



Eddy Merckx: The Cannibal

Daniel Friebe

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'The whole point of a race is to find a winner... I chose to race, so I chose to win.'

For 14 years between 1965 and 1978, cyclist Edouard Louis Joseph Merckx simply devoured his rivals, their hopes and their careers. His legacy resides as much in the careers he ruined as the 445 victories - including five Tour de France wins and all the monument races - he amassed in his own right. So dominant had Merckx become by 1973 that he was ordered to stay away from the Tour for the good of the event.

Stage 17 of the 1969 Tour de France perfectly illustrates his untouchable brilliance. Already wearing the yellow jersey on the col du Tourmalet, the Tour's most famous peak, Merckx powered clear and rode the last 140 kilometres to the finish-line in jaw-dropping solitude, eight minutes ahead of his nearest competitor.

Merckx's era has been called cycling's Golden Age. It was full of memorable characters who, at any other time, would all have gone on to become legends. Yet Merckx's phenomenal career overshadowed them all. How did he achieve such incredible success? And how did his rivals really feel about him? Merckx failed drug tests three times in his career - were they really stitch ups as he claimed? And what of the crash at a track meet in Blois, France that killed Merckx's pacer Fernand Wambst, which Merckx claimed deeply affected him psychologically and physically? Or the attack by a spectator in 1975?

Despite his unique achievements, we know little about the Cannibal beyond his victories. This is the first comprehensive biography of Merckx in English, and finally exposes the truth behind this legendary man.

Eddy Merckx: The Cannibal Details

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From Reader Review Eddy Merckx: The Cannibal for online ebook

Chris Haney says

Three stars is probably generous since the author only spoke with Merckx for ten minutes. Very insightful to the world of the peleton of the 70's

S?awek Karwasz says

Daj? pi?? gwiazdek, bo to dobra ksi??ka jest.

Martin Mccann says

As a good summary of the life of the man voted in a number of polls as one of the best sportspeople ever, this is quite good. All the highs and lows are there, and there is an analysis of what drove The Cannibal, and what made him different to those who have gone before and come after him. While Armstrong may be held high in the eyes of many, it must be remember Merckx was succesful in Classics as well as the Grand Tours, whereas Lance just concentrated on the Tour.

Friebe allows for competing analysis from a range of sources, those who competed against Merckx, those who rode with him and those who reported on his career. Of course it helps to know the background to each of Merckx's interactions with those who have been interviewed- obviously some come with more an an agenda and desire to protect their legacies than others, and the author does well to reflect these, without negatively impacting on the validity of their input.

One voice that is missing is Merckx himself who did not want to collaborate with the book. Friebe insists this is actually more beneficial, but there is still a void there that is not filled. While a certain amount of revisionism is to be expected, I do feel that Merckx's absence is most clearly felt as Friebe attempts to deal with the controversies that surround Eddy. This is no hiagoraphy but it would be good to see what how these events are now viewed by the man himself with hindsight-to get this however the reader would need to seek out the other works Merckx did collaborate on.

This is generally well put together, although on a small number of occasions I had to re-read sentences a couple of times to get their meaning-some were open to ambiguity which should have been addressed at the editing stage. Overall though I recommend this as a good summary of Merckx's life though I am looking forward to checking out William Fotherington's Half Man, Half Bike, to see how he deals with Merckx.

Ronnie says

Two main thoughts reside at the closing of is book.

The first is that Friebe's writing is easy, low impact and conversational - for the first half of the book, at least; it seems to lose those qualities somewhat in the second half - although the final chapter works well.

He speaks quickly, Eddy Merckx. His eyebrows are almost permanently raised, not in surprise but arched almost like brackets around everything he says, or around everything he is; almost as if to say, 'I'm telling you this, but you have to remember that I'm Eddy Merckx, and not even I know what that means...' That, at least, is my impression. It could be just a mannerism.

The second is that Merckx himself is still a bit of an enigma, and Friebe fails to uncover the *man behind the man,* so to speak. Given that this is an unauthorised autobiography, it's not that surprising, I suppose.

Merckx's most attractive and long-hidden qualities, particularly his warmth and humour, have risen slowly to the surface, above his natural shyness and suspicion.

If it's a truism that sporting heroes are either flawed and psychologically impaired, or they're tirelessly professional and so good as to be robotic, then - although he has his moments - Eddy is definitely in the latter camp. In fact, a lot of Friebe's book made me want to read more about his 60s and 70s Belgian compatriots, De Vlaeminck and Van Looy. Both of whom seem like more interesting, if far less successful (but isn't that everyone?) characters.

Aaron says

Eddy Merckx: The Cannibal is a very thorough account of his cycling career that emphasizes his trials and drawbacks. The author has an encyclopediac knowledge of the races and competitors of the late 60s/ 70s.

N4N0 says

Zbyto?ne komplikovaná angli?tina, v?aka ktorej sa ?lovek ob?as stráca v záplave mien a udalostí ... kniha ur?ená pre znalých cyklistickej histórie a fanúšikov tohto športu ?

Patrick O'Rourke says

An enjoyable read. Unfortunately I don't really know that much about cycling and most of names, races and technical terms required me to frequently consult the Oracle at Wikipedia. As such I kinda wished I had more foreknowledge going in.

Dan Cohen says

It's worth a read, but I don't feel that this is one of the better cycling books. I umm-ed and ahh-ed about whether to give it 2 starts or 3 so it's fair to say it's on the border for me. The writing is confusing and, at times, inelegant - I found I was having to read some sentences a few times to understand them. I didn't feel that I had gained significant insight into the subject and the pen pictures of other characters were too numerous and too short for any of them to stick in my mind. Even now (minutes after finishing the book) they are blurring together.

Carl Wells says

Couldn't get into it. Perhaps I need more background on the era. Just too many names and characters on every page. Flipping through it there were some great stories, but not worth the full read for me at the moment.

Richard Graveling says

Very detailed accounts of the exploits of the world's most successful cyclist. Should be read by Armstrong supporters who maintain this accolade should go to him. Merckx dominated everything, not just the TdF.

Mentions the doping allegations, but not much detail on this (quite refreshing having read Hamilton et al). Concentrates on the cycling career and not the man after retirement (fair enough), I am sure there could be another book on Merckx's contacts post-retirement (introductions to Michele Ferrari, etc.), although I'm not sure we need one!

Gumble's Yard says

Very much written in Herbie Sykes/Rouleur style and relies on a large number of current interviews with Merckx's contemporaries (with in many cases comments on the interviewees and many based at cycle races especially the Giro) and mainly his rivals; he explicitly makes a strength of the book's weakness – that Merckx contractually wouldn't talk to him and instead bases the books around the enigma of Merckx: when did people realise how good he was, how did they adapt to him, what did they think drove him.

William Fotheringham Half Man, Half Bike: The Life of Eddy Merckx, Cycling's Greatest Champion is a much more conventional book and is written around translations of previous works and a much more limited number of interviews (many from other projects or previous magazine articles) – although interestingly he features many of the same stories at Friebe which implies many are well worn tales and Friebe just the latest to hear them.

Patrick says

I picked this up from the local library on a whim. My knowledge of elite level cycling, such as it is, comes largely from Geoffrey Wheatcroft's History of the Tour de France, with a smattering from Victor Hugo Pena's 'A Significant Other' and the small amount I was able to glean watching Eurosport in French at a loose end in a hotel room for a few days back in, I think, 2006.

But really, what made Merckx's story interesting to me was not primarily, the cycling but the way it traced the career of a man who, for a time, utterly dominated his sport, how his rivals and colleagues reacted to that dominance, and how Merckx himself reacted when time and tide saw him lose that edge. Really, it could be about an elite sportsman in *any* sport because, with those rare exceptions who know to bow out at the very

top of their game, it's been the story of anyone who reaches the very top of professional sport.

How accurately Friebe describes the cycling rivalries I couldn't say, but the version of the story he tells made for an intriguing read, and the chapter near the end about that ever-present spectre in elite level cycling, doping, gives the lie to the idea that performance enhancing drugs were either rare or ineffective back in the 60s and 70s, while coming to no definite conclusions as to whether Merckx' success could be attributed to them (he tested positive for drugs 3 times in his career, but set against that, he tested negative hundreds of times.) I can only speak as someone who doesn't know much about the subject, but I found this worth my time.

Andrew says

Eddy Merckx can be an enigma for anyone with a growing interest in cycling. Friebe points out that football has Pele and Maradona, tennis has Borg and McEnroe (and maybe Federer), F1 has Schumacher and Senna (and Clarke and Fangio), but cycling has only Merckx.

Knowing about sporting icons is essential because they reflect the values and approaches that are the essence of their sports. The interesting part of the Merckx story is that his inevitable dominance of cycling history seemed to be a fact to those he was riding beside as much as it is five decades later.

Friebe explains Merckx as representing both the 'old' style of cycling as exploits and the 'modern' cycling with its professionalism, but without today's limited focus on peaking at specific races or specialities.

Merckx rode at maximum every minute of every race for an entire career.

This book works well as an introduction to the Merckx era, his achievements, and the personalities in that age of Belgian cycling. It is an easy read and is full of anecdotes built from extensive interviews with everyone, except Merckx himself.

This is the book's weakness because Merckx's motivations and approach were obviously more complex than his soundbites: His genius remains opaque without being explained in his own words.

The book is also challenged by attempting to cover such an incredible palmares, and might have been more appealing if it focused more on crucial moments in the way that it treats Savona, Barcelona and Pra Loup.

This book is definitely a must-read for anyone with a keen interest in cycling, but it is unlikely to be the last book we need to read on the greatest competitor that cycling (and possibly any sport) will ever see.

Timojhen says

Good, though it was largely academic and dry. No dispute he's the greatest cyclist ever (so far) but I couldn't seem to get a rhythm with the book. Did drive me to watching some of the stages mentioned on YouTube - what a different era than the one we live in today.
