

The Home Forum®

EVER RIDDEN ON A VELODROME TRACK?

Kids try a new-old kind of bicycle race



RIDING A BIKE on a velodrome is not for everyone.

Renee Duprel, who teaches classes to children on how it's done, understands that flying around banked concrete curves can feel a little threatening.

Some kids show up at the Marymoor Velodrome in Redmond, Wash., make one lap around the track, and never return, she says. And those who do keep riding have to muster up a bit of courage, since most riders bump an elbow or skin a knee occasionally. (Helmets are mandatory.)

But, oh boy, what a thrill to ride high in the curves, seeming to defy gravity, and then swoop down into the straightaways as though catapulted by an invisible force.

The top riders, the national-caliber competitors who practice at this track, can reach speeds of 40 miles per hour. And when they zip past in a row on their high-tech bikes, it's something to behold.

Bicycle tracks, or velodromes (VEL-uh-dromes), were a common sight in the United States a century ago, when cycling was a major spectator sport. (See story on facing page.) Now, professional sports like football, basketball, and baseball, as well as auto racing, have grabbed public attention. Today, only 20 velodromes are scattered across the nation. Some are still made of wood.

The one in Redmond, a suburb of Seattle, is longer than most. It's 400 meters long (about a quarter mile), which means the turns don't fly at you as fast as they do on Olympic ovals, which are often just 250 meters and much steeper.

"This is a great place for kids to learn how to ride," Ms. Duprel says, "because it's not so intimidating." She belongs to the Marymoor Velodrome Association.

No previous experience is required. You're welcome to take a trial spin when classes, practices, or races are scheduled, and the track is dry.

The organization offers free lessons throughout the spring and summer, to anyone from 5 to 18. The youngest class, the PeeWee pedalers, is for ages 5 to 8.

Learning to ride with no brakes

This youngest group of riders use their own street bikes. Youth and Junior riders cruise around on special track bikes provided by the Junior Development Program. They have only one gear, they are direct drive (meaning you cannot coast or freewheel), and – get this – no brakes!

As you can imagine, learning how to stop is one of the first subjects covered in



ONE-SPEED ONLY: Special track-racing bikes have just one gear (above) – and no brakes. At right, young racers zip around the banked quarter-mile Marymoor Velodrome.

any lesson. It's pretty simple: You slow your pedaling, gradually reducing the motion of your feet, which are secured to the pedals with toe clips or special cleats. Once you're going slowly enough you can grab hold of a metal railing on the apron of the main straightaway. The railing also is a good place to mount your bike.

Because the apron is flat, Duprel likes to start her students there until they get comfortable with certain fundamentals. Then they can move up on the banked track, which is gently tilted in the straights and slanted steeply in the turns.

When pupils first start riding on a banked surface, Duprel tells them to ride a straight line, to follow a line painted



PHOTOS BY ROBERT HARBISON – STAFF

ON YOUR MARK: Former national junior champion Renee Duprel (r.) steadies a rider before a mock race on a Redmond, Wash., track.



around the track.

It's important to keep pedaling at a steady clip and let physics take over in the curves: The banked surfaces will steer you around the corner without your having to turn the handlebars. Inexperienced riders worry about the tilt of the track and slow

down. But as you slow down, it's harder to stay in control, and you may tip over.

As riders gain confidence, Duprel introduces them to a follow-the-leader exercise. Each rider leads the others around the track once, and then peels off to let the next person in line take the lead. This helps riders learn to use the whole track and to ride near other bikes. This is important if you want to learn to race. Cyclists ride wheel to wheel in various racing formats.

Bumping elbows on purpose

The bikes don't have rearview mirrors, so you must constantly be aware of what's going on around you. Who's above you and below you on the track? Is there a clear spot you can move into quickly?

To help young riders get comfortable with close riding, the bicyclists do drills in which they gently bump elbows with others while riding. This helps make them safer, more confident riders in pack situations. "Instead of freaking out and getting anxious, they work through that [mentally]," she says.

So what's the reward for completing a three-week training session? An opportunity to compete with your age group in Friday night racing under the lights.

– Ross Atkin

The greatest sports star you've never known

IF YOU'VE never heard of Marshall "Major" Taylor, a genuine American sports superstar, join the crowd. Not many people have.

Mr. Taylor made headlines a century ago in a sport seldom seen today: track bicycle racing. The fact that he was African-American adds a further twist.

In 1899, Taylor became only the second black (the first was bantamweight boxer George Dixon) to win a world championship. This was 48 years before Jackie Robinson broke Major League Baseball's "color line."

Like Robinson, he had to deal with racial prejudice. Promoters refused to let him enter races. Other riders conspired against him. Once he was pulled down and choked until he fell unconscious.

Taylor was a gentleman and a worthy champion. This fact still wins him fans today.

In Indianapolis, where he grew up, he was banned from the local track. Today, a velodrome there now bears his name. A biography of him ("Major Taylor: The Extraordinary Career of a Champion Bicycle Racer," by Andrew Ritchie) was published in 1988, and another book about him is due out next year. Bruce Bailey, a cyclist in Portland, Ore., plans to lead a cross-country ride in Taylor's honor next summer.

In Worcester, Mass., a statue of Taylor will grace the entrance of the public library. Funds for the statue are being raised by the Worcester-based Major Taylor Association. Taylor, known as the "Worcester Whirlwind," lived there during his athletic prime.

Bicycle racing began in the 1870s in Britain, France, and the United States.

Riders rode on tracks used for other purposes - horse racing, for example.

In the 1890s, the popularity of bicycles and bicycle racing soared. The modern "safety" bicycle had replaced the old high-wheelers. Mass production and competition among some 3,000 bike manufacturers meant that prices were reasonable. By the turn of the last century, Americans owned 20 million bicycles - and only 8,000 cars.

Hundreds of banked-track velodromes of wood and concrete were built. Racers like Taylor made good money - more even than the baseball stars of the day. Crowds packed New York's Madison Square Garden to see races.

Taylor's father was a coachman for a wealthy white family in Indianapolis. The family gave young Marshall a bike. He got the nickname

"Major" at age 14 when, dressed in a soldier's uniform, he did bicycle tricks outside a local bike shop.

Taylor also began winning races. In 1897 he moved to Worcester with his racing manager, Louis "Birdie" Munger. With its many hills, Worcester proved to be an excellent training site.

Taylor soon emerged as an outstanding short-distance racer. He excelled at races of 1, 5, and 10 miles. In 1898, he set the world record for a paced mile from a standing start with a time of 1:41.4. The next year, he lowered that mark to 1:19.

A deeply religious man, Taylor refused to compete on Sundays. That prevented him from racing in Europe, where bicycle racing is still very popular. In 1901, however, he began traveling overseas and became a star in Europe, Australia, and New Zealand. He retired in 1910 at the age of 32.

Meanwhile, autos were rolling out of factories. Track-style bike racing, which had brought Taylor fame and riches, fell out of favor.

Sadly, Taylor lost his fortune to illness and failed business ventures after retiring. In 1932, he died in obscurity in Chicago.

Just a few years later, a group of racers began a memorial so that Taylor's achievements would not be forgotten.

Bicycle racing in the US never entirely disappeared, thanks in part to the Olympics. Today, the US has 20 velodromes, compared with France's 144 and Japan's 90. The US Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs, Colo., has a track, but the hotbed of bicycle racing in this country is probably the Lehigh Valley Velodrome in Trexlertown, Pa.

R.A.

■ For more information, see: www.majoraylorassociation.org

LIKE BASEBALL'S JACKIE ROBINSON DECADES LATER, MAJOR TAYLOR HAD TO DEAL WITH PREJUDICE.



COURTESY WORCESTER (MASS.) TELEGRAM & GAZETTE

THE 'WORCESTER WHIRLWIND': Marshall 'Major' Taylor won fame and fortune as a bicycle racer at the turn of the last century.

TODAY'S ARTICLE ON CHRISTIAN SCIENCE

Helping children learn about God's care

'You first'

MY FRIEND KATE is better than an alarm clock. She calls early and wakes me up. I stay up late watching baseball games. Kate gets to bed early and is up and ready for school when she calls. Kate never asks if she has waked me. She figures she's awake and the world is awake, or should be.

I have known Kate since she was so little she spoke a different language - little-people language. Now she is big enough to be in kindergarten, and I understand most of what she is telling me. Today she was telling me about seeing "Beauty and the Beast." She said the Beast was scary sometimes, and she said how she liked Belle, who is Beauty.

She called this morning because she said she had a sore thumb. We talk about praying to God, and Kate says, "You first." I say, "No, you first," and we go on like that until I am awake enough to say a prayer with her.

"Dear God," I start, because I like to think of prayers as letters to God. "Dear God, You are perfect Father-Mother, and I am happy to know and think about that. Today Kate wants to see only 'beauty' and no 'beast' in her day. She wants to remember she is like You. She is Your child, and You never made her anything but perfect." We end our prayer with "thank you" and "I love You" to God.

A prayer is more than what you say out loud. You could say nice things out loud but not really believe them. Then you would only have words. Pretty words, convincing words, interesting words, but without inside prayer, outside prayer isn't enough. Inside prayer is what you think and know when you are quiet and talk to God as your friend.

Prayers don't have to be long. They should be as wonderful and easy as watching the sun rising over a hill early in the morning, making everything light.

Another name for God is Love, and the woman who started this newspaper, Mary Baker Eddy, wrote, "Love, redolent with unselfishness, bathes all in beauty and light" ("Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures," pg. 516). We are the reflection of love, unselfishness, and when we pray, we can feel like we've just had a sunshine shower of beauty and light.

Inside prayer wakes us up to all that is light and nothing that is dark. As we are quiet and let the light fill us up, nothing dark can hang around and make us feel sad or bad or afraid.

After Kate calls, I start to do my chores. I'm thinking about beauty, and my daughter, who is old enough to live in her own house, calls me, troubled about some problems she has had with her friends, wondering if she has been less than loving. Hmmm. Sounds beast-like to me, and I tell her about being lovely, not cranky - letting into her thought beauty and not letting any beastly behavior hide her true beautiful self.

That night, just before the baseball game begins, Kate calls to say goodnight, and that her thumb feels better. We decide to say a tuck-in prayer. I say, "You first." Kate is quiet. "God loves me?" she says, like a question. "YES," I say. That's enough. What a big prayer for a little girl. I am so happy to hear her prayer.

"See you later, alligator."

"After a while, crocodile." We say our favorite goodbyes until the next time she wants to call and wake me up.

Today Kate wants to see only 'beauty' and no 'beast' in her day.

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