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Mile a Minute Murphy: **Paced Bicycle Racing and the Quest for Speed at the End of the 19th Century**

On June 30 1899, Charles Murphy, a professional racing cyclist from Brooklyn, New Jersey, rode at 60 mph (1 mile in 57 4/5 seconds) behind a railway locomotive on a specially prepared track on the Long Island railroad. It was an extremely hazardous and foolhardy exploit, but Murphy succeeded. Struggling to stay in contact with the rear of the speeding train, he was finally grabbed and lifted to safety by helpers leaning from a specially constructed platform. The event was reported on the front pages of almost every American newspaper, and even in some European newspapers. Another rider, Anderson had made a similar ride, in 1896. Murphy was feted as “Mile a Minute” Murphy for the rest of his life.

Murphy’s ride was the most dramatic and widely publicized of many spectacular bicycle speed records that set new boundaries and redefined human athletic capacity within the bicycle racing boom of the 1890s. The high-wheel bicycle had laid the foundations of an energetic sport in the 1880s, and with the commercial development of the safety bicycle and the pneumatic tire in the late 1880s and early 1890s bicycle racing had emerged as one of the largest, most popular and commercially dynamic spectator sports. In the search for greater speed over both short and long distances, the pacing of riders to lessen wind-resistance was universally recognized as a crucial dynamic of the sport. In any race the shelter one rider received tucked in behind others was always understood as a tactical advantage. Riders were at first paced by tandems and triplets (multi-cycles) to achieve higher speeds, then by experimental steam and electric-powered machines, and finally by gasoline-powered motorcycles. Bicycle and tire manufacturers, who used each new success for advertising purposes, sponsored speed trials. In England, France, Germany and the United States, new championships were hotly contested on the many specially constructed velodromes in this highly dangerous, noisy sport, and long distance races pushed average speeds up to as much as 100 kph. The 1-hour record was especially coveted, and became the object of international competition, and the professional “stayer,” a rider capable of maintaining a high speed over a longer distance, achieved fame in the sport.

This search for speed, using a complex, constantly developing, high-tech pacing machine, can be seen as an aspect of modernism in the 1890s. Using a new definition of collaboration between specialized machinery and the human body, paced bicycle racing extended the boundaries of athletic capability and provided a dramatic sporting spectacle capable of attracting thousands to the velodromes. A nasty accident in Berlin in 1909, when a large gasoline-powered pacing machine shot off the track and exploded in the crowd, forced authorities to place limits on the power of pacing machines and effectively

ended the experimental period of paced racing. However, the technical progress realized in the development of pacing machines in the 1890s was a crucial factor in the emergence of transportation technology. The large gasoline engines developed for these machines went on to become motorcycle, automobile and aviation engines, and the athletic and commercial pioneers of bicycle racing went on to become the pioneers of the huge automobile and aviation industries.

This period of bicycle racing history has been very little explored. The present paper explores it using primary source materials, including newspapers and the specialized cycling press.



Archivist Jackie Esposito with Hal Ray, NASSH photographer.