

Merckx's obsession with weight extended to the dust caps, which he removed, the axles, which are hollow, and the nuts, which are undersize.

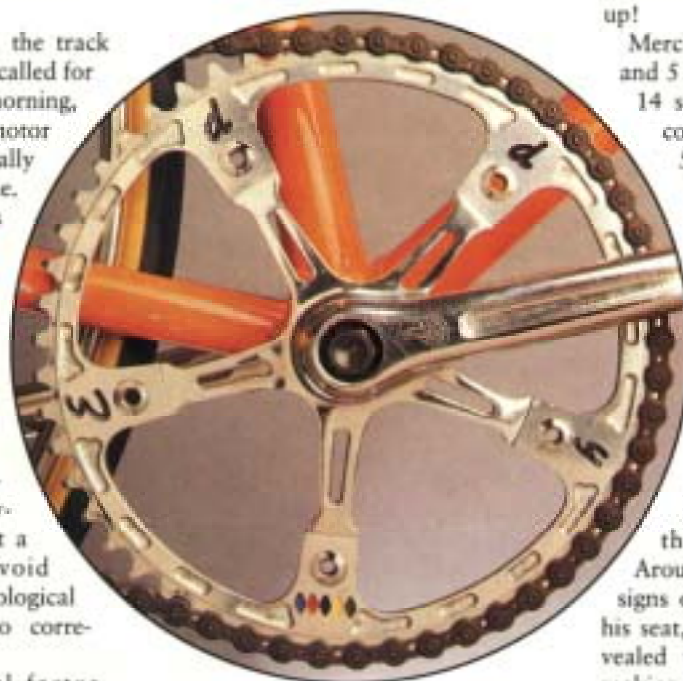


Precursor to Super Record? Campagnolo Record Crankset (below) had milled, relieved and polished arms; chainring's inner webs were removed.

He showed no trace of fatigue. Indeed, after a few test laps he decided to gear up from his 52x15 to 52x14. (Only Jacques Anquetil had used a higher gear, 52x13, during his non-homologated attempt in 1967.) The Belgian felt so good he drew up a schedule for a preliminary ride to break records at 5, 10, and 20 kms.

Then disaster struck. A tropical deluge engulfed Mexico City that afternoon, leaving the track unrideable. So Eddy went to the Mexico City sports car circuit the next morning to train behind a derny. That afternoon the rains came and soaked the track once again.

Day three, Tuesday, found the track still unusable, but the forecast called for clearing weather. In the morning, Eddy did some laps at the motor circuit, and that evening finally got in some more track time. Jean Van Buggenhout, Eddy's manager, favored an evening attempt. Often the air was calm then, the track was at its driest (if it hadn't rained), and the humidity was up a few percentage points which would help offset the dry throat a rarefied atmosphere frequently imparts. On the other hand, the Molteni team physician, Dr. Cavalli, noted that a morning attempt would avoid pushing Merckx against his biological clock. Eight P.M. in Mexico corresponded to 3 A.M. back home.



Weather was the critical factor. Merckx decided to try the next morning, Wednesday, October 25, 1972. Furthermore, he gave up the idea of a special attempt at shorter distances. Rather, he decided to grab the 10 and 20 km records along the way. His friends were aghast. Even that great gambler, Anquetil, warned him about an overly rapid start that would leave him vulnerable to any letdown late in the ride. As sportsmen often do, Jacques spoke bluntly: "Don't kill yourself and blow up afterwards." But the thought of starting at express speed excited Eddy. "Excellent," he muttered more to himself than those present, after reviewing a chart equating each 5-km increment to time and speed, "I must suffer during the opening kilometers." Maybe he even dreamed of pushing the record

over 50 km.

At five the next morning, Eddy was up and pounding on doors in the hotel—no fewer than 53 journalists accompanied him to Mexico. He breakfasted on toast spread with his favorite cheese brought from home, ham, and coffee. By 6:50 he was at the track and by 8:00 he had completed his warm-up and was ready to go. In that hour, over 2000 people, alerted by Radio Mexico, rushed to the track to witness this historic 60 minutes. Also watching were Belgian ex-king Leopold, Princess Liliiane, and their daughters Esmeralda and Maria Christina. They eschewed the royal box for banking seats, "The better," Leopold explained, "to appreciate the ride."

At the last moment Windsor stickers were slapped on Eddy's otherwise unlabeled bike. A distracted Merckx saw this as an acceptable nod to his Mexican hosts (Windsor is a Mexican bike), but Colnago was infuriated.

At 8:56 exactly Eddy Merckx began his great ride. A bell was sounded each lap. If he were on schedule, he would cross the start line as it sounded. After the first two laps, Eddy was a quarter lap up! Giogi Albani, who had the job of standing where Merckx actually was when the bell was rung, had a hard time keeping up!

Merckx's first kilometer passed in 1:10 and 5 km in 5:55.7. Already Eddy was 14 seconds up on Ritter. Onlookers couldn't believe their eyes. A second 5 km in 5:58 obliterated Ritter's 10 km time by 5 seconds. Ritter's 20 km time was eclipsed by 11 seconds. And remember, Ritter had set his records on a special ride, separate from his hour attempt. Compared to Ritter's hour pace, Merckx was 35 seconds ahead at 20 km.

Albani urged Merckx to slow a bit, and he did, dropping to a 6:07 per 5-km pace for the next seven 5-km segments. Around km 35 Merckx began to show signs of being human. He fidgeted on his seat, and the grimace on his face revealed the superhuman effort he was making. There was never any question of his taking the record, however, only by how much. Far from fading, his last two kilometers were reeled off in 1:13 and 1:12. His final distance: 49.431 kilometers.

He could barely speak when he first dismounted. Pictures of the moment show his face a mask of pain. Quickly, though, Eddy regained his normal composure and was able to answer questions.

"Throughout this hour, the longest of my career, I never knew a moment of weakness, but the effort was never easy," he said. "It's not possible to compare the hour with a time trial on the road. Here it's not possible to ease up, to change gears or the rhythm. The hour record demands a total effort, permanent and in-

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