

[musette]

family ties

An exclusive interview with Mike & Michael Barry

WORDS BY GARY J. BOULANGER 🌱 PHOTOGRAPHY BY WALTER LAI

Father and son sit in their car, huddled around an iPhone, watching a pirated feed of the Tour of Flanders or Paris-Roubaix, as their families sit inside the church on a Sunday morning in Toronto.

In a scenario played out in similar circumstances in our modern age, where entertainment and sports are available on-demand, what was once only accessible through the pages of *LEquipe* or *Miroir du Cyclisme* unfolds before one's very eyes. Mike Barry and his son Michael haven't lost their passion for cycling, despite the long road they've shared since the elder Barry immigrated to Toronto from his beloved England in 1964. The difference here is that Michael pinned hundreds of numbers to his jersey, and raced the hallowed roads of Europe as one of the more memorable domestiques of the modern era.

Landing at Pearson International airport in Toronto was somewhat anticlimactic. The fog was thick fog and the heavy rain delayed the driver of the blue Volkswagen Passat wagon by more than an hour. Having grown accustomed to the warm and dry climate of my northern California environment, the novelty of a somewhat humid and wet entry into Canada after 11 years away was enhanced by the appearance of a small British man commanding said Passat to the curb, whose tiny frame was kept warm by a blue and orange Mariposa wool jacket.

"Mike, it's good to see you again," I said, extending my hand to the 74-year-old man. Our first and only meeting was at the 2007 North American Handmade Bicycle Show in San Jose, when Mike Barry was roaming the aisles with a former Rivendell Bicycle Works customer of mine, Douglas Brooks. Nine months later Barry retired from 'active duty', closing his Bicycle Specialties retail store in Toronto, and retiring his limited-edition Mariposa bicycle brand after nearly 40 years of production. He and his wife Clare wanted to take a breather from it all, and watch their grandsons grow up. Michael, their only child, was racing for T-Mobile at the time, and was based in Girona, Spain, like many of the North American professionals.

This is their story, gleaned from several interviews and time spent in Toronto. We covered all the bases, from Mike's fatherless upbringing in south London after World War II, to Michael's doping confession in late 2012 after a 19-year career. I discovered what makes them tick, how the cycling ties that bind run deep in the Barry family, and the profound influence the elder Barry has had on



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the greater Toronto cycling community since landing there nearly 50 years ago.

Christian Vande Velde, a former U.S. Postal teammate of Barry's, was going through a rough patch in 2003-05, when his back was causing him issues after multiple crashes. He was always in pain, and didn't want to ride his bike. Based in Boulder, Colorado, like the younger Barry, Vande Velde recalls Michael's dedication and adventurous spirit.

"Michael would drag me out into 18-degree weather on the Peak-to-Peak highway, and there's absolutely no one up there with an inch of snow on the ground—and we're on our road bikes," Vande Velde said. "He would ask 'isn't this awesome?!' He'd goad me on for another 15 miles, then another, then another... I remember coming back completely destroyed, but stronger for it. He'd do that crazy shit in Toronto, when he and his friends would come home in the dark all the time when they were kids. His mom must have had a heart attack five days a week!

"Michael has more miles on him than anyone under 40 in the world. He was riding the Galibier when he was 8 or something! He had this sick little custom bike that his dad built with 24-inch wheels and custom handlebars. He's been in pretty deep for a long time. I think he did a lot of riding by himself when he first arrived in France."

"Pretty deep" is only the half of it.

WHEELS IN HIS EYES

According to his father, since Michael was really young, he knew he was to become a professional road racer. It was what he wanted to be since he first opened books or cycling magazines. He was completely immersed in a cycling environment, whether it was at his father's Bicyclesport shop in downtown Toronto or at home, where the Barrys had plenty of books and magazines. Riding bikes was always a big part of his family's life, beginning with time spent behind his parents in a trailer, then riding to school together, and then riding solo.

"I remember going out on group rides when I was 7, and everyone was welcoming and helpful—right up until the time I started going over to Europe," he explained. "The local cycling community encouraged and helped me along.

"My dad organized the Toronto randon-



Father-and-son time can't be beat when it happens to double as a bike ride

neur events, and when I was 8 we did a 200-kilometer on the tandem together, Michael, 37, explained over tea in Mike's workshop on in northeast Toronto. "One of the fondest memories of my childhood was going to France with my dad, uncle and aunt, the four of us on two tandems in 1983 or '84. I met my dad in Paris, who was already in Europe for the Cologne Bike Show. We rode from Grenoble to Marseilles, up Ventoux. I was going to a French school in Toronto, so my school let me take the time off as long as I was the one speaking for our traveling group of adults. I was always pushed to the front of the line to buy train tickets."

The elder Barry chuckles.

"When Michael was at the French school, grade three or four, the teacher said 'Michael would do a lot better if he could get those bicycle wheels out of his eyes.' It was a wonderful trip—one of the most terrific trips of my life. In those days most people rode

tubulars, and there were several discarded along the Ventoux. Michael wanted to collect them all and repair them, so we decided to cut them up as souvenirs."

In addition to discarded tubulars, Michael collected everything related to cycling, including water bottles from international races, at a time when most boys his age collected rocks or beer cans.

"We loaded up a van and drove to the 1986 World Championships in Colorado Springs, interacting with the French cyclists Laurent Fignon and Charly Mottet," Michael added. "At that time French cyclists were the best in the world. We read the French cycling magazines at the shop. You learn how human your heroes were as you get older.

"We'd call the *Toronto Star* and get wire report results on the top ten finishers of a particular race in Europe—they usually didn't print them in the paper unless Steve Bauer got a good result. They'd always mis-

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pronounce the names of the riders.” Barry would eventually race alongside Bauer at the 1996 Atlanta Olympic road race, the first of his four Olympics for Canada.

“In hindsight, I’m fortunate that there’s always been an undercurrent love of riding and touring,” Barry said. “My parents kept me balanced, and school was important. I played other sports, and they tried to send me to the best schools they could. I’m glad I had those experiences, because it’s too easy for kids to burn out on sport if they’re pushed into it or forced to do it. Never once did my dad tell me that I had to get out and train if I wanted to race. I had fun on my bike, and that’s how I am today—riding a bike doesn’t feel like an obligation.

For Barry, the life of a professional racer got difficult once he and his wife, former professional racer Dede Demet, had a young family. He was traveling 200 days a year, racing 80 to 100 times.

“My crash in the Tour of Flanders in 2006 opened my eyes.

“The last couple years have been difficult, being away from my parents since my mom got ill. It was important that our kids are closer to family, which prompted our move to Toronto last December.”

Barry retired in September after two seasons with Team Sky. He was a frequent teammate with Mark Cavendish, beginning with T-Mobile, and continuing with High-road Sports before they reunited on Team Sky in 2012.

REASONED DECISION

Was it cruel punishment for his doping transgressions that dealt a pair of bone-breaking crashes to Barry in 2012? It appears to be the case for his former U.S. Postal teammates Zabriskie and Vande Velde who, like Barry and George Hincapie, were sanctioned with a 6-month ban from racing last fall, but chose to stay active, while Barry and Hincapie retired following USADA’s ‘Reasoned Decision’ on the doping practices of Lance Armstrong and several of his U.S. Postal teammates and directors. The Tour of California and Giro d’Italia summarily vanquished Zabriskie and Vande Velde to the rehab trainers in May, while Hincapie opened a hotel and restaurant in his adopted hometown of Greenville, South Carolina.



Part of the fun is found in planning the ride

Barry is releasing another book in spring 2014. An accomplished writer, he’s been published before—once for documenting his time on the U.S. Postal bus, based on his columns for *VeloNews*, and another in a richly textured narrative with equally descriptive photography for *Bloomsbury/Rouleur*, now in its third printing. Writing may or may not provide him with enough income in retirement, though, and he’s at a career crossroads.

“My book will focus on the emotions of riding a bike and the extremes that we feel as a professional compared to those one feels as an amateur on a group ride,” Barry said. “Group rides, even for pros, are much different than races. There’s really no comparison.

“The spiritual aspect of cycling involves a rhythm to the pedaling and the cleansing experience where this isn’t much noise other than the chain going around the gears,” he explained in his clipped and measured Canadian lilt. “You can always notice the conversations with people are much different when you’re riding compared to sitting in a café—people are far more open and relaxed on the bike.”

Going back to school is not an option for Barry, he added. “I made a good living as a professional cyclist toward the end. I also thought professionals made big money, but the reality was there are many in the peloton who barely scrape by. Our contracts are so short—too many crashes and one bad year makes for a short career. Dede and I had enough to buy a Toronto house. I knew I would have to work after retiring from racing. I have my Team Sky Pinarello, but I had to

buy my cyclocross bike from management.”

Michael and I shared a 3-hour ride during my visit. He provided an audio history of Toronto, including several bike-path and dirt-trail excursions only a native would be privy to. I rode his ‘cross bike, shod with fenders and light mounts for his wet rides. He and Dede take turns doing the 5:40 a.m. Morning Glory ride through Toronto, and both admit it’s been a great way to meet people. Several riders in their group have kids at the same school, and their social circle has enlarged quickly in a short period.

BRITISH ROOTS

The elder Barry grew up the only child in a single-parent home in south London. His father passed away when he was six months old. One of his earliest rides was out into the Surrey countryside, on his mother’s single-gear BSA. Barry then graduated to a Raleigh. He was well on his way to becoming a cycling scholar.

“In 1950 I was 11, 12 years old, and I started getting *Cycling Magazine*, and religiously read everything published about cycling,” he said with a glint in his eye. “I devoured them like the bible each week. My biggest influence was hanging around Clubman’s Cycles in a suburb of London, close to my school. I’d be there several days a week, and the owner would give me jobs to do. Never got paid, but didn’t care. I just wanted to be around bikes and riders.”

It was in this environment young Mike found his calling.

“We’d ride 150 miles or more on a Sunday with the club, eyeballs-out sprinting for every town sign and hilltop, but they wouldn’t allow

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us to race the 25-mile time trials if we were under 16 years old,” he said with a chuckle. “My first event was the Vintage Wheelers novice race, a bit of a March classic in south London at the time, and I managed to win it in a record time of 1:02.40. It started my racing career off quite well.”

By 1965 Barry was working for a U.S. company that made spectrometers. He moved first to Detroit, and then to Pittsburgh, and later to Buffalo, New York. In a 2003 interview, he said, “There was very little cycling in the U.S. at that time, but my job took me all over the country. I would always look up the local cycling club in any town I was in. That way I made cycling friends in many towns. Although there were few cyclists, they were real enthusiasts. One had to be enthusiastic to put up with the ridicule one received.”

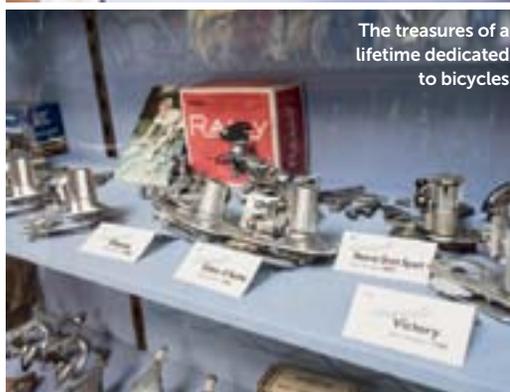
When Barry first arrived in Toronto there'd always be some idiot that would try to run him off the road.

“It was bad, but as time went on there were more cyclists on the road, and many were real enthusiasts and keen racing types versus casual riders,” he said. “Almost all the riders were immigrants from Europe in the 1950s and '60s. The races were like international events, 'cause you'd have British, Italian, Croatian, German—everyone was talking in their own languages. Great atmosphere with lots of parties after the races.”

It was in this newfound environment that Barry decided to practice what he learned in the London bike shops a decade or so prior.

“Most good bike shops in London either built frames themselves or had someone build for them with their name on the downtube,” he said between sips of tea. “I'd look over their shoulder, and wanted to do it. In 1964 I met John Palmer, who I remember racing against in England. We got to chatting, and talked about frame building. He mentioned having some Reynolds 531 tubing under his bed, and a shared interest in building frames as well. That cemented our relationship.”

“We heard there was a sport shop on Mount Pleasant that had bought all the frame components from CCM when they closed down their manufacturing division, and we paid him a visit. We were able to buy 10 or 12 complete Reynolds tubesets, plus a whole lot of fork blades and lugs in old wooden boxes. I gave him \$100 for the lot, humped



into the back of my car, and brought it to my tiny bachelor apartment. John came over and we spent a few hours poring over the rusted parts. Shortly after we rented out a friend's basement at 410 Davisville for \$100 a month, and became frame builders.”

Barry was still working for the instrument company during the week, building frames on the weekends. He'd just met his future wife Clare, and she would join John's girlfriend Barbara in their little workshop and make tea.

MARIPOSA RISES

There was a velodrome in a Belgian community about 150 miles from Toronto that ordered 10 bikes from Barry and Palmer. Many Americans would come up to ride the six-day events. The first frame they built was in January, so they test rode it in the snow. Barry was tired of the travel, and keen to plant roots in Toronto.

“I decided to open a retail store, and John wasn't interested in joining me—his father worked retail for years in England,” Barry explained. “Ian Brown, father of Garmin mechanic Geoff, put some money into my new venture and became a silent partner. Another limey arrived from England, Mike Brown, and became my business partner in the shop after working for me a year. He stayed with the business until he moved back to England

in 1986. His daughters are the same age as Michael, so they grew up together in the shop.”

After Mike Brown left, Bicyclesport was stretched financially. Barry had some rough years keeping it afloat, and by 1989 he'd pulled the plug.

“I would've been in the grave for sure, and vowed to open Bicycle Specialties as a sole proprietor with maybe, *maybe* one other person. We had 15 employees with Bicyclesport in a big building in downtown Toronto. Our first location was in a rough area, but it was on King's Street, a quarter of a mile from the city center. It worked well for a time. I know I'm not a good businessman or manager of people, which was my downfall. We had a good friend who owned property downtown who gave us a large space in exchange for nothing until we got on our feet financially. That helped get us going.”

“I was on my own at first, and hired a former Bicyclesport customer named Tom Hinton, who stayed with me from 1990 until we closed for good in 2007. He made virtually all the Mariposa framesets during his time with us. He'd build the basic frames and I'd do all the finishing work. He worked hard and was a good guy—never saw him idle. He built Dede's 2002 World Cup-winning bike quickly. She still rides it. It was originally painted blue,

now it's a creamy pink." Barry reckons close to 1,500 Mariposa were built between 1972 and 2007—he admitted they were never all that good with keeping track of production.

EUROPEAN TRAINING GROUNDS

As the conversation shifted back to Michael's racing career, I asked his father if he had any trepidation when Michael struck out to France to realize his dream.

"Not really. We encouraged it," Barry said. "Looking back, I don't think we realized how lonely he was or how tough it was for him. Thankfully, he spoke fluent French, but he didn't share any social time with any of his club-mates. Fortunately, the woman who owned the apartment treated him like a son and made him feel like home. The other Canadian he went over with originally lasted only two months, leaving Michael on his own. We also didn't realize how rife the drugs situation was, otherwise we might have encouraged him to come home.

Barry and his wife would chat with their

son once a week when he was in France. Michael didn't have a phone in France, so he'd call from a pay phone down the street from his apartment once a week.

"We probably didn't communicate with Michael as much as we should have," Barry added. "We watched Michael in Europe maybe once a year—I had the shop to run. Michael would spend the winters in Toronto, and he also suffered through some serious injuries during his career. Medical care in Europe is subpar. Many times his injuries were so bad we'd pay for a first-class seat home so he could recline in comfort—more than once. It was a tough period. If he would've chosen another sport he wouldn't have seen as much of the world as he did. I believe it's made him a better person."

I turned to Michael and asked who his most influential sport director was during his 19-year career.

"The most knowledgeable was Christian Rumeau when I was an amateur in France," he answered after a few moments pause. "He had an incredible knack for knowing the courses.

We didn't use race radios, and he could see things that most others couldn't. He was Sean Kelly's director for years. He started as a massage therapist for Freddy Maertens' Flandria team under Jean de Gribaldy. Eventually Christian became a director with Skil-Sem until Kelly rode for PDM. Christian retired after the RMO team fell apart. His wife suggested he come out of retirement, and he became my director at Velo Club Annemasse in 1996, when I was 19.

"He was really good at checking in on me, knowing I was a foreigner," he added. "Living in a small town in France could be pretty difficult. He learned from his experience with Jonathan Boyer and Kelly to recommend some time off the bike to clear my head, walking down to Geneva and getting a coffee while looking at the shops and the girls."

Rumeau also knew how to gauge the wind, and would tell Barry how many hours to ride in which direction—and how hard to ride. Barry found the training and racing advice spot-on. Rumeau taught Barry quite a bit, and

took him under his wing. “Throughout my career he’d call just to see how I was doing. He’d call after watching me at Paris-Roubaix or the world championships, and ask me why I did this or didn’t do that.” Barry said with a laugh. “Most of the time he was right. A few times I got messages on my phone, reminding me to be at the front at a certain point in the race on a certain hill, because no one else expects it. Sure enough, he was right. It’s different now with race radios, GPS, television in the team cars—his knowledge is sadly no longer needed, but missed. He was good, and I probably would have quit cycling during that period if he hadn’t come alongside me the way he did.

“When I was a pro, there were certainly directors I enjoyed working with,” Barry added. “Brian Holm had a good intuition, and was able to get the most of the riders. He could be friendly and relaxed, but he was able to put his foot down and tell us when it was time to race. Sean Yates was good as well. On some level I got along well with them because they

raced with the generation I grew up watching. Steve Bauer was never my director, but taught me quite a bit when we were on the national team together. He had a similar level of knowledge as Rumeau.”

Glancing around the workshop, with its hundreds of bicycles on display, my eyes landed on several of Michael’s framed jerseys. He raced the Olympics, the world championships, the Vuelta a España, Giro d’Italia and the Tour de France. I ask which race held the most significance for him and why. His answer surprised me.

“Looking back, the races in Montreal and Quebec were the most memorable, especially in the last couple years,” he said. “It’s ironic, because when I was younger I thought the races in Europe were the biggest. I grew up watching the Canadian races, and even though my performances in them weren’t the greatest, they were the most meaningful. I realized that Canada is my home, and I only had a few opportunities to race here.

“The Tour de France was an obvious, but

the race itself wasn’t remarkable to me in any way. Nearing the finish into Paris is a memory that will stay with me forever. Finishing Paris-Roubaix was great. Brian Holm would tell us beforehand, ‘no matter what you do, finish this race—this is different than any other bike race’. He was right: Coming into the velodrome was incredible.”

CHANGED FUTURE

Our conversation shifted into hindsight mode, specifically with the question of how hard it would have been, at the time, to walk away from professional cycling after he doped the first time while with Johan Bruyneel’s U.S. Postal team.

Without any hesitation, Barry junior answered first, followed by his father.

“I knew it was wrong, but it would’ve been tough,” he said, fidgeting with his phone. “That’s why I kept going.”

“As we said before, Michael’s had this ambition since he was 4 or younger.”

continued from page 74


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continued from page 40

“I think that when I got to that point where the dream was so far from reality, there was this digression where it felt more like a job,” Michael explained. “I still had these goals and ambitions, and I had given up many relationships in high school because I was racing. I even missed my graduation. I attended half a year of university, and then left for France to pursue my dream, where I raced for three years. At the time, it didn’t feel like I had any options. I was surrounded by people, teammates, who were living in the same bubble I was, and throughout my career I received plenty of bad advice.

“I don’t want to blame it on anybody else, but I didn’t take the time to step back and really think about it,” he added. “We were part of a generation where doping was so ingrained in our culture that it became extremely toxic and pervasive. I didn’t think one could compete without it—that’s the point I came to. I had crashed badly in the 2002 Vuelta, and the speeds were tremendously, ridiculously high. I realized, ironically, that it wasn’t good for my health to keep doing what I was doing without doping, and justified it to compete.

“I was part of a peloton where doping was accepted—I knew so few riders who weren’t. That was the state of it back then.”

I asked Michael if he found out who his real friends were after the Reasoned Decision last October. His answer was quick.

“I was expecting the worst, obviously. That’s what scared me more than anything,” he said, first looking at me, then over the counter at his father. “Testifying was tough, but I was scared at how my parents and closest friends would react. People were understanding and supportive, especially those who knew me. The Toronto community has been supportive.

“Those I thought would be upset turned out to be supportive as well,” he added. “I called several people to let them know ahead of the Reasoned Decision, and they understood, which made it easier. It was difficult not having been honest with my parents—especially my dad—who I’ve always shared everything with since I was a kid...”

I asked Barry if he ever thought how his life might have played out if he’d never become a professional cyclist. What career path might he have taken?

“I have no clue,” he said. “We can make and regret certain decisions in life, but like a crash, we learn from them. As an athlete I learned

to move forward. From every bad experience there is something good to be gained. Ultimately, I think it matured me and made me realize what was important in my life, and what I enjoyed about racing and riding my bike. I lost some of that during that period.”

Barry the elder ran several youth racing series when Michael was young, and it was fun for the 25 or so kids, he said. Not many stuck with it, though, like Michael. Barry used to take a bunch of the kids to Holland to do a stage race every year. There were races for all ages. He had a Dutch guy riding with his Bicyclesport-Mariposa club who told him about this event in Holland, and they’d bring 8 or 10 kids over there for four or five years starting when Michael was 10.

“It was a great experience to mix in with Dutch and Belgian kids,” Barry said. “After their races we’d take them to post-Tour de France criteriums to watch the big names, even taking the kids on several of the cobbled courses in Belgium. Michael knew of these races from magazines, and wanted to experience them himself. We rode some of the same roads as the pros during the 1990 Tour, when Claudio Chiappucci and Greg LeMond duked it out for yellow.”

These days Barry’s community involvement is limited. For years he and Clare were involved with team management and logistics. They’ve fallen away from any official capacity, but Barry meets at the zoo with a group to ride quiet roads most Wednesdays. There are maybe 14 riders maximum, including two women. Most of them are older, but there is a young, super-strong couple among the ranks.

“I guess you can say I’m taking an active rest from the Toronto cycling community,” Barry said with a chuckle.

While Barry senior enjoys retirement, Barry junior is busy raising funds for the Milton velodrome, currently under construction for the 2015 Pan Am and Para Pan Am Games. Toronto has changed considerably in the nearly 50 years he’s called it home, and with more than 63 cranes busy adding real estate to the skies, has become one of the fastest-growing cities on the planet. Barry laments the strain it’s putting on the roads, and is hopeful for safe roads to ride.

Five weeks after my Toronto trip, I received an email from Mike, telling me he just rode 60 kilometers on gravel in the Toronto heat—and an invitation to return to Toronto for a proper ride. ●