

Cycling in the 19th Century in Gent, Belgium

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The earliest mention in Flanders of a velocipede dates to 1819. In a local Doornik Journal *La Feuille de Tournay* of 23 April 1819, mention is made of a man

from Brussels named Karr who imported into Belgium a bicycle similar to the model that Baron Von Drais had made. [Figure 1]

Between 1819 and 1865 no accounts have been found of any bicycle contests or sightings in written reports. City people enthusiastically engaged in drinking beer and local forms of entertainment such as animal games (e.g. cock fighting), shooting and bowling games, and mast climbing. Exercise for the nobility included drinking cognac,

hunting, dancing, fencing and horse riding arts. Near the end of the 1860s a small breakthrough for the bicycle was at hand. Velocipedes became more and more fashionable and riding schools appeared in the main cities. [Figure 2]



Figure 1: Picture of a Draisine (repro. Miat in Museum Gent)

There is also a first mention of bicycle races. On Sunday 11 April 1869 a velocipede event took place in Gent on the Begijnhoflaan. [Figure 3]

According to the *Gazette van Gent* these races attracted a lot of attention. Originally they were planned on Easter Monday but did not take place due to major traffic congestion problems on that day.

They were postponed until April 11 and these were so successful that a second event had to be programmed in July. [Figure 4]

This form of entertainment, which was

CONCOURS
DE
VÉLOCIPÈDES
A GAND,
le Dimanche 11 Avril 1869.
à 2 1/2 heures précises de relevée, au boulevard du Réginaige.

PROGRAMME DES COURSES.

VITESSE.

1. — Vélocipèdes à 3 roues.
1^{er} Prix. — Une médaille en vermeil.
2^e id. — id. en argent.

2. — Vélocipèdes à 2 roues.
1^{er} Prix. — Une médaille en vermeil.
2^e id. — id. en argent.

LENTEUR.

3. — Vélocipèdes à 2 roues.
1^{er} Prix. — Une médaille en vermeil.
2^e id. — id. en argent.

OBSTACLES.

4. — Vélocipèdes à 3 roues.
1^{er} Prix. — Une médaille en vermeil.
2^e id. — id. en argent.

5. — Vélocipèdes à 2 roues.
1^{er} Prix. — Une médaille en vermeil.
2^e id. — id. en argent.

Vélocipèdes de petite dimension à 2 et à 3 roues.
Course de vitesse, spécialement réservée aux enfants.
Prix. — Une médaille en argent.

Dans les Courses de vitesse et à obstacles le premier arrivé a le 1^{er} prix et le second arrivé le 2^e prix.
Dans les Courses de lenteur le dernier arrivé a le 1^{er} prix et l'avant dernier arrivé le 2^e prix.
Dans chaque Course il ne partira que trois concurrents à la fois.

PLACES RÉSERVÉES SUR L'ESTRADE :
Premières 2 fr. — Secondes 1 fr.

Figure 3: Picture of the programme for a velocipede race in 1869 (photo City Archive Gent)

new for Gent, was so successful it was nearly impossible to get a seat as a spectator on the main street and platforms had to be built for this occasion.

The velocipedes rode in a parade with a musical corps in front towards the starting line. There were participants from all



Figure 2: Picture of a Boneshaker School (photo Miat). Originally published in Harper's Weekly - February 13, 1869. (USA),

veel corps en de aanbidders in amselinge hoor ontvangen.

Gemengde berichten.

De groote wedstrijd voor velocipeden, die den 2^o dag na Paschen zal plaats hebben om 2 1/2 ure namiddag, op de Begijnvest te Gent, belooft curieus te zullen zijn. Er zullen liefhebbers van verschillende steden verschijnen. Er zullen twee estraden opgericht zijn, eene voor 1 muziek, voor den *Café du Boulevard*, en de andere bij de plaats van vertrek en aankomst der mededingers. Men zal op die estrade kunnen plaats nemen mits eene kaart van 50 centimen per persoon.

Te dier gelegenheid zal er ook eene velocipede met één wiel rijden, wat zeer aardig is. Het is een uitnemend groot, en zal in hooge mate de aandacht der nieuwsgierigen opwekken.

De engelsche brouwers zijn in onrust. Het vreemd bier moet een aanzienlijk recht betalen alvorens in Engeland in te komen, en het gouvernement is van zin dat inkomrecht zoo veel te verminderen dat de vreemde bieren op den zelfden voet als de engelsche oog slechts aan een zoogenaamd excise recht zouden onderworpen zijn.

Eene erge zaak en welk op dit oogenblik al de

Figure 4: Picture of article in Gazette van Gent April 1869 (City Archive Gent)



Figure 5: Picture of Gustaaf Stragier (collection Bouqué Overmere)

major cities. There were also very beautiful young ladies, dressed with trousers and vest, who rode on 2 wheeled velocipedes.

The races were mainly for speed, but there was also one for the slowest rider where the winner was the one who came in last but still riding.

Bicycle races in those days were very spectacular and experimental. For instance, there was an experiment with a one wheel velocipede, but this was not a big success.



Figure 6: Picture of Hubert Houben (collection Bouqué Overmere)

Quote from the *The Journal*:
 “people were very curious to see the big one wheeled velocipede being ridden, but they were somewhat disappointed with the result. The velocipede has been ridden but the rider had need for a lot of help from many friends to continue his ride. Some of the friends started the wheel and its rider on its way and others were needed to keep them in balance. The operation was surely not very well optimised and this experiment is to be redone.”

Soon after this, velocipede shops opened and local newspapers began to report the results of bicycle races. Around 1870 bicycles were still very expensive and relatively dangerous. Most of the velocipedists were young aristocrats. It appealed to their competitive spirit and sense of risk, and the bicycle provided them with adventurous travel possibilities.

In spite of this burst of enthusiasm, the long-term future of the velocipede did not seem very bright. A large number of bicycles were being sold at public auctions, indicating a decline of interest. We had to wait till the end of the 19th century, with the invention of the pneumatic tyres, before cycling and races attracted widespread interest again.

Cycling in general at that time included 4 aspects. First, long distance rides; second, record attempts and challenges; third, local races; and fourth, the rise of cycle clubs and velodromes.

1) The long distance races:

These races were mostly ridden between major cities. In 1893 a



Figure 7: Picture of Flag advert in 1895 (collection UB Found Gent)

long distance ride from Gent to Oudenaarde and back (approx. 70 km) was won by Gustaaf Stragier in 2 hours and 12 minutes, which was 7 minutes in front of the second finisher, Deschaepmeester. Both of these riders were amongst the best riders in the country at that time. [Figure 5]

2) Record attempts and challenges:

The most important and renowned record ride of the period was the one by Charles Terront in 1893 from St. Petersburg to Paris. The Belgian Hubert Houben from Brussels was a very well-known cyclist who won many two-man races in the 1893-1895 period. [Figure 6]

The most famous encounter in Gent at that time was initiated by Gustaaf Stragier who challenged William Cody (alias Buffalo Bill), bicycle against horse. [Figure 7]

The duel between Stragier and Cody took place in the Gent velodrome in 1895. Cody was in Gent with his Wild West Circus

at that time. The challenge attracted a mass of people and was a very bizarre race. On the inside of the track in the velodrome a sand track was laid, so that the horse could run alongside the track. That gave Cody an advantage of 10 meters per round.

Cody and Stragier had to ride for 1 hour - Stragier on his bike and Buffalo Bill on his horse. Cody could change horses as often as he wanted to, choosing

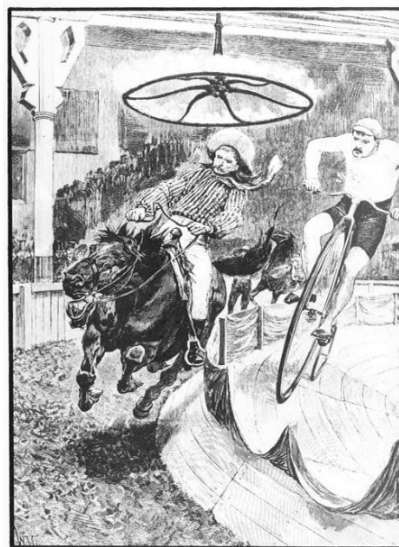


Figure 8: Picture of race hippo-cyclist (repro Miat Museum Gent)



Figure 9: Picture of board of the Gent Cycle club (photo Miat Gent)

from a batch of 6 horses. The first day of two, Stragier won the race with 50 meters ahead of Cody, while on the second day Buffalo Bill won. Everybody, including the organisers, were happy with this outcome.

Table 1: Number of Bike Shops in Belgium – 1893-1900

Year	Number of Bike Shops
1893	12
1894	13
1895	19
1896	23
1897	28
1898	35
1899	51
1900	58

[Figure 8]

3) Local races:

These were attractive meetings with a local character: music and races took place together. The races were combined with obstacles and required certain agility and skills of the riders. These obstacles were specifically put in the race and were not so much based on strength. Examples of obstacles were: putting a stick through a ring during the ride; crossing a 4 meter long and 40 cm wide board mounted on a pile of wood like a balance; passing under a cord tied between 2 trees, which required riders to dismount and climb on again; riding over a big tree log or a trough of shallow water were further obstacles.

4) Rise of cycle clubs and velodromes:

Gent had one of the first cycle clubs in the country. A newspaper article dated 27 April 1869 speaks about “la société Sport Vélocipédique Gantois, établie au café du Boulevard du Béguinage nr. 51”. This is the same club that had organised races for velocipedes earlier that month. [Figure 9]

The Gent velodrome was founded in 1892 in the gardens of the local hospital De Bijloke alongside the orphanage. The track was made of concrete with high bends and had a length of 370 meters. The middle square could be used for festivals, jumping, tennis - and soccer games. [Figure 10]



Figure 11: Picture of Ed. Vandersluys factory advert (collection Miat)

Finally some numbers:

Table 1 deals with cycle merchants in Gent before 1900. The shops and factories are only mentioned after 1893. There are no records before that period. We see that they increase in number each year. They were mainly located around the centre of town and specialised in importing foreign bicycles, mainly British. There are only 5 constructors. The local makers were Boterdaele, D’Haenens – Gathier (with factory), Goossens & Steyaert, Van Wassenhove and Ed. Vandersluys (with factory). [Figure 11]

Interestingly, whereas there was a decline in cycling in other countries after 1896 as the bicycle boom came to an end, in Gent growth did not stop as Belgians, like the Dutch, took to cycling as a life-style. [Table 1] ●

Sources.

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Figure 10: Picture of the Gent Velodrome (collection A. Vander Haeghen)