

Hell on wheels

Cycling is a boom sport among middle-aged men seeking the twin thrills of speed and prestige. But as bikes become faster and riders grow ever more competitive, the consequences can be dire. By *Fiona Harari*. | *October 13, 2007*

He had been down this way many times: past the bay-front homes, the pubs and life-saving clubs and the odd traffic light, along the wide, gently curving route that makes Beach Road one of Melbourne's most scenic.

In a city with no shortage of wide expanses, Beach Road has become cycle central. On any weekend between 6am and 10am, up to 3000 bikes will traverse this picturesque route, and over the years Justin Heitman has come to know it well. He has run on its paved waterfront path, cycled its bitumen surface endlessly, and commuted along a great stretch of it a couple of times a day.

One Saturday morning, August 26 last year, he was in his car after a hard run along the foreshore. In training for the Melbourne Marathon, Heitman had joined some mates at Ricketts Point for a workout before immersing himself in the icy bay waters and, still wet, had set off for the short trip home. But not long after he turned back on to Beach Road, he drove up to mayhem. "There were bikes going everywhere," says Heitman, an avid sportsman who is keenly aware of cyclists' vulnerability. "I totally thought someone had come off their bike – until I saw him." At the bottom of a hill near the Mentone Surf Life Saving Club, an old man lay sprawled across the middle of the road, blood oozing from the back of his head.

James Gould, a 77-year-old retired auditor, had been on his daily walk when he crossed paths with the Hell Ride. For years, a growing pack of keen cyclists – amateur and professional – had been gathering in the post-dawn light at the nearby Black Rock clock tower for a furious 80km training ride to Mt Eliza and back. At 8.30 on this morning, 100 of them were coming down the hill as Gould waited to cross. As the traffic lights turned red, about 20 riders at the head of the pack sped through. Those behind slowed down. Some of them yelled out, "Stop!" But three of those latter cyclists pulled out to overtake. They passed the pack and went through the red light, too. And as they did so, Gould was crossing the road.

William Raisin-Shaw, then 30, was the first of those three riders. Under pressure from pursuing cyclists, some of whom were yelling out "Rolling, rolling!" he raced through the red light at between 40kmh and 50kmh. The impact was catastrophic. Gould was thrown 5m. "His head hit the ground pretty hard; it was bleeding from the back. He'd smashed his false teeth. His mouth was bleeding," says Heitman, who drove up only moments after the collision. "He was literally in the middle of the road, so I parked my car right near him to protect him from any cars coming in the opposite direction." Then, using his experience as a volunteer firefighter, he and another passer-by administered first aid until an ambulance arrived.

"I spoke to him, tried to see if he knew where he was ... His body was trying to fight. His arms were throwing around; he was groaning. But he gripped my hand and he held my hand and when the ambos went to take him, he squeezed my hand."

The following morning, suffering extensive head injuries, Gould's life support was switched off. He died early that afternoon.

There was no family or funeral to mark his death. Almost 40 years after arriving in Australia from England, Gould, who had no children and never married, had told his few close friends that he should be cremated without ceremony. "He said, 'You know, I'm not important...'" recalls Ivan Lomasney, who, in retirement, had joined Gould on several cargo voyages in recent years.

A few weeks after Gould's death, Raisin-Shaw was charged with failing to stop at a red light. At the ensuing coronial inquest, his counsel claimed that, worried about being hit from behind, he was faced with "the choice between the inevitable accident or possible accident". Ultimately his decision proved fatal. In August this year, he was fined \$400. Beyond his court appearances, he has refused to discuss the case, or his own injuries. (Amid the mayhem, he had been struck by a second cyclist.) Heitman, however, has not forgotten him. "He was very remorseful. He did the wrong thing ... but he stopped, he said, 'How can I help? What can I do?' He wasn't worried about himself."

Raisin-Shaw's silence, however, did nothing to silence criticism of the Hell Ride and, before long, even road cycling in general. Suddenly cycling's image of clean and green had morphed, in some eyes, into thoughtless and mean. To passionate riders, this seemed ironic because that was precisely the description they could have applied to the many non-cyclists who had hounded them for years.

To understand how Gould's tragic death occurred requires some insight into the appeal of intensive cycling, and the rush to be ever faster and stronger that lures so many out of their beds so early and so often.

Faster. Lighter. Stronger. The intensive cyclist's mantra is oddly Olympian, and when you've attained it, when you're flying on your ultra-light racer, the feeling is incomparable. "Absolutely alive; you just feel extremely in the moment," says Melbourne chef Robert Castellani, a dedicated cyclist who, when he's not covering up to 400km a week on his bike, gets a great view of the passing parade of pedallers from his St Kilda kitchen window. "Very little is important at that particular minute in time, and you seem to be completely into your breathing, how the little old jelly legs feel, how your neck feels, how your bum feels. Are you going fast enough? You're completely overtaken by this. And you want to compete. You want to go fast. You want to feel younger."

Castellani's transition from novice to serious cyclist was fairly typical. Now in his mid-40s, he took up cycling five years ago after his doctor recommended he do more exercise. Starting off on a mountain bike and wearing a pair of old shorts and a T-shirt, he was soon seeking comfort by slipping into some streamlined Lycra racing clothes; before long, as he found his old bike slowing him down, he upgraded to a lighter, faster, and consequently more expensive racing version. Today he rides up to six days a week, often cycling the 40km return trip from his eastern suburban home to work and back.

He does not cycle the Hell Ride, yet by the time he factors in his weekend rides, which invariably see him up at 6am on a Sunday and sometimes not returning home until midday, he will often clock up almost the equivalent of a one-way trip from Melbourne to Mildura during the course of a week.

"It's an imposition (on the family), having bike paraphernalia all over the place. Sometimes I wonder if I'm not there enough. But I have to do these things," he says, and then adds with a laugh: "I don't want to get fat."

But behind his self-deprecating humour there is a seriously alluring side to his passion. "The older you get, the more interested you are in protecting the old self-esteem," says Castellani, who is being coached for the 300km Melbourne to Warrnambool race later this month, which he is hoping simply to finish, never mind place in the top 100. "You become middle-aged and you want to still do the same things that you could have done when you were 20."

Unlike many other sports, cycling offers an attraction that seems age-resistant. As Harry Barber, chief executive officer of Bicycle Victoria, says: "You can't make yourself younger ... but one thing you can do is get yourself a faster bike."

And plenty are doing just that. "I bought the bike because it had a fancy label. It was normally \$6000 but

it was \$3000 on special.” Brisbane hairdresser Stefan Ackerie soon saw the error of his purchase on his first serious foray into cycling six years ago. The bike he had bought on special was way too heavy –and then he added a heavy bike lock. It was slowing him down. “I realised I had bought a semi-trailer rather than a Porsche.”

Ten bikes later, his latest favourite weighs less than 10kg, cost \$14,000 and is a replica of the model Lance Armstrong last rode in the Tour de France. “The ego trip kicks in: I’ve got more horsepower than you have, like people with cars,” says Ackerie of his ever-changing set of wheels. “You can never drive the same car Schumacher drove or (use) the same golf club that Tiger Woods hit. But you can ride the same bike Lance Armstrong rode.”

Football may slow you down over the years. The possibility of replicating David Beckham’s form on the field might also slip further away with each passing month. But on a bike like Lance Armstrong’s, a dedicated cyclist has a better chance than most of feeling on top of the world.

“It’s a minor thrill sport,” says Ben Wilson, manager of Bicycle Queensland. “People actually like to ride bicycles really fast. The Dutch are happy to sit up on an old clinker of a bicycle to get around.” But not here. It’s faster, lighter and stronger all the way. And it’s a goal that’s attainable. As Wilson says: “People can’t afford a Porsche. Not many can drive them. But many people can afford a \$4000 bike. It’s less than a John Howard baby bonus.”

On any weekend and most weekday mornings, often before the sun has risen and well before traffic starts to mass, intensive cyclists are chewing up roads in cities all over the continent. You’ll find some women beneath those slick cycling helmets but an overwhelming majority will be men.

For the cyclists who gather in St Kilda’s Café Racer after a one-hour, 50km cycle, Friday is a comparatively slow day. “Tuesday and Thursday there’s not much talking because it’s concentration,” says Jamie Leggat, an IT professional, as he sips a coffee. By 7am, the room is full of brightly clothed men hobbling around in racing shoes and hovering over half-sipped lattes. Well before their work day has begun, their intensive workout has already ended.

“It sort of lends itself to a type-A character. There’s a lot of people who are driven, who want to do more,” says Leggat. As for all that shiny new gear, “it’s a bit like a golfer who aspires to a set of (irons). It’s like any sport ... You want the best equipment on the premise that it’s going to make you a little bit better than it did before.”

The golfing comparison is apt. For an ageing demographic, in particular, this passion for cycling has earned it the sobriquet of “the new golf”, and it’s not hard to spot a devotee. “They have just fallen in love with bike riding,” says Bicycle Victoria’s Harry Barber. “Their old selves would be surprised at how much their new self has spent on a bike. And in the back of their minds they are eyeing off an even more expensive bike. They are right into it. They just love it. It’s a bit of the week that they would never miss – rain, hail or shine. When they’re out of town, they pine for it. They know exactly their average speed, the kilometres they have done this year, how far they went that day.

“They can talk about bike bits. They know the new parts that are coming or are available. And they can size up someone else’s bike in the blink of an eye. It’s called bike porn; looking at magazines and lusting after different bits of carbon fibre. And they wear colours in clothes when they are riding that they normally wouldn’t wear in public life.” It’s catchy and it’s in demand. “There’s one group I know of that operates like the Melbourne Club,” says Barber. “You can ride with them but only by invitation.”

Cycling is even replacing other traditional pastimes as the preferred manner of entertaining clients in

some workplaces. “To me, taking someone to the football every week or some of those things, they’re pretty much done,” says Craig Bingham, CEO of boutique fund manager Portfolio Partners, and a recently appointed director of Cycling Australia. “Now, rather than taking our clients to the footy, we get them to go for a ride.” Kitted out in Lycra gear bearing his company’s logo, “it means I can actually even talk work beyond Monday to Friday”.

The cycling network extends to most cities. Neil Fox runs an advertising agency in Sydney, and regularly rides with professionals on Saturdays from the Coluzzi bar in Darlinghurst to Waterfall, about 45km south of the city. “If you need to know somebody or get to somebody, it’s a pretty interesting network. People are involved that can help you achieve a coffee with someone you might want to talk to for a specific project,” he says.

Says Ben Wilson: “The new golfers (cyclists) are really people who, yes, they are corporate executives, but the old days of them being hard-drinking, hard-smoking, hard-living people are gone. They are actually hard-riding, hard-latte-drinking people who want to kick around and charge John Howard a lot of retirement benefits.” Many have taken up the sport, initially at a more sedentary pace, on a doctor’s advice. The obsession tends to come later.

IN 1984, TOWARDS the end of his AFL career, Bernie Quinlan began cycling when an Achilles heel injury prevented him from running. “There were three of us living in Black Rock,” he says. “We just started off from the Black Rock clock tower and rode down to Mt Eliza and back again.” As the weeks passed, other friends joined the trio on their Saturday morning training sessions.

“I would say it’s probably the hardest thing I have done,” says Quinlan, a winner of AFL’s highest individual accolade, the Brownlow medal. “At least with football you could duck down to the forward pocket and have a rest. (With cycling) you can’t hide anywhere. You don’t have a rest; you can’t stop. You’ve just got to keep on going.”

Riding en masse, the pressure can be intense. “You get the group mentality where you don’t want to get dropped. If half the pack riders get through the lights, the other half don’t want to get dropped off so you can’t get back on the end of it. If you’re stuck there for a minute or so, the group’s gone,” says Quinlan, 56. While he has not ridden recently, the memory of those rides, and the pressure that seemed to mount as the pack size increased, lingers. “Basically from Frankston all the way back, it was very competitive and you went flat out all the way. Because we could, I suppose.” From a casual, if vigorous, cycle with a couple of mates each Saturday, Quinlan’s weekly ride kept growing through word of mouth until the group became a pack, and then a bigger and looser herd, and before long this impromptu ride grew, completely unintentionally, he says, to become today’s unstructured Hell Ride.

It’s still a loose gathering of cyclists of all standings. Riders seem to arrive by word of mouth, and at 6.45 on a Saturday morning, some stretches of Beach Road resemble Christmas in August, as the rear lights of countless racing bikes line the road. In this amorphous assembly, some unwritten rules seem to have developed. The almost universally accepted rule, says Barber, “is to go as fast and as hard as they can and you’re a wuss if you stop at the red lights”.

Those who have taken part do not agree with rule-breaking, but not all are critical of what the ride provides. “It’s a great ride, the fact you’ve got punters like us who can go and ride and have a chat with Cadel (Evans, who this year finished second in the Tour de France) when he was back a few years ago, riding. We’re riding alongside some of the greatest riders in the world,” says Jeff Provan, president of the St Kilda Cycling Club.

Yet Gould’s death has generated some terrible publicity for the ride and its participants. “It’s now almost

famous for the wrong reasons, so it has attracted a lot of riders who should not even perhaps be riding on the road,” says Provan. “The riders need a certain level of experience. Even to ride two-up at a reasonable speed you need a fair bit of experience. When the ride is going (well) that’s okay. But when something happens, you need to be able to have the skills to stop and manoeuvre around someone.”

William Raisin-Shaw did not see James Gould crossing Beach Road in August last year. He went through the red light, coroner Graeme Johnstone found, “under the pressure of the following bunch of cyclists”.

Undoubtedly pack riding has its benefits. “If you get in a group, you might do it in two hours, and 2.20 on your own,” says Quinlan. But that pressure can also be dire as pack members in some instances race to outpace one another. In delivering his finding into Gould’s death, coroner Johnstone said the Hell Ride had degenerated into a race between aggressive cyclists trying to set personal bests. “One must not underestimate the difficult group dynamics and pressures on individuals to go along with the mass of training or racing cyclists,” he concluded.

Watch a pack carefully. There’s a certain skill to keeping your distance while maintaining speed, all the while making sure you take your turn at the front of the pack. But that need for speed, especially on a public road, can be disastrous.

“There is little doubt that large groups or bunches of cyclists running pedestrian lights or red lights is a recipe for disaster,” the coroner warned. “It is only a matter of time before we see a catastrophe when a car proceeding through an intersection with a green light strikes a group of cyclists.”

That warning may have been heeded. “The majority of riders are now seriously controlling the behaviour of the group they are in, stopping at red lights,” says Barber. In the year since the Hell Ride fatality, “there has been a significant cultural change,” he says. “But there is no legislative change.”

And so the weekly ride continues, albeit with a couple of police cars prominently waiting at the start. Yet for all the criticism the Hell Ride attracted after Gould’s death, this fatality was, in fact, a rarity. Of the 220 unintentional deaths involving cyclists since 2000, James Gould was one of only two pedestrians thought to have been killed. Almost all the other deaths were of cyclists.

“Everyone worries about being knocked off and you hear about it all the time,” says Robert Castellani, who is unusual in acknowledging the toll his cycling habit takes. “In my family it’s difficult. I ride a lot of kilometres during the week. My wife, her brother was killed in a bike riding accident in 2002.” (Dr Timothy McArdle, a GP, was on a training ride near Warragul when he was knocked over by a car.)

That Castellani persists with cycling says much about the depth of his passion. Then again, when it comes to athletes on two wheels, passion seem to flow in every direction. “Here are some silly old fools trying to take some responsibility for their health by bike riding and sometimes I feel there is so much against poor old bike riders,” says Castellani, who has found that abuse is not such a rarity for a cyclist encountering a motorist. “I’ve had eggs thrown at me. I’ve had water bottles squirted at me. I’ve had apples thrown.”

Confides Justin Heitman: “I’ve had people abuse me and spit out the window at me.” He has continued road cycling despite having seen up close the terrible toll it can cause. Indeed, in the wake of James Gould’s death, it wasn’t long before Heitman was back on Beach Road. “The day after James’s accident I went for a ride,” he says. “And a car tried to push me off the road.” J

Staff writer Fiona Harari’s previous story was “The party people” (September 15-16), about event planners.