

Bike Racing Tales

Episode 2: Princeton Cycling History, 1962-66

Mikk Hinnov, July 9, 2021 (corrected July 16)

Bike racing at Princeton during our time was a club sport. The club was founded by Leif Thorne-Thomson '63 a couple of years before we arrived on campus in 1962. He had grown up as a bike racer out in Illinois, and his parents' misgivings notwithstanding, he couldn't stay away from it at Princeton. He worked at Kopp's Cycle Shop over on John Street, half a block down the alley off Nassau Street, and recruited a few riders, including John Allis '64 and Oscar Swan '64, to form a club. They began training and participating in intercollegiate and open amateur races in the eastern region of the country.

After I arrived on campus, I occasionally saw 3 or 4 riders coming and going from Dillon Gym – very athletic and graceful on their impossibly light and thin bikes. I fancied myself something of a bike rider, too, and asked to join them. (Just WHY I thought I was a bike rider will have to be the subject of another story.) They looked at me and my flapping shorts and sneakers and heavy “truck” bike, (though one with 10 gears and drop bars and toe straps on the pedals), probably thought “what the hell”, and invited me along on a training ride out into the open country, by way of Great Road, up a couple of big hills, and around about 25 miles north of town. I guess I passed my audition, and they consented to my joining the team. They let me borrow someone's else's real racing bike for a while, and I was hooked. Later, over the Christmas break, Leif went home to Chicagoland and brought back a real racing bike for me – a big red Schwinn Paramount – for \$100. That's where my earnings from setting and washing tables at Commons went for the next few months. I sold my truck bike on campus for \$35. I had no cash allowance from my parents and expected none. My father, a tenant farmer's son, had graduated from Tartu University in Estonia before the war, but it had taken him 12 years, scraping together the tuition money all the way. With student financial aid from him and from the University, I had it much easier.

We did get some support from the University. We were provided with sweat suits and wrestling tights, eventually orange-and-black uniform wool jerseys. In Dillon Gym, we were given use of the showers and a small dusty room in the basement, tucked back behind the ventilation ducts and blowers under the front lobby. There we kept our bikes and gear, a workbench, and a set of rollers on which we “spun” on our bikes and honed a smooth pedaling technique. Tools were our own. I learned to repack bearings, to rebuild wheels and to patch tubular sew-up tires, (a delicate and time-consuming task requiring dexterous use of a pump, a bucket of water, a razor blade, rubber cement, a patch, a big, curved needle and waxed linen thread), and to re-glue them on the rims. New tires were expensive. There was also a cot in our room. I had to resort to it surreptitiously for several nights once when I got back at the start of sophomore year from our team's European trip before the dorms reopened. I guess that little room was my “club house”, in the Prospect Street sense.

Fred Kuhn, the owner of the terrific bicycle shop in town, Kopp's Cycle Shop, (still there, the oldest continuously operating bike shop in America, now owned by his son Charlie), was generous with us, providing us with advice and tires and tools and other equipment at a discount. Sometimes transportation, too. I still have the top-of-the-line Italian racing bike (Cinelli Super Corsa) that he provided me in my sophomore year at his cost, \$200, which I paid off by fixing flats and assembling and repairing bikes in his shop or (mostly) on the stoop in the alley in front of it.

The University's lightweight crew coach, Al Povey, an Englishman, took a personal interest in us, and acted as a liaison between us and the Athletic Department. He was not our coach in the sense of directing our training or performance in any way; Leif did that. He also paid my air fare to Europe to compete with the team in the World Championships in the summer of 1963; my parents and I simply did not have the money, beyond the \$400 we scraped together to sustain myself in Europe through the summer. Al Povey traveled to Europe with us, and arranged for us to stay in the home of a family friend of his in Maidenhead, England for the first few weeks while we raced there. (I wonder if that friendship outlasted our stay!) We raced in England and later in Belgium, hoping to improve our game against the competition to come in the Worlds. More about our races in Europe and the World Championships will have to await another story.

At our ages, 19-21, we were still developing physically. Bicycle road racers tend to be at their best in their mid-20's to mid-30's; and in open amateur races, that was much of our competition. As rank amateurs, we really were barely worthy of representing the USA at international competitions. But what we lacked in maturity, experience, coaching and support, we tried to make up for in optimism, enthusiasm and doggedness!

In some years, we occasionally got car rental money from the University when we traveled to races. In freshman year, we traveled in Leif's old panel van, all of us throwing gasoline money into a common kitty. After John came back from Europe in 1964, he brought his VW bus to campus and we traveled in that, and again we all ponied up the gas money. When we had to overnight at a collegiate destination, the host team usually found some space in a dormitory or a wrestling mat in a field house for us. A Princeton alumnus hosted us at his family home one time when we had an early Spring open race in Columbia SC where we raced in the celebration of their Cherry Blossom Festival. (See photo below.) My dirty sweaty face got kissed there as the winner by the Cherry Blossom Queen on the portico of the Capitol! She was brave – didn't even make a face!

In intercollegiate races, we competed against colleges including Williams, Dartmouth, Yale, Drexel, Cornell, Brandeis and others, and we hosted races ourselves on the rural roads of Skillman, out north of Princeton. Some colleges that did not host races nevertheless fielded teams or individual competitors at these races, so we usually had fields of 30-40 riders. We had a Fall season and a Spring season. The Intercollegiate Championships were the last race each Spring, and in all four years, took place at West Rock Park in New Haven CT; 4 laps of a 12.5 mile course along the top of the mountain ridge, then down to the bottom and back along its length, and a long, steep and winding climb back up to the top. Leif won in 1963; I took the honors in 1964 and 1965. In 1966, Our classmate Leighton Chen '66 took the top honors in 1966.

My first-ever race was at Williams in the fall of 1962, a road race of about 35 miles. We participated with a team of 6 or 7 riders. My most vivid memory of that race was the big crash. The peloton was all together, pedaling through town at perhaps 30 mph down an incline that curved gently to the right. A car was parked on the right side of the street at the apex of the curve. A rider near the front and at the right side of the group looked down at the worst possible moment to check his gears, hit the back left corner of the car, and bounced diagonally to the left into the middle of the peloton. He took down about a dozen riders in a 30-mph clatter of tumbling bikes and the thuds of tumbling bodies on the tarmac. I managed to stay upright by pure luck. The race was stopped while order was restored and injuries were assessed. There were lots of abrasions, contusions and shock; and one of my teammates was taken to the local hospital. The race resumed, and in the final sprint to the line, I took 5th.

Our hospitalized teammate had a broken shoulder. He did return to the club several weeks later and rode with us for the rest of the school year; but never again did he display the speed, stamina, and verve that he had had before the crash. He did not return to the team in subsequent years. It is not an un Hazardous sport.

In subsequent races that fall, I took, in order, 4th, 3rd and 2nd. And then the fall season was over. Each year for several weeks in the early Spring, the racing clubs in New York City arranged for sanctioned open road races for licensed riders, Sunday mornings in Central Park, using the 6-mile undulating oval around the inner border of the park. The city did not close off the road to regular traffic, so we raced among the moving (and worse, the stopped!) taxicabs and delivery trucks. They paid attention to traffic lights; we didn't. To minimize the traffic conflict, races started early, so we had to leave Princeton long before the first glimmer of morning in the eastern sky. We had the pleasure of watching the sun rise red before us as we headed east toward the Lincoln Tunnel. It was here, in our first race in the Spring of 1963, in my 5th race ever, that I won my first race, accelerating away from the peloton of about 50 riders up Cat's Paw Hill with about half a mile to go to the finish line. I was an unknown, and nobody started to chase me until too late. After this, I was unknown no longer.

Our teams raced not only in intercollegiate competitions, but also in fully open licensed competition against the best racers in America. For example, one of the most prestigious and competitive open races in the US at the time was the Tour of Somerville, about 20 miles north of Princeton, every Memorial Day. Racers came from all over the country, Canada, Mexico, the Caribbean islands and even European countries, for a 50-mile race through the streets of the town. In my freshman and sophomore years, I took 5th; I got 3rd in 1965, after a German Olympian and a top US racer from NYC. As a prize in one of those years, I got a substantial gift certificate from a local men's wear store, and that provided me with a business suit that lasted me for several years. Repeated mechanical problems forced me to abandon the race in 1966.

An unusual series of open races that we participated in, in the winter, was "roller races". In addition to hiring a band, large bars and night clubs in the NYC metro area would sometimes entertain their clientele with bicycle roller racing. A local race promoter would set up two sets of "rollers" out on the dance floor. Each apparatus consisted of a set of 3 heavy round metal drums or rollers about 16 inches long, mounted horizontally in a frame such that a bicycle's front wheel rested on the curved surface of one, and the back wheel nestled high between the

other two. A belt from a rear roller drove the front roller, and a cable drove a large dial set in front which measured the distance rolled. Two cyclists side by side would set their bikes on the rollers, perhaps a foot and a half off the floor, mount up and, on "GO", start pedaling like hell! Whichever rider drove his needle around the dial a preset number of laps first was the winner. There was nothing holding the bike up or in place other than gravity keeping the rear wheel nestled in place, so balance and control and smooth pedaling were essential. It took practice! You'd spin up your revolutions as high as you could sustain until the start of the last lap, and then sprint for all you're worth! The legs would go rubbery. and your balance would crumble before the end, and your spotter would have to grab you to prevent you from riding off the rollers and into a wall somewhere. The capacity crowd would roar, cigarette smoke would fill the air, beer would flow. and sums of money would be laid down for one rider or the other! Cheers and groans would erupt as the finish line was passed! Winners would go on to the next round, and the final winners would qualify for the next event in the tournament, until finally there was an Eastern States Roller Championships event.

I made it to the Championship round, along with John Allis. Kopp's Cycle lent me a top-of-the-line track bike for the event. I made it to the Finale for the Gold or Silver Medal! But my opponent had studied the rules and determined that there was nothing that prohibited him from installing light sheet-metal discs over his wheels to cut way down on the wind resistance encountered by the spokes spinning rapidly through the air. I thought "What the hell, I'll beat him anyway!" But I didn't; only took the Silver. And then we partied with the crowd! The whole thing sure beat squatting in a carrel in Firestone, worrying about research for some dumb Senior Thesis!

Speaking of Senior Thesis, even that was determined by my love of cycling. An Economics major, I wrote about the historical effects of tariffs on bicycle sales and imports into this country. Nothing brilliant or, probably, even mediocre; but I passed.

In addition to Leighton Chen '66 mentioned above, another standout rider and classmate after our freshman year was Peter Waring '66. Not only was he a strong teammate on the road, he was also a total gentleman and great friend who saved me from a bad failure of team leadership in our junior or senior year. We had an early Sunday morning race scheduled for NYC Central Park which required a very early-morning wake-up and departure – like 4 o'clock. I failed to show up at the gym for departure. He came to find me in my dorm, and he found me there in bed with a young lady and in no mood to leave it. He brokered a compromise: I would get up and go race, and she would get up and go with us. So it was. Some 50 years later, after a long detour, I married that young lady.

Correction (July 16, 2021): A previous version of this story mistakenly said tha Brad Kuhn now owns Kopp's Cycle Shop. Brad's brother Charlie Kuhn is the current owner. We regret the error.



Through the heart of downtown Columbia, Princeton's Mikk Hinnov leads teammates Leighton Chen, Pete Waring, Jim Wager and Joe Stager.



National Champs, 1966



Leighton Chen winning in 1966 at West Rock