

CYCLE RACE THRILLS
... Tough and Exciting

CYCLE racing in Britain increases in popularity and national appeal year by year. But we cannot yet match the intensity of enthusiasm or interest shown in the sport on the Continent, which explains why Britain's best rider, Tommy Simpson, and other British riders have to live and train there.

In France over 40 million 'live' spectators watch the annual gruelling Tour de France. This classic cycle race has a sound claim to be regarded as the world's leading sporting occasion. I cannot think of any other sporting event with such a huge live audience.

How tough are Britain's racing cyclists? What is a long cycle race really like? Is it all that exciting to watch? These questions and many more I was able to answer myself after following the 1964 London-Holyhead Cycle Race, sponsored by Corona soft drinks and now in its fourth successive year. It is the world's longest unpaced single-day cycle race... 279 miles this year!

The London assembly point was a quiet hotel in Lancaster Gate. On Friday evening 42 riders in ten teams made their way to the hotel from all parts of Britain with their managers, most of them by train after a normal day's work. Between 8 p.m. and midnight the hotel seemed alive with cyclists carrying their precious hand-made ten-gear bikes up and down stairs and in and out of rooms as if they were brief cases. They cost anything from £70 to £100 each.

There was a temporary lull in the checking of kits and gears and machines around midnight; one unfortunate team of four riders from Yorkshire arrived an hour too late to enter for the race, since reserves had already been briefed and were sound asleep.

Did I say 'sleep'? The telephone started ringing in my room at 1.30 a.m. and continued to do so at ten-minute intervals until I showed up for breakfast about 3 a.m. An amazing sight confronted me. The room was packed with hard, lean cyclists in full war-paint, all devouring huge



HITCHEN leads . . . BURNS looks back

steaks crowned with eggs and tomatoes. They had eaten mounds of cereals before this! The steaks were followed by
PLEASE TURN OVERLEAF

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large plates of cold ham and tongue, acres of toast and gallons of milk or tea, or so it seemed. Pockets were stuffed with lumps of sugar. Water bottles oozed with mysterious mixtures of golden syrup, honey, glucose and patent foods. One bright young man carefully cut a spare steak into one-inch chunks and wrapped them up in a handkerchief.

I was following the race in a Triumph Vitesse driven by the expert Ken Ryall, who makes Ryall racing cycles at Hounslow; he was also the team-manager of the Ryall Raxar team of four riders. (Raxar is the trade name of a Belgian sports clothing firm). The six-cylinder Triumph with its superb 'getaway' is ideal for chasing crack cyclists who average 25 m.p.h and often touch speeds between 45 and 50 m.p.h. We packed lots of sandwiches and a large plastic jerrycan of water, and then edged our way between the Chief's Marshal's car and the 'sag wagon', which was a coach provided by Falcon Cycles for competitors who fell out of the race en route.

The long column of 42 cyclists, plus a convoy of cars, the sag wagon, an ambulance, and service vehicle, left Marble Arch promptly at 5 a.m. Surprising how many people were there at that time of the morning, but London never sleeps.

We kept 'in caravan' on the A5 as far as St. Albans (20 miles) and then the race really warmed up. Dunstable (32), Towcester (59), Kilsby (76) and Atherstone (101) soon followed, for conditions were good on this fine, warm summer's day. All the normal road hazards of traffic streams and lights, bridges, level crossings, temporary diversions, bottlenecks and so on are part of the routine to road racing cyclists. I was impressed by their all-round fitness and road sense, and the split-second thinking which saved many a spill. Food and drink (delicious Corona orange juice or tea) were taken on the wheel at three feeding stations—food in small bags hung round the neck

and drink in plastic bottles; both were thrown away later to be picked up as souvenirs by some of the many thousands of people who lined the route all day.

At Chirk (192 miles) we went ahead to watch the spectacular hill climb up Chirk Bank. These climbs are called *primes* and special prizes go to riders who get to the top first. A stoat shot across the road in some haste in front of us! Peter Ryalls (Woodrup-Ovaltine) won the Chirk *prime* by a wheel from Kevin Fairhead, Camberley.

On we sped through the green and blue Welsh hills—Llangollen (199), Corwen (209)—the riders touched 48 m.p.h down the long, winding hill into Bettws-y-Coed (221). The summer heat soon gave way to swirling rain clouds and mountain mist and the Nant Ffrancon pass with Tryfan on our left was its usual gloomy self. A fierce thunderstorm hit us at Bethesda (247) and the riders, now thinning out, obviously enjoyed this unexpected shower.

On to a fine reception at Bangor (252) where the traffic lights fortunately favoured the leading trio—Hitchen, Holmes and Mills—on over the Menai Bridge into the fair green ways and warm sunshine of Anglesey. Twenty-three miles of straight Roman road ahead—over the Cob at Valley into Holy Island, and then a fast, hard neck-and-neck sprint to the finishing line at Newry Beach, Holyhead. Albert Hitchen won by a second from his team mate, Billy Holmes, with Tony Mills only another second behind. Two seconds apart after 279 miles non-stop! The winner's time was 11 hours 47 minutes 6 seconds.

Altogether 27 riders finished the race in less than 12½ hours. They earned their baths and showers, and a dinner worth having—oxtail soup, salmon mayonnaise, roast turkey, pears and cream and lots of pudding as well!

Jack Cox

275 mile London-to-Holyhead Road Race

WON BY

1st Individual (Albert Hitchen) **2**nd Individual (Billy Holmes)
1st Team (John Perks: Bernard Burns: Billy Holmes: Albert Hitchen)

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Billy Holmes