

## Racing in the 1940's and 1950's

By Barrington Day



As the title suggests this is about racing in the 1940's and 1950's, in fact we go back into history. It all started in the 1800's, but it was in 1941 when a gentleman called Percy Stallard wanted to start Continental Road Racing on the open roads in this country, seems he was up against the proverbial Brick Wall.

Percy Thornley Stallard (19 July 1909 – 11 August 2001) was an English racing cyclist, who reintroduced massed-start road racing on British roads in the 1940s. It was banned in the late 1800's by the NCU. Born in Wolverhampton, at his father's bicycle shop in Broad Street, Stallard became a member of the Wolverhampton Wheelers and was a keen competitor in cycle races, competing for Great Britain in international races during the 1930s, including three consecutive world championships (1933–1935). He was also a successful cycling coach and team Manager.



Cycling was run by the NCU (National Cyclists Union), (see badge)

They were totally against any Road Racing on the open roads. In fact it was on the 24<sup>th</sup> July 1894 when it finally came to a head. A 50mile Road Race was being held on The Great North Road, 50 starters plus any number of pacers that each rider could cajole into acting for them. F.T.

Bidlake was going flat out, being paced by J.W.Stocks who was really winding it up, Arthur Ilsey the other pacer was just hanging on. When near the 57<sup>th</sup> milestone a horse and carriage idly approached, the lady driver panicked, swerved across the road, the three cyclists all crashed, their bikes ruined. The lady complained bitterly to the police. The outcome of which they issued an edict that all racing on the public roads must cease. From then on, the only massed start races were usually in parks, motor racing circuits like Donnington, Brooklands or RAF airfields. Even the 1948 Olympic Road Race was held in "Windsor Great Park".

The NCU mainly controlled track racing. Time trials were governed by the RTTC (Road Time Trials Council). Time Trials were held in secret, competitors had to wear all black to appear inconspicuous, and the courses had code numbers, P413, H10/8 and so on.

Then along came Percy Stallard with new ideas. He formed the BLRC (British League of Racing Cyclists) (see badge) in 1941 with the intention to run road races on the open roads. This gained immediate response from several clubs around the country, with membership of the new organisation growing very quickly.



On June 7th 1942 the first road race was organised by Percy, The "Llangollen to Wolverhampton", the police were informed, they had no objections, and offered to help in any way they were able. The distance was 59 miles, there were 34 starters and 15 finished. All chose to use gears, except Cecil Anslow, he went for a fixed gear of 85" (47x15), he was 2<sup>nd</sup>. The first four places were Albert Price, Cecil Anslow, J. Jones and J Kremers. Almost immediately all who took part, either as competitors or officials received a life suspension from the NCU and RTTC. 'The Cycling' magazine, (now Cycling Weekly), would never show any reports or results of road races, not even the Tour de France. Sponsors began to take an interest in road racing; It was mainly bike manufactures, Viking, BSA, ITP, Wearwell and Dayton. From this, the 'Independent' Category was born, riders were sponsored by some of the aforementioned, they were not fully fledged professionals, yes, some were supplied with a bike and jersey, and they were allowed to ride for money, they might have had a small retainer, but it was not enough to live on, so they carried on in their normal jobs. In 1955 'Hercules Cycles' formed a team with a view to riding in the Tour de France; it was a very bold move.

It was not very long before several classics races emerged. "The Circuit of Wrekin" "London to Holyhead" "London to Brighton and Back" "Tour of the Cotswolds" "Tour of the Mendips" "Coventry to York" "Tour of the Peak" "Lincoln Grand Prix" "Chequers Grand Prix" "Tour of the North".

The first Stage race was the "Brighton to Glasgow" stage race, first held in 1946. Nothing like this had ever been attempted in Great Britain before. It became known as the 'race that ran itself' mainly because, the starts and finishes of each stage town, were so far apart that each town had its own set of officials. On one occasion, the finish in Birmingham, I believe, the timekeeper left his watch at home, and a member of the public stepped in to help. It was mainly petrol rationing that stopped officials travelling the full 5 day course (542miles). The race was won by the Frenchman, Robert Batot. The 'News of the World' announced they were sponsoring the 1947 Brighton to Glasgow to the tune of £500. This created a lot of commercial interest, with five Independent (semi-professional) teams entering. A total of 28 out of the 76 entered. Hence the prize for first amateur was introduced. The winner was Mike Peers of the Manchester Coureurs. Accommodation was not very forth coming, many riders spending the night in barns, Hay ricks and even ditches. Food was still rationed, so fish and chip shops did a roaring trade. It was tough back in those days.

In 1951 the "Daily Express" organised the first "Tour of Britain". It was a real Tour of Britain encompassing England, Scotland and Wales (not like today's piece meal effort). The winner was Ian Steel of 'Viking Cycles'. It is worth mentioning that Fareham Wheeler member,

Mike Eastwood, Chairman of our Club for many years was a competitor in that 1951 "Tour of Britain", finishing a very credible 26th.

In the late 1940s 'Billy Butlin', the Holiday Camp founder, took an interest and organised a stage race, starting and finishing from all his holiday camps. The 1st stage started from his 'Clacton on Sea Holiday Camp'. This series enabled the previously mentioned Mike Eastwood to gain selection for that Tour of Britain, after winning the 1<sup>st</sup> stage.

Now we are in to the fifty's. Let's look at the bikes, slightly different from to-days, the frames were larger with very little seat pin showing, saddles were made of leather, pedals



had toe clips and straps, brake cables were all on show and gear levers were on the down tube for the rear mech, with a lever on the seat tube for the front changer (see picture). The block (now a cassette) had 5 sprockets and with a double clanger (double chainset).

You had 10 gears. 14,16,18,21,23 with a chainwheel of 48/51. Bottles, one on the handlebars and one on the down tube. Quick Release Skewers were not available, so we used 'Huret' Wing Nuts, you had to take care that nobody took out your spokes with them. (A common occurrence) Tubular Tyres (Tubs) were glued onto 'Sprint Rims'. A spare tubular was

always carried together with a CO<sub>2</sub> pump, service was virtually non-existent, if you punctured you changed the 'tub' yourself and chased back on, the good riders could be back on the bike within a minute. You always carried an old tub as a spare, hopefully it was still sticky. You would normally repair the punctured tub when you had a spare hour at home.



This involved finding the puncture, cutting about 2 inches of the stitching, pulling out enough inner tube to stick on the patch, then re-stitching, ensuring that you didn't stick the needle in the tube. Most riders only had one set of wheels, so the day before a race, you would swap your training tubs for racing tubs.

What did we wear? Shorts and jerseys (see picture) were made of wool, socks were always white, hardly a crash hat in sight, just a cotton cap. The jersey had five pockets two on the front and three at the back, when wet; the

jersey and shorts could weigh an extra 4 pounds (2 kilo), and hang around your knees. (Both Jersey and Shorts).

Race sustenance was usually two ham rolls with the middles removed, a peach, raisins and glucose tablets, Bananas were not available, two bottles, one with 'Ribena' (not too strong) and one of water. This was for 150 mile races; we just reduced it according to the distance.

Racing categories were Junior, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> (1<sup>st</sup> is to-days Elite) and independents.

Juniors were restricted to races of no more than 50miles, but could ride against any category, even professionals. Some of the longer events had a finish line at 50miles just for junior and 3<sup>rd</sup> cats. Like a race within a race. 3<sup>rd</sup> Cats could carry on for the full distance, if they wished. Most of the senior races varied from 100 to 160 miles.

You worked your way through the categories by gaining places it required 3 in the first three or 6 in the first 6, to move up a category. Juniors could tot up placings providing there were seniors in the events they competed in. When reaching senior status (18 years) Juniors could compete in the category attained, or revert to 3<sup>rd</sup> category and work their way up again.

Prizes were very different from today, quite often £3.00, £2.00 and £1.00 for 1<sup>st</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>, sometimes there was a most aggressive rider prize and/or a mountains prize. You were not supposed to receive money, often it was vouchers from a local shop (to that area) or National Savings Certificates.

Training was miles and more miles, 300 per week was the norm including any race. Turbo Trainers had not been invented, although most real bike shops had a couple of sets of rollers that anybody could use (in the shop).

The racing was in many ways as it is today, with climbers shining in the hills and sprinters hoping to be there at the finish. There were no sprint trains; you just hoped that you found the right wheel to follow. Fields were limited to 40 riders, plus 10 reserves, normally they all got a ride. The roads were a lot quieter back then with very little traffic, The race had a lead car, and a following car containing the Commissaire, who always went by the book, no advertising on your racing kit, no crossing any white lines, although a lot hadn't been repainted after the war. Sometimes there would be a broom wagon, especially when you had one continuous route of 100 miles or more. Smaller circuits filtered in later. Yes, there were crashes, a touch of wheels or a wingnut ripping out your spokes, but the injuries did not seem to be so severe as they are these days. You just got back on your bike (or even borrowed a spectators) and chased back into the race.



There was normally a Police presence, checking the standard of riding and ensuring that every rider put at least one foot on the floor at 'HALT' signs. (See picture) These days they have been replaced by 'Give Way' signs. If the police took your number for this offence, you normally had a 10 shilling fine (50p)

Although the 'BLRC' was not recognised by the 'NCU', it was by the 'UCI'. Hence they were getting many invitations to race on the Continent and the 'NCU' were not. This resulted in the winner of the 1951 Tour of Britain, Ian Steel – Viking

Cycles winning the Iron Curtain Stage race, The 'Warsaw-Berlin-Prague' in 1952. Our first ever win in a continental stage race, we also took the team prize.

The 'BLRC' had its ups and downs over the next few years, at one stage Percy Stallard was kicked out. Being re-elected at a later date. However, it all came to an end in 1959 when the NCU and the BLRC merged and the BCF (British Cycling Federation) was born, things seemed to go downhill from then on, for a few years.

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