

Martin Sheen with his hellraising actor son Charlie Sheen

# Like father like son

The father-and-son dynamic is a fascinating one, not least when a progeny decides to follow in his father's footsteps, writes *David Young*.

**T**he bond between fathers and sons is a difficult one to understand, let alone articulate. And so, the mechanics and oddities of the relationship remain a mystery to most of us. Perhaps it's because the crossing of this particular generation gap invariably hangs on a loose yet tacit arrangement of nods and winks, and at times, silences.

The experts tell us all fathers and sons pass through certain stages – starting out with dad being every boy's idol. And for that fleeting time, fathers are invincible. But when the teen years arrive with a bang, sons take up residence on the opposite end of the logic spectrum. And then, just as these troubled times are abating, competition rears its head.

Fortunately, by the time sons hit their 30s, they're ready to let go of all the slights and insults felt in the earlier years, and they get to see their father for who he really is. Friendship can follow. But it's only really at the so-called legacy stage when the true extent of a father's influence is understood. (Hey, no-one said it was going to be easy.)

Chances are the challenges come from a quest for mutual approval, and ultimately respect. One thing's for sure though: root around long enough and you'll find a bedrock of pride, stubbornness, and resolve. For some, it brings them closer together. And for others, well, let's just say – it's incendiary.

Now, imagine trying to craft an identity, and be recognised as a person in your own right, when your father's persona dominates billboards.



Stephen Roche and his cyclist son Nicolas

## FOOTSTEPS OR SHADOW?

With an icon for a father, you'd wonder why Nicolas Roche ever entered the two-wheeled game at all. Dad Stephen is a legend, and rightly regarded as one of cycling's giants. Just consider his haul of massive wins – the Tour de France, the Giro d'Italia and the World Championships. All in one year. 1987.

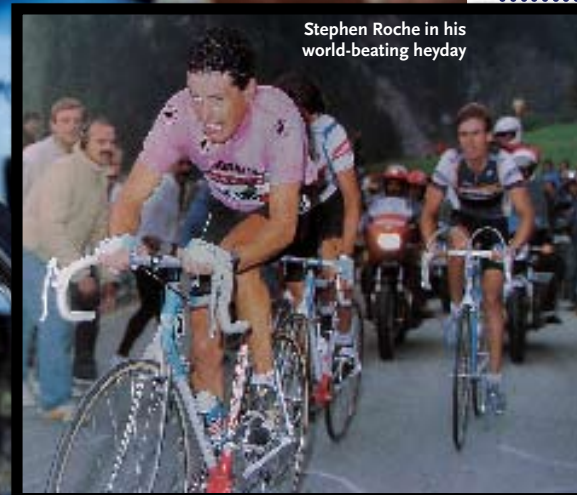
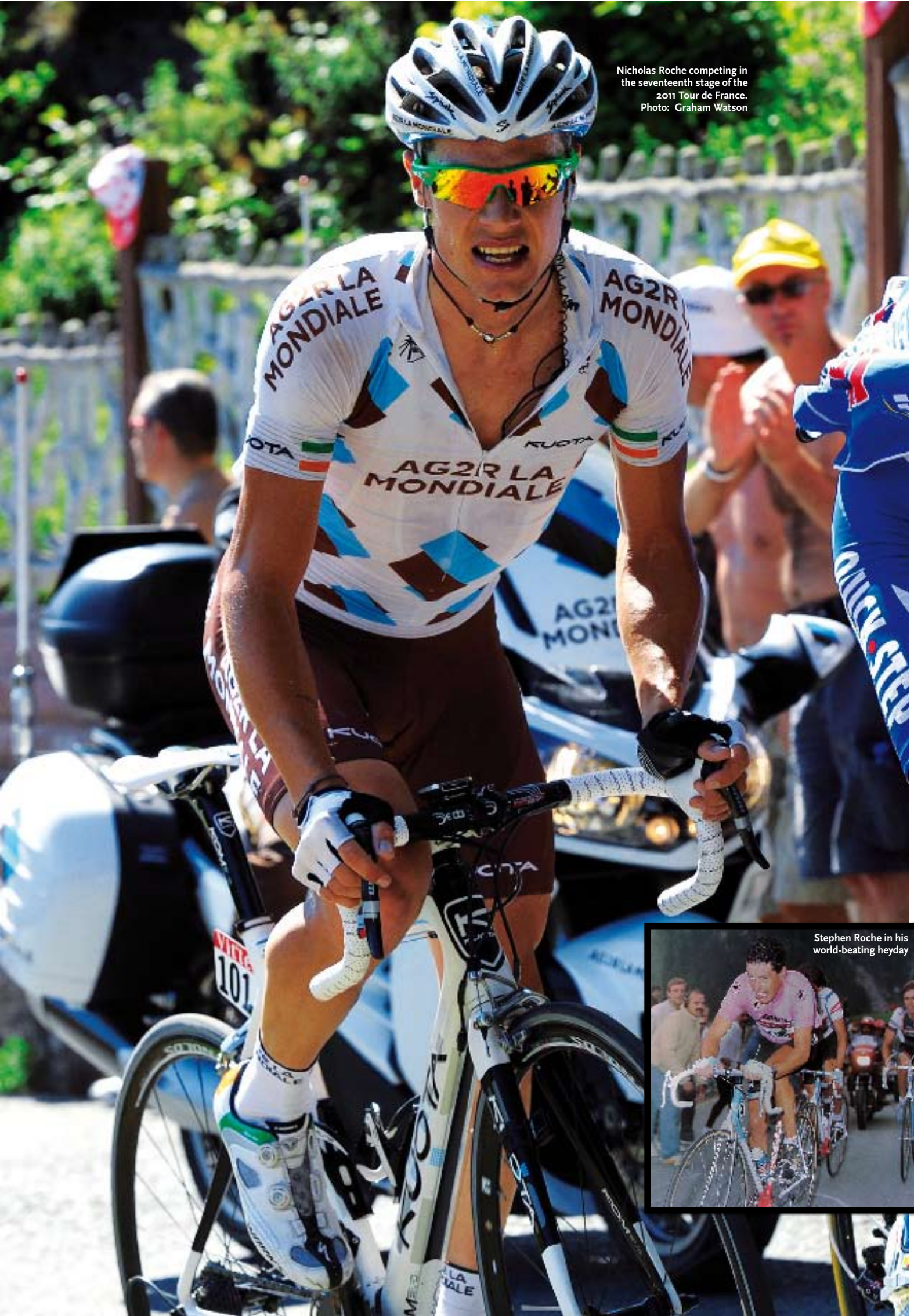
Then again, perhaps Nicolas' accession into the one of the toughest arenas on the planet was a fate sealed by the relationship he's always enjoyed with his dad. "I have memories of some riders quitting because of having parents on their back every weekend," recalls Roche Jr. "Telling them how in their day, they would've done this or that."

"I was lucky. I was never under that kind of stress," adds Nicolas, who now captains the French AG2R-La-Mondiale team. "Don't get me wrong – I had pressure to perform. But for my Dad, cycling was also an education. A way for me to get out there and meet the lads. Just like a social network kind of thing."

"It was also about keeping your shoes clean," he adds in the same breath. "And there was no going out with a filthy bike."



Nicholas Roche competing in the seventeenth stage of the 2011 Tour de France.  
Photo: Graham Watson



Stephen Roche in his world-beating heyday



That's just the way it had to be. Everything had to be perfect. He didn't care how good or how bad I was, at first. The idea was 'ok, son, if you want to do this, these are the kind of things, you have to know'."

Somehow Stephen kept his distance, especially through his son's teen years, by giving advice, sparingly. "Never too much," says Nicolas. "Because I think I would've gone mental otherwise. You know that stage in life when everything that your parents say is wrong, and what you say is right."

Yet Super Dad didn't let up on the fundamentals. "I had to do my two or three hours training, two or three times a week. And then four, five and six hours, every day. What was important was I had to do be rigorous," Nicolas recounts. "I had to do it with heart and passion. Whatever the weather."

"For Dad, sport was kind of a life experience thing – where you learned how to be polite. How to get into training. How to perform. I was a hyperactive kid. I couldn't sit and watch TV. I had to kick the ball around or go and play rugby. And then go running. That was the kind of curriculum."

Today, things have evolved to the point where every little detail counts. And Nicolas welcomes the extra paternal input: "I'm at the stage where I've worked on my training, my diet, my experience in the peloton. And Dad's there now with the kind of advice that can change your luck. It would've been useless a couple of years ago; I wasn't ready."

Nicolas, unprompted, also offers: "The Col d'Eze. It's a famous climb on the last day of Paris-Nice. My Dad won it a few times. It's the first big event of the year. And a big challenge for me. He'll be giving me advice on the gear to use. Which chain ring, and the likes."

Even with a father who knows how to step in and, more importantly, stand back, surely there must have been an added weight of expectation because of the Roche name? "No," Nicolas laughs. "I didn't think that far ahead. I kept it pretty simple. I was passionate about all the sports I played. At school, as long as I was on the sports field, I was happy. I felt a release."

"I wasn't thinking about whether I was doing it for myself, or my Dad. I just had this need to compete. I wasn't doing it to make Roche proud. Or granddad proud because his son was famous. I was just doing it because I loved the competition."

Ironically, Nicolas had to pitch the idea of going professional to his father, only getting the green light on strict conditions. "Dad said 'I'm giving you two years to turn pro. There's no chasing dreams till you're 25. I don't want you just sitting at home.' So, I worked at his hotel for a year. Dad made sure I had the hours to train but I had to turn up for him. Everyday."

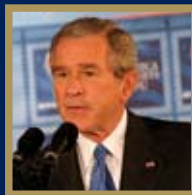
How did it all run so smoothly? Nicolas quickly counters: "We had our arguments

## FOLLOWING IN FATHER'S FOOTSTEPS



### Martin & Charlie Sheen

When Martin (also father to actor Emilio Estevez) drank his way through the seminal Francis Ford Coppola movie, *Apocalypse Now*, to be followed by son, Charlie, starring in *Platoon*, only seven years later, there was likely to be a some fallout. Charlie's continued wild behaviour - despite his much parodied catchphrase, "Winning!" - is essentially a battle of wills with his father, to be treated as more than a 12-year-old. Go figure.



### George H. W. Bush (Senior) & George W. Bush (Junior)

Oliver Stone immortalised this very special relationship in his movie *W*. More than just a chronicle of one man's presidency, the biopic provides an insight into a fiercely competitive father and son relationship - with junior usurping his father's political career, namely in length and wars fought. Stand back - fisticuffs do fly.

### Cesare & Paolo Maldini

This football-loving Italian father-son pairing is the epitome of 'cool'. Both played for the same club, Milan, scooped European footballing success, and went on to represent their country. And all without a hint of friction.



### Brendan & Domhnall Gleeson

There's no fuss about the Gleesons. Intelligent, understated, and damn funny at the drop of a hat. Brendan may have opened the stage door but his son Domhnall certainly walked through with his own talent. Both appeared in *Harry Potter*, so you can imagine the banter they had over a pint afterwards. "Yes, Dad, or should I say Alastor Mad Eye Moody?"



### The North Korean Kims

Kim Jong-il was the Supreme Leader of North Korea for most of 20 years, so there may not have been a whole lot of back-chat at the kitchen table in the Kim house. Not yet 30, Kim Jong-un now finds himself stepping into his late father's shoes. His grandfather founded the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, so Kim Jong-un is pretty much destined for cult personality status. Like it or not.

alright. Sometimes – by principle – he'd make me wash the hotel windows when it was stormy. And I'd be, 'Why are you making me do this? In two hours they're gonna be dirty again.' It was just to show me life isn't easy. If I wanted something I had to work hard. And go and get it."

Nicolas turned professional at the end of 2004, with French team Cofidis, and became one of the youngest Pro-Tour racers at just 20 years of age. Soon, his ability in the long tours would emerge. And now the races that extend over three weeks are his forte.

So, is it a case of like father, like son for the Roches? "I'm not sure," Nicolas reflects. "On some aspects I'd be more meticulous. Like preparation and diet. But I think Dad was a better tactician. He's won about 80 races and I've only won 6. So, there's a performance gap in there."

He adds: "But what we do have in common is that both of us feel good on the bike. Even if I had a normal job. I'd still cycle. Of a Sunday, I'd take the bike. Go for a spin with the lads. Have a coffee and come home. The two of us are like that. We have that same thing. That same heart for the bike."

But what gets the old man's attention? "He's a hard man to impress," Nicolas laughs. "I just do my thing. But when he says, 'Good job, Nico' – it matters. Because those are rare days. We don't talk two hours about it. Just a quick text. It makes me happy, and shows him we're not fighting or trying to compete."

So, how close is the father-son relationship? "We're not on the phone everyday. Usually it's once a week or every ten days," says Nicolas. "But it can also be three times a day if we need to – but not necessarily to do with cycling. If Dad's got something on his mind, he'll just call."

Given his father's legendary status on the cycling circuit, one might expect some dimming of the limelight, especially come race time. Not so. Nicolas reveals, wryly: "Every year, at the world championships, he rents a camper van with my grandparents. And they go and stay for a couple of days somewhere along the course. Barbecuing. And meeting the fans. There's no Stephen Roche, the VIP."

For Nicolas, the dream remains the same. "If I had to choose a win, it would have to be the Tour de France," he admits. "I know each year I'm getting better. But the years are flying. It's my eighth year as a pro. I'm aware that it's now or never. Cadel Evans won it at the age of 34. But Contador won it at 25. I'm still young. Yet 30 isn't too far away."

He concedes that if he were to find himself in the shake-up in a grand tour, his Dad would be called. But what would the veteran say? "He'd tell me, 'Nico, if you have an opportunity, attack. Even if it's just to show that you're there. And not just following. Make your mark.' – I imagine," says Nicolas.

Words any father would be proud to utter to a son who's very much his own man. **TM**