



# RYAN TUBRIDY

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# STEPHEN ROCHE: I OWE MY EX €300K

Cycling legend accepts French court decision against him but feels 'no moral compulsion' to pay

**CYCLING** legend Stephen Roche said he will refuse to pay a €300,000 debt to his former lover despite a French court ruling against him.

News of the debt, which Mr Roche claims he feels no moral compulsion to pay, comes as authorities in Spain continue to pursue him for hundreds

By **Michael O'Farrell**

INVESTIGATIONS EDITOR

of thousands of euro owed to creditors there.

Speaking to the Irish Mail on Sunday this weekend, the 1987 Tour de France winner acknowledged his former

partner, French citizen Sophie Desobry, won a court action against him.

The case involved a claim by Ms Desobry that she had contributed €300,000 towards the Antibes villa the couple shared for the 10 years

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## SYDNEY ATTACK

# Dying mother's final act of love

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# 'I do owe my ex ... but I am not paying her, says

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that they were together. In the wake of his financial troubles in Spain, Mr Roche's French bankers called in their loan on his French Riviera villa, which was worth in excess of €1 million.

As a result, Mr Roche said he was forced to sell the property. He has also lost a wellness guesthouse business he was running on the shores of Lake Balaton in Hungary.

However, his financial troubles deepened as Ms Desobry took court action to recover the funds she had contributed to the villa.

Speaking to the MoS, Ms Desobry confirmed her case against her former partner had been successful.

'Yes, and I think one day he will refund me - j'espère [I hope],' she said.

'He has to refund me because I paid a part of the house in Antibes. He doesn't work and it's difficult for me to speak about this because he has to refund me a lot of money.'

Nevertheless, Ms Desobry said she still loved Mr Roche.

'It's very difficult for me because I love Stephen, always,' she said.

'I want to say Stephen is a very good person. It's not necessary to break him.'

Mr Roche acknowledged the outcome of Ms Desobry's case against him.

## 'I paid a part of the house in Antibes'

'I acknowledge it's there, OK, but I don't believe I owe it at all because it came from a goodwill gesture.'

'I just have to kind of take it on the head and see what happens down the road. But I don't really believe I owe her any money because I did so much for her... and her family and everything else,' he added.

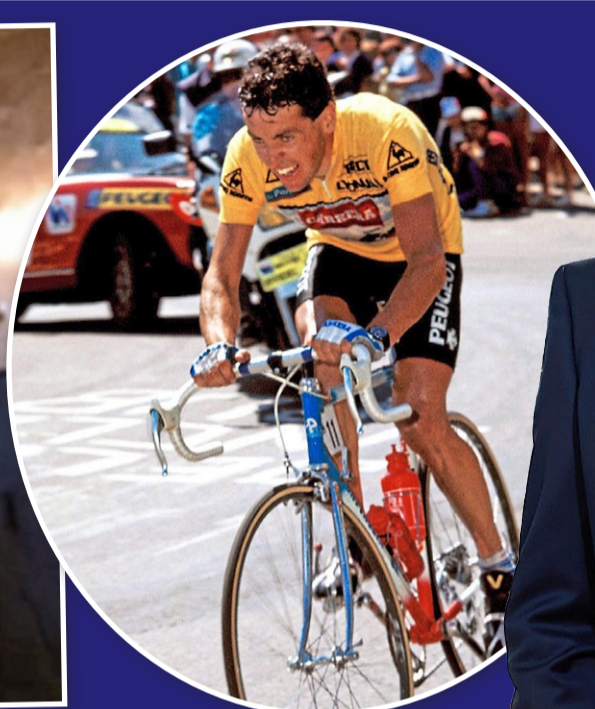
Mr Roche's current wife, Hungarian citizen Csilla Roche-Henschl, also denied any money was due to Ms Desobry.

'You have to choose who you believe,' she told the MoS. 'I don't think that Stephen owes any money to Sophie Desobry.'

'He signed the paper that if he dies, there will be some payment that they did on the house, but we don't owe any, I certainly don't owe anything. I certainly know that



**CASE:** Manuela Serrano Sanchez



**FINANCIAL WOES:** Stephen Roche's former partner Sophie Desobry, his wife Csilla Roche-Henschl and the Tour de France winner in 1987

Stephen does not owe her any money.'

Mr Roche said that, because he never married Ms Desobry, he had wanted to ensure she would not be excluded from his estate in the event of his death.

'She was depending on my heirs to give her some money, you know, so I didn't want her getting screwed. So I made a declaration and to make it legal I put it to the tax office that I had a debt,' he told the MoS.

'But, you know, in divorce nothing goes easy and she wanted to hold that against me to get her money back. So, long story short, I lost the case. Again.'

The 'again' refers to his loss in a culpable bankruptcy case taken against Mr Roche by the Spanish authorities when his Mallorca cycling tourism business collapsed in 2019.

In 2022, Mr Roche was ordered to repay €750,000 after a Spanish court found he negligently bankrupted his Marbella firm and plundered its assets to finance a luxury lifestyle.

The damning civil court ruling found Mr Roche

deliberately and consciously stripped the assets from his cycling holiday firm rather than repay creditors before disappearing from Marbella in 2017.

As a result of the ruling, Mr Roche was banned from acting as a company director in Spain for seven years.

According to the 2022 ruling, Mr Roche's conduct in 'generating and aggravating' the insolvency of his firm was 'malicious or gravely negligent'.

'Mr Roche was perfectly conscious of its debt situation,' the judge said.

'And instead of adopting measures to avoid financing the company, or entering into voluntary insolvency, he continued to loot the company accounts for his own private use when there was a minimum amount of income in them.'

The Palma-based judge detailed the Irish cycling hero's 'sumptuous expenditure' using company money to fund his personal lifestyle.

'Mr Roche's sumptuous expenditure on things like golf, apartment rentals, hotels in Switzerland and Hungary, restaurants, clothes stores and fashion houses like Loewe evidence a life of luxury and spending while his creditors weren't paid.'

The judge said these creditors included hotels that provided accommodation and meals to Mr Roche's clients who paid his firm for cycling holidays.

Mr Roche appealed the Spanish ruling, and in February he succeeded in having the seven-year directorship ban reduced to two.

He also succeeded in having the amount he owes reduced to only those monies taken out of the business in the two years before it collapsed.

However, the appeal ruling upheld the original finding that the bankruptcy had been culpable.

'In this case, the insolvency has been declared culpable because of the absence of accounts, the breach of duty in asking for the company to be placed in administration and the asset-stripping that occurred in terms of the unjustified use of company money. We share those

## 'I had some issues and now I have to clean it up'

arguments,' the appeal judges stated, adding they found no evidence to justify the expenditure of cash taken from the company.

This week, the Spanish administrator responsible for the case, Manuela Serrano Sanchez, told the MoS: 'Now we are trying to look for money or assets, but it is difficult.'

Ms Serrano Sanchez, who works for PWC in Madrid, said she would seek to register judgements against Mr Roche's assets in other European countries.

She said: 'I will try to find out how can I get the money and the assets of the business.'

'I am very interested in doing it because here in Spain we are very serious with the behaviour of this

man in the trials, in the proceedings, before the proceedings.

'A lot of creditors trusted him, and they are frustrated. They are angry because they are not going to recover any debt because there is no money in any bank account. There are no assets. There is no possibility for recovery.'

'The only possibility they have is that I find assets outside Spain,' Ms Serrano Sanchez said.

'Once I find assets, I can request enforcement if the assets that I find in any other country - especially in Europe.'

Ms Serrano Sanchez said that, if Mr Roche 'came back to Spain and he moved any money or asset he would be absolutely be under our control'.

Asked if she had a message for Mr Roche, she added: 'Pay us. I don't want to say anything regarding him except that he pay all the money he owes to the creditors.'

Mr Roche said he was 'quite pleased with the outcome' of the appeal.

In particular, he pointed out that allegations of fraud involving a company van had been dismissed.

'I felt personally relieved a little bit because, OK, I screwed up, but I didn't do anything purposefully to destroy anybody. Things happen, you know, and I lost control of it,' he said.

'I'm morally over it now because I don't feel people are looking at it the same way. People



# partner €300k'

## broke cycling star Stephen Roche



**'I play the EuroMillions hoping for a windfall'**

STEPHEN ROCHE is fed up with the negative publicity that has followed him since the Irish Mail on Sunday first revealed his financial problems with the Spanish authorities five years ago.

Now he needs a windfall from somewhere to see him clear for sure.

'You need to find the guts of a million quid somewhere,' I tell him when he calls from France on his wife's mobile.

'Yeah well,' he sighs. 'I play the EuroMillions every Friday night, you know.'

Mr Roche said news stories of his culpable bankruptcy in Spain have been devastating for him.

'The repercussions of it have been totally enormous. You can't imagine the damage it did to me financially, emotionally and everything else, you know.'

He has lost contracts. 'I pleaded, got on my knees... to get back into Tour de France,' he said before adding that he lost the gig because the organisers were concerned about possible negative publicity relating to his Spanish appeal.

He has also lost his prized French Riviera villa.

'Losing my house, you cannot imagine how devastating that was,' he said. 'My whole pension was based on that house. It was two big apartments. I was living in one. The other was rented out - Airbnb €40,000 a year - so I had potentially €80,000 a year from

renting it plus the upturn on the sale in [a few] years' time. And the banks basically stole it from me.'

By Michael O'Farrell

In fact, the banks, after becoming aware of the cycling legend's problems in Spain, recalled their loan on the home. As a result, he was forced to sell quickly to repay the borrowings.

'When you got the loan your company was in Mallorca, you had this, you had that,' he said the banks told him. 'Everything was positive. Now everything is negative, and everyone wants your assets so we're very sorry, we can't renew your loan. We're recalling the loan.'

A luxury wellness guesthouse business on the shores of Lake Balaton has also gone.

Funded by friends as an investment, a combination of the pandemic, electricity costs and rising interest rates put an end to the enterprise.

'Basically, my investor guy was starting to get a bit impatient because he couldn't see any exit, so we had to, kind of, let it go, you know.'

Almost gone too, it appears, is his share in a development site at St Tropez he had previously believed could repay his debts.

'It was my big hope and my big disillusion, you know. It was all promising, promising, promising, and if that had have come through everything would have been great,' he said.

'But the land never got the planning permission, so it never got sold and I haven't got my money either.'

Even his memorabilia has gone missing, misappropriated, he claims, by others.

'My Tour de France-winning bike, my Tour of Italy-winning jersey, my World Championship gold medal... I cannot find or get anybody to tell me where the memorabilia is.'

Mr Roche believes he could have asked companies such as Pepsi or Kellogg's to 'sponsor

me for €200,000 or €300,000' in exchange for the memorabilia.

Or he said he could offer it to 'a potential saviour' who could help to repay his debts.

He told the MoS: 'That memorabilia could have helped me to generate income... but I haven't been able to do it, because I haven't got the material.'

Recently, Mr Roche said he has been working with a contact on 'commission-based deals using my network here in France' to assist with planning permission.

He said the small retainer he earns from this 'pays for apartments or my Airbnb, wherever I'm staying, you know'.

But this enterprise also has its problems. 'I'm realising now it's much more complicated than I thought,' he admits.

'It's all very well knowing the mayor and knowing the syndicates and everything else but at the same time they're looking over their shoulders now. You can't just, kind of, because you know somebody, look for favouritism for planning and everything else.'

He said he now realises his

main source of 'potential earnings' will be 'doing cycling camps again or consulting either in Spain or somewhere else where I've got a few contacts'.

One such camp he ran in Antibes and Nice last year to celebrate the 35th anniversary of his triple crown victories in the Tour de France, Giro d'Italia and the World Road Race Championship, charged participants almost €2,000 for a five-day trip, excluding flights.

Mr Roche said the event was a success, as well as a follow-up camp. But they were not successful enough to earn enough to pay back any debts.

'No, when I say successful, I didn't lose money,' he said. 'The budget was like 50 grand, I spent 49.'

As he puts it, Mr Roche needs to 'get around the corner so I can I can work properly'.

And one of Ireland's greatest sporting legends doesn't even have a place to call home.

'At the moment I have no fixed address. I'm Airbnb-ing it and what-have-you, because I haven't got sufficient documents for long-term rentals or anything else.'



**PRIZED VILLA:** Roche's former home in Antibes on the French Riviera



**MONEY TRAIL:** Our exclusive report on Mr Roche in May 2022

do f\*\*\* up and it doesn't make them criminals. I made mistakes, I had some issues and now I have to kind of clean it up, you know,' he added. 'I did

lose a lot of credibility. And people are kind of sitting on the fence, waiting to see my reactions and what I do and how I pick the pieces up.'

Mr Roche also said he is willing to negotiate with Ms Serrano Sanchez and that his lawyers had reached out to her.

'The only reason that's held up is because they asked me for an upfront sum of money, which I haven't got to help finance the negotiations. But I'm hoping to get that together where we can follow up and negotiate,' he said. Mr Roche said he has backers who will help fund a negotiated deal.

'I know approximately what I can do,' Mr Roche continued.

'It's about them coming back with an official number.

'And when they come back with an official number, within 48 hours I'll have the yes or no, you know.'

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