CYCLING FOR GOLD

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OWEN SLOT



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ALWAYS LEARNING PEARSON

★ 1 ★

THE RACE

Every morning started with a bike race and Sam thought that it was about time he won one.

Every morning at Mr Parrott's newsagent's shop – early. They started at 6.30 a.m., Sam versus Nate, ready, steady, go – and away they went for thirty-eight minutes of frantic pedalling, thirty-nine on a bad day when the weather wasn't friendly. When it was really bad, Sam would come back wet, shoes and socks soaked, and with mud spattered up his back. That wasn't a good way to start the school day.

The race record was thirty-seven minutes and twelve seconds, and it was Sam who held it. The day he set it, he flew on his bike through the roads like a maniac; that was the day when the wind and every single traffic light seemed to be in his favour. He'd thrashed Nate easily. But that was a month ago, and his winning streak had pretty much ended there. Now it seemed he was losing more than he won – and that meant that he was not only losing the race but money too.

This was what happened every day at this shop on the edge of the Peak District: two fourteen-year-olds doing two newspaper rounds raced each other on their bikes. At the newsagent's, which was called Anything & Everything, Mr Parrott would always have his customers' newspapers laid out in two piles, all in perfect order. He was very precise. On the left was the pile for what he called the 'west circuit' and on the right was the pile for the 'east circuit'. Sam and Nate would take one each.

'Which do you fancy today, Nate?' Sam asked. 'West or east?'

It was Nate's right to choose. Whoever won the previous day could decide whether he did the east or the west the following morning. The west was slightly longer, with more countryside, longer roads and fewer newspapers to deliver. The east circuit was shorter, with more newspapers for more houses that were closer together. If you did the east circuit, you delivered to sixty-eight houses; if you did the west circuit, you delivered to sixty-one. Whichever you picked, though, your time on the road was almost exactly the same. It was the perfect race.

Sam watched Nate's face. He was sweeping his hair across his forehead and staring out of the shop window, checking the weather. Upstairs, in the kitchen above their heads, Sam could hear Mr Parrott starting to make breakfast for his family; he heard the kettle whistling; he heard Mr Parrott

yelling to wake up his wife and kids: 'C'mon, you Dozy Dogs!' He always called them Dozy Dogs or Lazy Lizards, or sometimes Weary Wildebeest or Cuddly Kittens. And then he'd laugh heartily. When he was with his family, Mr Parrott was a happy man. Loud and happy. Sam really liked him.

At that moment Sam knew exactly what was going through Nate's mind. If it was a good weather day, Nate would pick the west circuit; it was longer but there were less stops so you could really pick up speed and race it. However, if it was a bad weather day, Nate would avoid the west – he wouldn't want to climb Freshton Hill in the wet, not dragging that newspaper trailer behind him, and worse was the wind that blew into your face when you got to the top. But today it wasn't easy to decide as the weather was neither good nor bad.

Sam, though, knew exactly which route he wanted; he almost always wanted the west circuit. He almost always wanted the option that involved speed. Sam loved going fast.

'You not feeling confident today?' he said to Nate, teasing him gently. He wasn't often allowed to tease him, especially not at school, but when they were at Anything & Everything the rules were slightly different. 'Not sure you can beat me?'

'You wish!' Nate replied, shaking his head slowly and confidently. He leaned down and picked up the bigger pile. He was going to take the east.

Perfect! thought Sam. He picked up the other smaller bundle, which was very heavy nonetheless, and carried it out to the side passage beside the shop where the two bikes were locked up with the mini-trailers attached to them. He placed the newspapers gently in the trailer, and started fiddling with the cogs on his bike lock. The combination was 1968 – the last time Manchester City won the League, as his grandad so often reminded him; he'd never forget that. The lock sprang open. He was ready to go.

'Right,' said Nate, swinging his leg over his bike. 'You ready?'

'Sure am,' Sam replied. He pressed the button on the side of his watch so it was in stopwatch mode.

'OK. Ready, steady, see ya!' And with that Nate peeled off left down the side of the road and Sam hammered his foot down and set off in the other direction. The race was on!

Sam loved to race. It seemed weird even to him, but tearing around the countryside at this horribly early hour with a small newspaper trailer attached to his bike had become the highlight of his day.

As he started speeding away in the opposite direction from Nate, he felt his legs warming up and his pedals spinning faster. On the west circuit you had to go half a mile before your first set of deliveries: seven houses next to each other in Garrold Street, two of them taking the *Sun*, three *Daily Mails*, one

Guardian and one *Times*. After that, it was another mile, straight, no traffic lights, and you could really get the body pumping, before deliveries in Arthur Road and Eric Avenue.

The east circuit was less fun. More stop-start, more traffic lights, though Sam didn't think for a minute that Nate stopped at the lights. There was no way that Nate could be beating him if he was obeying the Highway Code.

They had been racing now for two months, pretty much ever since Sam had joined as the new boy on Mr Parrott's delivery team. Nate had been doing it for ages, always the same two routes, always £25 for a week's worth of work.

Sam needed the money. His mum didn't have any to spare; she was always apologizing, scratching around to try and help him out, but as she told him: 'Times are tough, Sam.' It seemed that she said it more and more these days. So when Sam heard that Mr Parrott needed a new delivery boy, he was round at Anything & Everything in no time.

He knew Mr Parrott well. All his life, he and his mum had lived in a flat just round the corner from Anything & Everything. One day, when he was eight, she said that he was old enough to go off on his own if he wanted and spend his pocket money on sweets there. And now that he was fourteen he was old enough for the paper round. And he didn't need to ask his mum for pocket money. Now he had

his own and he liked that. And he liked being able to offer to help his mum. When she asked him to go to Anything & Everything for a pint of milk or some bread, he always offered to pay. But she'd say, 'No, you little darling, you've earned that money, you spend it on yourself.'

Except that, since Nate suggested they race for money, Sam didn't have so much to spend on himself. Three weeks ago, Nate had come up to him in the school dinner queue and put forward his proposal: 'Look, we do five days' work a week and earn twenty-five pounds each. That's a fiver a day, ten pounds together. If we're going to carry on racing every day, why don't we say a tenner for the winner, nothing to the loser? It'll make it more fun.'

Sam had gone away to think about it. It did sound fun and he knew that he'd be able to earn more money that way. He normally beat Nate after all. And, since it was Nate's suggestion, he was keen to say yes. He felt they were starting to become friends. At school they'd never really been mates. Nate was in the football team and Sam wasn't – enough said. But, with their morning paper round and the daily race, when they were around Anything & Everything Nate was much chattier. So Sam eventually reached the conclusion that if Nate wanted to race for money, then he did too.

The next Monday, though, when they arrived at Anything & Everything for the first day of the

prize-money paper round, Nate turned up with a new bike.

Sam turned out of Eric Avenue and flashed a look at his watch. He was making good time this morning.

After Eric Avenue, the houses started to spread out a bit, though every time you got up any speed, you'd have to stop, fold a newspaper and drop it through another letter-box before you could get going again. This was the frustrating part of the west circuit. After that, it was head down and up into Freshton Hill. Sam loved the feeling of going up that hill. His bike was a bit old and cranky, but he looked after it, oiled it, checked the tyres every morning. Even on this old banger he thought every day that he'd beat Nate. But he was dead envious of Nate's new bike. It wasn't even Nate's; he'd borrowed it off Deano Wells, who was also in the school football team.

Nate had said, 'Yeah, my bike's broken. There's a problem with the brakes. I had to use Deano's.'

But Sam didn't entirely believe that. And he would definitely have liked a bike like Deano's himself, it was so light! It was a Rolls-Royce of bikes. He gazed at the gears and immediately thought of the help they'd give Nate on the Freshton Hill climb. Yet he was still convinced he could beat him. He knew that at school, in football and other sports, Nate was almost always one of the best and certainly better

than he was. But on his bike Sam felt differently; he felt powerful.

His great-grandfather used to be a good cyclist – at least that's what Grandad told him. Maybe that was why he was good on the bike. Maybe that's why he wasn't scared of Nate's flashy new bicycle.

On the first day they ever raced, Nate was amazed that Sam had beaten him; he kept on saying, 'I don't believe it! I just don't believe it!' And Sam rather liked that. Nate had also said to him, 'Look, our bike race is just for here. You better not tell the other guys at school. Deal?'

Sam agreed. 'Deal,' he said.

And so they carried on racing, and Sam won most of the time. And then they started racing for money and Nate turned up with Deano's bike and the results levelled out a bit. Actually, they didn't level out. They swung dramatically in Nate's favour.

The first week Sam did really well. He won three days out of five; that was £30 for the week's work rather than the £25 he was getting before. But the following week was different; Nate won four times. The week after was the same again: Nate won 4–1. And so in two weeks Sam had earned just £20 – and he certainly didn't want his mum to know about that. So he'd thought of saying to Nate that he didn't want to race for money any more. But every time he considered making that suggestion he was held back by two thoughts. One: he didn't want to be

some kind of pathetic loser and concede defeat. Two: he remained absolutely, completely and utterly convinced – every day – that he was going to win.

Today he felt the same. As Freshton Hill approached, he raised the pressure on his pedals slightly and attacked the slope at speed. He then stood up in the pedals and soon felt a rhythm which he tried to keep going to the top. He felt good and strong.

Freshton was small, a village with five roads, though lots of Mr Parrott's regular customers lived there. But once Sam had delivered to all of those, he was able to begin the long arc home: a stretch of country road, two solitary houses with scary barking dogs, then a steady, slow downhill, three more roads side by side, another stretch, three more deliveries, some traffic lights and then right into Station Road from where you could see Anything & Everything two hundred metres away.

Sam posted the very last of the day's newspapers, leaped straight back on to his bike and then accelerated down the last stretch. He carefully checked his stopwatch again. He was looking good today, not quite record-breakingly good, but surely fast enough to win himself some decent pocket money.

And today he felt lucky because he'd worked out a brilliant way of going even faster. On two or three stretches of each circuit, Sam knew that if the wind

was in your face it really slowed you down. He also worked out that if he cycled close behind a car he wouldn't feel the wind in his face so much and so could go much, much faster. He had to be really careful though; he had to ride with one hand on the brakes – if the car suddenly slowed down, he didn't fancy hurtling into the back of it. But sometimes, if he got really close to a car in front of him, it was almost as though he was being sucked along by it.

And today he found himself in a perfect position. In front of him was a white van going slowly – slowly for a car, fast for a cyclist – and, pedalling like fury, Sam managed to stay close behind it for nearly two minutes. Eventually, his legs were hurting so much from the effort that he slowed and let the van disappear into the distance, but the end of the circuit was in sight. He thundered towards the traffic lights. They were green and he needed them to stay green. He could feel the cool breeze on the sweat on his neck. He got to the traffic lights – still green – and then swung his handlebars into a right turn.

No sign of Nate. Two hundred metres to go. Still no sign of Nate. One hundred metres to go. Fifty metres to go and there he was. Nate swung round a left-hand turn from the other direction. The turn was only forty metres from Anything & Everything so Nate was closer. Nate had won.

Sam couldn't believe it. He whacked the top of his handlebars with frustration. Another day, another defeat, another day's wages disappearing into Nate's pocket.