

Handout Mentality – 50 years after Russell Mockridge

On 13th September, 50 years will have elapsed since the death of Russell Mockridge in the Tour of Gippsland. We tend to remember the announcement of sad news in relation to where we were and what we were doing at the time. For me the news of Mockridge's death came with a feature about him in the quality British monthly magazine Sporting Cyclist. The article was written by the Scottish journalist John Burrowes, who ghosted Mockridge's autobiography "My World On Wheels." The piece was written prior to the fatal accident and focused on the hopes for a successful return to Europe after an unparalleled record three seasons in Australia. The Editor of Sporting Cyclist, Jock Wadley, felt that the article, with its emphasis so much on the future provided a poignant tribute and it did. I remember it more than anything written about Tommy Simpson eight years later. Or any other cycling magazine.

Russell Mockridge was an enigma. Born in Laverton in 1928 and brought up in Geelong, he looked scholarly but despite his Geelong College background he only dabbled with the academic life. He won the 1952 Grand Prix of Paris beating multi world sprint champion Reg Harris and another man who went on to take that title – Jan Derksen. At the time Harris and Derksen were experienced pros, Mockridge an amateur. The 1952 Olympic Kilometre Time Trial and Tandem Sprint Gold Medalist, he finished the 1955 Tour de France over 3830 kms in the days when just over half the starters managed to complete the race. The only other sprinter to achieve this transformation that I can think of is Patrick Sercu. That was in the 70s. In the 50s it was almost unheard of for a track sprinter to start the Tour. At the time of his death, Russell Mockridge was the reigning national sprint and road champion.

Mockridge was a man who did not mix easily and lived out his convictions of rightness. He was naturally shy and tended to be over trusting of others. At one stage he felt called to the priesthood and briefly walked away from his cycling career. When he was awarded a race he thought he hadn't won against his long time rival Enzo Sacchi, he went to the judges and got the decision reversed. He refused to sign a bond to remain amateur for two years after the 1952 Helsinki Olympics and was only admitted to the team after the Mayor of his home town Geelong, Bruce Purnell brokered a compromise where his ratepayers put up a bond to keep Mockridge from joining the pro ranks for twelve months. The courage of his convictions did cause him some trouble with that great Australian institution - the chop.

Russell Mockridge won the first race he rode after politely asking his co-marker, one Don McGregor, if he'd mind if he went on alone. By his third club race he was riding off scratch and in his first season he was third in the Melbourne to Castlemaine. He won the Australian Amateur Road Championship in only his 18th start. In the professional ranks in this country he was the strongest of the scratch bunch and towards the end of his sadly shortened career, occasionally rode away from his fellow scratchmen. On the road he sometimes rode one out because he was not asked in and sometimes he refused to join a joke until the race had gone far enough to see who was prepared to put in and who wasn't. On the track, save for one infamous Austral where he started on the scratch mark with Sid Patterson and Oscar Plattner and no agreement, he accepted that the chop was a necessary part of handicap racing.

I was sponsored to Australia as a ten pound Pom by someone who knew Russell Mockridge and got this one from some of his circle of friends. Mockridge was unbeatable in a road sprint so the opposition, I was told, tended to get a bit naughty. In one sprint finish it was arranged to throw the contents of a bidon in his face. Short sighted without his spectacles, this slowed him down but just for the time to sit up, clean the specs and put them back on. He still won.

Mockridge's two fastest times in the 1956 and 1957 Warrnambools remain legends of Australian cycling. In 1956, with 10 companions, one of whom lasted only 16 kms, he set the world's fastest average speed for a road race. In 1957, with just Jim Taylor for company he was only 19 minutes slower. Taylor remembers clinging to Mockridge's wheel for mile after mile and enduring the greatest suffering he had ever known. The pair caught second scratch at Stoney Rises and sailed straight past them. Some say it took a week for Taylor's eyeballs to return to their sockets. In those years the race started in Warrnambool and finished on the Melbourne Showgrounds on the last day of the Show.

In his later career Mockridge had been training by running on the sand dunes of Portsea with Herb Elliott's innovative coach Percy Cerutti. For a man who could roll like Fabian Cancellara and sprint like Tom Boonen he added another talent, testing Cerutti's "pulse pedaling" theory with multiple ascents of Mount Dandenong. He was planning on returning to Europe for the 1959 Giro D'Italia. In 1959 he would have started to ride against a young Jacques Anquetil, also an Olympic medalist at Helsinki. We'll never know how that one would have played out.

Russell Mockridge was riding out the Australian road season to fund his return to Europe when he died. His first open event had been the amateur Tour of Gippsland and the professional version of 1958 was his last. At the notorious Clayton Road – Dandenong Road intersection - a diagonal crossing in a dip and this was in the wild days of give way to the right – the scratch bunch met a bus and Mockridge was the sole victim. A rider of prodigious talent at the peak of his career was taken by a cruel act of fate 50 years ago on September 13th.

