



(Left and below) Phil at the start of the ride in his name, the 2011 CTC Phil Liggett Challenge Ride and Sportive. As the event comes right after the Tour de France, Phil arrives with few miles in his legs and finds the Peak District climbs tough. While he can't make the 2012 ride, there will be four members from Team Raleigh taking part.



Phil O'Connor/SportivePhoto.com

PHIL LIGGETT

THE CYCLING COMMENTATOR AND FORMER CTC PRESIDENT TALKS TO GRAEME FIFE ABOUT STARTING CYCLING WITH CTC IN THE SIXTIES, THE ROLE CTC PLAYS TODAY, AND WHY HE NEVER GETS TO RIDE AS MUCH AS HE'D LIKE

Sunday, 9am, early June. I call Phil as he heads for Heathrow, bound for America and commentary on the Tour de Suisse. He'd got back from Africa early on Friday, his bags sent home by taxi, him straight into the studio until late afternoon. Up next morning at 6am to do voice-overs in London, home to mow the long-neglected grass and attend to a huge backlog of mail.

'I'm not going to have a free day now till September, and I've done 1,000 miles fewer than I had at this time last year.' He says it with resigned weariness, even as he told me how he'd seen droves of cyclists out in the Hertfordshire lanes and longed to be with them, and how many were clearly first-timers on the bike.

'That's where CTC is so important – in giving a lead to people who are keen to ride but are novices and need advice. It's great that more people are riding, but there's a lot to learn, mainly for safety reasons.'

He stresses the role of CTC in standing up for 'the utility cyclist'. The swelling popularity of cycle sport is encouraging but those who turn to two wheels for humbler, no less admirable reasons – pleasure, efficiency, economy, speed about town – have different needs. It's CTC's influence, says Phil, that has brought cycling to notice where it counts: with Parliament and the

other bodies that look to the inclusion of cyclists' needs in transport strategies; fighting 'for all matters on highway usage, insurance and so on'.

So how did it start with him and CTC? 'Around 1961, a pal next door was a member and he suggested I go out on one of the local Sunday rides, in the Wirral. Neither of us had any cycling background and I told him no way – Sunday was roast dinner, best meal of the week, and I wasn't going to miss that. Anyway, he eventually persuaded me. George Lewis was the runs leader, and

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he was still the runs leader when I became President in 1996. That's another thing with CTC, the continuity.' (He laughs.)

'Well, soon I was going off for the hostel weekends, out from Merseyside – this was the Wirral section of the Liverpool DA – into North Wales, up Horseshoe Pass, Moel Famau mountain... it was like riding into paradise. One time, one of the guy's wheels collapsed and we stopped by a farmhouse, where there was a wreck of a machine

propped up against the wall. We begged a loan of the wheel and stuffed the tyre with grass. It got him home. CTC for me? It was friendship.'

When he was asked to become President – 'it was a real honour' – Phil's media profile changed the popular perception of CTC. Membership grew. 'Bringing in Kevin Mayne was the best thing I did. I'd emphasised that I couldn't attend many committee meetings because of my other commitments, but Kevin's Vision 2000 paper really boosted the drive of the organisation to embrace the new demands of the growing numbers of cyclists.'

Those 'other commitments' keep Phil off the bike for much of the year, to his chagrin. He generally comes to the ride he inaugurated, the annual CTC Phil Liggett Challenge, in sorry state after the Tour de France. 'And it's a hard ride – I wanted it to be – on roads I knew from my Milk Race days, but it's a fabulous country, even if it turns out to be a bit of a slog for me.'

We conclude our conversation as he waits to board. 'All the travel can get too much. I love bird-watching, canal trips, meeting people and, of course, riding the bike, but there's no time. Fact is, though, I think the name of CTC's campaign network, Right to Ride, in a way says it all. It's what we want and strive for, at all levels: the joy and companionship of the bicycle.'