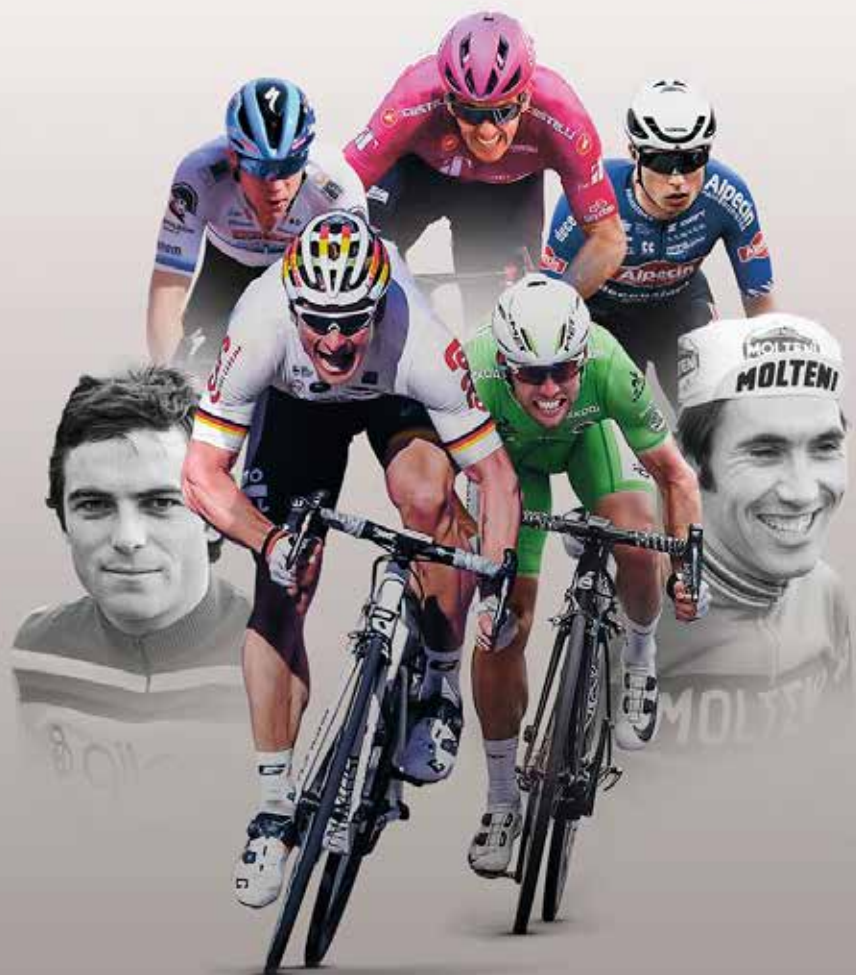


SPRINTERS

AND THE
ART OF SPEED



THE STORY OF THE FASTEST
RIDERS IN THE PELOTON

LUKE WILLIAMS

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Chapter One

Early Days

AS FAR as disciplines or specialities go in cycling, sprinting is one of the oldest both on and off the road. The urge to beat one another in a race is something that athletes have been doing since the dawn of humanity, though it took much longer for us to be able to compete on two wheels. The earliest records of competitive sprinting date back to the 1800s, though the practice was more common on the velodrome as opposed to on the road where races in this era were often won by huge margins, therefore not requiring a sprint finish. The men's sprint has been a feature of the Olympic Games since the inaugural modern games took place in 1896, with the women's version finally being introduced in 1988.

In this section we will be looking at some of the careers of the pioneers of sprinting, from the pre-Tour de France era of cycling all the way up to the end of what many describe as the pre-modern period that ended with major tactical and aerodynamic advancements.

The 1896 Olympic Games

In a short, we'll be looking at some of the earliest legends of sprinting and what made them so integral to its development as a speciality and discipline within cycling. The place we should begin, however, is the very first modern Olympic Games. Held in Athens (the birthplace of the ancient games that had taken place many years earlier), there were just five nations present to do battle on the track for the first time. Athletes from Great Britain, France, Greece, Austria and Germany raced each other across six disciplines, including the sprint.

The format of the race was slightly different to how it is today as all five finalists competed at the same time across a distance of two kilometres. This equated to six laps of the Athens velodrome. This distance made the race a tactical affair, with each rider desperate to get the jump on their rivals before the closing lap. The heavier bikes made this even more important, as whoever carried the momentum into the finale was almost certain to take home the gold medal. In the end, it was France who reigned supreme as their cycling talisman Paul Masson took the win. His team-mate Léon Flemming took third and Greece's Stamatios Nikolopoulos came home to claim silver. For Masson it was the start of a stellar Olympic campaign; the young Frenchman would go on to win two more golds in the time trial and ten kilometre endurance race respectively. At the time it was widely presumed that Masson would go on to become one of the greatest bike racers of all time – at just 19 years old

in 1896 he certainly had plenty of time to deliver on this promise.

Prior to his Olympic exploits, Masson was rejected by the French national team selection committee ahead of the 1895 World Championships; however, this made him more determined than ever to prove himself on the world stage.

Masson was something of an eccentric character, changing his name to Nassom (merely his own name spelt backwards) after competing in Greece. He would go on to compete under this guise for the rest of his career. Perhaps the change in name was what diminished his powers, as Masson would never be able to match his Olympic performances. New names began to spring up across the world and cycling began growing in stature with each passing season. Despite this fall from grace, Masson rediscovered some of his form two years later as he took a creditable bronze medal in the sprint at the World Championships in Scotland.

While it may seem like a dramatic drop-off in form, the peculiar thing is that none of the medallists from the 1896 Olympic Games went on to win very much after the Games. At the 1900 Games in London there were only three official events, each with a different medallist from four years prior. The French dominated once more, Georges Taillandier winning in the sprint.

It would take another 84 years for female athletes to be given a chance to show themselves on two wheels. The 1984 Games held in Los Angeles introduced the women's road race and homelander Connie Carpenter

became the first female cyclist to win gold in modern Olympic history. In 1988, the first women's sprint was held as the Soviet Union's Erika Salumäe took the honours in Seoul.

The history of sprinting is intrinsically linked to the history of the modern Olympic Games, at least in its earlier days – as we will go on to explore over the coming pages.

Major Taylor – American legend

While there were plenty of bike races held across Europe for much of the late 1800s, the sport was still in its infancy in the United States when Major Taylor first took to the track as an amateur in 1894. Taylor was a pioneer of the sport in the US for a host of reasons, one of them being his African-American heritage that led to him facing racial prejudice throughout his racing career as was sadly the norm for black athletes at this time. Given the segregation laws that still persisted in the country, Taylor often faced discrimination in terms of who he was allowed to compete against and would sometimes face abuse from his fellow riders while racing. In his autobiography Taylor wrote at length about his experiences with racism as a black athlete, citing it as one of the major reasons for his somewhat premature retirement from cycling in 1910. Despite all these negative experiences, Taylor still enjoyed a glittering career in terms of personal success.

In the earliest days of his professional career, the Indianapolis-born rider competed in the now legendary

Six Day events and soon began to build a fierce reputation thanks to some top performances at venues such as Madison Square Garden in New York. At this time, the Six Day events were not as organised as they are today. Competitors were often forced to stay awake by promoters and paying fans that wanted to push the riders to new extremes with every passing year in order to sell more tickets. The riders didn't mind this too much at the time, though, as the more tickets that they sold, the higher their cut of the prize money would be if they won. For reference, the victor of the 1896 Six Days of New York covered a staggering 3,070 kilometres over the course of the competition and took home a healthy \$5,000 prize (which would be worth nearly \$180,000 in 2023).

Soon after, Taylor stopped competing in such gruelling events and instead focused on sprinting. The American became the first from his country to become world champion in the discipline, in 1899, and was also the only black rider to hold the title for many years after. Taylor took his one and only World Championship by beating compatriot Tom Butler and Frenchman Courbe d'Outrelon in a three-up dash for the line that was decided by a matter of centimetres; the chances are that it would have been a photo finish in the modern day. Taylor then proceeded to reinforce his credentials as the fastest rider in the world by winning the American National Championship the following year.

Given his talent it was hardly a surprise that Taylor had become a star across the Atlantic Ocean, with fans

from Europe desperate to see the American compete more often against the best their nations had to offer. This challenge excited Taylor, though a short-lived spell in Europe yielded less success than back home and he soon returned to racing in the US. His successes soon began to become fewer and farther between as the 1910s came into view and Taylor subsequently retired in 1910 at the age of 32. The last win of his career came seven years later though, with him crossing the line first at a veterans' race in New Jersey that saw him once again best many of the riders that he had competed against in his prime. That must have been sweet.

Major Taylor remains the greatest American-born sprinter of all time and is an inspiration to up-and-coming track riders from across the country to this day. It's a shame he never had the chance to prove himself at the Tour de France that was still some way off being created when Taylor was racing. He died just two years after the inaugural edition took place.

Charles Pélissier and the 1930 Tour

Sprinting on the road is something that has really been around since the dawn of cycling if you look at it from a certain perspective. At a base level, cycling is a sport that simply pits a number of riders against each other with the aim of being the first to cross the finishing line. This means that even since the days of Maurice Garin, the winner of the very first stage of the inaugural Tour de France in 1903, there have been sprints for the line.

At this point in history, the term ‘sprinters’ wasn’t really a thing as riders had to cover such long distances at races that they simply didn’t have the capacity for explosive finishes. This all changed by the beginning of the 1930s, though, as the first ‘pure sprinter’ came into existence.

The 1930 Tour de France hailed in a new era of racing at the world’s biggest race, as it saw a significant rule change that outlawed trade teams in favour of those organised by nationality. At the time this was viewed by some as a deliberate ploy by the race organisers to ensure more French success at their home race. Then Tour director Henri Desgrange had begun to tire of the riders employing race tactics, as he believed that the Tour de France should be an event that is won via individual prowess and not through the help of a team packed with talent. By this point it was too late to prevent this.

It can be easy to refer to things as being revolutionary these days; however, the 1930 Tour was just that. For me, it was the beginning of the Tour de France as we recognise it today. This was due to the increased coverage of the race in its home country. Radio broadcasts brought news of the stage results each day, helping bring the French public closer to the race than ever before. There was also a commercial caravan present at the race for the first time – if you have ever been on the side of the road at the Tour, you’ll be familiar with the tirade of useless junk that gets thrown your way off the side of a lorry nowadays.

From a racing point of view though, this is where the true revolution came about. Talented Frenchman Charles Pélissier came to the Tour off the back of an impressive career in cyclocross. This was commonplace for many of the best riders of the era as the discipline was ideal for men that had worked on their bikes during the First World War. The raw power needed to succeed in these early cyclocross events also helped the competitors become some of the strongest riders on the road. This is still true today as riders such as Wout van Aert and Mathieu van der Poel have transferred their cyclocross skills on to the road, becoming top sprinters in the process.

Pélissier was born in the French capital of Paris in 1903, the same year that the race he was destined to dominate 27 years later was created. Charles was the youngest of three siblings, all of whom became professional cyclists, in the 1920s and 30s. His brothers, Henri and Felix, were no slouches either as both were renowned for their abilities on the cobbles of northern France. In 1921, the two older Pélissier brothers achieved an unparalleled feat of cycling brilliance when they pulled off a legendary 1-2 at Paris–Roubaix.

At this time, Charles was still young and was dreaming of emulating his famous brothers' impressive achievements. While Charles never did win Paris–Roubaix, it can be argued that he had bigger fish to fry at the Tour de France.

Alongside the might of the French national team, Pélissier was considered to be the fastest finisher anywhere in the world and would have the support of

his team-mates when they weren't protecting eventual yellow jersey winner André Leducq. From the outset it was clear that Pélissier was one of the strongest riders at the race; some even believed that he could make a challenge for the overall victory before the action had got underway.

On the first stage of the race from his hometown of Paris to Caen, Pélissier bested all-comers and took his first stage win at the Tour de France as well as the first yellow jersey of the race, becoming the third of his name to do so. Pélissier's main rival at the race, Italian Learco Guerra, took the spoils the next day before the Frenchman hit back on stage three into Brest.

At the climax of stage six, it looked as though Pélissier had already completed his hat-trick of stage wins after crossing the line first in Bordeaux; however, after an inspection from the race organisers it was deemed that he had cheated on his way to victory. Pélissier was spotted pulling on the back of Italian legend Alfredo Binda's jersey when he made his last dash for the line, and he was subsequently relegated to last place for his infringement.

It was soon time to head into the mountains though, which is where Pélissier would really begin to come unstuck. As a sprinter, he had to carry a much larger frame over the peaks of the Pyrenees and would drop a lot of time as soon as the road began to head skywards. Despite this relative weakness, Pélissier still managed to hold on to a place inside the top ten all the way to the finish in Paris as he ended the race in ninth.

After making it over the climbs, Pèlissier helped himself to another two wins on stages 10 and 11 before his team-mate Léducq secured the overall victory with a commanding display on stage 16 of the race from Grenoble to Evian.

The French had dominated their home race, with this success made even sweeter by Pèlissier taking four consecutive sprint victories to close out the three weeks of competition. This record stood alone until 1999 when Italian sprinter Mario Cipollini repeated it – nobody has ever taken five stage wins in a row.

As for Pèlissier, he would go on to take another five stage wins the following year as well as two more in the 1935 event. This took his tally to 16 career stage wins at the Tour de France, not bad for a rider that many believed to be the least talented of the Pèlissier brothers.

The success of the French team at the 1930 Tour was enough to convince Desgrange that the national team format was the way forward for his race, with it remaining this way until 1969.

Rik Van Looy – the Showman

As time went on, sprinters became more common in the professional peloton as trade teams and national federations alike saw them as valuable commodities that could increase their haul of prize money and coverage at races across the season. Long after Pèlissier had retired, Belgian rider Rik Van Looy burst on to the scene. A rider with a multifaceted skillset, Van Looy was the first real superstar sprinter of the pre-modern era. To most casual

fans he is best known for being the first cyclist in history to conquer all five of the sport's 'monuments' as well as a host of other one-day races throughout his career.

His abilities as a sprinter were what made these impressive triumphs possible though. The man known by many in Belgium as the 'Emperor of Herentals' was a rather vain character in his prime. Van Looy would often be pictured kissing young women at the finish line following the latest of his seemingly endless barrage of victories, as well as being known for kissing his large muscles on his way to various successes. In some way, Van Looy was a trendsetter for the modern mould of a sprinter, as it is now widely accepted that to be a successful finisher you need to have a level of arrogance to your style of racing. One only needs to look at riders such as Peter Sagan, Mario Cipollini and Mark Cavendish to see how this can often translate into winning races.

Van Looy's rise to the top of the world of cycling was pretty typical for the era. He twice won the Belgian amateur road race championships before taking part in the 1952 Olympic Games in Helsinki where he took home a gold medal for his country. The following year, the Flandrien made the step up to being a full-time professional on the road and duly took a couple of wins before his dominance of sprinting became apparent by the mid-1950s.

The following decade soon became his own, with him winning a plethora of races with every passing season. Despite his success it took Van Looy until 1962

to take on the Tour de France. By this point in his career Van Looy was a seasoned professional with dozens of prestigious victories to his name, including two World Championship titles. There are a number of reasons why Van Looy stayed away from France for so long, however; the key thing to consider is that at this time he rode for an Italian team that wanted him to compete at the Giro d'Italia.

The same year as his first foray into France, Van Looy had made the move to the Flandria–Faema–Clément team. He quickly felt more at home with the Belgian outfit. He also had more of a say as to which riders would be there to support him in achieving his biggest aims for the season. While a sprinter at heart, Van Looy was also a talented puncheur and could often mix it with the best in the hills and lower mountains. Before the race had even begun, pre-race favourite Jacques Anquetil was cited as saying that Van Looy was the only rival that concerned him. In the end, Van Looy's first tilt at the yellow jersey was ended by a crash involving one of the support motorbikes that was riding alongside the group containing the Belgian. After attempting to continue for a short while it was decreed that Van Looy would not be able to finish the stage.

A year later Van Looy returned to France with the aim of dispelling the demons of the previous edition as he targeted success in both the general classification and points classification. After taking four impressive stage wins, Van Looy won the green jersey with ease. The man from Herentals ended the race with a lead of

over 100 points from his nearest challenger, Anquetil. Alongside his sprinting triumphs, Van Looy also took home the award as the most combative rider of that edition after constantly attacking and hitting the front whenever he could. This level of tenacity also earned him his first top ten overall finish at the race.

Van Looy continued to win stages at the Tour de France for the rest of his career, picking up another four stages up until his retirement in 1970.

For me, Van Looy should be remembered as one of the first real dynamos of the sprinting world. He also represents some of what sprinting looks like today as he wasn't simply a muscular brute that barged his way to the finish – though he could do it when required – no, he was a versatile rider that could bring himself success on almost any given day. There's something of the Rik Van Looy about Wout van Aert wouldn't you say?

Eddy Merckx – the Cannibal

If the 1960s were the era of Van Looy, then the 70s belonged to the great Eddy Merckx. Known as the 'Cannibal', Merckx was a winning machine, the likes of which we will probably never see again. Born in the Brabant region of Belgium in 1945, Merckx was a sports fanatic from the start, investing his time into becoming a talented all-round athlete from a young age. One of these sports was cycling, with his parents buying him his first bike at the age of just three. Like most young riders, Merckx had to prove himself in the amateur ranks before making the step up to being a professional.

Upon turning 16, Merckx could legally register for a racing licence and wasted no time in getting stuck into the action at a number of local events. It was clear from the start that the kid had talent, with him taking his first win at a small race in Wallonia in 1961. After choosing to dedicate his life to cycling, Merckx's record continued to improve – he won a number of amateur races around Belgium for the next few years and was soon granted a place in the Belgian national setup for the 1964 Olympic Games.

The following season, Merckx made the transition into being a professional road racer and signed with the Solo-Superia team that was headed by Rik Van Looy. Racing alongside a star like Van Looy wasn't all Merckx had hoped for, however, as he often faced ridicule from his team-mates due to some peculiar habits that they believed the future great had. Despite this challenging time, the youngster still managed to take a handful of victories that earned him a move to Peugeot-BP-Michelin in 1966.

After floating around a number of teams in the late 60s, Merckx signed with the Molteni squad in 1971, by which point he was already a multiple Grand Tour winner. This is perhaps what sets Merckx apart from every other 'sprinter' in history, as he wasn't really one. The Belgian was a serial winner on all kinds of terrain and could sometimes be impossible to beat; it was at some points possible that Merckx had the attributes to win every single stage of the Tour de France. He was simply that good. Merckx's time with Molteni is what

many fans will recognise as his best era. The Flandrien hero would go on to take another four yellow jerseys during his time with the Italian outfit, alongside a host of other triumphs that simply cannot all be listed here. For reference, Merckx is believed to have won around 500 races during the entirety of his racing career, a statistic that remains mind-boggling to this day. It is true that riders tended to compete in more events during this era of cycling; however, having the ability to keep on winning at the rate that Merckx did for so long is something that we will never witness in the modern era.

Merckx's record of 34 stage wins at the Tour de France was once believed to be an unassailable advantage over anyone attempting to chase it, but in 2021 Mark Cavendish managed to overcome the odds and match the record set by the greatest cyclist of all time.

Freddy Maertens – ‘the other guy’

In any era that was said to be dominated by one person, there is almost always somebody that is considered ‘the other guy’, and in the case of professional cycling that man was Freddy Maertens. Born in Nieuwpoort, Flanders in 1952, the young Maertens came from a hard-working industrial town that epitomised this part of the world following the Second World War. Maertens was renowned for his intelligence; even at a young age he could speak a number of different languages, which would prove beneficial once he eventually turned professional.

Like his rival Merckx, Maertens was well versed in a range of sports and activities before he finally settled on cycling as his primary objective in his mid-teens. As a rider, Maertens modelled himself on the earlier Belgian professionals such as Rik Van Looy and rode in a go-for-broke style on many occasions. Unlike many of his rivals, Maertens would turn up to races with a huge gear that would allow him to steamroll his way through to the front of the pack on most days. His power levels made him an ideal sprinter who would also succeed in time trials. This is something that still happens today on occasion as many top sprinters have also enjoyed good days out on prologue style courses that can sometimes suit their riding style more than traditional TT specialists.

Maertens's amateur career was spent with a lot of his formative years racing in unlicensed races across Belgium and it wasn't until 1968 that he was granted an amateur racing licence. The Belgian's strained relationship with his father made racing difficult for the youngster to begin with as he struggled for guidance both on and off the bike. Maertens would go on to win an impressive 21 races in his first amateur season despite his family troubles; however, it would be another three years until he made the jump up to being a full-time professional. For Maertens, these family-related issues would never really go away as he struggled with his finances for many years during his career, which put pressure on many of his personal relations.

Upon making the move into the professional ranks, Maertens wasted no time in establishing himself as a

rider that wouldn't shy away from the challenge of trying to better Merckx. The 21-year-old became somewhat ostracised by his fellow professionals for ignoring many of the standard procedures that newbies to the sport had to endure in their first season. His rivalry with Merckx was growing in the shadows for much of those early years but exploded into a full-blown feud in 1973. At the World Championships in Barcelona it was decreed by the Belgian team bosses that Maertens would ride in service of Merckx in order for the latter to become world champion. Maertens wasn't keen on this idea and eventually dropped a struggling Merckx in the hope of taking the rainbow bands for himself; this didn't happen, though, as Maertens was bested by Italian hero Felice Gimondi.

It took Maertens until 1976 to take his first World Championship title after having to endure hardship after hardship in his first few attempts to take the rainbow jersey. By the time of the 1976 running, Merckx's best years were behind him, and the Belgian team decided to put their might behind Maertens for the first time. After tackling a testing course, Maertens came out on top in a two-man sprint for the line with ease, this time beating another Italian legend, Francisco Moser, to the finish.

Maertens competed at the Tour de France throughout his career and enjoyed plenty of success at the race; the Flandrien took home the points classification on three different occasions as well as eight stages. It was on the streets of Spain that Maertens enjoyed his finest hour

though. Alongside his Flandria team, Maertens took a stranglehold over the race from the outset as he powered into the red jersey on the first stage prologue. Now leading the race, Maertens didn't look back as he cruised to the overall win at the race following an incredible 13 stage wins at La Vuelta.

What came next was a period of peculiarity and distinct lack of success for Maertens. There are always a number of reasons as to why these things can happen to sprinters and other riders alike; however, it is likely that the pressures of his financial woes as well as other outside factors that contributed to Maertens's temporary downfall. It was the sudden nature of the once-great champion's demise that took fans by surprise as he failed to win anything of note for nearly four years and often got off the bike well before the finish line.

With Maertens now written off by the media, his rivals and most of his loyal fans, nobody expected him to make one of the comebacks of the century at the 1981 Tour de France, well before Mark Cavendish made his own storming comeback 40 years later. Now racing in a totally different era of cycling to the one he had begun competing in a decade earlier, Maertens tackled some of the finest modern stars on the road such as Sean Kelly and Eddy Planckaert. Maertens took a spectacular five stage wins on his way to his third green jersey at the race before moving on to the World Championships. Battling against more of the finest riders of the 1980s, Maertens managed to overcome French hero Bernard Hinault on his way to a second rainbow jersey that

nobody – even himself – thought possible a few months earlier.

Maertens's fall back down to earth was equally as rapid as his comeback was though. It appeared as if he had achieved all he wanted to from the sport and was happy to fade into obscurity once more. The Belgian was only really competing on a contractual basis by this point in his career as he needed the fees to pay off some of the enormous tax debts that he had racked up over the previous few years. It is no secret that Maertens was keen to spend in his earlier seasons as a professional, which led him to struggle later in life. The two-time world champion began to lose his physical edge towards the end of his career and retired at the age of just 35, an age that many top sprinters still win races at today.

Some people like to look at the story of Freddy Maertens as one of wasted talent; however, one only needs to look at his amazing palmarès to see that he was still easily the second-greatest rider of the 1970s and remains one of the best versatile sprinters in history.

Sean Kelly – last of the versatile sprinters?

With the days of the great Belgian all-rounders looking as if they were in the rear-view mirrors, the 1980s were arguably the last decade that riders were able to do it all (until recently at least). With this in mind, the final rider that I deem to have been a true part of this generation is the king of Paris–Nice, Sean Kelly. Born in 1965, Kelly grew up watching the likes of Merckx and Maertens tear it up at the highest level and would eventually take on

the latter at the Tour de France towards the beginning of his professional career.

As a child, Kelly was something of an outcast due to his quiet approach to life in school. The Irishman is said to have felt less intelligent than many of his peers, but naturally outclassed them in most sporting arenas. After struggling through the Irish education system for a number of years, Kelly decided that it was time for a change when he was just 13 years old. The future champion became a farmer before retraining as a bricklayer. By the time Kelly had left school, his older brother Joe had become interested in bike racing at a local level. Sean soon followed his brother, and the pair began to enjoy some success.

After achieving such impressive results at local schoolboy level, Kelly was soon ready for the step up to the national scene. The youngster went on to win his first national junior title aged 16 before successfully defending this title a year later. Despite his young age, Kelly had begun to attract attention from teams higher up in the cycling pyramid, signing up for a senior racing licence once he turned 17 – though he was still a way off turning professional.

Kelly fought hard for a number of seasons in the amateur scene across Ireland and Great Britain before moving to European competition with French amateur team Velo Club Metz. It was with Metz that Kelly became a formidable sprinter, winning a host of smaller races while riding for the French outfit. By the end of the 1976 season Kelly had built up a reputation as

one of the brightest talents in the amateur ranks, soon attracting potential suitors from the professional side of the sport. Franco–Belgian powerhouses Flandria were the first to get their hands on the Irishman, signing him up on a princely £6,000 per season contract.

At this point in his career, Kelly had not yet transformed into the versatile sprinter we all know today, though did show glimmers of this potential at some of the early season stage races such as the *Étoile de Bessèges* where he finished third overall on debut. Perhaps the truest indication of Kelly's talent came during the 1977 season when he bested the great Eddy Merckx in a sprint at the small French one-day event *Circuit de l'Indre*. While Merckx's best years were behind him at this point, the win still served as a statement to the rest of the peloton that were vying for Merckx's crown.

Kelly soon began to deliver stage wins at Grand Tours, taking his inaugural Tour de France stage in 1978 in a sprint. After enjoying a successful tilt at the general classification during the 1980 *Vuelta a España*, it was believed by many that Kelly was capable of replicating Merckx by becoming a true all-rounder. The Paris–Nice stage race was widely viewed as the race that Kelly should target, as it had the right balance of sprint stages and slightly tougher medium mountain days that Kelly had already proven he could perform well on. What followed was a love affair with the French Riviera that saw the Irish superstar take the overall standing in Nice on seven successive occasions. Nobody could ever touch him during that week of the season.

The Irishman's finest hour came towards the end of the 1980s when he won his one and only Grand Tour, the Vuelta a España. This was the victory that truly installed him as one of the biggest stars in Irish sporting history as he remains the only rider from the Emerald Isle to take the red jersey. After nearly triumphing at the 1987 edition of the race, Kelly came to Spain as one of the pre-race favourites alongside a group of homeland heroes, including Luis Herrera, Anselmo Fuerte and Álvaro Pino. For most of the race it was the Spaniards that dominated, taking a number of stage wins between them and holding the red jersey up until stage 20 of the race. The stage between Las Rozas and Villalba was a short time trial that suited Kelly's skills much more than those of his Spanish rivals. Kelly began his effort needing only to make up a small gap to race leader Fuerte to win his first Grand Tour, with the whole of Ireland watching with bated breath. Kelly duly took the stage win and the red jersey for the first time during the race, holding it through the final stage into Madrid. Cycling immortality had been achieved.

While Paris–Nice and La Vuelta are the races that Kelly will be remembered for winning, he also enjoyed victories at the Tour of the Basque Country, Tour de Suisse and Volta a Catalunya (among others) over the years, using his skills as a sprinter to gain bonus seconds and compete on finishes that most of his General Classification (GC) rivals were not capable of performing on. Kelly was also one of the best one-day racers in the peloton, tasting victory in four of the five

monuments over the course of his career – only missing out on the Tour of Flanders.

Perhaps the most impressive thing about Kelly's career was its ability to span generations of cycling legends. In his earliest days as a professional he competed against Eddy Merckx and Freddy Maertens, and by the end he was racing in the same peloton as Miguel Indurain and a young American protégé by the name of Lance Armstrong.

While it can certainly be argued that there have been plenty of versatile sprinters after the days of Sean Kelly, for me he was the last man to have been able to compete in every way imaginable on the bike. The ability to compete for overall victory at a Grand Tour is something that most riders can only dream of, even if they have all the talent in the world. Think about the 'versatile' guys that have raced over the past decade – could they really claim that they could win La Vuelta? I think not.

As we've just explored, the early days of sprinting were very different to what we're used to in the modern peloton. Riders no longer need to wear cotton jerseys and compete without helmets for a start! They also need to focus much more on science, sometimes over their own ability, and for some this isn't a good thing as they believe it has taken the raw competition out of cycling. I'm of the opinion that advancements are always good, whatever they are, as they simply form a part of the evolution of a sport that has been around for well over a century. Perhaps the rules are enforced a

little harshly at times; however, without bodies like the Union Cycliste International (UCI) our sport would be a chaotic mess without any form of centralised rules. Progress is good, as it led to the emergence of more refined sprinting tactics that gave us possibly the greatest era of sprinting we will ever see as well as some truly iconic days of racing.