

# **Conflicts Between Amateur and Professional Bicycle Track Racing: The San Jose Burbank Velodrome, 1935-1941**

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San Jose, California has a history of bicycle track racing dating from 1892 that continues to the present. The Burbank Velodrome was built in 1935, largely with Works Project Administration (WPA) funds, and racing commenced in 1936. Racing continued through 1941 and the velodrome, built on land banked school property, was tom down after the start of World War II to make room for a second high school in San Jose.

This paper describes the Burbank Velodrome's alignments with national governing bodies, what effects the changes in amateur and professional governance of cycling (particularly those of 1938) had on the racing program at the Burbank Velodrome, and how riders reacted to the situation. Data was gathered from newspaper articles in the San Jose Mercury Herald and archival work at the San Jose Historical Museum. Additionally, several former racers and one former cycling official (who has also served as historian for the city of San Jose) were interviewed; most of those interviewed also shared their scrapbooks and other memorabilia. The San Francisco Bay Area has a large community of cyclists and individuals involved in the current cycling governing body, the United States Cycling Federation. These individuals, plus Andrew Ritchie, biographer of Major Taylor, shared insights and allowed me access to their private collections of primary and secondary materials on cycling's history in the United States.

Bicycle track racing activities in San Jose were unique because the Burbank Velodrome was the only velodrome West of Chicago in the late 1930s with a regular racing program. Both professionals and amateurs raced the first season, but racing was strictly amateur beginning in 1937.

This site became a significant focal point for in-fighting in cycling's competing governing bodies. The National Cycling Association (NCA) technically governed all cycling activities, which included board track racing, considered professional at the time. Because the Burbank Velodrome was a board track, the National Cycling Association was the jurisdictional body. However, the NCA delegated control of amateur cycling activities, including selection of Olympic teams, to the Amateur

Bicycle League of America (ABL). The Burbank Velodrome then, became a living contradiction as a professional organization assumed control over amateur racing activities.

The riders themselves were caught in a difficult situation. Most of the riders had aspirations of professional careers on the six-day racing circuit, and therefore wished to remain in good standing with the National Cycling Association. Membership in the NCA however, technically disqualified them from amateur competitions away from the Burbank Velodrome, such as qualifying events for the Olympics and national championships. In 1938, when the Amateur Athletic Union gained control of the Amateur Bicycle League of America, it decided to enforce the amateurism/professionalism issue and issued letters in August of 1938 to all the riders at the Burbank Velodrome. These letters informed riders that they were jeopardizing their amateur status by riding at an NCA-sanctioned facility. Concomitantly, riders were informed by the NCA that if they failed to race at the local track they would be suspended by the NCA. Riders were forced to make decisions which resulted in some suspensions and limited their ability to compete and affected their access to the burbank Velodrome by national governing bodies and their officials and representatives penalized athletes who had no control over the political scene of their sport.