

# Deconstructing Le Tour

*Strategies for watching the world's most famous bicycle race in person*

It's July, and of the various offerings the sports world dishes up this month, the one that is sometimes mysterious to the American sports audience is the Tour de France. Those Americans who are lucky enough to be in France at the time of the race often ask two questions: "How do I watch the Tour de France?" and the more philosophical "Why should I?"

Let me preface this by saying that I am not a cycling guy. Therefore, I approach the Tour de France the way a general sports fan approaches the race. But I have been lucky enough to see several tours in the past five years from different vantage points and can offer my amateur perspective.

By far, the greatest viewing experience at the Tour de France is to see a mountain stage. And if you pick one of the legendary mountain stages, there is nothing like it in professional sports. Alpe d'Huez, where the tour has a stage every three years or so, is the ultimate in this category. On the 14-kilometer road up the mountain there may be as many as 700,000 people lined up five deep the entire way up. Think "Barack Obama campaign rally" for nine straight miles. The course is full of hairpin turns and is a brutal climb so the riders are going slow enough to focus on, and it is at the end of a long day during which the competitors have already gone up and down other mountains. You can see suffering in their faces, you can see their character being tested, and you can appreciate what they have done from a distance of only a few feet away as they go by. And mountain stages offer one monstrous party—ignited by those who have staked their claim to their viewing perch many days in advance.

At some point in your life, it is worth watching the tour pass through a small town. To me, the essence of

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by Bob Latham

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the tour is its ability to be both the marquee event of its sport and remarkably accessible. You can sit in a pub in the middle of a small French village and watch on TV so you have an idea of when the riders will be coming. When the lead rider is about half an hour away, you walk down the street or to the outskirts of town

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with several hundred people. The parade cars go by first, and then 190 of the greatest endurance athletes in the world come pedaling through your town.

You can't believe how fast they are going, especially when it looked so effortless on television. You can't believe how closely packed together they are, and how interdependent they are on no one's doing anything stupid. The downside of watching the Tour de France like this is that unless there is a breakaway from the peloton, on these flat stages the whole pack goes by in about 20 seconds.

Watching the Tour de France at the end point of a stage is another option. Most stages finish in a moderately sized and hospitable town where a grandstand will be set up for viewing the race. There are several advantages to this scenario. First, you get to see the riders actually racing at the end. Second, you gain an appreciation for the operational details that go into organizing this event. It's like the circus moving to a new town every day—broadcast trucks, team trucks, sponsor trucks, souvenir trucks, grandstands, restraining fences, etc.

And you see a podium ceremony with all of its rituals.

If you want to see as many riders individually as you possibly can, a time-trial stage may be the ideal solution for you. You're guaranteed a close-up view of each rider because they go by on their own, having started three minutes apart. This provides something to watch over a much longer period of time—hours as opposed to minutes. The downside, of course, is that you only get to see the riders race against the clock and not against each other.

The image of the Tour de France that many Americans have is Paris on the final day when riders do multiple laps around the Champs Elysees.

This is the only place where you get to see them go by more than once. Of course the race is usually decided by this point and the stage is largely ceremonial.

The upside to being in Paris is that the final podium ceremony is special. The setting in the middle of the Champs Elysees with the Arc de Triomphe in the background provides one of the great backdrops in sport. Surprisingly, despite the number of fans watching the final stage, Paris is not the mess you'd think it would be on this day. It's possible to go perhaps a mile from the finish line and have a relatively quiet dinner outdoors.

To move from the practical to the metaphysical, why watch the Tour de France? What these guys do on a daily basis over a period of more than three weeks is absolutely superhuman. It doesn't take long before you appreciate the level of endurance, the tactics and strategy, the teamwork, the courage and even a pleasant degree of nationalism. ■

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