

RACING ON THE RAND: A HISTORY OF TOWNSHIP CYCLING IN SOUTH AFRICA, 1920-60

TODD H. LEEDY

The past decade has seen both a rise in the prominence of professional bicycle racing within South Africa as well as a newfound awareness of South African riders among international road racing fans. Beginning with the corporate sponsored Barloworld Team to Darryl Impey's donning of the Tour de France yellow jersey (first ever South African rider) to the most recent excitement over the success of MTN-Qubheka team (comprised of South African, African, and European professionals), South Africa is now well known in the global road racing community. The mountain biking world had SA in its sights for somewhat longer, with perhaps the world's toughest mountain bike stage race (ABSA Cape Epic) and a number of other multi-day races drawing international racers for many years. So are the first 15 years of the 21st century poised to become the beginning of a 'golden age' of bicycle racing in South Africa? Quite possibly if sponsorship and participation maintain current trajectories. Much less is known however, either in South Africa - and certainly beyond - of how its modern bicycle racing scene reached this stage.

The little historical writing to date on earlier eras of bicycle racing in South Africa remains a monotone affair: it is entirely focused upon white racers, their clubs, and their events. From Laurens Meintjes (world champion in 1893) to the expansion of road racing in South Africa during the post-WWII decades, with only a few exceptions African racers simply do not feature in the narrative. Yet by the early 1950s major corporate mining operations included bicycle racing among their sponsored leisure activities for mineworkers and several even funded construction of racing tracks. In the 1970s, African riders, and indeed complete teams, competed at some of the largest racing events in South Africa despite the restrictions imposed by apartheid legislation. The popularity of track racing even



led municipal authorities to construct a velodrome in Soweto.

However, in brief accounts where they do feature, both the pool of talented racers and the many urban Africans who enthusiastically followed the sport seem to emerge fully formed on the scene. But in no sport do athletes reach a national or international level of competitiveness in such a short period. Nor does the sporting public immediately offer demonstrable widespread support. This project argues that bicycle racing among urban African populations already commanded widespread attention by the early 1930s, and indeed in some areas as early as the immediately post-WWI years. Materials from a number of key newspapers and magazines already allows tracing a number of elements: the types of racing events and venues for African riders; the emergence of separate teams/clubs and, consequently, sport governing bodies; the small business and corporate marketing of cycling equipment and accessories; the use of cycling images to advertise non-cycling consumer products; and role of bicycle racing in state/municipal efforts at social engineering

through sport in urban locations. Together, these streams of analysis point to an earlier 'golden age' of bicycle racing in South Africa, one organized or supported by entirely African participants, and one that existed largely outside the purview of both the white cycling community and the broader white sporting public.

At present, there is absolutely no published academic literature on the history of bicycle racing in South Africa, or for that matter, on the continent more broadly. Yet racing lies at the intersection of three broad historical fields: sport/leisure, urban, and labor. A nuanced historical treatment will reveal how individuals and communities created vibrant social spaces around sport during decades of intensifying segregation and apartheid. The study will likewise illustrate the ways in which municipal authorities as well as mining companies sought to utilize this sport for purposes of control and productivity.

Todd Leedy is senior lecturer and associate director of the Center for African Studies.