Chapter 1

Answering All Your Tour Questions

In This Chapter

- Sizing up the Tour
- Getting to know teams and riders
- Knowing the Tour's fashion statements
- Eating to ride — everyday
- Gearing up and packing up to watch the race

Every July, daily life changes in France, and has for the past 100 years or so. That's when the Tour de France — a fast-moving circus of cyclists — makes its way around the country. The Tour consists of nearly 200 riders from a couple dozen countries pedaling through fields of sunflowers and vineyards and climbing into thin mountain air.

Why do cyclists want to do this? This chapter tells you why. You discover how and why the Tour began and how to understand race operations and strategies. You get all Tour basics: what equipment riders are using, what apparel they're wearing, and what they're eating and drinking. You also find out how they do what they do, every day, for three weeks. You find out how, as a Tour de France fan, you can follow the Tour in person, watch it on television, or follow every kilometer of the race on your laptop computer.

Understanding the Race and the Strategies

Condensed to its basic premise, the Tour de France is a simple athletic contest: The cyclist who completes a strenuous and often perilous course of more than 2,000 miles in the lowest total time wins.

Yet, the event is so much more. Steeped in history, tradition, and racing lore, the Tour defines endurance and global sportsmanship. Unlike professional sports played in stadiums and arenas filled with fans who've paid for tickets, the Tour stands alone in the sports world. Its arena extends past countries' borders, and for fans, it's the best bargain in sports, because it's free.

For riders, it's a job with an equally simple equation. While progressing along the course like chess pieces on wheels, riders face the limits of endurance. They battle inclement weather and attempt to outwit and outrace each other while using the same strategy — conserve energy as much as possible for the times when it's needed most.

Working together

Riders participating in the Tour compete at the top of the sport. The Tour is the Super Bowl, Stanley Cup, World Series, Winston Cup, and NBA Championship of bicycle racing. Functioning as a team sport (see Chapters 4 and 6 for details), the race features teams of nine cyclists selected from a larger group of teammates. Reaping the benefits of synergy, teams work as units, and each rider has varying responsibilities. As riders make their way around France and into neighboring countries, teams that use sound racing strategies tend to have the most success — for the group and for the team captain.

Winning individually

Individuals win stages and one rider claims the overall title. Winning a Tour de France stage is the career highlight for many cyclists. Every day, one rider is victorious, and he climbs onto the finish podium after a stage win and hears fans' cheers and receives various accolades. But a rider's individual triumph, at least to some degree, is the result of selfless teammates. It's rare for a cyclist to win a stage without acknowledging teammates who've put him in a position to ride to a triumph.

Understanding Those Colored Jerseys

Riders on each team are required to wear the same color jersey (as discussed Chapter 3). Each team's jersey features logos of sponsors who pay the riders' salaries. The result is a kaleidoscope of moving billboards on wheels. Some teams' uniforms feature subtle

colors; other teams opt for brighter colors. Some teams' uniforms look surprisingly similar, further adding to the blur of the often fast-moving *peloton* (the main pack of riders).

A few riders wear special jerseys. Throughout the race, the reigning World Champion wears his team colors, but on a special jersey with horizontal stripes. National current road champions wear team jerseys featuring their country's colors.

Four other cyclists also wear different colored jerseys each day (see Figure 1-1).

- The yellow jersey represents the race leader.
- The green jersey represents the race's best sprinter.
- The polka dot jersey designates the race's finest climber.
- The white jersey designates the highest-ranked rider in the overall competition age 25 or younger.

Figure 1-1: Winners wearing their jerseys on the podium at the 2004 Tour de France. From left, Robbie McEwen, Lance Armstrong, Richard Virenque, and Vladimir Karpets.

In most instances, cyclists wearing specialty jerseys like to wear them as long as they can during the race. But the colored jerseys of the Tour change often, and the anticipation of those costume changes each day helps make the Tour a race of many races. See Chapter 3 for additional details on special jerseys.

Choosing the Right Stuff: From Bikes to Snacks

Since the Tour began, the equipment that riders use and the methods they employ for keeping themselves nutritionally prepared to ride have changed a lot and not very much at the same time. Bikes still have two wheels, two brakes, two pedals, a frame, handlebar, gears, and a saddle. Riders still wear cycling shoes. But technology (see more in Chapter 9) has catapulted current Tour bikes into the forefront of aerodynamic efficiency. Tour cyclists' machines were once steel. Aluminum, titanium, and carbon fiber materials are now in the mix. Gearing options have also dramatically improved since front and rear derailleurs became common in the 1950s.

Cyclists ate bread and pasta in the Tour's early days, just as they do today. But riders' nutrition (discussed in Chapters 7 and 8) is now a science. Tour cyclists drank alcohol like water during the race's infancy, and it was many a rider's delight to smoke cigarettes. And while a celebratory sip or two of champagne is still traditional during the Tour's final stage, there's no smoking. The infamous tales of riders lighting each other's cigarettes are now only billows of smoke in Tour lore.

Pedaling through decades of technology

Imagine Tour riders in 1903 riding a saddle that included synthetic gels for comfort. What would those pioneering Tour riders think of today's clipless pedals and aerodynamic handlebars that allow cyclists to ride in tucked positions like downhill racers?

Tour riders now use equipment built by computer-generated formulas. It's tested in wind tunnels and perfected by a battery of engineers and mechanics. Just like the riders of yesteryear, competing in the Tour today includes a man-versus-machine dynamic. Riders are hard on their bikes; bikes are hard on riders. Throughout the Tour's history — from ancient bikes to state-of-the art machines — one constant has remained: Something will go wrong with riders' bikes during the race. Whether riders use steel or titanium frames, mechanical problems occur every day at the Tour de France, and always when riders least expect them.

Tour de France teams employ riders, managers, physicians, masseurs, trainers — and cooks. While riding an average of more than 100 miles per day, Tour cyclists eat nearly constantly. It's rare when they can adequately keep up with their bodies' nutritional requirements. Team cooks do their best to keep riders properly nourished. Cooks prepare riders' meals for breakfast, dinner, and a prerace meal, when the Tour's starting time allows. But it's not just quantity that counts, rather the quality of the quantity. As endurance athletes, riders need specific amounts of carbohydrates, protein, and fat. If the equation isn't right, it can mean the difference between riders' successes and failures.

Spectating During the Tour

Unlike stadium and arena sporting events, there are no official attendance figures for the Tour de France. Many kilometers of the course are nearly spectator free. But at each stage's starting and finishing lines, on mountain climbs, and along the final-day cobblestones of Paris, watching the Tour (see more on this in Chapter 10) is a way of life. Millions of spectators attend the race every year (see Figure 1-2), some of whom camp for days to reserve key viewing perches. Millions more enthusiasts around the world watch the event live and on a tape-delayed basis. Radio listenership is global and massive. Cycling-specific Web site traffic grows exponentially during the Tour.

Figure 1-2: Spectators waiting in the rain for the finish of Stage 5 in Chartres, Tour de France 2004.

Watching the Tour from home

Tour fans in France who don't attend the race in person are still fortunate. The event is broadcast live on the French national network every day (see Chapter 10). Most stages are organized to finish around 5 p.m. in France, the prime viewing hour.

Dozens of countries have similar broadcasts, including, since 2001, daily live coverage on the Outdoor Life Network (OLN), the first North American network to offer live daily coverage.

Searching for Tour information

Daily European newspapers provide vast Tour information. It's front-page news and often dominates sports section coverage. *L'Equipe,* the French daily sports newspaper, is a Tour sponsor, so it publishes specialty magazines on the Tour and provides the public with an overwhelming amount or race information — from race reports to rider profiles, from road closures to columnists' strong opinions. The *International Herald Tribune* and *USA Today*'s international edition provide major English newspaper coverage.

The Tour's online presence (see Chapter 10) has reached its saturation point. The official Tour Web site, `www.LeTour.fr` features near-immediate details of every stage. Commercial sites — from newspapers' online editions to specialty magazines' sites — battle for fast and more comprehensive Tour news coverage. Many sites feature riders' daily diaries from inside the *peloton,* while blogs, cycling forums, and chat rooms burst with activity.

Making the trip to the Tour

By plane, train, automobile, or bicycle, attending the Tour has become an increasingly popular way for cycling fans seeking a vacation to get their fill. Most major international airlines fly into Orly International Airport and Charles de Gaulle International Airport, the two major Paris airports. With rare exception, the start of the Tour is within a few hours' drive or train ride from either of these airports. July is the busiest time of year for travel to France, so make airline, hotel, and car rental reservations by early spring — at the latest.

Traveling with a tour group is another increasingly popular option. Numerous retired Tour riders have lent their names to tour outfits that provide on-course training rides, varying accommodation options, and catered meals. Regardless of the travel method, Tour visitors should firmly adhere to one well-known Tour spectators' creed: Get there early and prepare to stay late.