

# Texts & Student Exercises:

## Alain Schifres

### A. Read the following text entitled "On the correct usage of Mr. Poulidor."

"On the correct usage of Mr. Poulidor"

Let's put first things first. The Tour gave to France the concept of general classification. A summons worthy of the nation, according to my ice cream vendor. He wasn't wrong: without general classification, there wouldn't have been a first in the general classification. And, without a first, there wouldn't have been a second. Which is where reasoning confirms ancient intuition: the Tour is but a long detour to give its country its cherished Poulidor. The classic national example of a worthy winner. Victim: 1. – of a luck that is against him; 2. – of himself, which is no less.

The foreigner will remember that 1. – Poulidor, plural Poulidors, is today a flowery way of saying "second" (the television speaks of "2 Poulidors" for 2 soccer teams ranked second in the championship); 2. – in spite of which, one does not say "poulidorly" but "secondly".

Thanks to Poulidor, it's better to be second in France than first in the world. "It's better to be a good teammate than a bad leader" said one rider in 1975. All in all, what is a first? An overly gifted, overly trained rider who is overly sure of himself. An individual above the norm, lost in the country of Measure. A Martian. Simply put, a kind of American. His resistance stupefies medicine. The university covets his body. The first is a monster. He lives cut off from humankind. Unfamiliar with weakness, he doesn't know pleasure. Sexual perversion isn't surprising in his kind. He has complicated loves and spectacular accidents. Extravagant illnesses. He knows tragic and premature endings, all without having known the happy retirement that the peleton aspires to. The hyper-champion soon leaves a world where his children are kidnapped and his bank accounts are in Switzerland.

No, I wouldn't want to be first in this country. At best, he's a secret and tormented being who doesn't laugh at funny stories. Yet there are situations in which it is excusable to be first:

a. If he's a good guy, if he has team spirit, but it's pretty rare: Platini;

b. If he stays simple and likes our friend soccer: Tapie. But it's a fragile grace because Tapie won stages in an extravagant manner. Which, in the Tour as in life, isn't done. He'll never have that sheen that comes from old money. Patient corruption. That tasty and noble rot that makes you appreciated in the countryside like a good Roquefort.

c. If he falters: Napoléon at Sainte-Hélène, Eddy Merckxx in the mountains. The blessed day where he ate crow. It was in 1975. Perforated sinuses, broken jaw: "Now, the people can love him. The cannibal has become a man like the others."

d. If the first is a former first: he only did it once and this absence of recurrence allows him to be surrounded by general esteem. His past assures him some small private incomes. He has a café, he owns a few dry cleaners. He recorded a single. He's a consultant somewhere.

e. If the first is a former second: acquired by effort and patience, like with normal people, the victory of a former second is saluted like a triumph. It's Mimoun, the challenger of Zatopek; Mitterand, challenger of everyone.

### **Comprehension Questions:**

1. According to Schifres, the name Poulidor has entered into the French language. What is its meaning ?
2. Schifres writes that thanks to Poulidor, it's preferable to be second in France than first in the world. Explain what he means.
3. How does the author characterize a « first »? What adjectives does he associate with this person? Can you think of any famous athletes who fall into this category?
4. According to the author, it is possible to be admired by the people if the first has certain qualities or has experienced certain events. What are these? Can you think of famous people who fit into these categories?

**B. Read the following text entitled, "Elegy to the Second."**

"Elegy to the Second"

Without having all these trump cards in hand, the first falls into excessiveness. Which would seem pretty normal in an excessive personality. "He liked what was impossible," said Poulidor of Anquetil. "I didn't have that."

While the second is what's best in man. The first being an extraterrestrial, the second is a kind of front man. "One didn't arrive second behind Zatopek," explains Mimoun. "One arrived first behind Zatopek." Maurice Diot, second behind Fausto Coppi: "I won Paris-Roubaix. Coppi was above the contest". In this, the second is a person who reassures the third: the first being, in some ways, eliminated for excess of brio, the third is the second of normal people and leaves his place to the fourth. So the second assures the advancement of everyone and the promotion of the peleton. The obscure ones rise in ranking. The last riders are re-classed. The second fulfills a social mission.

The second shares our doubts and our weaknesses. He knows our reversals of fortune and our love chagrin. He has the tact of acting as if he were anyone. He is the public. We call him "Poupou". But Anquetil? "An-an" is unpronounceable. In a country of double syllabled nicknames, this was a handicap from the beginning. The sign of certain death. Whereas with Poupou, one wanted to kiss him. To buy him drinks. One was "poulidorien" like one was French. The first symbolizes individual success. The second shows that he is a successful individual. The efforts of the first are inhuman. Superhuman, those of the second. The first pulls himself up to the height of his ambitions. The second chooses objectives for himself that are at his level.

The first wants others at his feet: he doesn't elicit admiration; he forces it. He has his valets. Whereas the second has his team members and his faithful. And it was the entire country of France that supported Poupou. Respected for what he is, the second persists in his being. He doesn't advance or back down. He lasts. And we speak of an "eternal Poulidor" to mean that it isn't about a ranking but a destiny. "I was content with my popularity," says Poulidor, "I didn't need to win to be loved by the people." In this system, it's better to be a little guy at home than a big one in the kingdom of giants: "He would win, but the public preferred me. I think that Anquetil was jealous of me."

**Comprehension questions:**

1. In the second paragraph, Schifres explains that the second fulfills a social mission. How does his ranking contribute to the completion of this mission ?
2. Why does Schifres say that « the second is the people » ? Give at least 3 examples

**Going Further:**

1. Comment on the style of Schifres' two essays. What is the overall tone of his analysis? Respond by giving several precise examples from the text.
2. In his first essay, Schifres compares the first to an American. Why does he make this analogy? Do you agree or disagree? Explain your answer.