

GEORGES BRIQUET

# WAR HERO & TOUR HERO

*It was hardly the audience to which Georges Briquet had become accustomed. Oh, they were hanging on his every word of course. Not for nothing had he earned the moniker 'Roi des radio-reporters' — the King of Radio Reporters. He knew what he was doing. He was a pro.*

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**B**ut his listeners were a rag tag bunch of a few hundred, not the millions who typically listened to his Tour de France commentaries. And they were dirty and dishevelled, and all considered highly undesirable by the powers that be. The microphone into which Briquet directed his voice didn't even work, and the stage results he was relaying were entirely fictional. But that commentary to his fellow prisoners at Dachau might be the most important Georges Briquet ever gave.

It is a century since Jean Georges Briquet entered the world, and over half a century since his voice was the soundtrack to the Tour de France. It's a long time ago now. Few are left who remember each of the 26 Tours for which he served as the narrator of every single twist and turn.

But let there be no doubt: even if you and Briquet never stood on this earth at the same time, you have felt — are feeling, will feel — his influence. As your heart soars at the sound of rapid-fire commentary for a Tour sprint stage; when details of *châteaux* reach your ears in the balmy summer air; as you digest details of what your chosen commentator enjoyed for dinner the night before, you should know that you owe it all to this man. Prior to Briquet, radio sports reporting had been ponderous rather than passionate. While Edmond Dehorter can lay claim to the title of France's first radio sports reporter, Briquet is considered the true father of the modern version of the art.

Listen to his Tour commentaries and, even if you don't understand a word of French, the tone will be immediately familiar. He speaks quickly, naturally, and in a conversational fashion. There is none of the slow and formal



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the Tour was passing, and explain the happenings around the race as well as within it (just as well, perhaps, since on one 1953 stage he managed to name a winner who'd actually abandoned the day before). His popularity guaranteed him a table at the best restaurant in town come the evening — the reward for the *maître d'* being the good chance he'd talk about the meal on air the next day. But it was not only restaurateurs who had a soft spot for Briquet. So did the riders. If a big name was considering abandoning, Tour director Jacques Goddet is said to have asked Georges to have a word to try to dissuade him.

Briquet had a very straightforward way of summing up his trade. "The radio reporter has to be a simple spectator who is better placed than others," he said, "and who can explain to those who aren't as well placed what is happening." Accurate, perhaps, but not entirely revealing of this one man's impact on the Tour and how fans all over the world experience it. For that, it's worth turning to Jacques Vendroux, the current director of sports at Radio France.

"Briquet invented the role of the sporting commentator," Vendroux has contended. "It's he who was the precursor, it's he who was the trigger, it's he who was the first, it's he who was the model for everyone who came after him. He gave us the framework, and we could only try to improve on it. When you listen to Georges Briquet, you think to yourself how lucky we are as reporters now to have once heard him work, because he gave us his gift: 'Here you go. This is the way you do it.'"

At one point, it became clear to his campmates that Briquet had not seen his pedals for some time. It was decided that action was needed. Somehow, several metres' worth of iron wire was acquired and two prisoners who were good with their hands got to work. "One transformed the wire into an approximation of a radio microphone of the time; the other into two pedals with toe clips," fellow Dachau prisoner Raoul Vignettes would remember later. "One evening, very officially, both were presented to our popular Tour de France reporter."

Their reasoning was that pedals with toe clips cannot be lost. Briquet used the microphone, meanwhile, to offer commentary on a stage finish — his typical improvisational style coming in handy, since the results were

entirely imaginary. "The audience applauded the victory of who knows what rider... French, naturally. From that day on, Georges rapidly regained his morale."

In April 1945, the American army arrived at Dachau and the camp was liberated. Inmate 74311 was freed, along with thousands of others. And when the Tour de France resumed two years later — its life also disrupted by war — he was again there to comment on proceedings. By then, Georges Briquet had become nothing less than chief sports editor for state broadcaster Radiodiffusion Française. He'd remain a firm fixture at the race for another couple of decades. Year after year, Briquet would regale listeners with picture postcards of the landscapes through which

precision of Dehorter, and there is his notable Limousin accent. Briquet was a son of Limoges and so, almost inevitably, the son of a porcelain worker. The city in central France is famous for its china-ware, and an education at its trade school for commerce and industry was probably obligatory for young Georges. By 14, he found himself working as a salesman in the household department of Galeries Lafayette. By 16, he'd be fighting in the first of the two World Wars, which would punctuate both the century and his life.

He'd always had a fondness for sport. He'd boxed, rowed, fenced and, yes, cycled. So when, in 1921, the opportunity arose to become a journalist for *L'Auto* — the newspaper edited by Tour de France founder Henri Desgrange — he naturally seized it with both hands. He'd also write for *Le Miroir des Sports*, but it was an open casting organised by that weekly magazine that began the career in which he would truly excel. Radio station Le Poste Parisien was looking for reporters. When the chiefs selected Georges Briquet, they probably didn't yet realise they'd struck gold.

The knock on the door came at 7am on a June morning in 1944. It was accompanied by raucous voices speaking a foreign but scarily familiar language. A husband and a wife and their daughter scrambled to get dressed in the midst of this abrupt early morning interruption. As they opened the door, it was as the family had feared. Two members of the German police were standing on the doorstep. And they'd come for one Georges Briquet.

It seems Briquet wasn't someone inclined to turn down work. At Le Poste Parisien, he quickly became the voice of more or less every sport — tennis and football followers became just as used to him as cycling fans. So too did those dreaming of becoming rich, what with his being the voice of the national lottery. And the singing competition he helmed, *L'Heure des Amateurs*, would uncover a host of French stars, long before *The Voice: La Plus Belle Voix* came onto the scene. All that before you even take into account his role as a film star — albeit something of a typecast one, given he played 'Le reporter' in *Les Cinq Sous de Lavarède* and 'Le speaker' in *Bichon* — and his narration of the album *Le Tour de Notre France*, a collection of regional songs from the country.

But there was one opportunity for which Briquet demonstrated no enthusiasm: working for a radio station that served as a Nazi mouthpiece. Radio-Paris had been under

German control since 1940, when Hitler's forces began to occupy the French capital. It was Briquet's consequent refusal to work for the station which aroused the displeasure of the Gestapo, and which ultimately led to that 7am knock on the door.

He was led down his building's five stories with a gun pointed at his back, and no details of the crime of which he was accused. After several hours in a secure room, accompanied by a hodgepodge of others accused of similarly nameless crimes, he was put in a van destined for an internment and deportation camp in Compiègne. From there, east to Dachau.

There's a saying in French: 'perdre les pédales'. It literally translates as 'to lose your pedals', a variation on 'to lose your marbles' or simply 'to lose it'. In Dachau, losing your pedals or your marbles — or just 'it' — was an understandably common state of affairs.

Daily life at the camp was one of near-endless misery and cruelty, not to mention physical hardship. "I single-handedly built two concrete walls while I was there: I learnt

all that in five minutes under the threat of one ruling with brutal authority," Briquet would recall later. "Sand, cement, water, lime, mixing, pouring, you're talking about a radio reporter!" And he wasn't just expected to witness the hangings of fellow prisoners, but to assist in them: something which would provoke violent bouts of vomiting despite his entirely empty stomach.

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