

# HEMINGWAY

By Guy Wilson-Roberts. Illustration Matthew Bibby



Ernest Hemingway was a sports fanatic. Boxing, fishing, hunting and bull-fighting were his well-known passions. But perhaps less well known is the fascination he had for cycling.

"Hem was mad about bicycle racing," said writer and friend

John Dos Passos, after meeting with Hemingway in Paris in 1924. "He used to get himself up in a striped jumper like a contestant in the Tour de France and ride around the boulevards."

But despite his interest in road racing, the main focus of his cycling enthusiasm was track racing. It remained popular in Europe and was enjoying a burgeoning reputation in America in venues that included Madison Square Garden – and Hemingway was determined to accurately capture the action in his writing.

"I will get the *Vélodrome d'Hiver* with the smoky light of the afternoon and the high-banked wooden track and the whirring sound the tyres made on the wood as the riders passed, the effort and the tactics as the riders climbed and plunged, each one part of his machine," he wrote in *A Moveable Feast*.

As he would do with all his other sporting interests, Hemingway made sure to master the intricacies of this new pastime. "Hem knew all the statistics and the names and the lives of the riders," said Dos Passos.

Also according to Dos Passos, Hemingway had an "evangelistic streak" that made him co-opt his friends and acquaintances to his new "mania". Two others dragged along to be educated were Sylvia Beach and Adrienne Monnier, already schooled by Hemingway on a previous outing on the intricacies of boxing.

"We attended the Six Jours, that six-day merry-go-round at the *Vél d'Hiv*, easily the most popular event in the Paris season," Beach wrote in her memoir of the now famous Shakespeare & Company bookshop.

It was certainly a sport for purists, however, and she and Adrienne could barely distinguish the fervent explanations of their professor above the din. "Fans went and lived there for the duration," according to Beach, "watching more and more listlessly the little monkey-men, hunched over their bikes, slowly circling the ring or suddenly sprinting, night and day."

It was not just the indoor races at the *Vélodrome d'Hiver* that Hemingway enjoyed, but the various sprint and motor-paced *demi-fond* races at outdoor tracks such as the *Parc des Princes* – the finish of the *Tour de France* for many years – which Hemingway called the "wickedest track of all" for the "savage" speeds that the riders achieved.

Hemingway recalled watching the riding of Victor Linart, "the great Belgian champion, dropping his head to suck up cherry brandy from a rubber tube that connected with a hot water bottle under his racing shirt".

Linart was indeed a great champion, having started his career in 1909, escaping Belgium during World War I for the racing scene in New York, then winning many championships and titles in Europe and North America in the 1920s.

Another rider mentioned by Hemingway was Gustave Ganay, a French professional. Unlike Linart, Ganay was in the army in World War I. Fortunate to survive, he had some success on the road then switched to the track. In 1926 he won the French national title for the 100km *demi-fond* event and placed second in the world championships version, just behind Linart.

But good fortune deserted him that same year when on August 23 he crashed heavily at the *Parc des Princes* and died, an event that Hemingway may have actually witnessed. "We saw that great rider Ganay fall and heard his skull crumple under the crash helmet as you crack a hard-boiled egg against a stone to peel it on a picnic," he wrote.

When he later recalled his enthusiasm for cycling during those times, Hemingway said: "I must write of the strange world of the six-day races and the marvels of road racing in the mountains."

Aside from his reminiscences, or the brief references to cycling in his work, or the names of fictional characters he borrowed from contemporary racers, he never did write of the strange world or the marvels. He edited *A Farewell to Arms* in a box at the *Vélodrome d'Hiver* in 1929 but his subsequent work focused on sports such as hunting, fishing and bull-fighting – although he called the latter a tragedy rather than a sport.

It's another tragedy that Hemingway confessed that he "started many stories about bicycle racing but have never written one that is as good as the races are both on the indoor and outdoor tracks and on the roads".

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