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A DARING MAN AT THE OLD LADY

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It is common knowledge that the world's best-known cycle race, the Tour de France, has been held since 1903. Until 2005, no high-wheel rider had ever taken part in this race, but that year, Josef Zimovcak, from the small town of Veselí in Moravia, Czech Republic, decided to enter the Tour de France as a professional—riding a high-wheel.

His plan was simple. Each day he would do a stage, to be followed the next day by the peloton of Tour riders. When he contacted the organizers for support, they didn't take him seriously. During a stage, all roads are closed to traffic. They said that what he could do the day before or the day after the race was up to him. Of course, no one believed him capable of such a performance on a high-wheel. No wonder, they had never heard of Josef Zimovcak. Although I knew him, I didn't believe it was possible either. Completing the Old Lady, as the race is dubbed, on a high-wheel bicycle would surely be impossible.

Who is Josef Zimovcak? In 2005 he was 48. Years earlier, the one-time athlete and then cyclist had to forget about competitive sports. He had lost an eye in an accident but he never gave up sport for enjoyment. He found occasion for this in riding a high-wheel that he borrowed in the early 1990s from a local museum. When he had to return it to the museum, and couldn't find an original to ride,

he decided to build a high-wheel all by himself. He made the first one in 1993 and to date he has produced about 200 of them. And being a sportsman body and soul he started to race with a high-wheel. In 1996 he rode on a cycle track in Brno 522.504 kilometres in 24 hours. In 1998 he crossed the United States from Los Angeles in California to Jacksonville, Florida, in 28 days. In all, he rode 4,356 kilometres, or 2,723 miles, averaging 97.3 miles per day.

He dreamt of entering the Tour. The problem was, such an enterprise demands money, among many other things. He found a sponsor in a curious way. Josef is the manager of a regional branch of the American insurance company Amcico. On one occasion, he went to a large firm that manufactures plastic windows to insure the two owners. He didn't talk to them about insurance for more than a few seconds: Messrs Petr Ingr and Roman Kozumplík refused emphatically. Then one of them remembered he had heard of Zimovcak's trip across

America. “Is that him, here now?” he asked. To cut a long story short, half an hour later it was agreed that the firm RI Okna of the town Bzenec in the Czech Republic would sponsor Josef’s Tour de France.

Now it was necessary to train. From November 2004 to June 2005 Josef rode on his high-wheel a total of 12,000 kilometres, even training in Corsica, sometimes spending seven or eight hours a day behind the handlebars. For the Tour he made four wheels, 48, 50, 52, and 54 inches in diameter. The two small ones were for steep climbs (with cranks 300 mm long!), the bigger ones for riding on flat ground and downhill. He fitted the front wheel with a modern brake and learnt to go downhill with his left foot on the footrest (step), the right one bent on the saddle. He could go on like this for as many as twenty kilometres, sometimes going downhill at over 40 km/h.

He formed an accompanying team, took leave from work and went to France. Now it should be said the press viewed his efforts with condescending smiles. The well-known Czech racer Pavel Padrnos, who had done the Tour seven times and was for several years in Lance Armstrong’s team, gave him valuable advice and in the end told him in all friendship that it was nonsense and that Josef had no idea of what he was getting into. And how right Pavel was.

To give you an idea, one of the “royal stages” is 212 kilometres (132 miles) long. This is the famous climb to the top of the Col du Galibier. It starts 300 metres above sea level and ends at an altitude of 2,645 metres; below, the temperature was 22EC, at the top it was 6EC. And it’s only one of three such hills in this stage! The climb is so steep that one cannot do it with a high-wheel. It’s not that Josef couldn’t do it with his muscular force but the front wheel slipped so much that he remained rooted to the spot. For a few hundred metres he had to push. And where he pedalled he wore the tyre on the front wheel to the rim so it had to be changed. He mounted the wheel at seven in the morning and finished at two in the morning, to recommence again the next morning. And that was just for starters, the Alps.

The Pyrenees are much tougher, with steeper climbs, worse surfaces, sharper bends. The biggest

problem was the saddle, or rather, Josef’s backside. He could see that sitting on a wheel for eight hours in training was too little, what with some stages now lasting fifteen, seventeen hours. In the middle of the Tour a doctor told him that further riding was out of the question as there was risk of infection. The points where his backside touched the saddle were practically skinned. It was clear that if Josef gave up his Tour, it would not be because of any lack of strength or will—he would be defeated by his health problems.

The fears proved unfounded and Josef didn’t let up. In stages that were not too hilly his average speed was 25 km/h (15.6 mph), averaging 30 km/h (18.7 mph) on flat ground. He had snatched victory, it seemed.

Then came stage nineteen of twenty-one, with only 300 kilometres on flat ground remaining to Paris. As he was riding down a low hill the tyre came off the rear wheel and he came a cropper at a speed of some 30 km/h. What happened afterwards Josef only pieced together from what people later told him. He lay on the road unconscious, with blood trickling from his ears, and the doctor thought at first that Josef was beyond help. He did get help in hospital where he was taken by helicopter.

The diagnosis was two and a half hours of unconsciousness, concussion, a broken jaw, a fractured skull, two teeth knocked out, lacerated wounds in the face and head, a broken rib, and a collarbone fracture. He could hardly see with the one healthy eye because he had pushed his glasses into the root of his nose, and he was battered all over. He was released from hospital after eleven hours with the advice that he had better stay in 48 hours for observation. It was two in the morning, two and a half stages before the finish. The sponsor went to him, took his hand carefully in his hands, thanked him for a heroic performance, and home he went.

And Josef? He recalled it in these words:

From the beginning of the Tour I knew that some crisis was imminent; something would happen in those 3,607 kilometres. It happened very close to the finish. But I was ready to overcome any difficulty. When they brought me from hospital, I woke up in the morning after three hours. Broken, smashed up, all stitched up, I

laughed for a moment in the back of my mind at how I ended up. But straightaway I thought, just a moment! Am I to be stopped now by two teeth knocked out? Give up now? Come back and face the horror in the Alps and Pyrenees once again? And I recalled a police car that overtook me on a hill, and a policeman got out, stopped me, came to me and embraced me. But if I said I wanted to ride because of other people I would be lying. I did the Tour solely for myself. Nothing could break me mentally but physically I felt terrible. I let them take me to the place of my accident to finish the stage and then the remaining two. The problem was I couldn't mount the bicycle by myself. They had to take me there. And on I rode, reaching Paris in two days.

When a Czech Television editor asked after the finish what Josef would do now, he said, "I've missed quite a lot; got to get back to work".

Josef did the Tour in 192 hours net, riding at an average speed of 18.78 km/h. For comparison: the winner, Lance Armstrong, did the same route in 86 hours, averaging 41.94 km/h.

Josef Zimovcak decided that the Tour de France wasn't enough. This year (2006) he set out

for the Giro d'Italia, which is said to be even more taxing than the Tour. This time too he was to be faced with a crisis and this time too, just before the very end. When he reached the finish of the penultimate stage, he learned that the accompanying car had had an accident and a motorcyclist who had hit the car died in the crash. Josef immediately gave up and did not start the last stage of the Giro. This may have been his most glorious victory.

Such is the story of Josef Zimovcak. Why does he do all this? He's just obsessed with beating unbeatable records. Is there any sense in it? Well, it just fills him with happiness. Is this normal? No, it isn't normal. But thanks to people who aren't normal our life is richer, more colourful and interesting. Incidentally, once there was a chap, a forester by trade, who toyed with the idea of joining two wheels with a wooden frame. And he succeeded in doing so. He sat on the contraption, scooting with his feet, the first man to ride a two-wheeled vehicle. If you asked his contemporaries what they thought of him, what do you think they would say? Oh, they would say Karl Friedrich von Drais wasn't normal.