



## Transcript for Episode Five: Matt Keenan

**Phil Latz:** Matt, thanks very much for coming on *influencers!*

**Matt Keenan:** My pleasure. Your magazine influenced me for a long time. I just showed you a few photos of the great articles you used to have with Alan Piper. It works both ways.

**Phil:** Well, I'm flattered. I'm speechless.

**Matt:** Excellent.

**Phil:** In researching this interview, I discovered that we only had 218 mutual connections on LinkedIn. Why is cycling such an incestuous activity do you think?

**Matt:** The person that got me into cycling was a guy by the name of Jim Fawcett, who sadly passed away riding to work. His wife was a big influence on me getting into bikes because of the stories that she used to tell. She always said, "Cycling gets into your blood. Once it's in there, you can't get rid of it, and even if you stop racing a bike, you still identify as a cyclist, as a bike rider." We've all got that great connection through a wonderful sport.

**Phil:** I heard that you obviously, best known-- We're going to come to your cycling career in a minute because I think it's very much undersung.

**Matt:** Career's a strong word. [laughter]

**Phil:** I heard that you even commentated throughout your childhood, that you commentated on your life.

**Matt:** Yes. I would take the footy down to the park as a six-year-old and I'll be playing on my own and it would, "Keenan handballs to Harmes, Harmes to Keenan, to Bosustow, Keenan, goal." and Carlton would win every single time.

**Phil:** [laughs] Robbie's the one, your co-commentator, Robbie McEwen, the 24-stage wins across the Tour and the Giro and the three green jerseys and all that, but let's talk a bit about yourself because you really were quite a successful racer in the day.

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**Matt:** I was okay at a national level. At the National Championships in 1996, I was the sixth rider across the finish line, but if you look it up on Cycling News on their archives, they made a mistake in the article and I finished fourth. I never correct anybody if they say, "You finished fourth at the National Championships," but I was the first under 23 that year and that was the first year they had under 23's at the World Championships and I'd dearly love to say that I represented Australia at the World Championships, but I didn't get selected.

At that time, that hurt, but then on reflection when you look back at the other guys that were in my age bracket, we had Bradley McGee, Matt Wilson, Cadel Evans, Josh Collingwood was in there having won the junior world championships a few years ago. It was a pretty impressive list. Luke Roberts was another one, Brett Lancaster, the guys who went on to win world titles, Olympic gold medals, and one of them the Tour de France. I'm not beating myself up about not being selected for the national team.

**Phil:** I was also fascinated to read about your struggle to get started in cycling, one of seven children, and not much parental encouragement initially.

**Matt:** That comes back to the story behind Jim Fawcett. He was a family friend of mom and dads. He passed away when I was 12 and his daughter was the same age as me and we ended up being childhood sweethearts and doing our debutante ball together and those sorts of things.

I wanted to race because of what I got from seeing him and into cycling and he was a good footballer, a good cricketer, just good at all sports, and that when you're 12 is pretty cool. But mom and dad just saw it as a really dangerous sport and rightly so. Particularly training out on the roads as a teenage kid before school or after school. They saw it as pretty dangerous. Plus they had six other kids to manage, going to netball or going to basketball or going to football or going to tennis, and there was only two of them.

They couldn't look after everybody so they weren't super keen on me riding a bike. I get that as a parent they were being totally protective, I completely understand it, but what that did was ensure that when I did get into cycling, that it was driven by me and it was a bit of a hurdle to get there, so it showed that I had real passion about it, and I absolutely loved it. It's a blessing that my parents didn't make it easy and I won't lawnmower parents, they didn't make the path really easy, I had to create my own path.

**Phil:** I haven't heard that expression lawnmower parent.

**Matt:** There's helicopter parents that stop your kids from falling over and having an accident, and then there's lawnmower parents who try and just clear the path so that the kid can go through. To be perfectly honest, as a dad now, I'm probably a little bit guilty of both.

**Phil:** I'd say most parents these days are more than lawnmowers than the helicopter, which is perhaps why it's even harder now to get kids riding bikes, especially riding to school and so forth.

**Matt:** That's a huge challenge. I'm sure you've seen the photo of it's too dangerous for Johnny or Joanne to ride to school so I drive them and it just perpetuates. We need to do a lot of work in that space so that kids can ride to school, or walk to school, or whatever it may be. I actually got abused just recently by a motorist at a roundabout. I actually was driving to pick my kids up from school as I was taking my daughter to netball.

We came to a roundabout and I stopped to let a couple of primary school kids across the road and the car behind me, it was a woman in her mid-60s, has given me one of these. Having a go at me for stopping to let kids across the road. We've got to change that culture.

**Phil:** We certainly do. Now I'm going to ask you about three of your favorite expressions.

**Matt:** Here we go.

**Phil:** Here we go.

**Matt:** You've got me nervous now, Phil.

**Phil:** 'Volunteering for the job you want to have', or words to that effect. Talk to me about that and in relation also with your commentary career.

**Matt:** You're going to really hurt my next contract negotiation. Because I got into commentating on bike racing, not as a pursuit to make a living out of it. I had that dream of being a professional cyclist wasn't good enough. I wanted to stay involved in the sport. So I started commentating. That's what I did on the weekends, I did at local track races, junior events. I do remember commentating on Simon Clark and Mitch Docker when they were 14 or 15 years of age, at the country carnival in Warragul.

It's the job that I would dearly do regardless of what the fee is. I just love being able to share my passion for the sport, but don't tell SBS and don't tell ASO who are currently helping with the assistance of paying my mortgage.

**Phil:** Okay, I promise. I promise I won't. The second one, 'infect as many people as possible with the bike bug'.

**Matt:** That's I'm sure something that you would relate to. My life is infinitely better because of cycling. The opportunities I've had to explore the world, as a kid before you've got your driver's license, the independence from mom and dad to just

explore the neighborhood and that neighborhood gets bigger and bigger. The people that I've met through cycling as well, you are the company you keep.

I've met some wonderful people through cycling and I want to share that with other people so they can get to experience that as well. My life is way better because of bikes, and why not try and share that with other people.

**Phil:** Number three, specifically for commentary, 'add value to the pictures'.

**Matt:** When I started commentating when you're in particularly in the shadows of a guy like Phil Liggett who was an icon of not just cycling, but broadcasting, you've got a pretty high benchmark to get over and it's TV, it's not radio. There's no point just telling people what they're seeing on the screen, you want to tell them why they're seeing it. When I first started commentating and going into the box, I was a bit nervous so I had three dot points. One of them was 'one point at a time'. The other one was 'light and shade'.

Because I like the idea of listening to commentators in another language, a language that I don't understand and that can still be entertaining based on the delivery. 'One point at a time', 'light and shade' and 'add value to the pictures'. Don't tell them what they're seeing, tell them why they're seeing it.

**Phil:** Very good. Your personal production company is called 51 Productions. That is a weird sounding name.

**Matt:** No, it's not. You know why. Surely you know why it's 51 Productions. Eddie Merckx won the Tour de France with number 51, Bernard Thévenet was wearing number 51, Pedro Delgado was wearing number 51. I think maybe Anquetil was wearing 51 as well. As a side note, I've got two kids. My nine-year-old son has just started playing junior football this year. His team is Heidelberg and they're in the Richmond colors.

I think he wanted whatever Dusty Martin's number is and he didn't get Dusty Martin's number. All the kids got quite high numbers and my son by pure chance got number 51. Don't worry, Tom. You're in good hands with 51 on your back.

**Phil:** That is amazing. You're known through your incredible knowledge of every rider in the pro-peloton and also to be able to identify them. When they're in the break and you're only seeing in front-on you can't see the number from the front. I was shocked to read in my research that you actually don't have that all just perfectly locked away in your brain.

**Matt:** Don't tell anyone, Phil.

**Phil:** You do hours of research.

**Matt:** Absolutely, I do hours of research. It's one of the conversations I had with my wife when we're on the couch and we're meant to be engaging and watching the television or something or other. If she's watching something that just doesn't grab my interest, I'll have the phone out and I'll be flicking through a few things and she'll say, "Is that work or pleasure?" and I'm like..."It's both."

Anytime that I find something and I might just stumble across it, I update my database on those riders. In terms of being able to identify a rider, there is a process that you go through with that. For example when it comes to a team that's doing the chasing at the front of the peloton. You know who the lead out rider is for a particular team. Let's take Lotto-Soudal, for example, you know that when Lotto-Soudal are chasing and Caleb Ewan is in the race.

The guys on the front early is not going to be Jasper De Buyst his last lead out rider and it's not going to be Roger Kluger. They've got three guys out of the eight that are eliminated. There's a fair chance that it's going to be one of the guys with a big engine who's not a noted climber and so you'll eliminate certain guys based on what their role is. You can probably pick who it is that's doing the chasing without even looking at the pictures.

You should know what the role is of each rider in the team. Then you look for other little details. Mitch Docker used to ride with these bright red Bontrager shoes so you could pick him pretty easily. Some guys have got a mustache, some guys wear their socks high, some wear them low, length of knicks, height, you look for all those little identifying factors.

**Phil:** When you're commentating live which unfortunately is a rare thing.

**Matt:** It's still live. We're just not at the venue. We did the Tour de France from Australia last year. We've done the Giro d'Italia this year from the studio in Melbourne. It's still live, but we're just watching the same pictures as you are. We don't get any additional information.

**Phil:** My bad. Let me rephrase that question. When you're on that double story finished structure at the finish line commentating, you've got race radio in one ear in French, you've got the producer in the same ear, the other ear, you've got Robbie McEwen in your third ear or whatever, how do you possibly cope? How does it work? Are they both coming out the same ear?

**Matt:** Yes, you're right. Sometimes you can have three voices talking to you at once. Robbie is doing the commentating, race radio is giving an update in another language, the language or whatever the team is that's having an incident might be a puncture for Movistar so it's in Spanish or it's a puncture for FDJ so it's in French and then the producer is telling you something as well.

You decipher which voice is the most important and you can listen to that. If all those three voices are going, I know that the producers the ones to listen to and I

can block out the other two. If Robbie's talking and I hear the race number from race radio, and it's a key number of the race, it might be number 51, it might be Thibaut Pinot's had a puncture, I can tune Robbie out slightly and listen to that race radio. If it's something mundane, I'm not listening to race radio and I'm focusing on what Robbie's saying and then my next comment.

**Phil:** Of all the fantastic moments in your already quite long commentary career, what's the one that still gets the hairs on the back of the neck?

**Matt:** There's no photo finish in this, it's a clear winner. Mathew Hayman, 2016 Paris–Roubaix what a moment. His 15th participation in the race. He'd broken his elbow six weeks earlier, he spent the whole preparation training in his garage with a cast on, and he's just such a nice guy. He's somebody that I've known for a long period of time as well. In doing that commentary, we were only doing it for Australia, just for SBS, whereas Robbie and I are often doing the world feed, so you've got to be neutral.

Now, one of the rules of commentary from Richie Benaud was there's no team called 'us or them'. When Matt Hayman entered the velodrome with Tom Boonen there was 'us'. It was Australia versus Belgium and unabashedly I wanted to see Mathew Hayman win and he did. It was beautiful.

**Phil:** You're normally a relatively mild-mannered commentator, it could be said. You've even been perhaps accused of being a nerd. When Mathew Hayman crossed that line, it was like, "Mathew Hayman!" full octave of real guttural cry.

**Matt:** It was my best Darryl Eastlake. It was great. It was just pure joy to see him win, the disbelief on his face. The reaction from his team members that were inside the velodrome on the side and then later seeing the in-car footage of Matt Wilson who'd grown up racing with Matt Hayman as well. He was then the sports director. It was one of the beautiful moments of sport.

When they entered the velodrome from memory, they entered the velodrome, Tom Boonen at that point had 110 race victories, Matt Hayman had two. Everybody loves the underdog. Don't they, Phil?

**Phil:** Yes.

**Matt:** There was only one Belgium that day though that was barracking for Mathew Hayman and that was Roger Devlaeminck because he didn't want Tom Boonen to go pass his record on Paris–Roubaix wins.

**Phil:** Excellent. That was an incredible moment in sporting history. You don't just do hours now as a TV commentary, you're prolific on social media, you do corporate events. 'Available for hire' right now, ladies and gentlemen? How does it all fit in? How do you possibly manage?

**Matt:** I've actually got a really good life in terms of the balance between the two. One of the things that I get to do more than most parents get to do, is I get to go to the school, drop off and pick up and after school sport and weekend sport because you're either on or you're off. Pre-COVID, I probably spent five and a half, six months of the year in a hotel bed with traveling to races and so on but that time that I'm home, I'm home. Whereas if you've got a normal job and you're leaving for the office or you're a tradie and you're leaving at 6:30 or 7:30 or whatever it is, and then you're getting home around six o'clock, it's all pretty functionary at either end of the day.

Then you've just got the weekends and you've only got four weeks of annual leave. When I've been traveling in the periods where I come home, I probably do less work than what is available because I want to focus on that time with my kids while they're interested in hanging out with dad and they are 9 and 11 at the moment so I'm not sure how much longer they want to hang out with dad. It goes pretty quickly. I'll try and make the most of that.

**Phil:** You start running a motel when they are about 16 or 17.

**Matt:** That's what mom used to say all the time. She used to really get upset and she'd say "It's not a hotel."

**Phil:** It is. I know from personal experience. You're also an ambassador for a couple of charities. Would you like to just talk a little bit about them?

**Matt:** Well, as being somebody with a public profile albeit, predominately within the cycling field, you get asked to support a lot of charities. I figured rather than doing a half-baked attempt of supporting a whole bunch of charities, I'll pick one that really resonates with me and my grandfather and two uncles on my mother's side, all died of heart attacks in their mid-40s. As a 14-year-old, I had an episode of tachycardia and I've had it a few times since. Heart disease really resonated with me and then Will Walker whose career was cut short because of heart issues he was working at the Baker Institute.

They reached out to me to support them as an ambassador. I said, "That's the one." I really want us to support them and throw myself into it wholeheartedly. There's more people who die each year of heart disease than anything else. The challenge with raising funds for research into heart disease is often somebody's first symptoms are the last and they pass away. Whereas with many other diseases, you can have a conversation with that person that has the illness and is going through the battle, so it resonates with people more. Yet heart disease has a bigger negative impact on life than most of I think all the cancers put together and that the challenge with this space is they're all worthy causes. I just decided to pick one and I picked that one in particular.

Then recently Variety Victoria who raise funds to support kids from underprivileged backgrounds, just a couple of weeks ago reached out to me for a

campaign that they're doing to get kids on bikes. As a kid, I still remember that one Christmas where I got a bike. I can remember the joy that that brought me, but the sidetrack from that, I can also remember the tears it brought me because at about 4:30 in the morning, I did the commando crawl out to see what was under the Christmas tree.

I could see two yellow bikes and I've got two younger twin brothers and I started sobbing and mom comes in and she said, "It's a bit early to be up. What's wrong?" I said, "Peter and David got a bike and I didn't get a bike." Mom turned the light on, and my bike was there, it was black. The twin brothers had yellow bikes. I had a black bike and that was the best Christmas of my life.

Then as a parent, to give my kids a bike and to see the joy on their face, that's even better than getting the bike yourself. I want to be able to support those parents who aren't as lucky as I am, to be able to buy a bike for their kids and give those kids that opportunity to get a bike and get infected with the bike bug and explore their neighborhood and then explore the world and dare to dream.

**Phil:** I know that you said when you got that bike, the black BMX, if I remember rightly, that it was the freedom, it was exploring, it was expanding your suburb from beyond what you could.

**Matt:** It was that sense of independence so no longer did I have to ask mum for a lift to footie training or a lift to tennis, I could go on my own. I could go and visit Simon around the corner, on my bike and then to ride around the local parklands and explore the neighborhood. It was fantastic. It was a real process of growing up.

**Phil:** How old were you when you got that bike?

**Matt:** About eight, I think.

**Phil:** Now your kids are nine and 11.

**Matt:** They're not going out on the bike on their own in neighborhood Phil, I'm the helicopter parent with the lawnmower.

**Phil:** [chuckles] Well, that was exactly what I was going to ask. What is their boundary? What is their freedom to roam?

**Matt:** It's a real challenge because I am part of the problem in terms of not letting my kids go out and do that much. The streets are busier now as well so I'm conscious about that. I want to know where they're going, and there's a couple of busy roads, and they're not crossing that busy road at the moment, particularly my nine-year-old without me being there with him. So Phil, it's a work in process I'm trying to expand that boundary, but I'm struggling with it.



**Phil:** What would you like to see your children do as far as cycling goes over the next decade work experiences, would you like to see them experience?

**Matt:** Some of the best holidays that we have, we go to Bright (Victoria), at least once per year, normally twice and that's where I let them go off and ride and they can do whatever they want because that community, that town is set up for cycling.

We go to the pump track and the jump track and do a bit of the mountain bike riding. I do a ride each time with my daughter it's 32 kilometers from Bright to Myrtleford and we meet my wife and son there to have a bite to eat and my son is now old enough, he'll be coming with us as well. I want cycling to be part of their life as a leisure activity.

In terms of sporting options, one of the deals I've cut with my wife is we want to give our kids access to every sport possible, try the lot, try netball, try horse riding, try football, try tennis, basketball, whatever it is. I'm never going to ask them if they want to go and do a bike race because they've got enough exposure to it. If they want to do it, they'll ask me and I don't want them to do a sport as a way of trying to seek their dad's approval. If they want to do it, I'll fully support them but they've got to ask me, they've got enough exposure to it to make that decision themselves.

**Phil:** Looking at the bigger picture Australia wide and the kids across Australia, we know from the data that they're becoming less active and they're not riding as much, they're not riding to school as much in particular. At that bigger picture level, what do you think Australia needs to do as a nation? If you could, what would your top three or four things be?

**Matt:** It's a huge cultural shift that is required. When I first went to the Netherlands racing in 1995, I went there dreaming of one day riding the Tour de France. I came home dreaming that we could have the cycling culture of the Netherlands, so it's a volume thing. At the moment when a cyclist is seen on the road and they're just a cyclist and the talkback radio doesn't help with that, or the tabloid press.

Whereas you go to a place like the Netherlands or Denmark, many of the Scandinavian countries and everybody, most people not everybody, most people ride a bike and the ones that don't, an immediate family member does, so they can relate to that person on the bike. The more people we get on bikes, the greater the chances are of the person driving the car that doesn't ride a bike, knows somebody that does so they can identify that person as a person, not as a cyclist.

We need that cultural shift, we need more infrastructure, actually helps tell the story as well. Having the infrastructure, lets the community know that this is a

valid mode of transport and we need ongoing government-funded communication campaigns.

Cast your mind back to the early 1980s, 'drink and drive and make it home, you were a bloody legend' was the culture. That has completely changed. We're now in a position because of the campaigns, the education around drinking and driving that a 19-year-old will take the keys off a friend who's had too much to drink or has had a drink at all because they shouldn't be drinking and driving at that age at all. We need to reach that cultural shift with bikes, but it's going to take time.

**Phil:** Cultural, infrastructure, communication.

**Matt:** Absolutely.

**Phil:** They'd be the three points. Now you just mentioned the Netherlands and I noticed that you tweeted recently a photo from a famous Canadian bike advocate, of the Netherlands in 1975, I think. Would you like to talk about that photo? What it was and what it says?

**Matt:** The talkback radio in Australia so often say 'we're not the Netherlands'. Well, the Netherlands weren't the Netherlands either 40 years ago, they had the same congestion and car issues that we have, but they made a big shift, led by the government and that is what's required. It needs to be led by government and it probably wasn't popular at the time but as Malcolm Fraser once said, real leadership is doing something that's not popular, but right.

There are so many knock-on benefits and one of the big benefits is the improvement in the community's health. I'm sure that as a community, those countries that ride bikes more are overall healthier than the ones that don't, because you get incidental exercise, you're riding to work and it might only be five kilometers or you're riding to the shops and it might be two k's, but it's better doing that than being in the car. You don't have to go to the gym, but you're getting exercise as your mode of transport.

There are so many benefits to it and that picture of what was happening in the Netherlands in the 1970s, it kinda looks like what a lot of Western countries do now. Even look at Paris 10 years ago, they had hardly any bike infrastructure. It can be done. One of the ways to reduce congestion is actually get people out of cars so it's in the motorist interests to have more people riding bikes. It actually speeds up the traffic and when I had a real job before I was a full-time commentator, I was in an office block and my next-door neighbor worked in the same office building and he'd be out the driveway in his car and I'd be out the driveway on my bike. It was about a 13-kilometer commute. I'd beat him to the office every time so how am I slowing down any motorist if I'm getting there first?

When I did see him though, I opened up the throttle a little bit and went faster than normal. [laughter]

**Phil:** 2007 was when you really got serious about the commentary, correct.

**Matt:** That's when I got the first opportunity to commentate on the Tour de France and it started with a recommendation from Phil and Paul, the Tour of Qatar was clashing with the Tour of California at that time. ASO was doing the broadcast for the Tour of Qatar and Phil and Paul weren't available and ASO said 'have you've got anybody that you'd recommend' and they recommended me. Then that was my audition to be the warm up act to those guys at the Tour de France. Fair to say, I was a little nervous before day one.

**Phil:** You'd really earned that recommendation with, from Phil and Paul through a long apprenticeship.

**Matt:** Yes, through doing local races in Australia, probably might've been close to five years of commentating at local races before I got paid to do any commentating. There was some races that actually paid my travel and accommodation to get there, to be able to do it and I was really lucky that I got the opportunity to work with Phil on the Bay Cycling Classic. I was hosting a radio show on SEN in Melbourne and did a couple of interviews with Paul because I just loved Paul Sherwen as a commentator and then as I got to know him, I loved him as a person as well. I was really lucky to have those guys in my corner.

**Phil:** Even since you hit the world stage, if you like, it's already 14 years now if I have my math correct.

**Matt:** It's not bad.

**Phil:** Thank you. What's the future? How many more years do you think you have on the microphone?

**Matt:** Good question. One of the things with COVID has been not traveling, which I love traveling, but don't love being away from my wife and kids. I married my wife because I kinda like her and I like hanging out with her and I love spending time with my kids. That's been one of the really big benefits of the restricted travel around COVID. In terms of what the future holds, I want to get better as a commentator, I want to infect more people with the cycling bug.

Cycling's going to be part of my life until I keel over for sure, there's no question. I don't have a deadline on when that would be. I definitely don't want it to be anytime soon and I'm absolutely confident that I'm getting better each year that I commentate, because I'm getting more comfortable in my own skin. You're rattled with, I was anyway, I was full of self-doubt for the first 10 years and maybe more. I still have plenty of self-doubt about my ability to commentate and entertain people.

One of the realities of commentating is it's a bit like music. There might be something that is played absolutely correctly as an instrument, and you like it and

I don't, it's taste. There may be another set of music that we both like, and then we go and watch a movie, I came out saying, "that was fantastic," you say, "that was boring." It's very opinion-based. You need to have thick skin as well and realize that there's going to be some people who like you, so don't get too ahead of yourself with a bit of wind blown up your backside and there's going to be plenty of people that don't like you.

One of the best things I read was a quote from Morgan Freeman which said, 'don't take criticism from anybody you wouldn't take advice from'. I like that. I use that to try and block out a lot of the criticism that you get. One of the other things that happens in commentating is there's a multiples of 10 rule.

You say something really insightful and interesting, you'll get one person that comments. You say something outrageous, you'll get 10 people who comment. You make a mistake, you'll get 100. There was a really good, there was a really good post that I saw recently from a school teacher that did the nine times table on the board up to 10 times 9 and the teacher deliberately did the first one incorrectly, did 9 times 1 equals 7, the rest were all correct.

Then she stepped away from the board and she asked the class a question. They all started laughing at her. She said, yes, I got nine of them right and I got one wrong and you all laughed at me. That's how the world will treat you. You make one mistake, they'll focus on that. I thought it was really good.

**Phil:** That is excellent and the Morgan Freeman comment is excellent too. One other of those comments that I really like is that 'you are retired when you are doing what you want to do'. Have you ever heard that comment before?

**Matt:** Yes, so I haven't worked for the last 10 years. I pinch myself because I was the kid that commentated on myself playing football. I commentated on myself going up hills out training and I love telling stories. I love, I prefer to tell other people's stories than my own story to be perfectly honest, but I just love sharing the joy of the sport. It's a real privilege to have a public voice on something you love.

**Phil:** Matt, thank you very much for being an *influencer!* and thank you for coming along today.

**Matt:** Thanks, Phil.