



Long before they race for OLYMPIC GLORY

Associated Press

Author Chris Cleave tells story of getting to the starting line

8/1/12

By Lisa Reisman

Special to the Times

BRANFORD — Of all the events in the London Olympics that began last Friday that might whet our collective Shoreline appetites, it's doubtful track cycling is among them.

You might have seen a race on television. Anonymous helmeted athletes with sculpted Lycra skin-suited bodies ferociously powering aerodynamic bikes around a steeply banked oval track in a velodrome, an arena for track cycling, screaming with fans. You've probably then yawned and switched to "Cake Boss" or "Falling Skies."

Even the popular British author Chris Cleave, whose most recent novel "Gold" focuses on two world-class track cyclists vying for a

spot on the 2012 Summer Olympics team and whose own country practices a fanatical devotion to the sport, seemed less than interested in the 2-minute race.

From the boyish, sunny-faced Cleave, who appeared at the Pine Orchard Yacht & Country Club in mid-July at an event sponsored by Madison's R.J. Julia Booksellers, "what we're witnessing in those last 2 minutes is the final act of a battle that's stretched over four years. I'm much more intrigued by the three years, 364 days, 23 hours, and 58 minutes preceding that." His objective in "Gold": Tear off the helmet and report back what's underneath.

Cleave who, as part of his research, immersed himself in a grueling cycling regimen, discovered the "savage joy of training." Only after being



Lou Abercrombie

British author Chris Cleave dropped by the Pine Orchard Yacht & Country Club in Branford last month to talk about "Gold," his story about two female Olympic cyclists and the choices and sacrifices each makes.

roundly trounced by a female master's champion did he confront the soberingly vast gulf that separates elite athletes from everyone else.

Such is the level of

their natural talent, their intense dedication, and the height of their pain threshold, he told the 50 or so in attendance, that "they may occupy the same space as us, but



they exist on a plane few of us will ever visit."

Take the extremes to which female marathon world record-holder Paula Radcliffe resorted to gain an edge of 7 or 8 seconds on her rivals. At the height of his fellow Brit's preparation for the 2004 Athens Olympics, according to Cleave, "she spent eight hours training and 16 hours sleeping."

Naturally, there are attendant costs. "Outside ... each race," he writes, "they were condemned to be ordinary people burdened with minds and

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bodies and human sentimental attachments that were never designed to accelerate to such velocities."

In the end, in short, the choice required of elite athletes is not so different from the one faced by all of us: How to juggle work and family life. Particularly for females, said the soft-spoken 39-year-old whose two other books, the best-selling "Little Bee" and "Incendiary," were also written in the female voice. "At the very time they're reaching the pinnacle of their potential, they're also at the peak of their fertility."

That conflict he animates in a contrast between the two rivals: Zoe and Kate share the same coach, the same training regimen. But while the model-beautiful Zoe nourishes herself on nonstop training and victory as a substitute for family and friends, Kate, the more gifted athlete of the two, derives sustenance in large part from her marriage to another track cyclist and an 8-year-old daughter.

The equalizer: Four years before the London Olympics, the daughter is diagnosed with childhood leukemia. "Doubtless an elite athlete's pursuit

of gold verges on how much she's prepared to give up," said Cleave, who spent countless hours at London's Great Ormond Street Hospital, which specializes in rare and complicated children's disorders and was spotlighted during the Opening Ceremonies. "But it pales in comparison to the Olympian level of parental love and sacrifice required when a child is seriously ill."

To what extent the mother proves willing to set aside her hard-fought ambitions for her child is precisely the sort of timeless question that has Chris Cleave unconcerned

with the interest "Gold" might excite in track cycling.

If his story at times approaches, er, velodrama, Cleave, it seems, would be the first to agree that the struggles enacted in the book are hardly isolated to track cyclists, much less athletes.

Still, "Gold" for the most part, is a pulsating read. Which is precisely why, while the sport will be broadcast from London starting on Aug. 2, anyone could be forgiven for opting to crack open Cleave's book instead.

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