

None of the parts on Merckx's bike was stock. The Campagnolo Record post was drilled in back and pierced radially below the seat collar.

butes or happenstance. In cycling there is only one such place, the velodrome, and only one event, the hour. The absence of wind, the regularity of terrain, and the depth of self-knowledge necessary to maintain a near-peak effort for sixty minutes have chopped through the ranks of great cyclists like a scythe through a field of summer hay. Of the thousands of professional cyclists of the last 98 years, only 19 have set a new standard for the hour. And that is why an insider such as Merckx appreciated this face of cycling. In 1965, only 15 had held the hour record. This was a very exclusive club, much more so than the list of Tour winners, and therefore a natural goal for Eddy.

Feeling his destiny in the hour record was natural for Merckx, but time became a great barrier. Year after year, he raced 200 times or more. He did so not just to devour his competitors, as his nickname, the "Cannibal," implied. He would have loved to spend more time at home, especially during the winters, but he found it impossible to resist the argument that if he didn't show up for the six-day races, attendance would be low and his less-famous colleagues would not be paid as well. Never has the sport seen a finer example of professional responsibility.

It wasn't until 1972 that Merckx decided to include the hour in his season's plans. His idea was to ease up on the number of races so he would have energy enough for intense preparation. In practice, though, he barely altered his full schedule. During the year, he won no less than fifty races, among them a fifth Milan-San Remo, a fourth Tour de France, and a third Tour of Italy.

During the Tour de France, he acquired a saddle sore that needed time off the bike, and so, in August, he began to seriously contemplate the hour. The "how" would be broken into two parts, physical and technical preparation. The other question was "where"?



Many riders care little about the machinery they use, but as in many things, Merckx was an exception. His attention to detail bordered on fanatical. It was he who designed his hour bikes, and some special road frames with similar geometry. In general, the frames were more upright and the saddle position more forward than typical of that period. Merckx's friend and sponsor, Ernesto Colnago, quickly translated Eddy's ideas



into several orange-painted custom machines. From mid-September on, Merckx used the road frames exclusively, explaining "I am, above all, a roadman. I shall attack the hour record as a roadman must. I must finish the season at the peak of my road form, for that is how I shall have the best chance of beating the hour record."

Indeed, in the first outing on his new bike, the Tour of Piedmont in Italy, Merckx intentionally attacked with almost fifty miles to go. This solo ride was done to test himself. Any reference to rivals was left far behind.

At the same time, however, the apparently simple question of location became more complex. In 1968, the Danish rider Ole Ritter explored the modern possibili-

ties of high altitude by setting a record of 48.654 km in Mexico City. (I say modern because W. W. Hamilton made the second-largest increase in distance covered during the hour in 1898 in Denver, Colorado.) That left Eddy torn between the traditional site of the Vigorelli Velodrome in Milan, Italy, and the obvious advantages of Mexico.

Vigorelli was attractive because it involved little travel, would allow direct comparison with all but two previous records going back to 1935, and would better satisfy the publicity demands of his Italian sponsors, notably Molteni sausages. But a trip to the Vigorelli on October 12 was disappointing. Days of rain had left the track saturated and unfit for riding.

Immediately Eddy began to think of Mexico. There were three principal reasons against such a trip and only one for it. First, he was well aware of Ferdinand Bracke's disastrous attempt in Mexico in 1969. Bracke had set the record in 1967, and this was his attempt to retake it from Ritter, but the thin air in Mexico City asphyxiated him. Eddy's solution was to ride a home trainer every day while

hooked up to an air mixture as thin as Mexico City's. Second, compared to the record itself, the publicity from the event meant nothing. Eddy was ultimately to pay over \$20,000 of his own money to fulfill his purist dream. The third objection, regarding comparisons to previous winners, would be answered by the one major asset of Mexico, the air's thinness. Eddy meant to set a record so inaccessible that no one could dispute its worthiness.

At last departure day came. Eddy and his retinue flew from Brussels to Mexico City via Montreal, a 13½-hour flight during which Eddy drank a couple of whiskeys and slept not at all. At one a.m., Mexico time, he was in bed, and eight hours later he took his first look at Olympic velodrome.