hard slog to freewheeling ecstasy. Day after day.

The potential for breakdown hovers around every corner. Tyres puncture and riders get tangled in multiple unpredictable pile-ups. Illness and injury must be shrugged aside, though even the most stalwart can be struck down by circumstance too cruel to allow them to continue.

In the end, victory eludes almost all, but honour is attached to the mere finishing of this long punishment.

The Tour de France, in short, is capable of both inspiring and reassuring us all, for here, concentrated into a few absurdly intense weeks, is life itself. Talent, strength and tenacity is worth much, but persistence is worth more, and the acceptance of unexpected misfortune is a treasure beyond price.

There are the unsung people everywhere who do precisely this, reaching into the well of the human spirit to drive onwards. Parents of disabled children, those disabled or injured themselves, the heartbroken, the poverty stricken, the hungry, the grieving.

Even more unsung are the very aged, who have survived all the trials of their long ride and have learnt that the finishing line is the least of the race. They will get to it when they get to it.

Yet in all this, the Tour de France's most important lesson resides in the modest shadows.

Those few riders who have been granted the gifts that might elevate them to glory have no chance at all if they are not supported by a loyal and hard-working team.

The names of those team riders who work for their leader - always there to urge him through the toughest stretches, taking turns to fly in front to take the brunt of the air, giving him the mercy of tucking in to a draft, blocking chasing riders to give their man a fighting chance out front, and riding alongside to lift both his spirits and the rate of his progress - are hardly known to most of us.

They are the labourers, the believers, the selfless ones. The French have even given them a title: 'domestique'. It means, literally, servant.

Such a term underplays their importance.

Far beyond the Tour de France, the rest of us, if we are to survive with any measure of contentment, rely on domestiques every day. They are no mere servants: they are the members of our families, our friends and the occasional stranger who might offer a little assistance or a cheering word.

Without them, the finishing line is always very far away and every climb is tougher than it need be. Left without a team, we founder, whether we be a political leader or an everyday citizen trying to get by.

Each of us, in the end, is - or ought to be - a domestique, for it is they who make the wheels go round, even if they win no obvious glory.