



by William Humber

backpedaling

Albert Schelstraete-Coulier: A Lifetime of Achievement

few people are as committed to making the Hall of Fame case for a lifetime veteran of cycling as was Sudbury-based writer and historian Arnold Devlin.

I've never met Schelstraete-Coulier, but I'm sure you appreciate why I'll be a little personal in simply referring to this giant of the sport by his first name, Albert.

He was born in 1918 in Longpre along the Somme River in the Picardie region of north-western France. The family's roots were in Belgium, and so it was with their fellow countrymen that he and his parents settled when they immigrated to Delhi in southwestern Ontario in 1927. Belgian emigrants worked in the tobacco and sugar beet fields of Delhi and Tillsonberg, but their overriding enthusiasm was cycling, and in this passion, they implanted in the region something more resilient than smoking, though few could have known this at the time.

Albert demonstrated so much early talent that he returned to Belgium to live with relatives and race in the "Kermis," a cycling festival of races on narrow country roads around a small village. Racers rode a loop of eight to 10 kilometres a half-dozen times or more, with the race finishing in the village square.

The 18-year-old, with the familiar last name but an emerging Canadian identity, impressed the villagers of Oudenaarde, Ronse, Mouscron and Waregem in the Flemish Ardennes. Monetary prizes, tight corners, friendly bets and the presence of scouts for the profession-

al cycling teams turned these races into highly competitive affairs, much like the atmosphere of a small Canadian town hockey arena.

Albert won four of the 12 races he entered, but his progress was cut short by a crash and layoff of 12 weeks, during which he was unconscious for 21 hours. He returned to Canada, a country less-enamoured with the glories of cycling's open-road competition, but one, along with the United States, that had fallen in love with the sport's indoor six-day form.

Six-day cycling was a true Depression-era phenomenon, as off-duty hockey rinks were transformed into velodromes with the installation of a board track. Upon this oval track, two- and three-man racing teams competed, with one man from each squad required to be on the track at all times. And all times meant just that — 24 hours a day, six days a week, ending just as midnight ticked on Saturday and the Sunday blue laws came into force.

Though six-day races flourished in Toronto, Montreal, New York and Chicago, Albert didn't have to go that far, at least initially. In 1939, he built his first track in Delhi. Spectators filled its available seating for 1,000 people.

The first race in late July 1939 attracted competitors from the big cities, but it was young Albert with partner René Cyr who stole the show and provided the impetus for him to make his jump to the professional ranks, where he would join, among others, the incomparable Torchy Peden, the gangling redhead from Victoria, B.C., who had dominated the sport for years.



Albert Schelstraete-Coulier: a giant of the sport

courtesy of Bob Schelstraete

Before the jump to the pros, however, Albert was named to Canada's 1940 summer Olympic team. It was a dream not to be realized though when it was discovered he still had Belgian citizenship. More catastrophically, the opportunity became moot when World War Two caused the cancellation of the Games of 1940 and later those of 1944.

Albert was a professional in the concluding golden age of six-day cycling. He had two fifth-place finishes in Buffalo and Montreal, but further glory was curtailed with the demands of war and, in Albert's own personal life, injuries, marriage and a new son. The world had moved on and so it seemed had Albert's cycling days.

But he was a determined man, and the post-war years would bring an entirely new focus to his cycling engagement. There were tracks to build, young cyclists to coach and, eventually, a return to the competitive world itself.

The challenges and the triumphs of those postwar days will be a future column, as will an examination of why Devlin believes this man deserves recognition by his country in its premier sporting museum.