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THE EARLY DAYS OF ROAD RACING

Dirty Ricks, Thunderflashes, missing arrows and spiked drinks!

It is now some 50 years since I first came into cycling. To celebrate those fifty years I will try to describe what racing used to be like and to convey something of the atmosphere at the time and the obstacles which every road racer had to overcome

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In early 1948 I was 15 and about to leave college and start work. At the time I was living in Brighton and I was an ice hockey fanatic. My sporting heroes were Brighton Tigers. I'd had a sheltered childhood as I had nearly lost a leg due to osteomyelitis but now I aimed to get fit and I had just bought my first bike, a Hercules Kestrel, which I used on exhausting trips to such faraway and exotic places as Falmer, Lewes and Ditchling, which I could only find using a compass and an old map I had managed to acquire. It was only a few years since the end of the war and maps were only just beginning to appear in the shops.

One day during 1948 I happened to see a poster advertising the start of the six-day Brighton to Glasgow cycle race on Brighton's Madiera Drive. I went to take a look and I was fascinated by the atmosphere. The riders, with their cotton caps, colourful jerseys and spare tyres knotted round their shoulders, looking supremely fit. There weren't many official cars but there was a loudspeaker van and masseurs were busy massaging the riders, mechanics were fiddling with strange gears, such as the Osgear and so on. There was a huge cheer as the Mayor lowered the Union Jack and the riders sprinted away along the seafront. I was completely hooked there and then on this Continental sport!

I met some other cyclists during my rides and I took their advice and turned up at the old Brighton Labour Party HQ in London Road to enquire about joining the Brighton Clarion which was affiliated to the National Clarion. The driving force behind the Brighton Clarion was Wally Newman, a prominent local councillor, who led the local club runs. Wally signed me up and I was given a copy of the National Clarion's rules. These included advice on how to recognise other Clarion members. On seeing another club rider you had to shout 'Boots' at him or her and if they were Clarion members they would reply 'Spurs'. But the only riders who responded were riders I knew anyway and I came to realise that shouting 'Boots' at other riders was not a good idea. They might have thought I was shouting 'Boo' and I could have ended up at the funny farm so I soon gave up the practice.

After a couple of months I was persuaded to enter the Clarion's club 25. I knew nothing of cycling politics then but the Brighton Clarion was a

National Cyclists Union club, although most members adopted the British League of Racing Cyclists dress code and wore berets, sunglasses and trousers elasticated just below the knee. A string of onions round the neck would have completed the fetching ensemble! By contrast the typical NCU riders wore plus fours, woolen sweaters and carried their kit in large saddlebags falling over their back wheels. I remember the late Allen Packett of the Brighton Mitre producing a spare chainwheel from his saddlebag one evening after he had chain trouble!

Anyway, this club 25 began at 6.00am from the bottom of Dale Hill on the main London Road, not that there was any traffic to worry about. I was sent off first, which concerned me as I had no idea where the course went. I finished in a state of complete exhaustion in 1hr.25m. Everyone overtook me and as I lay on the grass the officials took one look at my face, which had apparently turned blue and from then on I was known as 'Blue Boy'. It stuck with me throughout my cycling career. Having read a few cycling articles in the meantime, I approached 1949 with more confidence and after having devoured a whole packet of glucose tablets I rode my second 25 and crossed the line in 1hr 18m. Heady days indeed. Then in 1950 I joined Brighton Excelsior, a more serious racing club and my 25 time came down to 1hr 9m 34s, in a Prestonville Nomads event and I was third in a hilly event. A few years later I came down to 1hr 2m 15s, a respectable time when only a few riders were beating the hour. I had also learned an important lesson, which was that I really wasn't cut out for time trialling, at least not on flat courses. It wasn't that I lacked the speed but I was unable to motivate myself. I only came to life when another rider passed me, such as Brighton's 'Silver Ghost' Arthur Linington. Yet when I went on training runs and could see other riders I could not only stay with them but often drop them, even those who were easily beating me in TTs. One day I was out training and I met some riders from the Brighton Velo, a BLRC club. One of them, Eric Clark, who now lives in Crawley, is still racing in veteran TTs. Their club TTs went up hills such as Ditchling Beacon, handcross and Devils Dyke. I found I enjoyed these events far more and my performances improved. As a result I made a fateful decision and joined the Velo. I began to learn about how to train properly. I bought a decent bike and from now on racing was to become a serious business.

CYCLING WARS

I will now explain what all the hostility between the BLRC and the NCU/RTTC was about. In 1942, six years before I took up the sport, the NCU and the RTTC were bitterly opposed to bunched racing on the open road. A group of enthusiasts defied them to promote the first open road race from Llangollen to Wolverhampton. The CCU, with RTTC approval, suspended all those who had taken part and as a result of this, the British League of Racing Cyclists was born. For years there was intense rivalry between the BLRC on one hand and the NCU and RTTC on the other. Did I say intense? It was red hot!

The RTTC, meanwhile, followed a set of rules that present-day time-triallists would find bizarre. All start sheets were 'Private & Confidential'. Nobody was allowed to divulge where TT's took place, in the ludicrous belief that if the public knew, they would be lining the streets to watch events at 6am! I was actually called to account by the Sussex CA for mentioning in one of my early newspaper reports that a rider had punctured at 'Handcross'. To compete in RTTC events you had to wear 'inconspicuous clothing' consisting of black socks, black jerseys and black shorts. Some riders even wore hairnets. Today, they would probably be detained as potential terrorists! Yes, it may seem absurd now, but such attitudes helped to set back British cycling for many years. Had the RTTC concentrated on TT's and left the BLRC to run road racing and the NCU had just run track racing then the sport would have thrived.

RIVALRY

Despite such outdated attitudes as outlined above, it was a great time to be a racing cyclist. The intense rivalry even helped to spur the BLRC and the NCU to greater things. Eventually the NCU were forced to run some road races themselves. I took part in the Brighton Velo's two-day race which started on Madeira Drive and headed east, while on the other side of the road, starting at the same time, the NCU's two-day to Folkestone and back was starting! The rival traders traded insults before setting off. Training runs then were more like road races with large numbers of riders taking part. The Velo's riders used to hide behind some trees at Patcham and wait for the NCU clubs to pass, then the Velo riders jumped on their bikes and sprinted past shouting 'Up the League!' On Tuesday evenings many riders would end up at The Forge cafe at Sayers Common around 9pm. The cafe would have about 50 riders there and then everyone would gather outside for a mass

'burn-up' back to Preston Park. A car passed me one evening and the passenger stuck two fingers out of the window. I gave a two-fingered salute back, but it turned out to be an unmarked police car. The passenger shouted 'two abreast, you lot, two abreast!'

DIRTY TRICKS

In 1951 the BLRC got the Daily Express to sponsor the first Tour of Britain. In 1952 the BLRC sent a team to the Warsaw-Berlin-Prague race and supplied the winner in Ian Steel and also won the team prize. A BLRC team went on to win the Tour of Mexico and Brian Robinson won a stage of the Tour de France. The BLRC's membership increased by 24% and it was promoting over 1,000 races a year. The BLRC's riders still had to put up with no end of dirty tricks, however. There were reports of tin tacks strewn on the road, direction arrows being turned round or torn down, bogus cancellation notices and so on. In one race at Cowfold, I left my bike outside the HQ for a couple of minutes and during the race found my water bottle had been spiked with salt. In one race at Winchester, a Velo team even had thunderflashes thrown at them!

RACING SUCCESS AT LAST

Soon after I had joined Brighton Velo in April 1952, I was advised to enter the first available road race, which just happened to be the Southern Section BLRC (Sussex) road race championship. The 62 mile race took place over three laps of a Newark-Maresfield-Nutley-Wych Cross-Chailey circuit. As it was my first ever bunched race and first race over 25 miles I naturally asked some of the old hands for some advice regarding tactics. I was warned to watch out for certain star riders. I was told 'they will wait until everyone's tired and then they will attack on the hills and just ride away from everyone'. So I was pleased and rather surprised to still find myself in the leading bunch after the first tough climb up Wych Cross. Second time up, I swear in all innocence, I asked a team mate, Dave Penfold, when the stars would be launching an attack. 'They already are', he gasped, and then promptly dropped off the back of the bunch! During the final lap I went to the front on Wych Cross and at the top found myself alone in the lead. I decided to press on to win the senior title by 7m45s. Needless to say I was well pleased. I soon had my first category racing licence and found myself riding in races alongside riders such as Ian Steel and Dave Bedwell, who was one of the first British road race winners abroad, taking the 'Grand Prix l'Humanite'. In 1953 I won the 'Sussex Roadman Trophy' held on a league basis and I finished second in the

17

the Southern BLRC championship road race. The winner was Brighton Velo's Derek Cover, who like me had started cycling as a Brighton Clarion member.

In 1954 I was second again in the BLRC championship and when the Sussex NCU ran their version of the Sussex road race championship in September I decided to take out a NCU licence and have a go. Four of us broke away last time up Wych Cross and in the sprint finish at Newick I won the sprint by a length. The NCU supporters on one side of the road were silent and motionless while the BLRC supporters opposite were leaping around and ecstatic! Several NCU riders sportingly congratulated me but one NCU official raved "fancy letting that BLRC bastard win". I went on to enjoy my racing for another six years

although a training accident in 1956, when I was hit from behind by a learner motor-cyclist and injured my back, meant I never fully realised my potential. I still picked up some useful placings, including a third in the Tour of Ashdown Forest, third in the Sussex criterium championship, seventh in the Isle of Wight Grand Prix round the Island, etc.

When I retired from racing in 1960 I stayed in the sport as a freelance reporter for several national magazines and local newspapers and of course, as editor of Chequered Flag for some twenty years to date. So although you may never have seen me on a bike, at least now you know I did do my bit in the past!

Brian Hutton



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