

Book Review

***The Golden Age of Bicycle Racing in New Jersey.* By Michael C. Gabriele. (Charleston, S.C.: The History Press, 2011), 126 pp., illustrations, bibliography, \$19.99.**

If you associate competitive bicycle races exclusively with scary Alpine roads, victory laps along the Champ-Elysees, and chemically-enhanced leg muscles, well, you might be surprised to learn that in the early 20th Century, New Jersey was a world-class cycling capital. The sport's top performers flocked to Newark and Nutley, students at Rutgers and Princeton organized cycling clubs (no doubt figuring that football players shouldn't have all the fun), and a young rider from East Orange was one of the international circuit's hottest riders.

Like most of his fellow Garden Staters, journalist Michael C. Gabriele knew nothing of New Jersey's place in the history of bicycle racing. That changed in 1980, when, as a reporter for the Nutley Sun, he researched and wrote a series of stories about the old Nutley Velodrome, site of some of New Jersey's most-memorable bicycle races. Decades later, Gabriele has produced a small, useful narrative of a truly forgotten era in the state's sports history.

The author has done a fine job in recreating the excitement and hype of cycling not only in Nutley but in the Vailsburg section of Newark, home of a first-class velodrome on South Orange Avenue, as well as in Asbury Park, Plainfield, Irvington, Millburn, and many other cities and towns.

Gabriele take note of races like the Newark-to-Princeton affair in 1893 and the tri-state relay race in 1894 which attracted some of New Jersey's greatest cyclers. He also brings to life some of the larger narratives of the sport's history in New Jersey, noting, for example, that in 1898, an African-American cyclist from Indiana, Marshall Walter Taylor, won a major race in Asbury Park in 1898. Cycling, then, was integrated nearly a half-century before Jackie Robinson broke baseball's color line, the author notes.

Other wonderful characters spring to life in Gabriele's well-illustrated volume. Frank Kramer of East Orange won 32 races in Europe in the first decade of the 20th Century, a remarkable achievement. Camden-born Arthur Augustus Zimmerman competed in Australia as well as Europe in the late 19th Century. Vintage pictures of the two men and their bicycles bring to life a truly bygone era.

Cycling, of course, isn't what it used to be. The velodromes are gone and barely remembered. But Gabriele does a good job explaining why historians of the state should know more about this athletic obsession, and why it mattered.

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