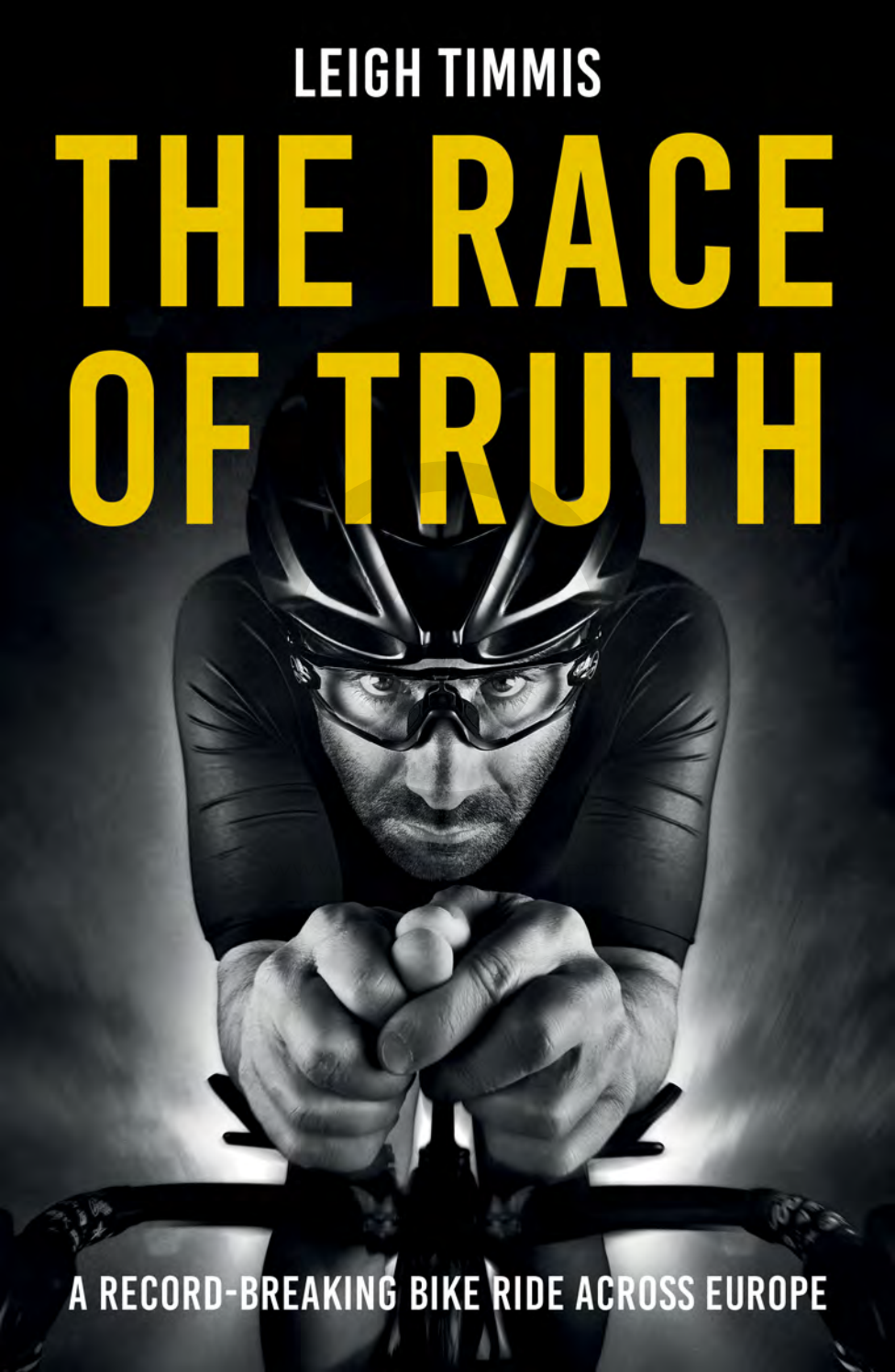
LEIGH TIMMIS

THE RACE OF TRUTH



A RECORD-BREAKING BIKE RIDE ACROSS EUROPE

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summersdale

To all those who have mustered the courage to stand on the start line, this book is dedicated to your journey ahead and the possibilities that await.

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PROLOGUE

My body slammed hard onto the asphalt. Stones ricocheted across dusty potholes as the bike clattered to a standstill. Ten days and 8 hours into the record attempt, I lay on the road, broken and defeated, with one thought repeating in my mind – *No more, just no more, I've got no more.*

Kerr ran over, video camera still recording, and helped me to my feet. I said nothing and turned my back. Walking away slowly with my head down, I half stumbled to the motorhome. I had one foot on the step to climb in when Jahna stopped me.

"Leigh, what are you doing?" she shouted from the physio table.

"I just need to sleep," I moaned.

"Not like that," she shot back, "look at the state of you."

Blood ran down my left leg. My jersey and shorts were torn, my right knee bruised and furrowed. The 30 minutes of sleep I was desperately craving were about to be replaced by a painful session on the physio table. Jahna, always amazing, pulled the grit out of my lacerations, cleaning and disinfecting the grazes, while I forced myself to eat in silence. Distant.

Why on earth have I put myself in this situation?

I never thought it was going to be this way. This was just the latest in a series of extreme decisions I'd made in the wake of my diagnosis with depression. An adventure across Iceland by motorbike, chasing the ski season to New Zealand and Canada, bartending around the world and ultimately, a seven-year circumnavigation of the planet by bicycle. Even after all that, I still needed another challenge.

This was it; the ultimate "Race of Truth", man against the clock. I'd decided to dedicate every possible second of my life to breaking it. This was going to be my definitive performance. I'd set the bar higher than anyone had ever expected, to prove myself once and for all. No second place. Winner takes all.

Those delusions of grandeur seemed a distant memory as Jahna dusted me down and I dragged myself up from the physio couch. My body was good to go but, as I'd learned again and again, the head matters more than the legs.

The end of the break arrived without respite and the meticulously planned yet relentless strategy continued. GPS files loaded, evidence video recorded, equipment checks completed and Jem's usual line, "Ready to roll out?" With a deep sigh I shook my head but lifted a leg over the saddle and clipped into the pedals.

"Just get on that wind, mate, just tap it out and you'll be alreet," Jem encouraged, understanding how tired I was,

knowing my temptation to stop. I gave a weak push to get the bike rolling, startled by the sharp pain of torn skin snagging on Lycra and the pressure of swelling bruises.

"Smile, yeah?" Jem shouted after me as the bike began to move. "Smile…" I threw a forced "smile" back at him. "Good lad!" he praised.

How much longer can I last out here? For the whole morning I'd been cycling with negative thoughts spiralling through my mind: *I'm too tired for this. I need to rest. I can't do it*. After falling off the bike, they were only joined by more. *Look at the state of your riding – terrible. You are your own worst nightmare. You can't keep going like this, you're going to crash again and get yourself killed*. I cycled despondently, listening to the internal monologue I'd become familiar with over the last year, certain that I just wasn't good enough.

It took the team 25 minutes to pack up and get back on the road. When they pulled alongside me, the electric window slowly buzzed down. I looked around into the dark cabin of the motorhome and, as my eyes adjusted from the bright daylight, I saw Jem's bearded face beaming at me.

His shout changed everything: "Eh, mucka! What's the view like from the balcony?"

Jem knew exactly what he'd said and why he'd said it. It was a personal quote that Phil and I had hooked our psychological interventions on. The balcony was a metaphor. I stood upon it – or, at least, Future Me stood upon it. The

Leigh who had finished the attempt. When I faced my toughest challenges, I could look up to the balcony, and I could ask for advice, for how to push on through. After all, there was only one person to whom I needed to justify the completion time, and that was myself. Jem's line spurred me to shift focus.

A sneer turned into a smirk and I nodded my head. "You bastard," I shouted, as the smile continued to grow. I eased off the pedals and the gap between the bike and the support vehicle slowly grew as I looked at my situation through different eyes.

All morning I'd had the tailwind I'd been waiting for, praying for, the kind of tailwind that makes or breaks records, but I'd wasted it trundling along in self-pity, thinking about how tired I was and how difficult the challenge had become. I'd lost focus, becoming so wrapped up in adversity that I forgot the whole reason I'd put myself out here. I was looking at all the things that were going wrong instead of looking at what I could control.

What would I shout to myself from the balcony right now?

In the end, the pain, the fatigue, the tiredness wouldn't matter; they would all fade with time. What mattered was that I gave everything I could, knowing that I could look back on whatever I achieved without regrets.

This wasn't about breaking a record; this was about life.

PART ONE:
HOW TO BUILD AN ATHLETE

ONE

LIVE TO RIDE, RIDE TO LIVE

On 22 April 2017, I woke in silence under canvas. A drained bottle of beer and an empty packet of Bakewell tarts lay discarded on the grass outside, the remains of my solitary celebration of the last night on the road. I unzipped my tent and peered out to look up and down the bluebell-lined footpath where I'd wild camped. Sunrise cast dappled light through the canopy onto the springtime colours of rural Derbyshire. The roar of my camping stove disturbed the quiet as coffee spluttered through my well-travelled moka pot. The smell of the crisp air and dirt mixed with the aroma of Arabica beans. There I stood, wearing a hoodie and boxer shorts, gazing over a familiar landscape that I hadn't seen in seven years – home.

Turning on a smartphone that I'd been given a month before, notifications pinged relentlessly. "Around the world in seven years… on a bike," read the BBC News headline. "Leigh Timmis: The man who cycled the world," the title of the BBC video. "Why you're wrong about Iran – and 14 other things I learnt cycling around the world for seven years," printed the *Telegraph*. My adventure was international news. I completed my morning routine for the last time, packed my tent and pedalled my heavy, worn-out bicycle along the bumpy woodland path, back to the road.

On my handlebar, a torn paper map with my route marked in fluorescent highlighter pen guided me down increasingly recognizable roads for my last few minutes alone. Helmet-free, wearing beach-bum sunglasses, I cruised along in grubby, ill-fitting clothes donated by strangers on my expedition. I looked down at the bike I called Dolly, the steadfast companion who had accompanied me through every country and encounter. Memories of all the roads those wheels had rolled along replayed in my head.

In a small village just outside the city, a gathering of 30 or so cyclists had formed to meet me. My dad, stepdad and the school friends I'd cycled with as a teenager were all there, and the entourage was completed by a local cycling club called Cycle Mickleover. Overwhelmed, I struggled to know what to say to everyone. An old friend passed me a hip flask and I took a swig of whisky. Excited conversation surrounded me but I withdrew into a bubble

of memories as we set off to ride the final miles into my hometown together. Pedals, wheels and thoughts cycled simultaneously.

"Nothing ever happens in Derby" stated a graffitied mural on the pedestrianized high street through the city centre where I grew up. Derby is considered by many to be the birthplace of the factory system that set Britain's Industrial Revolution in motion. The original Silk Mill still sits opposite the cathedral that towers above the single-storey skyline in the old heart of the industrial city. The factories and offices of Rolls Royce and British Rail employed most of its residents, including my dad. As a teenager in the 90s, it was the only world that I knew; I studied engineering and took work placements in the nicotine-stained, prefabricated buildings of Derby's industrial estates.

The bike was my escape.

When I was 14 years old, mountain biking took a hold of me and three friends. The relatively new sport had the chilled-out feel of the surfing community; we wore baggy shorts and skateboard shoes, we had long hair and listened to Green Day, Nirvana and the Foo Fighters. On any given day, at least one of us had scabs on our knees and elbows from a fall and we all built a collection of scars on our shins, shaped by the teeth on our pedals. We escaped

the classroom's stark white walls into the world of our imagination; designing bikes, dreaming up our perfect build from exotic components and talking about trails we'd ride that evening.

After school, I used to ride 5 miles to the other side of town where the four of us met up. We sat on the floor around the TV and watched mountain bike videos of our heroes, before copying their tricks and jumps in the University of Derby car park. When the campus security guards chased us away, we sprinted to the woods at the top of the golf course, where we thundered down dusty trails, our hearts racing. I was hooked.

There was one video called *Dirt* that we rewound and played again and again. It starred the best British mountain bikers of the time popping wheelies across the countryside and hanging off their bikes as they skidded through gates. The film wasn't about their achievements, winning races or endorsing brands. It wasn't really about bikes. It was about four friends hanging out and having fun. They were rock stars to me and I wanted to be just like them. They coined the phrase "Live to ride, ride to live" and I lived by it too.

Responsibilities and pressures didn't matter then – everything else in life was just the stuff in between biking. Life was great, I was fulfilled, and I had a purpose. When I was on the bike, I was myself, in my own space, at my own pace. I wasn't trying to live up to the expectations of others; I could shut out the rest of the world to be in a

place where I was in control. The future looked exciting from the saddle.

On long summer days, my friends and I challenged ourselves to ride as far as we could, choosing a route and just pedalling and pedalling. It felt as though we rode to distant places, even though we were only a few miles out of town.

As we grew braver, we took our bikes further, catching the train north to ride in the Peak District, where we disappeared for days with only a paper Ordnance Survey map and a jam sandwich. We rode the rocky trails across sandstone edges, under the wings of paragliders and past crowds of rock climbers. The smooth roads we cycled circumnavigated reservoirs where dinghies sailed before we dived through gates and hammered our bikes down technical, rocky tracks. It was as though life was simplified by those rides, the rudimental bikes that we built ourselves connecting us directly to the earth. We felt every contour on the map through our legs and lungs and the descents rattled our eyes in their sockets. The wind and rain froze us on hilltops when we packed too few clothes and the sun burned us when we stayed out in it too long, absorbed in the moment. We relied on our own skills to navigate the trails and to make repairs when things went wrong. Young, far from home and only connected to the city by a train timetable and the nearest phone box, we felt adventurous and alive.

The bike expanded my horizon beyond the city, into the National Park and countryside surrounding it. I never imagined it would take me out of England and around the globe.

I cycled ahead of the other cyclists, distracted by my thoughts. I had believed that at the conclusion of my epic cycle adventure, I would return as a changed man to a home that remained the same. But the grim city that I had left seven years before felt clean and optimistic as the cycling club guided me past new architecture and an imposing gold, silver and bronze velodrome.

I rode quickly past the historic landmarks I recognized in my hometown, anxious to find what awaited me at the finish. There she was. On the opposite side of a cobbled square I saw the tiny figure of my mum. She stood alone in front of the applauding crowd. Naturally shy, she would never have chosen to stand there; no doubt the media had asked her to be more visible. Wearing jeans and a thin jumper, she was the mum who had encouraged me to be myself, the mum who had picked me up when I fell, the mum who was always there. Among the insanity and noise of the moment, nothing else mattered. I was just a son reunited with his mother for the first time in years. It was just as I had imagined.

Through the darkest times cycling the world, I'd been motivated by the thought that, no matter how difficult, I would overcome any challenge I faced and one day this moment would come; I would return home and I would hug my mum again. That thought had brought tears to my eyes so many times before and yet I worried I wouldn't feel the emotion when it really happened. As I cycled across the square, tears streamed down my face. Camera crews from the local media gathered around us. I embraced Mum and whispered in her ear, "I love you so much, I can't believe what I've done." After years of being the stranger in places that I hadn't known, I belonged.

My hands trembled and my heart pounded, overwhelmed with the most incredible elation. An adventure that had begun in Derby seven years before and wandered 70,000 km (44,000 miles), through 51 countries on a budget of only five pounds a day, had come full circle. Champagne corks popped, speeches were made, and I tried my best to string a few words together that would summarize the moment for the interviews that followed.

I'd cycled around the world.

Crowds dispersed and calm descended. I sat beside Dolly, just as I had done in distant forests, mountains and deserts, but now I was in the garden of a pub in my hometown, surrounded by friends and family. It was surreal; I'd achieved more than I ever expected even in my wildest imagination. My life had been painted with a million vibrant colours

from the experiences, characters and landscapes of an impossibly varied world that I'd viewed from the saddle of a bike.

"Cheers!" we shouted. Pint glasses clinked and beer flowed. We laughed and hugged and celebrated.

"So, what's next?" asked my dad.

I arrived home with nothing but a bike, a tent, the essentials for survival, and a maxed-out credit card. At a time when friends had houses, cars, high-paying jobs and children, I moved into the spare room at my mum and stepdad's house. I'd been around the world and ended up back in the place where I grew up; at 35 years old, the adventure was over and I was faced with the "real world".

Two days later, my younger sister also returned to Derby from New Zealand. Emma and I had a strong childhood bond, reinforced in the stench of a tent we'd shared for months across multiple adventures; unbreakable. She had run across Africa twice and had an ultra-endurance world record herself; there were a lot of similarities between us. Living together as a family again was like looking into the past. Childhood and adulthood existed in parallel. I told her I wouldn't have cycled around the world without the lessons we learned at a very young age and she agreed; it was the same for her and her achievements.

When I was six and Emma was four, Dad wanted to build his own house, so our family moved to a self-build scheme in Derby. Oakwood would become Europe's largest housing estate. In a cut-out from a weekly magazine of the time, there's a photo of me and the other children in the bucket of a tractor surrounded by our proud families, in front of the houses they built themselves. The parents had full-time jobs and so, for two years, our weekends and evenings were spent building. Emma and I grew up on a muddy construction site. I remember pushing toy cars through tunnels dug in piles of sand, jumping on heaps of fibreglass insulation, running in and out of half-finished houses, riding my BMX bike around the gardens and making jumps out of bricks and scaffolding boards. The sound of hammering nails over static on the radio, the smell of cut timber and the view of overcast skies through roofing joists. We must have moved in while finishing the interior because I remember the bare floorboards of a bedroom shared with Emma.

Dad was a man who followed convention. When the house was built, he started an Open University degree and his evenings and weekends continued to be occupied for years to come. In a world that valued education, employment, promotion and security on the housing ladder, he fulfilled society's expectations and then some. Personally, I questioned whether the sacrifices he made for his achievements were worth it. Dad always seemed to be too busy to do anything with us and would say so as he refocused on his work.

I wanted our childhood to be like the ones I saw on television: when the father arrives home, he embraces his children and they share stories of their day. However, when *my* dad arrived home, he vented his frustration at the other "idiot road users" on us and when I tried to share my stories and experiences with him he'd say, "We don't need a running commentary on everything you do." My friends at school seemed to have great relationships with their dads, and I felt sad coming home from friends' houses, whose dads would play football with us or go out to collect conkers. I'd pull at Dad, working on his computer, and ask if he could play but he would plainly tell me, "Not now, can't you see I'm busy?"

He seemed to struggle to contain his emotions and his anger permeates my childhood memories. One day, I remember my sister and I were bickering in the back of the car as he drove, so he slammed the brakes on so hard that our seat belts locked and our heads were thrown forwards as the car skidded down the road, he then turned around and shouted at us, with an incomparable fury. At the other end of the scale I don't remember Dad telling me he was proud of me or that I'd done well – rather, there was always something more that I should achieve. He grew into a figure of authority, who I found it difficult to talk to, not knowing if I would provoke an emotional response. I stepped on eggshells around him, but some of them turned out to be landmines. He would regularly get angry at me and shout.

It seemed as though Dad didn't have time for us; he had the ability to build a house but making a home was seemingly a bigger challenge.

I resented some of Dad's behaviour towards me as a kid. I feel that he left emotional gaps in my upbringing that manifested in my own behaviours, but I can't hold it against him. He fulfilled his important role, he brought in the money to afford the childhood Emma and I had with Mum. Everybody has their own battle to fight and I'm sure he was trying his best. A traveller once told me that the characteristics we don't like in others are actually what we don't like in ourselves. For a long time, I tried not to make the mistakes that I'd seen my dad make but I often found myself walking in his footsteps. Looking back, it's clear that what angered me about Dad was often a reflection of my own behaviour. Although it seemed to be that our relationship wasn't always healthy, I felt that it added momentum to my life; I was trying to live up to what I believed were Dad's expectations of me, but I never felt that I did. Even as an adult, the child within me was still looking to prove himself and every time it felt as though Dad pushed me away, he pushed me to achieve more.

One year, on holiday from primary school, Emma and I spent a week on our grandparents' farm, 3 hours away on the south coast of England. Farm life was wild; we were free-range children. We raced up and down the long garden of the small white bungalow, past the shepherd's hut and

under the apple trees, taking it in turns to push each other in a wheelbarrow. We played in the dusty kennels, shot air rifles and foraged for fruits and eggs in the garden. As we walked the dogs through the woods, we heard the roar of the elephants from Marwell Zoo; life in the countryside was an adventure.

Towards the end of the week, we snuck out of sight and stood alone on the gravel driveway. Emma asked why I thought we were there for so long without Mum and Dad. I clearly remember feeling like the big brother as I explained my conclusion to the question I'd also been contemplating. I told her that I thought we were either getting a new brother or sister, or that Mum and Dad were splitting up.

When we returned to Derby, our parents told us they were getting divorced. I spent night after night crying myself to sleep or sobbing in my bunk bed as Mum and Dad yelled at each other and slammed doors downstairs.

Emma and I moved out with Mum into a small house that she finished with second-hand furniture, less than a mile away from the self-build street. Us kids had the two largest rooms in the house and Mum's room was tiny; barely big enough for a single bed and a wardrobe. We called it the "cat flap". At this time I started spending more time outside. There was a small green space beside our house where I towed Emma on her roller skates, tied to my bike with a skipping rope. I'd outgrown my BMX and Mum or Dad bought me a heavy, sluggish mountain bike, which I tinkered

with in the garage, learning how to index the gears, sharpen the brakes and fix punctures. After the divorce, riding the bike was a place where I could be myself – an element of my life that was totally under my control. In a way, I could express myself through the bike; sprinting or cruising, I rode at my speed.

Getting into bikes also helped keep me occupied, which was useful because Mum was growing busier all the time. I don't know what the employment options were as a single mother with two kids to feed but Mum made a brave decision. She created an opportunity from the experience she had and decided to expand a cleaning company she'd started.

Mum showed us an ability to radically change our lives for the better. As a child, she was abused by her parents and was told she had to move out as soon as she was old enough. It was a history that Emma and I were protected from – it was never spoken of. Mum overcame her malevolent upbringing and created a loving home, raising Emma and me with warmth and kindness. It must have been difficult creating something that you have never experienced, but she did it. Mum says that she always wanted to raise her children to feel loved, and she did exactly that.

Mum remarried a few years later and just before Emma and I became teenagers we moved in with our stepdad, Al. For a man who didn't want to have children, he handled it incredibly well. He was a tall financial adviser with "milk bottle glasses" and he wore leather gloves to drive,

which we called his "murdering gloves". Al and I stayed awake into the early hours to watch Formula One when the races were on the other side of the world and he had a Sega Master System, on which he let me play "Alex Kidd in Miracle World". Al didn't want to be "Dad" but he was always there for us, as a friend and as a role model.

As young children, we still saw Dad on alternate weekends and every Thursday evening, when he walked us round to his house after work. It was the same every week: he'd feed us tuna, pasta and mayonnaise, and watch us do our homework. I didn't understand why, if you only saw your children so rarely, you wouldn't make those moments memorable. When I left school, I lived with Dad for a couple of years because I knew he wouldn't treat me like a parent. We were like ships that passed in the night, which was better than the inevitable arguments that would ensue when we collided.

Al knew the importance of family and compassion. When he was young, his parents were loving and caring and always said, "I love you" to each other before they left the home. On one rare occasion when they had an argument, his dad slammed the door as he left the house without saying those important words. Later that day, he was involved in an industrial accident at the Rover car plant where he worked. He died from his injuries, in hospital, a week later.

As our stepdad, Al showed Emma and I a masculinity that was founded in reason and emotional intelligence and he

opened his life to us completely. Every day he told us he loved us and that he was proud of us, and he was there when we needed support.

Al's philosophy was that you had to look after yourself before you could look after others and Mum's was similar. She always said that she didn't mind what Emma and I did when we grew up, as long as we were happy. Those beliefs were clear in their actions when they raised us, and things were the same over 25 years later when they took me in after cycling the world. Their support underpinned everything I've achieved and allowed me to take opportunities that changed the course of my life.

Steve Reynolds, the organizer of my escorted ride into Derby, had introduced himself on the day I returned and invited me for dinner when the dust had settled. A week later, I took Steve up on his invitation. Arriving at his home, I walked across the vast brick-paved driveway, looking up at the enormous L-shaped building towering above me, climbed the steps and knocked on the front door. I stood, sweating, in cycling shorts so old that they were becoming transparent, a charity cycling jersey and old cycling shoes with Velcro fasteners that no longer worked, holding a change of clothes in a backpack.

Steve opened the door. "Hi Leigh, welcome, it's great to see you. You cycled here?"

"Erm, yeah," I replied, ashamed that my old bike was the only transport I owned. "So, how many houses is this?"

"Just one," Steve laughed. "Come through to the kitchen."

"Oh, wow!"

Steve was in his late 50s and the owner of a successful mobile technology company he'd built from scratch. He welcomed me into his family home just like every other stranger I'd met around the world and we bonded over a love of bikes. We laughed while comparing stories of cycling up the iconic Stelvio mountain pass in Italy, which he'd done on an 8 kg racing bike and I'd done on a 40 kg touring bike. We realized we shared similar experiences but through very different methods. Steve invited me to join Cycle Mickleover, the bike club he organized. I'd never cycled with a road club before and the thought of riding in a peloton, a tightly-bunched group of cyclists, at speed, intimidated me. I wondered whether I could even keep up. I was a cycle adventurer who travelled at leisure. In my panniers I carried food, drink and a tent so I could stop whenever I wanted to.

The following week, I found my old eight-speed aluminium road bike in Mum's shed, pumped the tyres up, oiled the chain and joined their Sunday club ride. I straddled my cheap bike in the pub car park, surrounded by thousands of pounds' worth of top-of-the-range racers. Everyone had

carbon frames and wheels, with brands and components that I'd never heard of. It looked like rocket ship technology to me. The cyclists, wrapped in aerodynamic fabrics, spoke in terms of drag coefficients, power meters, FTPs and MMPs, bikes for climbing, aero bikes and electronic gears. It meant nothing to me. I'd been passionate about mountain biking and touring but I realized that I knew nothing about road cycling. The most high-tech gadget I had was a magnet on the front wheel with a wire up to the LCD display on my handlebars that told me my speed, distance and the time of day. I was out of touch.

I held on for my life as the bike rattled over the potholed roads of Derbyshire on narrow tyres with a crowd of other cyclists all around me. They felt too close and I worried that I couldn't move to avoid any obstacles ahead. *What do I do if they brake suddenly? How am I supposed to see the holes in the road ahead?* With guidance, I started to figure out how road cycling worked and I enjoyed chatting to the other cyclists as we swapped places in the group, zooming down Derbyshire's country lanes to the soundtrack of clicking gear shifts. Fifty miles later, back at the pub we started at, I felt good and I'd built some confidence. I started to think this was something I could get into. I asked when the next ride was.

With a couple of rides under my belt, I learned group riding etiquette and realized that there was nothing to fear. I could hold the pace and enjoyed cruising in the middle

of the pack, sheltered from the wind at 20 miles per hour. Everyone looked after each other.

When I got to know the intimidating group of expert-looking, Lycra-clad "speed demons" with expensive bikes, they turned out to be human beings, some of the best I'd met. On cold, wet, miserable mornings, when I was tempted to stay in bed, it was knowing that my friends would be waiting in the pub car park to cycle together that encouraged me to go out. Each person had their own motivations for cycling. For some, the club ride was an escape from stresses that they experienced through the week, some were losing weight, some trained to race and, to others, the club was their social life. Club rides weren't just about cycling; they were about a group of people getting outside, exercising, catching up with friends and seeing new horizons together. The bike club changed lives.

At that time, I saw returning to Derby as the end of my cycling adventure, but Steve saw it as just the beginning. He introduced me to a local bike shop and convinced them to lend me a good-quality bike. Riding a top-of-the-range, carbon-fibre Cannondale Super Six, I led a 100-mile (161 km) charity ride out of the city, on the way to Skegness. At the end, we visited the Derbyshire Children's Holiday Centre – that I'd raised £12,000 for while cycling around the world – and celebrated with dinner and drinks on the seafront. A group of us cycled back to Derby the following day, completing 200 miles (322 km) in two days. It was the furthest I'd ridden in

48 hours. I continued to ride the borrowed bike through the summer, and with the help of the bike club, I began to realize that in seven years of cycling around the world I'd built an impressive foundation of fitness. I saw the potential that Steve had seen but at that time it wasn't important; I didn't know where to direct it and I had bigger things to worry about, establishing a life for myself in Derby.

As Steve and I spent more time cycling together with the club, I opened up to him about the overwhelming opportunities I'd received since I'd arrived home. I'd been offered a television interview with BBC News, a guest slot on a daytime TV show, photoshoots for magazines and newspaper articles, speaking engagements for businesses, a National Geographic event, and an invitation to present a TEDx talk. I had no idea where to begin unpacking seven years of experiences and presenting them in a way that anyone could comprehend, let alone how to act on TV or in front of a live audience.

Motivated purely by generosity, Steve and his family took me under their collective wing, offered to assist me and, through the summer of 2017, helped me get my career on track. Steve showed me how my experiences from cycling around the world applied to business and personal challenges that everybody could understand. His daughters, Hayleigh and Shelley, created a visual brand for me, taught me about storytelling and how to present on stage. Steve's wife, Gill, supported me through every panic and concern; she let

me bounce ideas off her and shared her own experiences to guide me. I spent an increasing amount of time at their house, sometimes staying over to run through talks and new content. They even had me doing fashion parades in new clothes and cycling gear.

As I spent more and more time with them, it felt as though I was all but adopted into Steve's family. We hung out in his garden, drinking gin and tonic in the drifting smoke of the barbecue, playing games, and sharing stories in the sun. We spent evenings catching up on culture that I'd missed while I was away, calling the seven years I'd spent cycling around the world "The Blackout" because I had no general knowledge from the time. That summer became synonymous with Marvel movies and the *Guardians of the Galaxy* soundtrack. I joined the family for dinner in restaurants that I previously thought were too good for me and his daughters dressed me so I didn't look like I lived in a tent anymore. They raised my self-esteem and my confidence began to grow.

Steve's family believed in me and they wanted to help me reach my potential. After I'd lived for so long with one foot out the door, always ready to leave, they made me feel settled.

With their support, I sat on the red sofas of BBC News and talked about the extremes of life on the road. I attended photo shoots and interviews for cycling and lifestyle magazines. Shelley accompanied me at the TEDx event, where I stood on stage wearing borrowed

clothes and shoes, praying that I wouldn't forget what we'd scripted. With cameras and lights pointing at me, I delivered a talk that I was proud of and I began sharing my lessons and experiences at corporate and educational speaking events.

Nevertheless, as the summer began ticking away, I found myself drifting without a purpose. I was financially treading water with income from low-fee speaking events at schools and bike clubs, living half the week at Steve's house and the other half at Mum's. Steve showed me that I could create a life from what I loved, not only in speaking but in cycle tour leading or brand ambassadorial roles, I just had to decide what I wanted to do. I had fantastic opportunities but there was something missing. I was still looking for that elusive "What's next?"

The more audiences I spoke to about cycling around the world, the more I began to doubt that I had achieved something of value. Once the awe of where I'd been and how far I'd cycled had worn off, my answers to some questions seemed disappointing.

"So, how much money do you get for cycling around the world?" I'd be asked.

"No, you don't get any money. But I'm rich in experiences," I'd laugh.

"Oh. Okay. What about a certificate?"

"No, nothing like that either."

"So, why did you do it?"

Why did I do it? At the time, I believed I'd spent seven years learning about the world and my place in it. I'd learned different languages and overcome great adversity. So much time alone on the bike had been almost meditative, I thought I'd learned a lot about myself. I was regularly asked if I was going back to work now that I'd finished my holiday. *Had it all been a selfish pursuit: personal gain but no social value?* I didn't have lessons about team building or peak performance to share at corporate events. I couldn't endorse giving up work to pursue a dream.

My reflections reminded me of a decision I'd made long ago. Before I cycled around the world, I went to see a talk by an adventurer who had walked across the Sahara Desert. For 45 minutes he showed slides and spoke of his adventures as though he had just returned. Afterwards I found out that he'd finished his challenge almost ten years earlier. From that moment I decided I couldn't be like that; I never wanted to live my whole life based on one achievement. Around the world would only be my first challenge and I didn't want to do the same kind of adventure again – I'd proved I could do that. I needed something completely new.

I wanted to be the guy who cycled the world *and*…

One bright morning, I sat in the sunlight that poured through the Velux windows in Steve's lounge with my feet

up on the reclined cream leather sofa. As I flicked through the pages of a cycling magazine, I read an article about the world record for the fastest crossing of Europe by bike – a 6,500-km (4,000-mile) transcontinental time trial.

Three cyclists had attempted to break the record that year and none had done so. In July, Iain Findlay set off from Russia, heading to Portugal and at the same time, Jonas Deichmann set off in the opposite direction. After a week, Findlay abandoned his effort due to stomach problems and, although Deichmann reached Ufa a couple of days quicker than the existing record, his attempt wasn't verified on the Guinness website. The magazine article reported that Sean Conway, one of the UK's premier adventurers, had recently abandoned an attempt due to a torn muscle. It piqued my interest.

It wasn't the first time I'd considered something like this. In the first month of cycling around the world I met a brightly dressed, excitable Australian guy carrying a ukulele, called Sebastian Terry. He told me the story of his best friend who had tragically died at a young age and it had caused Seb to question whether, if he was to die tomorrow, he would be happy with the life he'd lived. To that end, he'd written his bucket list and was travelling the world, ticking off his "100 things". I met him on number 36 – walk across a country – after he'd spent five months completing number 46 – learning French. He laughed as he explained that after completing his walk, he was flying to the United States to

conduct a wedding and deliver a baby, ticking off two more. When I explained to him that I was going to be spending years on a bike and I wondered whether there were other things I could do at the same time, he'd suggested breaking a world record. A seed had been planted.

As I read the article about the record for the fastest cycle across Europe it looked achievable at that very moment. James McLaren's 2016 record still stood at 29 days, 18 hours and 25 minutes. After some quick calculations, knowing that the route was about 4,000 miles, I guessed that would be about 225 km (140 miles) a day. I could beat that. Definitely. Without a doubt. I could knock hours, probably days, off it. I shouted through Steve's house, "I've found it, this is what I'm going to do, I could do it tomorrow, I should fly out there now!" Steve and I looked through the record guidelines together.

"From the lighthouse in Cabo da Roca, Portugal, to Ufa Railway Terminal, Russia. Any route may be followed. The same bicycle must be used throughout the entire attempt. The journey must be tracked by an accurate, professional GPS device. During the attempt, the challenger is not allowed the aid of drafting. No distinction will be made between supported and unsupported journeys. The clock starts from the moment the participant crosses the starting line and does not stop until they reach their goal."

In cycling, the individual time trial is called the "Race of Truth" because the result depends solely on one cyclist's

ability; no slipstream from other cyclists and no group cycling to benefit from; just the cyclist and the road. To me, this was the ultimate test, cycling between the geographical borders of a continent – from the coast of Portugal to the Ural Mountains, 1,000 miles inside the Russian border, against the clock.

Steve tapped the screen with conviction, pointing out one sentence that changed my approach to the attempt more than anything else: "No distinction will be made between supported and unsupported journeys."

"Yeah, but I don't need support, I know I could break that record right now," I told him.

"Which way will you achieve your best result?" he asked.

"Well, with a support team, for sure but—" I began to reply before he cut me off.

"And which way can you best mitigate failure?" Steve pressed me again.

"Yeah, a team would help but—"

"Then that is the way you will do it."

Without Steve, I wouldn't have even considered going fully supported; there were too many obstacles. In comparison to going unsupported it was extremely expensive, it would take much longer to prepare and it would require much greater effort to coordinate. At that time, I was a chancer; I was carefree and took risks. The only times I had done things without compromise were in matters of life or death. In those situations, I made certain that there was no room

for error but at home I let my standards slip. Steve changed that. He focused my attention away from what I *could* achieve and on to what I *wanted* to achieve. Through the summer, I'd grown. I was no longer the same person who was content to subsist on five pounds a day, living out of pannier bags as I had around the world. He showed me that there was a best way to do everything and that the best way was the only way. In breaking a world record, I was going to discover just what I could do. Steve convinced me to commit to an ethos of *no compromise*.

I was interested to know how Sean Conway had created his strategy, which had been on course to break the record, so I phoned him to chat about it. His answer reflected how everybody was approaching transcontinental cycling records at the time. Sean told me that he had the route of the previous fastest challenger and knew where he had stopped every night. His plan was to go a few miles further every day and, by the end, he would knock a few hours off the record. While that approach might get a world record certificate, copying others didn't seem like the best way of doing things. With Steve's *no compromise* hat on, I questioned how, by doing the same thing again, I would differentiate myself from everyone else and how I would find out what I was truly capable of. I intended to make my own mark on the world. Steve and I put a plan together to turn the traditional approach on its head.

I was an outsider, coming in with fresh eyes, unaccustomed to the world of ultra-endurance cycle

racing. I would bring innovation to a record that had previously been tackled by spending more time in the saddle to cycle more miles. The ultimate uncompromising method was to pull together a team of experts who would use science and technology. Professional support throughout preparation as well as on the road would improve my performance through training, analyze the challenge to find every marginal gain, build an evidence-based strategy, and mitigate risk of failure on the road.

I looked at the demands of the attempt and previous reasons for failure, and designed a team based on the best solutions to the problems. I would require a coach, a nutritionist and a physiotherapist to optimize my physical performance and a driver and a mechanic to join them on the road.

An unsupported effort would cost about £2,000 plus a bike. To put together an attempt with a preparation team in the UK, a support team on the road and all necessary equipment, flights, visas and vehicles would need about £50,000. Seven years spent living in a tent were less than ideal foundations for financing and managing a complex world record project. Evenings at Steve's house expanded into using his company's office space by day, as he helped me to develop a business mind.

Every day I learned something new and every day I asked questions. In the same way that I didn't know about cycling aerodynamics, power or heart rate, I also didn't know about memorandums of understanding, letters of engagement

or non-disclosure agreements. We put together a 16-page project outline detailing our objectives, the record and our approach, the performance team, our visibility and awareness campaign and sponsorship opportunities.

While cycling the world I'd fundraised for the Derbyshire Children's Holiday Centre because I believed that, even on a global project, I should help my local community. After explaining to Steve that I'd struggled with anxiety and depression in my twenties, he asked why I hadn't raised money for a mental health charity. The honest answer was that I was afraid of talking about it. When I left in 2010, there was a huge stigma attached to mental health and I feared being judged. Although this attitude hadn't disappeared completely, during the time I'd spent out of the UK, society's understanding of mental health had progressed. Steve urged me to talk about my own struggle and to involve a mental health charity in the world record. I partnered with MQ Mental Health Research, whose active scientific research into the causes of mental illness reflected my scientific approach to the record.

Steve mentored me and his experience directed me throughout the course of the project. I took on everything he taught me because I wanted to be like him; to have complete financial freedom, to be the one who people turned to for support, to be confident in my convictions. As a role model 22 years older than me, Steve was less like a friend and more like a father. I'd never consciously looked for father figures

in my life, but our relationship naturally grew that way. Since I was young, I'd suppressed or tried to eliminate many of my own characteristics that I negatively associated with Dad and maybe I was looking for someone to fill those gaps.

Steve could be fiercely harsh with his words but I knew he wanted the best for me, respected me and was proud of me – he told me as much. Steve's honesty and direct nature changed me, fast. Looking over my emails he would ask "Why are you writing like it's a letter to the Queen? Give it here," and show me how to write for business. When I missed a call with a potential sponsor he was stern. "You don't get a second chance to make a first impression," he told me, "you've ruined it." I didn't make the same mistake twice. Steve only aligned himself with success and so, with him by my side, I believed I could do anything.

My decision to attempt the record was made, but I had to prove to myself that I was being realistic. On a warm Saturday morning, less than five months after returning from cycling the world, my alarm went off before dawn and I loaded my jersey pockets with spares and snacks. I closed the door and began cycling my borrowed bike just after sunrise. By 2 p.m., I was eating fish and chips on the beach at Skegness before I turned around and completed the return journey. I cycled 200 miles (322 km) in just under 12 hours, doubling the furthest I'd ever ridden in a day. Knowing it was possible marked a major milestone; I'd been told about club cyclists completing this ride before but until I did, it

held a mythical status. Now, 200 miles was confirmed as a distance I could ride in a day, I knew what it took and what it felt like. I was elated. I wasn't sure whether I could get up and do the same thing the following day but there was time to work on that.

In a surge of enthusiasm, I bought a GPS unit and a heart rate monitor and declared the ultimate statement of intent: I shaved my legs. I was no longer an adventurer; I was an athlete.

On 8 September 2017, a week after my ride to Skegness, I submitted an application to *Guinness World Records* with a proposed start date of 11 June 2018.

The clock was ticking.