

ORIGINS

Eddy and the Hour

In his first year as a professional, 1965, Eddy Merckx was asked the not unusual question for a neo-pro, "What are your principal ambitions?" His answer was immediate: "To win the Tour de France and set a new hour record."

Americans with any interest in cycling will recognize the Tour de France, but to mention the hour record in the same breath with the Tour may seem odd. How could an event lasting just sixty minutes possibly compare with one spanning three weeks and thousands of miles?

Think of the question another way. What is a rider's worth in terms of pure power? Strip away the guile required of a Tour winner, that wily knack of knowing

when to attack, when to call upon one's team, when to sprint for a finish and when to hold back, and what is left?

One way to force an answer is in a time trial, the "race of truth." Yet even here weaknesses can be masked. Jacques Anquetil, his era's master against the watch, was beaten in a 1960 Tour of Italy time trial by his opponent's suicidal descending skills. Lucien Van Impe, who won the Tour in 1986, did very well in time trials with a hill, but faded on the flats. Time trials on the road will always be bound to their time and place.

What is needed is a purely neutral territory, one that leaves the rider naked, with no place to hide behind peculiar attri-

**On October 25, 1972,
Eddy Merckx set a record
that still stands
as the apotheosis of
human effort.
*Owen Mulholland***



PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN PRATT/PURSUIT PHOTO

None of the parts on Merckx's bike was stock. The Campagnolo Record post was drilled in back and pierced radially below the seat collar.

butes or happenstance. In cycling there is only one such place, the velodrome, and only one event, the hour. The absence of wind, the regularity of terrain, and the depth of self-knowledge necessary to maintain a near-peak effort for sixty minutes have chopped through the ranks of great cyclists like a scythe through a field of summer hay. Of the thousands of professional cyclists of the last 98 years, only 19 have set a new standard for the hour. And that is why an insider such as Merckx appreciated this face of cycling. In 1965, only 15 had held the hour record. This was a very exclusive club, much more so than the list of Tour winners, and therefore a natural goal for Eddy.

Feeling his destiny in the hour record was natural for Merckx, but time became a great barrier. Year after year, he raced 200 times or more. He did so not just to devour his competitors, as his nickname, the "Cannibal," implied. He would have loved to spend more time at home, especially during the winters, but he found it impossible to resist the argument that if he didn't show up for the six-day races, attendance would be low and his less-famous colleagues would not be paid as well. Never has the sport seen a finer example of professional responsibility.

It wasn't until 1972 that Merckx decided to include the hour in his season's plans. His idea was to ease up on the number of races so he would have energy enough for intense preparation. In practice, though, he barely altered his full schedule. During the year, he won no less than fifty races, among them a fifth Milan-San Remo, a fourth Tour de France, and a third Tour of Italy.

During the Tour de France, he acquired a saddle sore that needed time off the bike, and so, in August, he began to seriously contemplate the hour. The "how" would be broken into two parts, physical and technical preparation. The other question was "where"?



Many riders care little about the machinery they use, but as in many things, Merckx was an exception. His attention to detail bordered on fanatical. It was he who designed his hour bikes, and some special road frames with similar geometry. In general, the frames were more upright and the saddle position more forward than typical of that period. Merckx's friend and sponsor, Ernesto Colnago, quickly translated Eddy's ideas



into several orange-painted custom machines. From mid-September on, Merckx used the road frames exclusively, explaining "I am, above all, a roadman. I shall attack the hour record as a roadman must. I must finish the season at the peak of my road form, for that is how I shall have the best chance of beating the hour record."

Indeed, in the first outing on his new bike, the Tour of Piedmont in Italy, Merckx intentionally attacked with almost fifty miles to go. This solo ride was done to test himself. Any reference to rivals was left far behind.

At the same time, however, the apparently simple question of location became more complex. In 1968, the Danish rider Ole Ritter explored the modern possibili-

ties of high altitude by setting a record of 48.654 km in Mexico City. (I say modern because W. W. Hamilton made the second-largest increase in distance covered during the hour in 1898 in Denver, Colorado.) That left Eddy torn between the traditional site of the Vigorelli Velodrome in Milan, Italy, and the obvious advantages of Mexico.

Vigorelli was attractive because it involved little travel, would allow direct comparison with all but two previous records going back to 1935, and would better satisfy the publicity demands of his Italian sponsors, notably Molteni sausages. But a trip to the Vigorelli on October 12 was disappointing. Days of rain had left the track saturated and unfit for riding.

Immediately Eddy began to think of Mexico. There were three principal reasons against such a trip and only one for it. First, he was well aware of Ferdinand Bracke's disastrous attempt in Mexico in 1969. Bracke had set the record in 1967, and this was his attempt to retake it from Ritter, but the thin air in Mexico City asphyxiated him. Eddy's solution was to ride a home trainer every day while

hooked up to an air mixture as thin as Mexico City's. Second, compared to the record itself, the publicity from the event meant nothing. Eddy was ultimately to pay over \$20,000 of his own money to fulfill his purist dream. The third objection, regarding comparisons to previous winners, would be answered by the one major asset of Mexico, the air's thinness. Eddy meant to set a record so inaccessible that no one could dispute its worthiness.

At last departure day came. Eddy and his retinue flew from Brussels to Mexico City via Montreal, a 13½-hour flight during which Eddy drank a couple of whiskeys and slept not at all. At one A.M., Mexico time, he was in bed, and eight hours later he took his first look at Olympic velodrome.

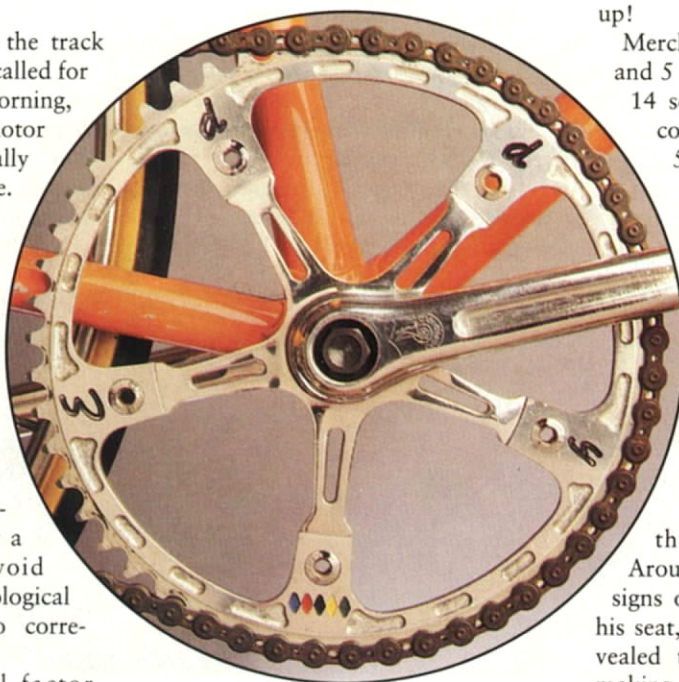
Merckx's obsession with weight extended to the dust caps, which he removed, the axles, which are hollow, and the nuts, which are undersize.

He showed no trace of fatigue. Indeed, after a few test laps he decided to gear up from his 52x15 to 52x14. (Only Jacques Anquetil had used a higher gear, 52x13, during his non-homologated attempt in 1967.) The Belgian felt so good he drew up a schedule for a preliminary ride to break records at 5, 10, and 20 kms.

Then disaster struck. A tropical deluge engulfed Mexico City that afternoon, leaving the track unrideable. So Eddy went to the Mexico City sports car circuit the next morning to train behind a derny. That afternoon the rains came and soaked the track once again.

Day three, Tuesday, found the track still unusable, but the forecast called for clearing weather. In the morning, Eddy did some laps at the motor circuit, and that evening finally got in some more track time. Jean Van Buggenhout, Eddy's manager, favored an evening attempt. Often the air was calm then, the track was at its driest (if it hadn't rained), and the humidity was up a few percentage points which would help offset the dry throat a rarefied atmosphere frequently imparts. On the other hand, the Molteni team physician, Dr. Cavalli, noted that a morning attempt would avoid pushing Merckx against his biological clock. Eight P.M. in Mexico corresponded to 3 A.M. back home.

Weather was the critical factor. Merckx decided to try the next morning, Wednesday, October 25, 1972. Furthermore, he gave up the idea of a special attempt at shorter distances. Rather, he decided to grab the 10 and 20 km records along the way. His friends were aghast. Even that great gambler, Anquetil, warned him about an overly rapid start that would leave him vulnerable to any letdown late in the ride. As sportsmen often do, Jacques spoke bluntly: "Don't kill yourself and blow up afterwards." But the thought of starting at express speed excited Eddy. "Excellent," he muttered more to himself than those present, after reviewing a chart equating each 5-km increment to time and speed, "I must suffer during the opening kilometers." Maybe he even dreamed of pushing the record



Precursor to Super Record? Campagnolo Record Crankset (below) had milled, relieved and polished arms; chainring's inner webs were removed.

At the last moment Windsor stickers were slapped on Eddy's otherwise unlabeled bike. A distracted Merckx saw this as an acceptable nod to his Mexican hosts (Windsor is a Mexican bike), but Colnago was infuriated.

At 8:56 exactly Eddy Merckx began his great ride. A bell was sounded each lap. If he were on schedule, he would cross the start line as it sounded. After the first two laps, Eddy was a quarter lap up! Giogi Albani, who had the job of standing where Merckx actually was when the bell was rung, had a hard time keeping up!

Merckx's first kilometer passed in 1:10 and 5 km in 5:55.7. Already Eddy was 14 seconds up on Ritter. Onlookers couldn't believe their eyes. A second 5 km in 5:58 obliterated Ritter's 10 km time by 5 seconds. Ritter's 20 km time was eclipsed by 11 seconds. And remember, Ritter had set his records on a special ride, separate from his hour attempt. Compared to Ritter's hour pace, Merckx was 35 seconds ahead at 20 km.

Albani urged Merckx to slow a bit, and he did, dropping to a 6:07 per 5-km pace for the next seven 5-km segments. Around km 35 Merckx began to show signs of being human. He fidgeted on his seat, and the grimace on his face revealed the superhuman effort he was making. There was never any question of his taking the record, however, only by how much. Far from fading, his last two kilometers were reeled off in 1:13 and 1:12. His final distance: 49.431 kilometers.

He could barely speak when he first dismounted. Pictures of the moment show his face a mask of pain. Quickly, though, Eddy regained his normal composure and was able to answer questions.

"Throughout this hour, the longest of my career, I never knew a moment of weakness, but the effort was never easy," he said. "It's not possible to compare the hour with a time trial on the road. Here it's not possible to ease up, to change gears or the rhythm. The hour record demands a total effort, permanent and in-

(Continued on page 81)

over 50 km.

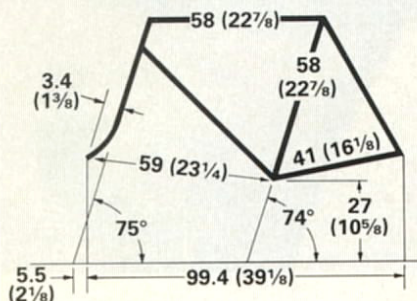
At five the next morning, Eddy was up and pounding on doors in the hotel—no fewer than 53 journalists accompanied him to Mexico. He breakfasted on toast spread with his favorite cheese brought from home, ham, and coffee. By 6:50 he was at the track and by 8:00 he had completed his warm-up and was ready to go. In that hour, over 2000 people, alerted by Radio Mexico, rushed to the track to witness this historic 60 minutes. Also watching were Belgian ex-king Leopold, Princess Liliane, and their daughters Esmeralda and Maria Christina. They eschewed the royal box for banking seats, "The better," Leopold explained, "to appreciate the ride."

(Continued from page 66)

tense. I will never try it again. There are those who told me that if I came here to Mexico City I wouldn't feel the pedals. I assure you, I could feel the pedals! Nevertheless, I don't regret this choice. I don't think I could ever improve on this record. Yet I am convinced that one day my record will be beaten. That is the law of the sport."

MERCKX HOUR RECORD

Size: 58 cm (center to center)



Total weight: 12 lbs, 1¹/₈ oz

Frame: Columbus special record tubing, specially cut pressed-steel lugs and Campagnolo forged dropouts, drilled chainstays, relieved BB shell; semi-sloping pressed-steel fork crown with round-section blades; custom aluminum headset

Rims: Fiamme Ergal, drilled gluing surface

Spokes: Zinc-plated steel, butted 15/16, radial front, cross two rear

Hubs: Campagnolo Record small flange, dust caps removed, hollow axles with downsized nuts

Tires: Clement Seta Pista

Crank: Campagnolo Record (Mexico prototype), 175-mm milled and polished arms, 52 Record chainring with cut-out webbing, custom titanium spindle

Rear cog: 14 tooth, alloy

Chain: Regina Record, custom drilled, 3/32 inside width (road dimension)

Saddle: Selle Royal Eddy Merckx

Seatpost: Campagnolo Record 27.2 x 180 mm, drilled below insertion into seat tube

Pedals: Campagnolo Record SL Strada with cut-down cages and titanium spindles, Christophe steel clips, Binda straps

Handlebars: Cinelli Campione del mondo, 64 drop, 40-cm wide, drilled along trailing edge; custom Pino Morroni titanium stem, 13.5 cm extension, engraved with "Pino" and "To Mr. Pedivella" ("Mr. Crankarm," Morroni's nickname for Merckx)

The Merckx hour record bike was displayed throughout 1990 at Il Vecchio, 140 Lakeside Ave., Seattle, WA 98122. Thanks to Il Vecchio's proprietor George Gibbs for making these photographs possible and for his technical assistance. Thanks also to Merckx's U.S. importer, Giorgio Andretta of Gita Sporting Goods, Ltd., for arranging the loan of the bike.

He reflected further and then wondered if possibly he could have done better if he hadn't started so quickly. If he entertained such thoughts seriously it wasn't for long. Merckx never attempted the hour again.

In 1984, Francesco Moser added over a kilometer to Eddy's distance. While Moser's performance had great athletic merit, it was also assisted by major advances in streamlining. Merckx felt that the record had been devalued, that personal fitness had not been the sole criterion for a new record. After all, he had

beaten Moser in every time trial in which they had met. His disgust was obvious when he said, "For the first time in the history of the hour record, a weaker man has beaten a stronger man."

The technical side of the sport can be controlled but not stopped. The search for more speed will continue by every means. But Eddy's record stands as the apotheosis of human effort on a bike. We may never again be able to judge a rider's ability as we did that of Eddy Merckx in 1972. We knew we had seen the finest cyclist in his finest hour. □