

STEVE PEAT

WITH TIM MARCH



FORGED BY SPEED

THE MAKING OF A MOUNTAIN BIKE WORLD CHAMPION



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INTRODUCTION: BLOWING IT

I used to love being at the top of the hill in the minutes before a race. I'd start heading up there an hour before my start time, my bike on the outside of the gondola as we were both carried up the mountain. I'd cruise around the top, chatting to everyone. It was amazing how each of my rivals dealt with the pressure. If you're into bike racing then I recommend you go to the start gate of a downhill world cup or world championships and feel the tension rising among racers who have only three or four minutes to prove their worth and watch how they deal with that.

I had my own rituals. I'd look at the first couple of turns to see how the track was running and then thirty minutes before show time I'd start warming up on the turbo trainer, get my muscles working. I'd put tissues soaked in Olbas Oil up my nostrils to keep my airways clear. Doing the same things at the same times before each race calmed my nerves. And if that didn't work, if the nerves started to take over, I'd calm myself by visualising the track. By race day I knew every inch, every root and stone. I could see it all in my head. Five minutes before my start time I'd be off the turbo trainer and on to my downhill bike and riding around for a couple of minutes, settling in.

It was no different that late summer day in 2004 at Les Gets in the French Alps. I loved the track and the place. I'd won there before. Yet this race was different. This was the world championships. For more than a decade I'd been trying to win this title and I had a hunch this would finally be my year. In that time, I'd gone from being a lanky kid from Sheffield to the winner of two world cup series. Everything I was had come through racing. I'd travelled the world, met my wife, bought my house and found my place, all

from mountain biking. Now I felt confident I would win the one prize that had escaped me.

Six or seven weeks before the race at Les Gets I'd snapped my collarbone. I'd needed surgery to fix it and followed that with experimental treatment to get me back on my bike. By the time I arrived in France it felt much improved, but in everyone else's eyes I was coming back injured. Nobody had me down as the favourite at the start of the weekend. I was the underdog and that was just how I liked it. I never wanted the pressure of being the favourite. I liked to catch my rivals unawares and take the pressure off myself. By the time I reached the gate that day, they knew I was the one to beat. I'd qualified fastest and that meant I was last down the mountain. At the bottom, French rider Fabien Barel was in the lead, in the hot seat as we say, waiting to see if I could beat him. I felt good. I felt this race was mine.

The gate sat above a steep ramp, protected from the sun by an open tent with a striped green roof. With a couple of minutes to go I took my place in its shade with my mechanic Ricky Bobby. There was a race official waiting there with the official timekeeper. I got the minute warning and another with thirty seconds to go. At that moment Ricky handed me my goggles. My feet were turning the cranks backwards, keeping my legs loose while I balanced myself on the bike with my left hand on the guardrail. Then the beeps started. I could leave any time in the next five seconds. I leant back and then fired myself forwards down the ramp and on to the mountain.

Throughout my career I always wanted to push things to the limit. Some of my fellow pros were more interested in riding for their sponsors, especially if their contract was up for renewal. Their focus was keeping the show on the road. All I wanted was to win and figured if I did the best I could then my career would last anyway. That way I could keep winning longer. When I look back on my two decades racing, my results show I was right. Despite the physical risks of downhill, despite giving it my all every time and despite how much I liked to party, I still managed to be among the most consistent riders of my generation. Pedal to the metal has its advantages.

A minute and a half into my run at Les Gets and things were going well. And if a race went well then afterwards I found my memory of it faded sooner. I can barely remember my best runs. It's the mistakes that stick out. On a great run my focus was so good that the crowds along the track disappeared. Mostly I was aware of them flicking past in my peripheral vision. At Les Gets I remember racing across some open fields before a fast left-hander to the first split that showed I was already more than a second ahead of Fabien. I didn't know that of course. He did. The TV cameras show his face

suddenly become serious as he sees my time. You can see the doubt. If I kept this up, he was going to lose. I was just bombing down the mountain, laser-focused on the task at hand. As a rider I always knew when I was on a good run. And that day I was on it.

Having crossed the road I had less than a minute to go. I came down a steep grass bank gathering speed. There was a gap over a small stream and after that the track went up a bit of a rise before dropping down again to a left-hander round a huge tree and then a final jump to the finish. I'd never had a problem on this section of the course before, but I guess I came into it a little hot and a microsecond too slow on the brakes. Over the course of the weekend the track had dried out and the ground had worn, exposing the roots of the tree a bit more. My back wheel kicked up and lost traction. I leaned forward to move my weight over the front wheel, but it wasn't enough. I went into a speedway-style turning slide.

The tyres must have missed just about everything they needed to grab on to for me to save the slide I was now in. All they touched was loose dirt. I was collapsing, my lower body shoved down low trying to save this monstrous slide into the dip around the tree. My upper body was bunched over the front trying to get some grip somewhere. With both wheels still on the move and all my weight into the bike, as I came out of the dip there was nothing I could do to stop the whole bike spinning round under me. At 2 minutes and 30.7 seconds, just 200 metres and a few seconds from victory, my 2004 world championship title disappeared in a cloud of dust.

Those few seconds would play on my mind for years to come. They probably would still if things hadn't worked out for me. At thirty years old some of my competitors must have thought my chance of ever becoming world champion had gone.

But you don't give up. Not where I'm from.



CHAPTER 1

MADE IN SHEFFIELD

Mum and me got chatting over a cuppa one afternoon round at hers. I was telling her about the book you're now reading and some things I'd like to include in it, my birth being one of them. As we sat down to natter, the silent welcome of an old friend wasn't lost on either of us: the house Mum lives in now is the same house we all lived in while I was growing up. It's the house she's lived in for the past fifty-four years of her life. Those walls and Mum's ears have probably heard just about everything that mattered to me when I was a youngster.

I was born in Chapeltown, a northern suburb of Sheffield in South Yorkshire and the best place to live in the whole wide world. My mum and dad had not been living there long. They'd moved into the town's Cowley estate four years before I arrived, after leaving Swinton, about twenty minutes away. For all you literature buffs, Mexborough, the next town east from Swinton, was where poet laureate Ted Hughes was born. Anyway, their middle son Andy arrived when they were living in 'Chap', same as me, but their firstborn, my elder brother Jonny, arrived when they lived back in their Swinton maisonette. One brother would get mad into pubs, clubs and working, the other into music.

It was music lover Andy that I was about to share a room with, being as he was the younger of the two. Though as my due date arrived things weren't right for Mum and me. There were serious complications with my delivery, which very quickly became a medical emergency. As soon as the ambulance crew reached the house and assessed Mum's condition, they got her into the ambulance in a panic and were off, all lights flashing and sirens

blaring, racing full tilt to Sheffield's Northern General hospital, flat out, foot to the floor. Start as you mean to go on, I say.

Following us in his car, tailgating the ambulance, was our family doctor, who was doing well to keep up. It's a quarter of an hour's drive from our estate to the Northern during the day, but the roads were empty late at night and the ambulance was running red lights and going the wrong way round roundabouts, not stopping for anything to get us there as quick as it could. Dad was following Dr Cortley in the family's Mini Clubman, although at some distance, since he did stop at all the red lights, law-abiding citizen that he was. He clearly had a respect for our boys in blue that skipped a generation with me. In fact, Dad was so slow following the doctor that by the time Mr Cautious reached the hospital I'd been born in the back of the ambulance at the entrance. There'd been no time to get Mum into the emergency room to deliver me.

So, there I was, close to midnight on 17 June 1974, taking my first breath of beautiful Yorkshire air and snuggling up close to Mum. The panic was over. I was okay, Mum was okay too, thank God. Maybe things could have gone different, but they didn't, thanks to Mum and those first responders in the ambulance who delivered me, and the old fella for making sure he didn't tarnish the Peat family name during a medical emergency with a speeding ticket. It was the week the nation woke up to Ray Stevens' number one hit 'The Streak' and the year Leeds United were the new First Division champions thanks to the dark genius of Don Revie, my dad also hailing from Leeds. It was also the year of the three-day week, two general elections and the continuing Troubles in Northern Ireland.

My new home was a typical newish semi-detached on a suburban estate with a carport and a garage in the back garden. This garage held secrets about Dad's great passion, guarded by a force that me and my brothers would encounter regularly growing up when we fell foul of the military-like rules he imposed on us. Rules, as I soon discovered, were not something that went as well for me as they might. I'd get no encouragement from Dad regarding those secrets in the garage. Thankfully, though, I would get all the encouragement a kid could dream of from my brothers and Mum, encouragement that would give me a life I could not have even imagined in those early years of life on Woodburn Drive.

The house was (and is) right next to Chapeltown Park on Cowley Lane. Chap was a small village before the industrial age. Then it had a blast furnace and later became a coal-mining town. Smithy Wood Colliery had its own coking plant for the steel industry, and had only just closed when we moved to the town. As for living there and having places to play outside, I'd

landed on my feet as a nipper. Chap was suburbia, big sprawling housing estates, one of a number of communities that looked pretty similar: Grenoside, Ecclesfield and High Green. Intermingled with the bungalows and semis are large stretches of farmland, parks and woods, as well as commercial estates built on the old industrial sites.

These woods and green fields would soon become my extended garden, a playground where my brothers took me on adventures to discover their secrets. I explored them unaccompanied from a young age, hunting for fun times with the pre-programmed single-mindedness of a heat-seeking missile. The irresistible pull of these woods would in the coming years draw me into new worlds of joy and mischief. So, despite all the troubles of that time casting a black cloud over many working-class families, I was just a brand new happy little kid with the world in front of me.

I'm sure everyone talks about the time they were born as the best, but I don't think anything could better the 1970s and early 1980s for me, despite the awful experiences my parents and families like ours were put through. Some lost their homes, their jobs, even their communities. I can't say I knew a lot about all that. I was too young in the late 1970s to be aware of the big things happening in the country. That stuff isn't important when you're six. I'm well aware of them now and like a lot of people I like to dig about in the past, finding out what those formative years were like for my parents and their three kids. Jonny would have better memories than me. In 1980 he'd have been twelve, and our Andy nine. Yet after talking to Mum, it was clearly a challenging time that affected a lot of people. Reading and watching documentaries made me realise how lucky I was to get through this period unscathed.

The UK was a very different place then than now. Fifty per cent of the country's work force belonged to a trade union. A gallon of petrol was fifty pence. A pint of milk cost four and a half pence, while a pint of beer was twenty-two pence. A single record was forty-five pence, but if you wanted a number one in the charts you'd need to sell about a million of them. Mum and Dad's three-bed house cost £3,500. I've never told them how much I paid for mine. The wages of a Premier League footballer, the First Division as it was called then, were the princely sum of 200 quid a week. The country's identity was much more defined than now but also less polarised between rich and poor. The lives of UK families were being radically transformed by consumerism; the old world was dying and a new one was struggling to be born.

My mum's dad, Grandpa Dixon, had been a colliery manager, so mining was in our family history. Once inflation took off in the early 1970s and there

was a public sector wage freeze, it meant a miner's wages were worth less and less. The National Union of Mineworkers went on strike in 1972 and an overtime ban in 1973 prompted Ted Heath to declare his government's fifth state of emergency in just three and a half years. As coal stocks plummeted, he decreed the three-day working week. Pubs were shut, TV finished at 10.30 p.m. and only the hospitals and supermarkets had electricity to work through the week. Oh, and the newspapers. In 1973 the IRA had brought its bombing campaign to mainland Britain and that October the Arab oil embargo spiked petrol costs, which was rationed. Another strike in early 1974 persuaded Heath to go to the country and he lost to Harold Wilson. The miners got their pay rise.

The writing was already on the wall though. Smithy Wood wasn't the only colliery to close around that time. There were 700,000 miners in 1956 but by the early 1970s that number had more than halved to 290,000. For my parents' generation, the nation's troubles were serious. They had come of age in the 1960s, an era of optimism, growth and social mobility. Dad started working as a metallurgist in the steel industry, but when that started to collapse his job prospects looked shaky and he changed again, retraining as a service engineer. He got through a few jobs, first working for a gas welding company selling and mending gas torches and then servicing industrial kitchens where he found stable employment. With three young kids he needed the security.

We fared okay as a family. We weren't broke as both my parents were working. Neither was shy of the graft needed to keep a young family fed, warm and safe. My dad's retraining as a service engineer worked out well and Mum worked part-time, first in a DIY shop and then at a motor factor selling car parts, which meant good things for me and my brothers. Mum would take me to work with her up until I went to school in 1979, my elder brothers being at school already. I managed to keep Mum full of giggles when she was at work at the DIY shop next to the river in Chap. We'd chat and I'd bring her Victorian bottles I'd dug up out of the riverbank behind the shop where I'd be playing, whiling the hours away until we went home. I was innocent about all the world's cares and I have Mum to thank for that. What I know about that time is what was great about it.

I remember kids' TV, everything from *Swap Shop* to *Record Breakers*, although I would always sooner be outside. Sheffield's two million trees made television reception a bit tricky in those analogue days, a situation made worse by the council not allowing aerials on their properties. Dads liked to think they knew a trick or two for tuning their rented TV sets. For a while Sheffield had its own local station Sheffield Cablevision, with a kids'

programme called *Hullabaloo*, a bit like *Tiswas*, except only in black and white. The music was also outstanding, everything from T-Rex to the Sex Pistols. Local heroes The Human League released their epoch-making album *Reproduction*.

According to Andy, who is the big music lover in our family, Mum and Dad would always listen to the chart show after we all came back from a motorbike trial he'd been competing in. In Dad's car there would be lots of eight-track cassettes played – Red Army Ensemble, War of the Worlds, pretty spacey weird shit that Andy and him loved, and from what I've heard he was also partial to a bit of Boney M. Mum was born in Wigan so had that Northern Soul thing too. Their marriage was Lancashire and Yorkshire, and she'd say that we all knew who won the Wars of the Roses.

An abundance of sweets was another memory. These days, health experts would look askance at how much sugar we ate as kids. On the other hand, health-wise, only one per cent of men and two per cent of women were obese. The figure now is loads higher. It's as bad for kids. By the time they leave primary school, almost a quarter of kids are obese and in deprived areas that number is higher. It's a different world to that of my childhood. The outdoor life and only three TV channels, plus no computers or mobile phones, must have had something to do with that. I'm no politician or social scientist but I do know we were all far more active then than now. I know we can't go back to those times, many wouldn't want to, but the outdoor life has served me well and maybe it could others.

There was a new energy and excitement in the country about being able to travel abroad. Yet while package holidays were all the rage, we'd take any chance we got to go camping in Britain. My birth didn't put a stop to this and from the start we'd be off round the north of the country. Most weekends as a family we were dragged along to the motorbike trials my dad was riding in with the Hillsborough Motor Cycle Club. He had always been into bikes, long before he got married. Mum would be an observer on a section at each trial and mark all the riders as they came through the challenge set them. She always made sure we'd have a bonfire and there was always something to eat in the picnic box. My brothers and me would bugger about playing in the streams, woods and bracken-covered hills, watching the hundreds of riders and their bikes taking on some really hard and technical riding. We also had our own pushbikes too and made our own obstacles to play around on.

Each year we took our annual family trip to Scotland for the Scottish Six Days Trial. This was a week-long event established in 1909 that largely took place at Fort William but was bookended with visits to Edinburgh. It's a

world-class event, a bit like cycling's Tour de France in terms of its status in the trials calendar. Dad's best mate was Dave Thorpe, a Bultaco factory rider, and we were on his helpers team for years. We would go to the event every year without fail, renting a static caravan on Mrs Brown's campsite. Nana and Grandpa Dixon, Mum's parents, would rent one too. The Thorpes would be a few caravans down the line, and we'd have a great time hanging out with Dan and Sarah. Following him about for six days in the Highlands was great, watching all the amazing riders from all over the world and hanging around on our bikes, doing wheelies, jumping and skidding. It was a kid's dream. We tried our hardest to make up sections we could do on our pushbikes, imitating our trials heroes: Martin Lampkin, Dave Thorpe, Malcolm Rathmell and Tony Scarlett. This was long before a mountain bike touched down at Fort Bill, so for those that know a little of my career you can now appreciate why the place is so dear to me.

From 1977 the Scottish Six Days Trial changed slightly, dropping the connection to Edinburgh, so we were based at Fort William for the whole week. This made things a lot easier. Dad had a good level of competence on his bike and was a well-rounded rider, expert at his level, with years of experience. He was handy on a bike. I've since done the Scottish a few times myself and it's a truly brutal event. I've finished it too, I'm pleased to say, because there's many that don't. One year I had to retire with an infected elbow injury, so I know how bloody hard it is on the body.

Mum would help at events at the Hillsborough M.C.C. every weekend and in the week did the club's secretarial work and organised its annual dinner. As boys we'd be dragged everywhere Dad wanted to ride or help his mates who rode at the Scottish. We had great holidays in North Wales too. All five of us camped in a huge tent in the beautiful countryside of the Llŷn Peninsula, cooking all our food on a Calor Gas stove, spending a week on the beaches and playing silly buggers, having the time of our lives. I looked forward to those holidays every year.

Due to my high energy and penchant for being adventurous, my future of fun was pretty much mapped out already. With two older brothers, one six years older, one three years older, and both up for mischief, it was inevitable. I was outside with them a lot, which was fine by me. Every opportunity I got I spent it outdoors. But if we ever heard a high-pitched whistle, the kind that only dads can do through their front teeth, we knew we were late for tea and would have to leg it back as quick as possible so as not to piss Dad off. If we were late there would be hell to pay; being the youngest, it was less bad for me. My brothers got the worst of it. I don't think Dad had heard of nurturing kids. His approach to fatherhood was to

be a stickler for rules and deliver physical punishment if they weren't followed.

When I talk to her about it now, not long after Dad passed away, Mum mentions how she and Dad were sometimes at loggerheads over how to bring us up. This created a conflict in their relationship although it never got in Mum's way of looking after me, Andy and Jonny. They weren't a united team in that respect. He was incredibly uptight and strict, while she was far more balanced and easy-going. Like me, she's a glass-half-full kind of person and that seemed to work better with us boys.

Maintaining motorbikes between weekend events takes up a lot of time, especially if you compete as a dedicated amateur or wannabe pro, which Dad was. It's a seven-days-a-week hobby; work was something that just got in the way. There's loads to do: bikes need hosing down – no jet washes then, dirty gear needs washing, boots need cleaning and polishing, and there's lots of work to be done on the bike before it's ready to be ridden at the next event. Every nut and bolt needs checking and tyres and wheels going over. It's lots of work and requires total commitment to the mundane. There are rewards too, which is why Dad loved it, and I do too.

You're probably asking yourself where he kept all this stuff: his bike, his tools and parts, all the rest of it. Where was this magical storeroom? It was of course the flat-roofed, single-skin brick structure at the side of our house: the garage. This was an Aladdin's cave of a place that hid secrets us boys wanted to know. It was for me and my brothers a place that held a lot of joy and also some conflict. Because Dad guarded this eight-foot-by-sixteen-foot Tardis with a set of strict regulations and protocols that he constantly reinforced.

It's no wonder with eight or more bikes in the garage to maintain that when he'd come home from work he would immediately disappear in there for the rest of the evening. Not before he'd had his tea though. Inside he'd while away the hours tinkering with something or other he was working on, as well as maintaining the bikes he had running, so they were at their best mechanically and safe to ride at whatever events the Hillsborough M.C.C. and other clubs he was affiliated with put on. There was somewhere to ride every weekend.

After having bikes myself and riding some competitive trials I can easily see how that garage got so full up with gear. It was wall-to-wall chaos. Mine could easily be the same. I find it no less difficult to chuck stuff away: chip off the old block in that respect. Back then he was doing everything on his own in there and he wouldn't take any help from any of his boys, which I guess suited us and allowed us to get out and do whatever we wanted.

Not all of Dad's bikes were built up. Some were being fixed; some were in the process of being put back together; some were simply being maintained. There was stuff everywhere. There were some basic engineering tools like a pillar drill, some grinding wheels bolted to a work bench, a few welding kits too, and other stuff you could use to engineer bits and bobs. There were also a couple of big toolboxes – both of which I now have in my garage – that were full to the brim with spanners, pliers and all manner of tools. It was all useful stuff you needed to have if you were going to be maintaining motorbikes and making things from metal or wood, or fixing stuff that had broken.

The hobby engineering kit he had was used to make custom bits for his trials bikes. He made some really special things to help them run better than standard. Dave Thorpe was a sponsored factory rider for Spanish manufacturers Ossa and Bultaco, and later the Bolton company CCM. He was a handy bloke to know, and Dad knew many of the other top pros as well. Dad would have got some ideas of how to tune his bike up and make trick bits from looking at their bikes and picking the mechanics' brains at events.

Along two walls of the garage was a bench whose surface was covered in engine parts, nuts, bolts, screws and other bits of motorcycle – anything from petrol tanks to mudguards and everything in between. It seemed complete chaos. Every inch of all the work surfaces and floor were piled high with motorbike bits in various states of repair. It was so bad that every time he wanted to work on a project, the garage had to be cleared of this debris so he had the space to move around. This meant our pushbikes being out in the garden irrespective of the weather, and along with them four or five of his motorbikes and other odds and sods. They at least had covers to keep them dry. That didn't change over the whole of his lifetime: more stuff going in, stuff coming out, stuff being taken apart, stuff being put back together. Patterns.

Being an engineer, Dad was really good at making stuff. He had an eye for turning what looked like a pile of junk into something useful for us kids. One year he made us all an amazing go-kart with pram wheels on the front and a rear axle from an old Mini. He kept all the motorised and non-motorised vehicles running, and anything else around the house that had a motor. We never knew what he might have in the back of his work van when he came home. It could be battered bikes found on scrap heaps, bits of old motorbikes and cars, or some other item he'd dug out of a skip. As well as being a hoarder, he was the original skip rat.

For as long as I can remember it was drilled into us that the garage was and always would be Dad's space, and no one else's. If we were to touch or

use anything it would have to be put back in the exact same place it was found. The garage became a minefield of his making, and the penalty for stepping on one was usually a wallop. The fear he instilled in us and his willingness to punish held a palpable psychic power over me, Andy and Jonny. As in Super Mario Kart, we'd have an idea when Dad's bananas would show up because we had inadvertently pressed the banana button. I'm sure we all dealt with it differently, but for me it was no fun watching my brothers get clobbered for doing nothing that might warrant it. As both Andy and Jonny grew up and got their own motorbikes, they would also be in there, adding to the pressure.

Tony Peat was well known for his temper. We'd heard stories from friends of his, about him chucking rocks at his motorbike if it broke or he made a mistake riding at a trials event. We knew when he wasn't in the best of moods; it was like the weather changing. The sky got dark and dangerous very quickly. We didn't try to piss him off on purpose, we were just kids trying to keep our bikes running and we needed his tools to fix them. A puncture kit was essential to fix flatties and we needed a roof over our heads to keep us dry while we worked. Of course, in hindsight he liked to be able to find his tools when he needed them. I get that. But hey, you can't have it all can you? Anyway, that'll teach him to have three boys as kids.

Considering all the traps that had been set for us, you can appreciate why we were pretty intimidated by our forays into his domain. Remembering where stuff goes when you're a nipper isn't easy and I'm sure we left stuff all over. As kids you carry those feelings with you. If anything we used was put back out of place or couldn't be found in an instant, or we couldn't remember where we'd used it or seen it last, he would resort to the punishment he thought we needed to help us remember next time and clout us.

A clouting from the old fella was a regular occurrence. A punch wasn't uncommon I'm afraid to say. Sadly, that didn't change for a long time and my brother Jonny, being oldest, bore the brunt of it, with a great deal of bravery. And it was Jonny who eventually brought an end to it. In his teens he took some boxing lessons in the local boys' club, picking up self-defence skills to build his confidence. It obviously worked, as one day, when Dad went to thump him for some misdemeanour in the garage, Jonny, by then around sixteen years old, deftly ducked the punch and the old man's fist swung right on through and hit the wall so hard he broke his wrist and scaphoid. Served him right. It took a good six months to heal. No trials for Tony Peat for a while. That was the last time that kind of thing happened, and from then on, thanks to Jonny, we had no more physical trouble from the old man.

Dad's obsession with motorbikes permeated my life and changed me for sure. When he wasn't riding his bikes or fixing them, he followed all the motorbike sports he could. In those days, the UK was a force to be reckoned with talent-wise on the two-wheel stage. The sport of BMX came to the UK from the USA in 1979 and I got a BMX bike. Speedway and scrambling were regularly broadcast on the Saturday sports show *Grandstand*. Evel Knievel came to Wembley Stadium in 1975 and in front of 90,000 fans almost jumped thirteen buses on a Harley-Davidson. It was a death trap of a bike but very fast and he bounced bikeless down the landing like a floppy puppet in his white flared one-piece leathers, coming to a halt in grinding agony from a broken pelvis with the bike in pieces.

Jumping motorcycles over long distances was a good way to make your name in the 1970s. In 1978 Eddie Kidd, Bond-movie stuntman and another rider with a dramatic personal life, came down nose first after jumping fourteen buses, these ones double-deckers, on ITV's *World of Sport* riding a modified Suzuki RM 370. Evel and Eddie, later partially paralysed in an accident, were far luckier than Robin Winter-Smith. The twenty-nine-year-old Royal Artillery motorcycle display team rider ended the UK stunt-rider decade by losing his life attempting to jump thirty Rolls-Royces on an under-gear Suzuki RM 250 motocross bike at Elstree showground. He came up short on the twenty-eighth car and collapsed into the face of the landing scaffold. American folk legend Nanci Griffith recorded a song about him.

Racing also had its daredevils and stars, not least the superstar Barry Sheene. In 1975 Barry crashed and nearly skinned himself alive testing at Daytona in the USA when his rear tyre exploded at 170 miles per hour and the wheel locked up. A few days later he was sat up in hospital, half the skin from his shoulders left on the asphalt of Daytona, smoking a fag and giving interviews to American TV journalists. A year later he was 500cc world champion. In the world of trials, Sammy Miller, Mick Andrews, Malcolm Rathmell and Martin Lampkin all won a world championship – or two. Peter Collins won his first speedway world championship in 1976 in Katowice. Sheffield Tigers Speedway was a force to be reckoned with on the national stage. Owlerton Stadium in Sheffield would be full of fans eager to get a view of four men hammering round four laps of an oval mostly sideways on bikes with no brakes. In motocross, Hampshire-born rider Graham Noyce won the world championships in 1979.

Inspired by all this, we'd spend our afternoons and evenings after school on our pushbikes up in the woods or in the parks, playing with our mates. We'd bomb every hill we could find, my brothers building jumps or making

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dens to hide in. I can remember hitting the infamous root jump, ski jump and horseshoe in Chap Park. We had an awesome group of mates on the Cowley estate, which I think is lost these days.

And so I made it through the chaotic 1970s unaffected by it all. Mum never let the chaos affect how she treated my brothers or me. Not once were we exposed to the worries going on inside her head. I had two brothers to play with, and Mum's friends had kids too that were good pals and still are to this day. We were always busy, either following Dad around on weekends, having the best holidays and spending weekdays doing whatever we wanted. Looking back, I don't know how it could have been better. Maybe if our dad had controlled his anger better. That would have been the icing on the cake.