



Each year, more and more cyclists are setting aside weekend touring to go



RACING

In Belgium, the name Eddy Merckx means the same thing Muhammad Ali means to American sports fans — The Greatest.

In Italy, it's Giomonde. In France, it's Ancquetil.

All names of former professional bicycle racers, they tower as monuments in Europe, a continent where bicycle racing enjoys a popularity similar to baseball in America.

If the recent surge of nationwide interest in bicycling is an indication, the sport soon may attract similar attention in the United States.

While the number of American amateur bike racers has remained stable over the past five years — about 10,000 — the number of spectators has shown a dramatic increase, especially on the East Coast and in Southern California.

At last year's "Apple Lap," a closed circuit lap-race in New York City, crowds rivaling most

pro football audiences jammed the 12-block course to see some of the country's best cycling talent compete for \$100,000 in prizes.

During the "Colorado Coors Classic" last summer, race officials estimated nearly a million people watched at least one of the 12 races during the week-long event.

The Coors Classic, now the biggest bike race in the United States and one of the largest amateur races in the world, was started in 1975 as a promotional event by a Boulder, Colo., tea company. Then called the "Red Zinger Bicycle Classic," it expanded into an international event with teams from Holland, Sweden, Spain and Colombia competing.

Last year, Coors Brewing Co. bought the rights to the race and changed the name.

Crowds such as those at the Coors Classic are not unusual on the European racing scene.

As many as 10 times that number annually watch the Tour de France, the longest, richest

and most grueling professional race in the history of the sport.

Most European fans keep themselves glued to the TV during this two-week stage race, much like their American counterparts during the World Series. But others numbering in the hundreds of thousands either line the streets of towns the racers pass through or camp out near one of the several mountain passes the racers climb.

Ironically, bicycle racing originated in the United States. During the early 1900s it was the country's most popular sport.

The advent of the automobile, coupled with a crackdown on illicit gambling that was the sport's mainstay in its waning years, caused bicycle racing to fade quickly into obscurity in the United States.

In Europe, however, the sport caught on and continued to grow. Since then, only soccer has garnered more fans.

Although Europeans still dominate professional racing, a new breed of cyclists has risen to the top of the amateur circuit.

These are the scientifically trained and systematically developed products of East Germany and the Soviet Union. According to an article in Velo-News, an American bicycle racing monthly, government-sponsored cyclists do little else than train and compete in bicycle races.

Raised as athletes, each cyclist enters a special sports school and devotes his time to bicycle racing.

The program has obviously paid off. During the 1980 Olympics, the top two places of every cycling event was won by either an East German or a Russian.

While the Soviet bloc countries have been creating a stir, American amateurs rarely are considered serious competition in international cycling events.

After a particularly embarrassing

performance by the Americans during the William Tell stage race in Switzerland, the race promoter was asked by a local reporter why he bothered to invite the U.S. team to such a prestigious race.

"They are not very good riders," the promoter conceded, "but they are blond and handsome" and attract larger crowds.

Recently, however, Americans have been attracting other than a cosmetic interest in international bike racing, especially in women's events.

Beth Heiden, sister of five-time gold medalist speed skater Eric Heiden and a bronze-medal skater herself, won the 1980 women's world championships in Switzerland. Sue Novarra, a track cyclist, won a gold medal in the sprint championships.

The increased popularity of international women's cycling competition caused the International Olympic Committee to create

women's cycling for the 1984 Olympics.

But while U.S. athletes are beginning to attract attention in cycling, American cycling was dealt a severe setback when the United States Olympic Committee voted to boycott the 1980 Olympics.

In 1979, 18-year-old Greg LaMonde, a cyclist from Nevada, won a gold medal at the Junior World Championships, the first for an American.

LaMonde was favored to win a medal had he competed in the 1980 Olympics. The closest an American has come to an Olympic medal in recent years was sixth place by Californian George Mount in 1976.

Speculation abounded on the publicity an Olympic medal might bring the sport. A victory by LaMonde could have meant the same instant popularity for bike racing as Frank Shorter's marathon victory did for running.

Instead of remaining an amateur to try for another chance in 1984, however, LaMonde

signed a contract to race for a prestigious French professional team, an opportunity that few American cyclists have been offered.

Whatever lost publicity might be blamed on the Olympic boycott was made up following the success of the motion picture "Breaking Away." The movie, based on a story about a young bicycle racer, showed several well-photographed scenes of bike races, and apparently has been the inspiration behind a number of beginning bike racers.

Because of the category system designed by the United States Cycling Federation which controls American racing, people of any age, sex and ability always compete against others in their skill level.

The USCF has one message for anyone attracted by the sport — enter a race.

By Harry Esteve
Photos by Tom Bingham
and Damon Phinney

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