

SHELLEY VERSES

words Richard Moore photographs Daniel Sharp

Sometimes, the most interesting interviews come from the most unexpected sources, even from some of the most apparently marginal people. As I embarked on my research for *Slaying the Badger*, my book about the 1986 Tour de France, I was urged by a trusted friend: “Speak to Shelley Verses.”

Shelley Verses? The name rang a vague bell. Well, it would, wouldn't it? I remembered it from the 1980s. And then “Shelley Verses” triggered other distant, though somehow less vague, memories, of long, blonde hair, tanned legs in skimpy shorts – standing in feed zones, handing out musettes – and a dazzling Californian smile.

Well, if you were a teenaged boy in the 1980s, you probably would recall such details, wouldn't you? We are talking about the unreconstructed sport of cycling, after all. Before Shelley Verses began popping up in feed zones – and, *quelle surprise*, featuring in TV montages more than any other soigneur – you could count the number of girls involved (excluding those on the podium) on the fingers of a mitten.

Verses worked as a soigneur for several teams: 7-Eleven, La Vie Claire, Toshiba, TVM and Saturn. And she worked on the '86 Tour, but for 7-Eleven, not Hinault's team La Vie Claire. And so my first question was: why should I speak to Shelley Verses? “You just should,” came the reply.

So I tried to track her down. It wasn't that easy, not because she has gone into hiding, but because she isn't wedded to the internet. Her last known involvement at the highest level of the sport – at least as far as I could discover – was when she acted as Lance Armstrong's soigneur for a brief period in 1998, when, in the early days of his return to the sport after overcoming cancer, he escaped to the US to train in the company of one of the original 7-Eleven riders, Bob Roll. It has often been cited as a formative phase of his comeback.

All I could find was an occasionally updated blog with a photograph showing Verses cradling the head and cleaning the face of one of her riders, Jean-François Bernard. It's a strikingly intimate picture. And beneath it there was some touching correspondence between Bernard's son, Julien, and Shelley. “I have so many beautiful stories about your father,” she wrote.

Eventually I located an email address and sent her an email explaining my book. It didn't take long for her to respond. “It was so wonderful to receive your e-mail!” Verses wrote. “It takes me like 20 mins to type 2 lines! I have a blog and pay a bike racer to type for me! I'll talk to you any time. Cheers, Shelley V.”

It was followed by a second email which seemed to begin in the middle:

“...makes me happy! I have been wanting to connect with Paul Koechli for years and never could find a way. I found out recently that my old teammate Jaanus Kuum had passed away... suicide. It came about cuz Graham Watson had sent me some images and one was me working on Jaanus... I googled him cuz I wanted to send image and saw what had happened. I was broken, wanted to talk to Paul. I was up in middle of night sobbing. That was one of my boys. I am crying just writing this stupid e-mail! Ok, so much to say I guess. Actually loaded to the gills! Oh for fuck sake! Talk soon, love, Shell.”

A few days later I called Shelley at her home in Santa Barbara. She spoke for about two-and-a-half hours. It wasn't so much an interview as an outpouring. And she didn't merely recall the events of '86 and so many other incidents in her eight-year stint in Europe as a soigneur: rather, she seemed to relive them all, and to do so with breathless urgency. Apart from her formidable gifts as a storyteller, it was the raw emotion stoked by her recall of those events that struck me so forcefully.

I could hear her catching her breath, and struggling to keep the lid on those bubbling-up emotions as she spoke about “my boys”, and of her commitment, as a soigneur, to “keeping the stallions calm in the stable”. At other times I could hear her trying with considerable difficulty to talk through gales of laughter as she described misadventures and escapades. Her every sentence had an exclamation mark at the end of it.

Shelley made a big impression, and of course she featured far more in my book than I would ever have expected a soigneur on a rival team to feature. We kept in touch. And, when I found myself in California in May this year, I looked her up. “Come and stay!” she said – *of course* she did.



“Soon my boyfriend had me doing free massages to all the boys in the local bike club. And he says, ‘You’re a soigneur.’ A fucking what?”

She met me at the train station in Santa Barbara, the exact embodiment of the voice that had gushed through the phone, smiling dazzlingly and skipping across the platform in her bright pink hooded jacket. And the first thing she did, after the warm embrace, was to offer a bottle of water and an energy bar. Once a soigneur, always a soigneur.

Shelley Verses was an unwitting and unsuspecting pioneer who was thrown in at the deep end. Her first European race was the 1985 Giro d’Italia. The first question is: how on earth did she become involved in cycling?

Answering that, she insists, involves telling the tale of how she ended up in Santa Barbara. She grew up in Stamford, Connecticut, where she was a talented field hockey player; then she went to study physical education in Massachusetts, but she hated the course, dropped out and returned home. She enrolled at another college in Long Beach, but en route, with her brother, Stephen, their Chevy broke down “in the middle of the fucking desert” – but close to a service area.

In the toilets was a man – “this beautiful guy” – called Tony, mopping the floor. “Is that you making all that noise?” he teased her.

“I was just wondering, how far is it to Long Beach?” asked the 20-year old Shelley.

“A nice girl like you going to Long Beach?” said Tony. “It’ll ruin you, Long Beach.”

“I grew up by the ocean,” explained Shelley. “I want to be by the ocean again. I want to see palm trees.”

Tony opened his wallet, and pulled out a picture of him and his wife by a palm tree. “This is Santa Barbara,” he said. Then he produced a map. “This is where you want to go. I want you to drive to Santa Barbara now. Get your car fixed. Then, if you leave Santa Barbara, Long Beach is here.” He showed it on the map, then added: “But you’re never gonna leave Santa Barbara.”

Her brother decided the next day that Santa Barbara wasn’t for

him, and left. But Verses lived in her car for the next eleven days. She never made it to Long Beach. That was 1980. “I have never, to this day, seen Long Beach State [the college in which she had enrolled]. I never finished college.”

This gives some idea of Verses’ personality: flaky and erratic on the surface, loyal and dependable underneath. She has never left Santa Barbara.

Once there, she wanted to work with athletes. And so she began working “in this little city college training room. And I took as many jobs as I could – I had five. I was a gardener, I sold flowers, I sold strawberries, I cleaned houses, I cleaned boats. And I got a bike, because my car finally blew up.”

She also began seeing a bike racer, and she went to night school to learn massage. Soon her boyfriend “had me doing free massages to all the boys in the local bike club. And he says, ‘You’re a soigneur.’ A fucking *what?*”

“The next thing I know, I’m at a bike race and I’m doing these little massages, like my boyfriend told me to do, and a guy comes up to me, in a red, white and blue velour tracksuit. He says [she adopts a strong Polish accent]: ‘I see you at races. I’m Eddie Borysewicz, Olympic coach. I need someone like you at Olympic Training Centre.’

“Get out of here!” replied Verses (thinking: nice velour suit!).

It was the legendary coach, Eddie B, but the opportunity wasn’t as glamorous as it sounded. The “job” was unpaid but it could lead, explained Borysewicz, to working with the cycling team at the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles.

“How many girls work at the Olympic centre?” asked Verses.

“Two,” said Borysewicz (and that was only because there was a quota: there had to be two). “But they never last.”

“Why not?”

“Either they can’t handle the load, or they’re having sex with the riders,” shrugged Borysewicz.



Offside / L'Equipe

“What load?” asked Verses.

“The massages,” said Eddie B.

“I’ll do it!” she said.

“It was so difficult,” says Verses. “I went for the winter [training] camp in 1983. You had to do 12-14 rubs a day. The other girl didn’t even make it to the third day. On the very first day Amos Ottley, this famous soigneur – a black guy from Harlem who had been working with the US federation for 25 years – saw me and said, ‘Hey, California, get your table and put it next to me.’

“Amos says, ‘What’s your name?’ I told him, then he said: ‘I want you to copy everything I do. Everything. Don’t talk unless you have a question. Copy everything I do and you’ll make it. If something starts hurting you, tell me the second it starts hurting.’

“This was day three and I could hardly lift my arms. I couldn’t take my shirt off. So I told him. And he took me down to the training room, and there was this 18-year-old boxer, Mike Tyson. Amos signed me up for what he was getting – ice-packing. Every night at 9.15 they had me beside Mike Tyson, packing us with crushed ice bags, down the neck, shoulders, arms, hands, full back, hips; then we’d get this electrical muscle spasm treatment and all this shit.

“And I made it. I was the first girl. That’s how I started.”

She still wasn’t being paid. “If I wanted to make cash I babysat for little Eddie [Borysewicz’s baby son] or I’d wash the coaches’ cars. I didn’t get paid until seven weeks before the Olympics; I didn’t get anything for working at the camps.

“But I couldn’t learn fast enough. I was so eager to learn that all I did in my spare working hours was hang out in the coaches’ office and say, ‘Somebody teach me something else!’”

Under Borysewicz, the American cycling team performed outstandingly at their home Olympics, although the successes were tainted when it was subsequently revealed that seven riders, including four medallists, had blood transfusions on the

eve of the Games. The practice wasn’t illegal then, although the US cycling federation banned it in January 1985 and fined Borysewicz a month’s wages.

Several of the US Olympians, including Davis Phinney and Ron Kiefel, turned professional with 7-Eleven in 1985, the year the team became the first American outfit to make a serious challenge on European racing. Verses had worked with the team on and off – she first worked for Centurion, a Californian team – and she was called up for 7-Eleven’s first Grand Tour, the 1985 Giro.

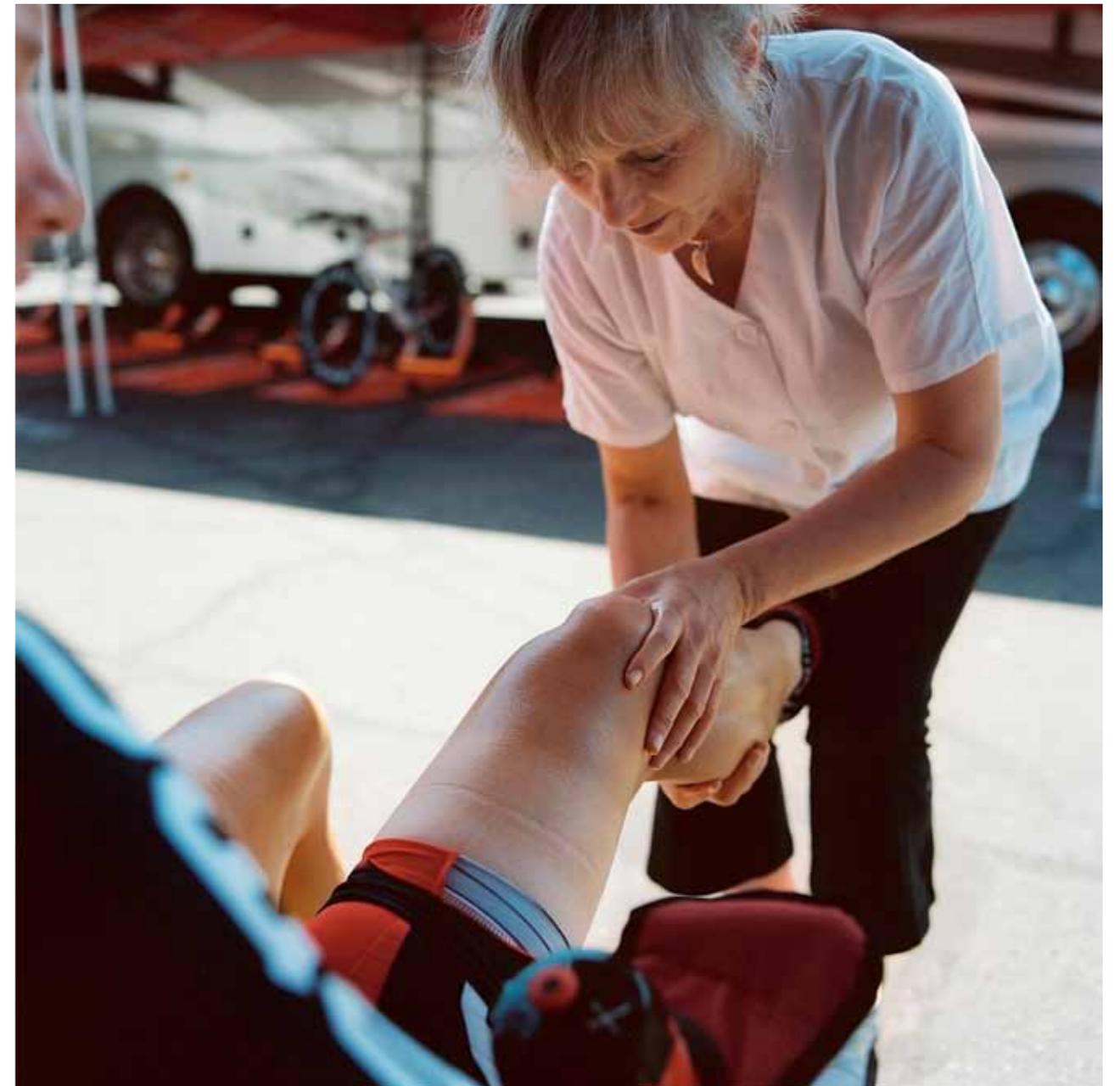
The Olympics, in comparison, had been a breeze. She was completely unprepared for Europe, “a whole other world, where someone like Ruud Bakker [the long-time Panasonic soigneur] would say, ‘I won five Tours de France, I won seven world championships,’ and take total responsibility for what his riders did; all their success. My world had been, ‘I can help facilitate someone’s healing and help them recover.’ In Europe it was totally different.”

That wasn’t all. A bigger hurdle to overcome, initially, perhaps inevitably, was her gender. 7-Eleven, run by Jim Ochowicz and Mike Neel, had taken the pragmatic step of applying for Verses’ accreditation using only her initial. When she went to collect it, she was met with incredulity: “But you’re a woman?”

It only got worse. “I was being interviewed all day, every day, and it was always: who are you fucking on the team? How many guys do you have sex with a day? How did you get on the team? Do you carry the bags?

“They wouldn’t let me in the feed zone. The first European feed zone I was ever in was the Tour de France in 1986... They literally didn’t want me out in public. They wouldn’t do that to the team, nor to me, in that Giro. But because I was around the team and wearing my shorts and a T-shirt, people thought I was a girlfriend, just hanging around. At the end of the first week, Max Testa [the team doctor], Mike Neel and Och [Ochowicz] pulled me aside and said: ‘Shelley, you’re to wear this now for massage,’ and they handed me a lab coat.

“I said, ‘But that’s not me!’ I looked like a lab doctor! They said, ‘You can’t be you any more.’



“These are pedigree stallions and you are their groom, their trainer. You feed them – and make sure they are going to win the next day.”

“But the funny thing is that even now, in 2011, when I leave my house in the morning for my massages, I have on a long-sleeved lab coat. Even for massaging my boyfriend! I never stopped that tradition.”

Of course, it wasn't just the fact they had a female soigneur – 7-Eleven were different in lots of other ways, too. “I don't think we had the intention of being different,” says Verses. “We didn't know any different, we were just being ourselves.”

“In fact, we were holding back on being ourselves! In the States our vans were like the fucking 7-Eleven pop stand! We had chairs, umbrellas, and when we got to Europe, in Verona for the start of the Giro, there was nothing. I was thinking, what are our boys going to sit on? I'm at the truck mixing bottles, and I'm looking around, and I see a café across the street, with Coke and Sprite umbrellas.

“I ran across the street. The café's closed, and I'm trying to decide, ‘What matches our [red and green] jerseys better? Coke or Sprite?’ I decide on Sprite. The other soigneurs and mechanics are sitting around, saying, ‘*Ah non Shelley, ce n'est pas possible,*’ but I'm trying to grab the Sprite umbrella out of the table, and this waiter with an immaculate white shirt and tie comes running out of the café, shouting, ‘*Bandito! Bandito!*’ I'm shouting, ‘Giro! Giro! Wait a minute!’ and I run across and get him hats and bottles, then I'm pointing at the umbrellas saying, ‘*Ritorno!*’ And he says, ‘OK. Which ones do you want, Sprite or Coke?’”

It was at the start, too, that she encountered Francesco Moser. “Here comes this guy, with five henchmen running after him with blue jumpsuits on, and tools, and he stops in the middle of the road, and he points at me, and he's pointing to his legs... And [Chris] Carmichael and everyone is saying, ‘Shelley, it's Francesco Moser, and he wants you to go massage his legs!’

“And I'm like, ‘Get him out of here! Go away!’ and I'm shooing him away. But Davis Phinney, in a loud whisper, is saying, ‘Shelley, it's Francesco Moser. You must massage his legs.’ I said, ‘But I'll get in trouble from Och.’ Davis says, ‘Believe me, you won't.’

“So I have to take a stool to Moser and he sits down by the ancient wall – because he couldn't come in our set-up – while these guys

are polishing his chariot, and I'm shaking him down, thinking, this is a big guy; he's kind of a specimen. Thinking to myself, oh boy, he's a little different to my guys.”

There were numerous language problems. Instead of saying “figs”, she told a horrified Italian shopkeeper that her riders liked to eat female genitalia. After six days of being an object of either desire or derision, or both, Verses cracked.

As she recalls the incident, her words tumble out and her heart begins racing. “I have two suitcases in my hands, two bags over my shoulders, and I get to the plate glass doors of the hotel. I realise the doors have closed and they won't open. I'm standing there, completely overloaded. All the soigneurs are outside smoking cigarettes, and no one will come and open the doors.

“So I start to panic, and I could hear them all laughing at me. Shouting ‘*Allez Shelley!*’ It was awful. But later, one of our soigneurs said, ‘Shelley, listen to me: there's a bet in the peloton that you're not going to make it to day seven.’ This was day six. ‘And there's big money riding on it. There are bets on how long the Americans will last; and they're laughing at us that we're working with a girl. You're a big joke in the peloton.’

“I cracked that night. I called my dad in Connecticut, and I said I couldn't do it. I couldn't stop crying. He said: ‘Shell, at the end of every day, just as you wash your hands after a massage, I want you to wash your hands of this day. You cannot cry. You cannot let anyone see you cry. You wanna cry, cry in your room.’

“I said, ‘I'm so angry. I can't believe they're doing this.’ And he said, ‘You better believe it. They don't like you being there. They're scared of you.’

“Two days later some journalist asked me, ‘Is it true you're sleeping with the riders?’ So I said, ‘Yeah, you have no idea – I sleep with all the riders, and the mechanics and the soigneurs. I'm exhausted.’”

Mike Neel mentored Verses through the Giro; she credits him with teaching her the fundamental rules of being a good soigneur. “No matter what happens to you,” Neel told her, “you have to keep the stallions quiet in the stable. You can't tell them





what happened to you, any of the stories; that you were stuck in traffic; that you almost didn't make it to the finish; what the press are asking you; nothing. No matter what team you're ever on. I don't want these stallions to snort, rear, or get nervous. These are pedigree stallions and you are their groom, their trainer. You feed them – and make sure they're going to win the race next day."

Verses says: "Over the years, I would get thrown over the barricades by gendarmes or carabinieri; pushed off the finish line at Alpe d'Huez by cops with batons; I'd get lost for seven hours in the Pyrenees; I'd get pushed against walls by riders who wanted to kiss me. And I couldn't tell them anything."

I can imagine that keeping schtum didn't come easily to Verses. But the riders loved her. Greg LeMond would always

squirt her with water from his water bottle in the feed zone (an affectionate gesture). And that picture of her cradling Jean-François Bernard's head in her arms, wiping his face, is telling. Tears well up in her eyes as she recalls the riders she worked with.

Remarkably, despite the initial misogyny and outright hostility, Verses fell in love with this world, and she remains fiercely protective of "her boys" – all the riders on all the teams she worked on. She tells what initially sounds like a poignant story about one young rider at Toshiba (she was lured to the French team, formerly La Vie Claire, by Paul Köchli in 1987; her salary jumped from \$7,500 to \$35,000; by now she was in a relationship with Phil Anderson, whose team, Panasonic, had also been interested in employing her).



It was towards the end of the 1988 season and the young rider in question – a Dane – was a third-year professional. He hadn't had a good season. In fact, Toshiba was a marketing-driven team that used data, derived mainly from media coverage, to determine the value of a rider.

Mid-way through his massage, this young rider was called into a meeting. He left Verses, and returned 20 minutes later, ashen-faced. "Shelley, they're getting rid of me," he told her. "Apparently I'm of less value to the team than you – and you're a soigneur."

"Don't worry, Bjarne," Verses told him. "I'm sure someone will pick you up and develop you."

Verses laughs. The rider was, of course, Bjarne Riis. Eight years

later, he won the Tour de France – with the help of EPO, as he admitted in 2007.

Verses knew about doping, certainly. It was part of that world; we all know that now. She remembers being struck at first by how many riders, especially star riders, carried attaché cases. "I thought, 'Wow, these bike riders must be really intelligent!'" she laughs. Later, of course, she discovered that the cases were stocked not with reading material, but with medical paraphernalia – legal and illegal.

Verses tells a story about an unnamed rider who threatened to visit a notorious soigneur from a rival team if his own soigneurs didn't grant his request to be doped. Verses spoke to her boss, who reluctantly granted the wish. Or so the rider thought.



“Tears well up in her eyes as she recalls the riders she worked with.”

In fact, he was given a pep talk by the head soigneur, who warned him of the potency of the product he was about to be given, and then injected him “with several subcutaneous homeopathics. We scrapped off the name with a scalpel so he wouldn’t see what we were giving him.” He was then given a “bomb” – a huge capsule, to be taken, he was told, ten kilometres before the end of the following day’s stage. This “bomb” contained nothing more sinister than amino acids. Yet, as Verses stood by the finish the following day, listening to the race commentary, she heard, as the race entered the final 10km: “And [the rider in question] has attacked!” The power of placebo.

(On another occasion, the same rider, during a race in Holland, demanded a Brazilian prostitute. The wish was granted by the team’s head soigneur – on two conditions: “You take no longer than thirty minutes, and no standing up!”)

As Verses describes it, there were notorious soigneurs, well practiced in the dark arts, but good soigneurs would, first and foremost, look after their riders. Sometimes that meant protecting them from themselves.

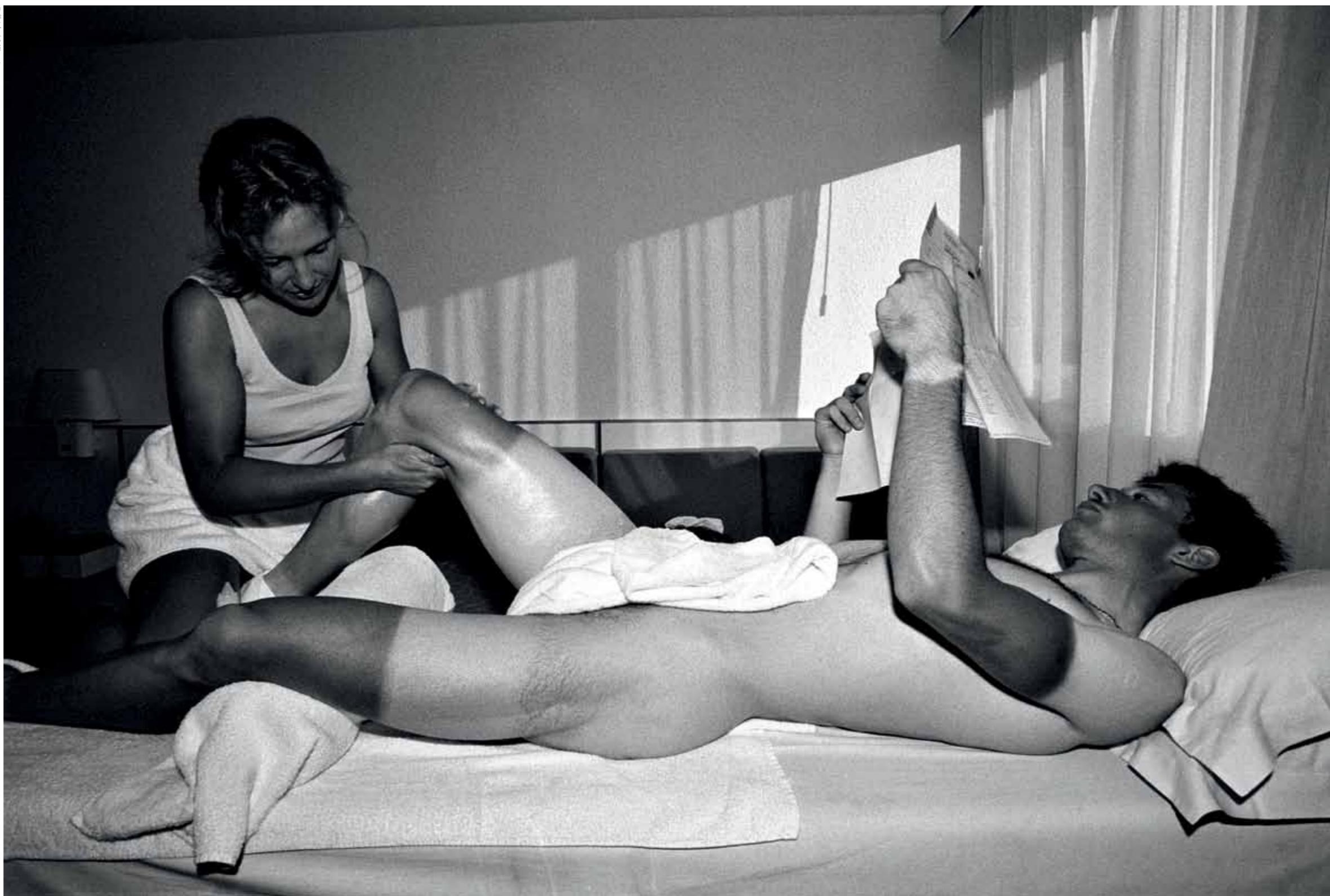
It is perhaps telling that Köchli was so keen to recruit Verses in 1987. A known opponent of doping, who did what he could to run a clean team (which wasn’t easy, and might have been impossible), Köchli “wanted a big clear out; he wanted to change the mentality of the team”.

“When he called,” says Verses, “I said I didn’t have any interest in going to a European team. But he persisted.” And he offered a substantial pay rise. “There was so much money on that team,” says Verses.

“Changing the mentality” covered everything. Köchli wanted Verses to act as his broom, clearing out and freshening up - but she encountered fierce opposition from Bernard Hinault’s old soigneur, Joël Marteil. Hinault had just retired, but Marteil was still in charge, and set in his ways. For example, he filled the musettes with exactly the same food everyday: “The same panini, a tart and mint water, 200 days a year. No cherry water or lemon water; no chocolate bars; no change of filling; no fruit. Just no fun!”

At the early season Étoile de Bessèges race, Verses changed the feed following encouragement from Köchli – and Marteil

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exploded with rage. “He went through the musette bags, took all the food out, laid it on the ground, got in the team vehicle, and ran it over, back and forth, back and forth, with all the food exploding over the parking lot.”

When Verses reported the incident to Köchli’s second-in-command, Maurice de Guilloux, Köchli called Marteil and told him Verses was in charge of the feed. “Then the hostility really started to build,” she says. Yet it was the beginning of the end for Marteil: Köchli sacked him soon after.

Verses’ musettes, for the record, featured, “choc bars, cream cheese and mandarin fillings, or tuna sandwiches, or chicken; puddings with a little piece of fruit; and I’d sometimes wrap them up in a picture torn from a Playboy magazine. For fun, you know? These boys suffered; they deserved to have some fun.”

Later, on TVM, she was in the unusual position of working for the same team as her partner, Anderson. They lived together in Waregem, Belgium. It gave Verses another extraordinary insight into professional bike riders.

Patrick Jacobs, who’d ridden as Claude Criquelion’s domestique, had been signed by TVM to work for Anderson. “Patrick called,” says Verses, “and said he wanted to come and live at my house; to live with Phil, so he could understand him properly and know the rhythm of his body.

“It was extraordinary! He came for three days and three nights. He woke up before Phil woke up; he ate and drank everything Phil ate and drank; he trained with Phil; he slept in the spare room and he asked so many questions. Phil was doing heart rate-based training – it was brutal. He was supposed to do it on his own, but Patrick did everything with him and really suffered.

“But he saw that as necessary for the job. He didn’t want to disturb Phil, so the questions were guided like missiles towards me: how many bottles does he drink? What’s in his bottle? Is he completing the bottles you’re giving him? When does he stop for a pee? If he wears arm warmers, does he take them off, and when? The questions were insane! But he was going to be his water-carrier, his right-hand man; he needed to know this stuff if he was going to be a good domestique.”



Verses could – and, as I discovered on my visit to Santa Barbara, actually can – tell stories like these all day. She is a mine of anecdotes and information, all of them detailed, fascinating, engrossing, and painting a colourful, vivid picture of a thrilling period in the sport.

“When I think of my boys I want to cry,” she says. “Just the sheer thought of my boys’ faces on the start line – it was like walking through a hall of kings. The privilege, the honour to do what I did, in the years I did it.

“That I could even see Kelly, Fignon, Hinault, LeMond, Roche, Visentini, Breukink. All these fucking beautiful, these gifted people, and get to see that level of sport, to be involved at that level. It was a hall of kings to me.

“But I have two recurrent nightmares. The first is an airport one, to do with picking up riders from a flight. The other one: I leave the hotel and I forget all the race food, I leave it in the hotel refrigerator.

“I get to the *ravitaillement* [feed zone], I open up the cooler and there are no musettes. It’s empty! Oh my God! Cold sweat, high pulse... I wake up and I’m in a full sweat.”

Richard Moore is the author of Slaying the Badger: LeMond, Hinault and the Greatest Ever Tour de France, published by Yellow Jersey



Richard Moore

