Jack Beaudoin

Sightseeing on the tour de la vie

ST. ETIENNE, FRANCE – Cyclist Tyler Hamilton has called the Tour de France – the 21-day stage race across this beautiful, Texas-sized country – a "Super Bowl every day," and he's not exaggerating.

"It's amazing," he said atop the 6,000-foot summit of Alpe- d'Huez. "This is something I've dreamt of doing since I was about 10."

If you are not familiar with the Tour, take Hamilton, a 28-year-old Massachusetts native, at his word. For three weeks, this country pays little attention to anything outside the domain of bike racing.

During the entire race, television stations broadcast each of the five-hour stages from start to finish. Newspapers devote at least six pages daily to the intrigue of the Tour. And old men, dressed out in the colors and logos of their favorite teams, pour out on to the nation's back roads after France's most popular July television show – Velo Club – signs off for the day.

Thousands line the switchbacks that climb peaks in the Pyrenees and the Alps, just to catch a glimpse of their heroes ascending the mountains like so many angels on their way to Heaven. And on the race's last day, which ends traditionally on the Champs-Elysees in Paris, a crowd of more than a million assembles to crown the victor with laurels.

Given these circumstances, it's easy to understand Hamilton's enthusiasm for the "Super Bowl everyday." The racer never hears a pause in the cheering. As he blurs by, he hears only serial hysteria, the chain of applause keeping pace with the cyclist. He does not see what's left behind when the race has passed. I was in St. Etienne last week, an industrial city southwest of Lyon, watching a stage of the Tour known as the "contre la montre" – the race against the clock. I stood at the foot of a steep hill in the middle of the city, a narrow street lined closely on both sides by stone row houses, about a mile and a half from the finish. An old man tapped me on the shoulders. "How fast do they go," he asked me, pointing to a racer.

"About 50 or 60 kilometers per hour," I told him in my best French. "It's not a big hill they're descending."

"It's very fast," he countered. "I live on this hill. I rode my bicycle to work every day, and I never went that fast."

We watched the next cyclist speed down the hill. Behind him, in the team car, his coach blurted out directions over a public address system. The old man tapped my shoulder again.

"Where are you from? Holland?" he asked.

"Maine," I said. "In the United States. I'm here following the Tour."

"And you came all this way to see bicycles go down my hill?" the old man said incredulously . "I myself have never left St. Etienne."

I shrugged. I wanted to tell him, of course, that it was much more than that. I wanted to explain to him the way cycling makes me feel, about achieving a kind of grace in the chain ring, about realizing one's dreams, even vicariously. But what could I tell this man, who had lived and loved and worked near a hill he would always know more intimately than any bike racer?

Like Hamilton, we all begin life with dreams. For the greater lot of us, these visions always remain on the far horizon, hazy and shimmering. After a while, as the mirage retreats with our every advance, we make accommodation, chalk up another failure, and recall it later with remorse. Such a view ignores a simple fact – every day we climb the hills we can tackle, and every day we relish the short, effortless descents.

Jack Beaudoin is a staff writer.