

The Historical Framework of Velodrome Racing from 1924 to 1930: A Kenoshan Perspective

Introduction:

In the 1920s, the sport of bicycle racing was the highest-paid sport.¹ Baseball and hockey were the other popular sports of the day but paled in the popularity of bike racing. Football was not very popular and still considered an underworld sport. Basketball did not even establish a league yet. Bicycle racers were also the highest-paid athletes. Baseball owners were corrupt and did not pay their players very well. The World Series of 1919 was the way by which some of the players tried to make additional money by throwing the series.² The players' plan failed and is known to this day as the Black Sox scandal. In the north border of Canada, hockey was popular but was not popular in the U.S. market yet. Hockey players at the time made around seventy-five hundred dollars a year, and good baseball player made even less at around five thousand.³ In contrast, the best bicycle racers could make one thousand dollars or more per race.⁴ Some racers reportedly made more than fifteen thousand dollars per year.⁵ This was a considerable amount of money at the time. Unlike other sports, the public at the time did not know exactly how much money the top riders made. In contrast to sports figures, the average worker was paid very little for a full day's work. For example, the average automobile assembly worker at the Kenosha Nash plant received two dollars and fifty cents per

¹ Susan Sutherland, *No Brakes* (California: Iris Press, 1995), 47.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, 48.

hour for an eight-hour day.⁶ The salaries in popular sports of today do not come close to the figures that bicycle racers made relative to the ordinary man of the day. Since bicycle racing was the highest-paid sport of the time, does this imply that it was the most popular sport of its day? Some racers of the day would probably agree with that statement, but it is unclear in historical information about which sport was the most popular. I do believe that bicycle racing was truly the sport of the era.

History:

When you study history, you notice major changes or movements. Many things happen in different areas at the same time and come together very quickly. This is the same thing that happened to bicycle racing in Kenosha during the 1920s. When the Whitecomb Track opened in 1924, it began to what would be a long tradition of bicycle racing in Kenosha. When Whitecomb closed in 1926, the Washington Park Velodrome opened in 1927; the tradition in Kenosha continued. Riders from all over the Midwest such as Milwaukee, Chicago, and St. Louis came to race on the track; and so did visiting spectators. From 1924 to 1929, Camp William's Whitecomb Track and the Washington Park Velodrome played a huge role in the Midwest bicycle-racing arena. The *Kenosha Evening Newspaper* reported that "bicycle racing was edging its way back as the most popular sport in Kenosha."⁷ This was initially due to J. A. Whitecomb and his new track, which made Kenosha recognized nationally for its track and events. The first track at Camp William made the velodrome at Washington Park possible

⁶ Kenosha Historical Society, *1924: Your Year In Review*.

⁷ "Fifteen Local Ready for Test," *Kenosha Evening Newspaper*, June 12, 1925.

due to the explosion of interest in the cycling world. The Whitecomb Track at Camp William and the opening of Washington Park Velodrome in 1927 kept Kenosha in the national spotlight.

To understand what happened and why one should learn the history of the bicycle, the track, the race, the rules of cycling and training. Bicycle history, most say, began with Baron von Drais in 1817.⁸ His invention, the draisienne or hobbyhorse, has two wheels of equal diameter with the front one being steerable.⁹ The hobbyhorse lacked the means of self-propulsion, and the rider straddled the frame and pushed the vehicle forward with his feet, much like the toys we have today for toddlers. In the 1860s, the velocipede (fast foot) was slightly popular.¹⁰ Made entirely of wood, this machine did have pedals with direct drive to the larger front wheel.¹¹ It was very uncomfortable to ride on the cobblestone streets of the day. They became an indoor fad, ridden in riding academies similar to today's roller rinks. Improvements to this were the high-wheeled bicycles we see in the early 1880s.¹² These bikes had a smoother ride than the velocipede and could be ridden outside. However, the size of the front wheel made it difficult to mount, dismount, and control. The tendencies of the front wheel to turn, taking the rider's head into the pavement, lead to the term "taking a header."¹³ Women, due to the dress codes of the day, found these bikes impossible to ride. By the late 1890s, the first modern bicycles appeared; they were made possible by improvements in technology.¹⁴ Small metal chains were now practical to mass-produce. The design of the bike returned to two equal tires with a sprocket and chain drive. Smaller, lighter, and easier to control, this design made bicycles

⁸ D. Mozer, "International Bicycle Fund," n.d., [www.ibike.org/history use.htm](http://www.ibike.org/history_use.htm).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

popular as a leisure and practical mode of transportation. In fact, cycling had become so popular clubs began to form, the earliest of which was the League of American Bicyclists formed in 1880.¹⁵ They lobbied for improved paved roads, which would be rideable in all kinds of weather. By the 1890s, the league numbered over a whopping one hundred thousand members.¹⁶ The 1890s have been called the golden age of the bicycle.¹⁷ An important member of the Wheelmen and Kenosha resident was Nobel Tarbell.¹⁸ He was a century rider. Nobel Tarbell was able to ride one hundred miles in twelve hours or less.¹⁹ His most notable achievement was a ride in 1906 from Lake Geneva to Erie, Pennsylvania, in fifty-one hours. Mr. Tarbell rode over 110,000 miles in his life.²⁰ Nobel Tarbell was one of the original people who started the trend of the sport of bicycle racing racing in Kenosha.

Track-bicycle racing is not a complicated sport. Anyone can start racing if they want to put the work into becoming a decent racer. The equipment, which is needed to race, simply includes a bicycle, helmet, and a place to race. You can buy other fancy equipment, but it really is not necessary and racing may be more fun if done with an older bike with less equipment. The bicycle is a very simple transportation device. The oval tracks used for track-bicycle racing are called velodromes.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Coffman, *The Nobel Record of Nobel Tarbell*, "Motorcycling the Bicycling World," August 4, 1926, p. 48.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Susan Sutherland, *No Brakes* (California: Iris Press, 1995), 20.

Velodrome tracks were developed so that racers could ride in a confined area without slowing down, and to accomplish this, corners of the track are banked at seemingly steep angles.

Velodrome Basics:

Velodromes can be found both indoors and outdoors. They can be made out of wood, concrete, asphalt, or cement, grass, or dirt.²¹ Velodromes vary in length and can be 333.3 meters around, but they can be as much as 500 meters or more.²² “Portable” tracks are shorter and usually are around 200 meters or even smaller. In 1977, Kenosha obtained the stature of having the oldest operating velodrome in the United States after fifty years. The velodrome is a 333-meter track and has a 23-degree banking. All velodromes have two long sections called straights, which are linked by two curved end sections, giving the track a total of four turns.²³ Track-bicycle races are always run in a counterclockwise direction. This is so, so that all four of the turns are to the left. The turns on a velodrome are usually “banked,” or constructed at an angle, and the banking on some of the shorter tracks can reach such incredible angles that it would seem impossible for anyone to ride a bike on them. The centrifugal force generated by the riders’ speed, however, usually keeps them firmly glued to the track’s surface no matter how steep the banking may be. The area inside the track is called the infield and is used as a warm-up area for riders and as a seating area for competitors and coaches. Encircling the infield, just at the edge of the track itself, is a flat paved surface called the apron. This can be used as a warm-up area, as a place for mounting your bike, or as a runoff area for coming off

²¹ Ibid., 21.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

the track in case of an accident. Several lines are painted on the track and run around the full oval. The line, usually black, at the bottom of the track nearest to the infield is called the pole line and is the line along which the length of the track is measured.²⁴ Some seventy centimeters up the track from the pole line is painted another line, usually red, called the sprinter's line. The area between these two lines is called the pole and is involved in the rules for a very popular event called the match sprint.²⁵ About halfway up the track is another line called the stayer's line, which is usually blue and is used in team racing and in motor-paced events as well.²⁶ Velodromes constructed in the 1920s consisted of either clay or dirt. Velodrome spectators now and then are not only spectators but could be in the next race if they choose to. Susan Sutherland describes spectators as "velodrome racing has its own character and its own characters [47]."²⁷ For spectators, the velodrome was the place to be. The velodrome at Washington Park was and is an ideal setting for watching a bike race. The *Kenosha Evening Newspaper* reported, "Huge crowds would gather at Washington Bowl Track to watch the races. In 1930, twenty thousand spectators came to the bowl to see the unstoppable Robert Thomas."²⁸ Bobby Thomas was a national champion and local hero.

Velodrome Bicycle and Equipment Fundamentals:

A track bike has only one gear and no brakes. A track bike has a direct drive, which means that while the back wheels turn, the pedals will turn also. When you are racing on a velodrome, it is important to be aware of the degree of control because the bike lacks brakes.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 46.

²⁸ "Kenosha Velodrome Association," n.d., <http://www.333m.com/velohist.htm>.

The reason why velodrome bicycles lack brakes is to reduce weight and to keep anything sudden from occurring that might cause an accident. If a rider needs to make a quick stop, he or she can fall down off the bike or hit something to slow down the bike. The wheels on the bicycle play an imperative function. The process of placing the tire on the rim is the same as it was in the 1920s. There are two different ways the tire can be put into the rim: glued or clincher type. Clinchers are tires that hold on to the rim by a bead, which clinches to the rim and held in place by the air pressure.²⁹ The second term is called tubular, which also could be called a sew-up.³⁰ This is a tire that has a tube sewn into it, and then the tire is glued to the rim. The tubular process is a lighter method than the clincher method due to the amount of air in the tire. With the tubular method, one hundred and twenty pounds of air rather than the one hundred and sixty.³¹ Serious racers sometimes use silk because it is able to save weight and is strong, but can be very expensive. The goal is to make the bike as light as possible because it allows the bike to be lighter, giving the racer an edge on the track. Depending on the rider and conditions, the bike can swiftly move around the track over thirty miles per hour. The frame of the bicycle plays a great importance to the rider. The bicycle must have a higher bottom bracket to ensure that the bicycle's pedals will not hit the ground during a race, which may cause an accident.³² The bike must have a shorter wheelbase than an offtrack bike. The stability of the bike is affected by the rake or slope, which is determined more or less by the front fork of the frame. The slope is the angle the rider's back has relative to the frame. The main concerns here are responsiveness and aerodynamics and not comfort. To have increased stiffness and handling

²⁹ Susan Sutherland, *No Brakes* (California: Iris Press, 1995), 36.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, 38.

will be to your advantage on the track. Aerodynamics is the ability of the bike and rider to slide through the air, cutting down air resistance.³³ Every little advantage that the rider can have gives them a better chance of victory on the track. Today's racers use special headgear and lightweight clothing to reduce air friction. The pedal has two major important functions. First, the rider must have a solid contact between his foot and the pedal.³⁴ If this solid contact is not made between the rider's foot and the pedal, the transfer of power between his legs to the wheels will not be made, the consequence of which would be the loss of power transmitted to the wheels.³⁵ The other important issue concerning pedal involves the position of the rider's foot. The rider's foot must never come out during a race. If this were to happen, the rider would lose time, and it might possibly cause a serious accident.

Velodrome Events:

Now that we have seen the equipment needed to race, we can get on the track and see the different kinds of events. The events that will be discussed will consist of match sprints, keirin, miss and out, point race, Madison, and scratch race. The match-sprint race is an all-around test of power, speed, and skill. The match sprint is a one-kilometer race and is a slow race overall.³⁶ It might sound odd, but it is common in this race for riders to come to a full stop. Riders would balance their bicycle in an effort to make the other riders pass. This is commonly known as track stand. Speeds in the final lap of this race can reach as high as forty-five miles

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 37.

³⁴ Ibid., 38.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ *Bicycle Racing 88* (Kenosha: Kenosha Wheelmen Velodrome Association, 1988), 10.

per hour.³⁷ During the last lap, timing is very important. If a racer's timing is off even by a little, it may determine if one wins or loses.

The keirin race consists of six laps where the first four and a half laps the riders are behind a motorcycle. The riders can try to gain ground on other riders but are not allowed to move in front of the motorcycle in the first four and a half laps of the race.³⁸ There are around six to eight riders who are each testing how each of the rider's bicycle handles what the riders call "bumping and grinding" each others on the track.³⁹ As the motorcycle accelerates, it will reach around thirty miles per hour. In the last one and a half laps left in the race, the motorcycle leaves the track. During this time, the riders are able to do whatever they can to win the race without the restriction of the motorcycle. This race takes someone who is able to take a hit or two on the track, and I recommend that experienced riders only participate in this dangerous race.

Miss and out is another race that is sometimes referred to as the devil's race.⁴⁰ The last rider to cross the finish line after each lap is taken out of the race until three riders remain. The last three remaining riders are given one lap to position themselves before the last lap, where the riders battle it out for the victory. For both spectators and competitors, the miss-and-out race is very exciting.

A point race is basically a mixture of sprinting and swift endurance racing.⁴¹ This race can have sprints for points that are given at every six laps. The race can be broken down like

³⁷ Susan Sutherland, *No Brakes* (California: Iris Press, 1995), 64.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 31.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 118.

this. First, points are given by the order of who crosses the finish line first. There are two ways that you can win this race. First, have the most points at the end or complete more laps than any other rider.⁴² Laps that are ahead of other riders', count more than points. The rider that has less points but completed more laps would finish ahead of a rider with more points and not as many laps. This is a more complicated game, which involves strategy by the racer.

The Madison race has some history from events held at the Madison Square Garden and is very popular in Europe. When competing in the race, be prepared to be racing at very high speeds. Just like a relay race the Madison involves two people. While one person is racing, the other person is resting at the top of the track. The speeds of this racing are very fast because as one person races, the other rests. This race takes immense practice since you are traveling at high velocities and should be done by more experienced racers for safety reasons.

The scratch race is not only an enjoyable race but also one of the easiest races that a cyclist can compete in. The race starts with a group of racers competing for a certain number of laps; the first rider who completes the set number of laps is the winner. Whoever completes the set number of laps is the winner.

The sport does involve a high magnitude of concentration and focus, but the sport can be extremely fun and competitive. The best part about the sport is that you do not need an immense amount of equipment to get started. If you either enjoy watching the races or competing in events, either in the Washington Park Velodrome or in another velodrome, you will surely be having a marvelous time.

Velodrome Racing in Kenosha and its Impact on the Middle West:

⁴² Ibid.

Now that the ins and outs of bicycle racing have been explained, the history of bicycle racing in the Midwest and in Kenosha can be examined. Kenosha, during the 1920s, was nationally recognized like never before mostly due to bicycle racing. The beginnings of bicycle history in Kenosha started in the 1890s. In 1890s, Kenosha's first bicycle club was formed, and it was called the Kenosha Wheelmen. The Wheelmen, working with a national organization called the League of Wheelmen, lobbied for a bike path between Kenosha and Racine. Construction was started in July of 1890 and completed the same year. The path was very popular and increased involvement of the local population to the sport of bicycling. The Wheelmen, like most of the biking enthusiasts, moved quickly from leisurely activities to racing. The Wheelmen in 1907 had a Labor Day celebration, which included a bicycle race where over seven hundred participated.⁴³ The drawing of the many participants was a good sign for the continued existence of bicycle racing.

At first, bike racing was a sport of endurance. Even the grandfather of bike races, the Tour de France, was one of endurance, not speed. Only as the sport matured did speed become important. Racing would come into national standing in Kenosha, and the Midwest would be the center of this popular and exciting sport.

Names such as J. A. Whitecomb, Nick Wade, and Robert Thomas are names that excelled the sport of bicycle racing to its heights in the 1920s. Their names are still alive in the hearts of bicycle riders today. In 1924, Kenosha exploded into the sport of bicycle racing. The Whitecomb Track had the Kenosha locals scrambling for their bicycles. Before the famous Washington Park Velodrome, Kenosha bicycle racers competed at Camp William. The track

⁴³ Louis Lois Roepke Bader Stein, *Kenosha, 1835-1988: A Pictorial History*.

was a flat dirt track but amazingly attracted hundreds of racers and spectators from across the Midwest area. James A. Whitecomb is considered the “father of bicycle racing” in Kenosha.⁴⁴ Whitecomb was not only the president and the manager of the Whitecomb Wheel Company but was also known as the person who brought professional bicycle racing to Kenosha. The business of selling bicycles in Kenosha was booming. Thomas W. Kollman owned a bicycle shop in Kenosha and was very successful during this bicycle boom. Mr. Kollman stated, “Of course, we are one jump ahead of most cities in the state, having a cycling fan like J. A. Whitecomb in the midst at all times.”⁴⁵ Whitecomb dreamed of building a track in Kenosha that would attract the best racers in the world. It would be a saucer-shaped oval that would allow the racers to maintain high speeds all around the track.⁴⁶ He started to promote the idea of such a track to the local businessmen, and his work caught the eyes of two local landowners: the Plous brothers and Captain Alexander.⁴⁷ They donated the land for the project that was located on South Sheridan Road (the lease to the new track was for only a year); this track would be known as Camp William.⁴⁸ The track was built on the part of the camp called the Troop E drill field.⁴⁹ Today, a McDonald’s is located on the site. Whitecomb now had the means of making his dream into a reality.⁵⁰ Kenosha would have the best bicycle track in the Midwest at Camp Williams. The *Kenosha Evening Newspaper* wrote,

Kenosha has been overwhelmingly voted as the logical city in the state to hold the annual Wisconsin championship bike races this season according to official information give out here today. Kenosha has the most modern facilities for

⁴⁴ *Kenosha Evening Newspaper*, “Whitecomb Off to Bike Meet,” 1926.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, “Whitecomb Keeps Cycling Alive in Kenosha,” August 5, 1926.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, “To Build Bike Race Oval Here,” 1926.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

staging such an event, the new quarter mile bike speedway at Camp William. This piece of construction would be suitable for all the demands of the state competition. According to A. J. Whitecomb racing promoter, August the sixth will be the day of the races with star cyclists from Green Bay, LaCross, Oshkosh, Milwaukee, Madison, will all represented.⁵¹

The city gave quick approval to the building of the new track. One year later, July of 1924, the quarter-mile-long racing oval track was ready for competition.

The opening of the track was heralded with great fanfare. The Whitecomb Track at Camp William excited the city of Kenosha. Whitecomb wanted everyone to come see the new track. A newspaper ad stated, "We want every bicycle rider to ride on the new track at Camp William. The boys of Troop E will be glad to direct you. Go down and try it out."⁵² A parade was held to commemorate the occasion. An advertisement in the *Kenosha Evening Newspaper* read, "Bicycle parade Friday, July 11. Parade starts at seven o'clock sharp. Mount your bikes and let's go!"⁵³ The riders assembled east of Main Street near the Rhode Opera House. The parade was led by Nobel O. Tarbell, the veteran Century Road Club member. The oldest and youngest riders received prizes. The oldest rider was T. J. Armstrong, who was at the age of sixty-four.⁵⁴ The youngest was eight-year-old Michael Conforti.⁵⁵ Other prizes were awarded. Mr. Whitecomb rode his twenty-five-year-old bicycle in the parade. The judges awarded him a prize for having the oldest bicycle.⁵⁶ Various other prizes were also given to some of the participants. To the city of Kenosha, this bicycle parade was important. While the parade may have been fun, it also brought the people of Kenosha to the track and involved

⁵¹ Ibid., "New Oval Built by Whitecomb at Camp William to be Course," 1924.

⁵² Ibid., "Bike Riders Invited to Ride on New Track," 1924.

⁵³ Ibid., "To Have Parade Tonight," Friday, July 11, 1924.

⁵⁴ Ibid., "Name Winners in Keno Bike Races," 1924.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

them with the sport of bicycle racing.

The first races at Camp William were on the next day, Saturday, July 12, 1924. Admission was fifty cents and included free parking and live entertainment by the famous Simmon's Band.⁵⁷ George Green, the Simmon's bandleader, was noted for writing the tune that played during many championship races. In 1924, the average salary was two thousand one hundred ninety-six dollars.⁵⁸ Fifty cents was a lot of money at the time. This shows that people were willing to spend money on bicycle racing and that the sport was popular. The event was a huge success. The *Kenosha Evening Paper* stated that a record number of spectators were at the Camp William races.⁵⁹ "Speed kings from Chicago, Milwaukee, Madison, La Crosse, and Kenosha came to break in the Whitecomb's track at Camp William."⁶⁰ To show how exciting and successful the race was, it was documented in the *Kenosha Evening Newspaper* that "to call the afternoon program a success would be putting it mildly when spoken by those who attended."⁶¹ The track was in great praise. The *Kenosha Evening Newspaper* wrote, "It was said that Kenosha's speedy racing oval, the Whitecomb Track at Camp Williams, was the mecca for the state's best bicycle racing talent when the annual Wisconsin State Championship was conducted here Saturday."⁶² "The highest point total at Whitecomb's Track went to Roy Schulz."⁶³ "Schulz was a junior rider and showed remarkable speed to win the featured events

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid., "Noted Riders in Bike Races Here," 1925.

⁵⁸ Kenosha Historical Society, *1924: Your Year In Review*.

⁵⁹ *Kenosha Evening Newspaper*, "Noted Riders in Bike Races Here," 1925.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., "Hiram Event Scoring Star," 1925.

⁶³ Ibid., "Whitecomb Track Scene of Races," June 22, 1925.

of the day.’⁶⁴ All of the winners that are eligible for nationals were given free transportation plus expenses to Buffalo, New York. Buffalo, New York, would be where the national championships would be held on September 5 and 6. It was reported in the *Kenosha Evening Newspaper* that teams from Madison and La Crosse did well considering that they had less experience compared to those from Milwaukee and Chicago. The quarter bank turn on the track was something new to the Madison and La Crosse riders, which greatly reduced their chances of winning. The Milwaukee Steele Boys took advantage of this and finished with the first three places in state. This big bike-racing event on Whitecomb Track at Camp William opened the floodgates to a well-respected track and a hopeful bicycle racing future in Kenosha.

Out-of-town visitors, as well as locals, came to the bowl to watch Kenosha stars race. People would sit on the hill for hours, watching races on the dirt track with such Kenosha stars as Corky Thomas or Robert Thomas.⁶⁵ Spectators watching a velodrome race have it all both now and then. A velodrome race puts you in the heart of the excitement. You can see it all and every second of the race. Sometimes it may be hard to go get food at the concession stand because you do not want to miss anything.

Of all the racers in Kenosha’s rich history, Robert “Bobby” Thomas is the most famous of all. Robert Thomas’s story will be examined to show how he helped boost the sport of bicycle racing in Kenosha to a national level.

In Kenosha, Robert Thomas was “the man” of the time. He was and is the largest hero of Kenosha’s bicycle history. This youngster propelled himself and Kenosha into the spotlight.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Louis Lois Roepke Bader Stein, *Kenosha, 1835-1988: A Pictorial History*.

Robert “Bobby” Thomas became interested in the sport of bicycle racing at the early age of twelve. His age made him special to the sport because he was young and a very successful star in Kenosha in other places. It was reported by the *Kenosha Evening Newspaper*, “There is nothing halfway about Robert Thomas when he straddles his bicycle for bigger and better prizes. He does a thorough job of it and leaves nothing for an argument relative to his superiority.” Robert Thomas was a dedicated athlete and worked very hard on the track. Robert Thomas and his brothers were highly respected in Kenosha.

On May 19, 1925, at the age of twelve, Robert Thomas raced in the Chicago Tribune Bike Derby Sunday with fellow senior and junior riders.⁶⁶ Thomas was able to finish in seventh place out of sixty-five other starters. Whitecomb and Noble Tarbell expected that Robert Thomas would win big races in his future. They were right. In 1926, he was the Wisconsin State Junior champion. Thomas displayed spectacular ability of speed and professionalism as he raced around the local Whitecomb Track. It was the final year that the track would be open, and Robert “Bobby” Thomas took it out in style. Junior champs from Chicago, Milwaukee, and Kenosha lined up for a triangular match; and Thomas proved to be the best. Thomas beat out Ormal Steele, a Milwaukee ace. Thomas took four straight first places for a total of twenty points. George O’Brien, who was the clerk of the course, presented Thomas with a silver trophy. This was only the beginning. Bobby Thomas was smooth and unexcitable when racing. He went about racing in a businesslike manner. This was and is uncharacteristic for a person of young age. In 1927, Thomas finished second in the National Junior Championships at Philadelphia. He did come close but was unable to pull it off due to a nasty fall he took during

the quarter-mile race. But the fall did not stop Robert. He entered into the mile race in the afternoon. In that event, Bobby would be able to finish second in the meet. C. Atwood of Washington would become the winner at the nationals.

In 1928, the nationals were to be held in Kenosha at the new Washington Park Velodrome. The Wisconsin governor sent the lieutenant governor to the national championships at Washington Park by airplane.⁶⁷ This was the biggest event in Bobby Thomas's and Kenosha's biking history. Bobby responded by easily winning all his events. Local hero Bobby Thomas became Junior National champion, and ten thousand fans went wild.⁶⁸

In 1930, Robert Thomas won junior championship, and his brother, Corky Thomas, won the senior championship.⁶⁹ Robert Thomas was truly Kenosha's icon of the time. Not only did local fans love him, but he was also respected in the national level.

As *Kenosha Evening Newspaper* noted,

bike racing has been a tremendously popular sport in Kenosha for the last two years, and thousands of local fans and visitors are expected to see the Sunday "feature" Robert Thomas, the national junior bike champion.

Robert Thomas was something special to the local people and visitors who came to see Robert race around the bowl. It was reported in *Ripley's Believe It or Not* that "Kenoshans were so proud of Bobby Thomas and his brothers that they proposed to the city council to change the name of Washington Park Bowl to Thomas Bowl."⁷⁰

⁶⁶ *Kenosha Evening Newspaper*, "Kenosha Riders in Bike Derby," May 19, 1925.

⁶⁷ "Kenosha Velodrome Association," n.d., <http://www.333m.com/velohist.htm>.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ *Ripley's Believe It or Not* (Kenosha: Kenosha Historical Society Archives, n.d.).

However, this never came to be. In 1977, Robert “Bobby” Thomas wrote a letter to the Kenosha Wheelmen; it read,

I feel very honored and I want to thank you for thinking of me after all these years. According to the clippings in my scrapbook the Washington Bowl opened in July 11, 1927. Speeches of dedication were given by City Manager, C.M. Osborn, and Mr. Nick R. Wade, President of the Kenosha Advancement Association, before a packed hillside of ten-thousand people. Preceding that was a parade that started from the downtown Market Square, up 6th Avenue to Washington Bowl. Many drills and gymnastic teams were part of the opening day ceremonies.

I had the honor of being the first to win Junior Class, City, State, and National Championship on the Kenosha track. Since then, there have been 250 championships.

I cherish many memories made at the Bowl, and I went on to win 6 City titles, one at the old Whitecomb track, on South Sheridan Road; three City and State Junior Championships; four City and State Senior Championships, one runner up in Junior Class, one National runner up; and one National title and Junior Class.

I had the honor to represent the United States and to be the captain of the Cycling Team in the 1932 Olympics, held in Los Angeles, California. I lost in the quarterfinals to eventual winner.

I turned professional in the fall of 1932 and in 1935 rode motor-paced bicycle races in New York and New Jersey. They were held at outdoor velodromes on wooden tracks. I rode in 68 professional six-day races and had the opportunity to be teamed with riders from the United States, France, Germany, and Canada. One of my greatest professional thrills was winning at Chicago Stadium race, teamed up with Gustaf Killian (a great German champion) before 23,000 people, many of them Kenoshans.

The greatest thrill of all (amateur and professional) took place in the year of 1930, at Washington Park Bowl, when my brother “Corks” won the National Junior title and I won the National Senior title. We both won all the races in each class. If I could do anything all over, THAT would be THE DAY!

Most of my clippings are in five scrapbooks that date 1925 to 1940.

In my opinion the Kenosha track is one of the best in the United States, and I am so happy and proud to have been a part of its history.

In closing, I want to congratulate the Kenosha Wheelmen for their years of good work. Keep it up! Good luck in future years, especially this 50th anniversary year of 1977!

Sincerely

Bob Thomas⁷¹

⁷¹ *Fifty Years of Washington Bowl Racing* (Kenosha: Kenosha Wheelmen, 1977), 22.

Robert “Bobby” Thomas was a true hero in Kenosha in his time. His skill and attitude make him one of the finest bicycle racers in history.

Whitecomb Track lasted until 1926. The last race at the track was the biggest event of the year besides the state championships. Ninety-one bicycle racers would gather at the track for the annual Kohlman Fisk Race. This was the last race due to the fact that the lease would be up after this year. The best riders from Milwaukee that raced included Hi Everts, who was the state champion; Leo Steele; Russell Ridley; Bruno Mencus; and Merle Steele. Bobby Thomas, of Kenosha, was the junior champion. The success of Whitecomb’s 1926 state championships and the overall success of the track proved that Kenosha was the center of bicycle racing in Wisconsin. While the attendance was lower than expected for Sunday’s races, it grew 50 percent higher after Sunday’s races. With the support of J. A. Whitecomb, Bobby Thomas, and Nick R. Wade, the future of bicycle racing in Kenosha was to be a bright one in 1927.

Riders needed a new track, and veterans insisted that action should be taken to keep the tradition of bicycle racing alive in Kenosha when the Whitecomb Track closed. In 1925, in the *Kenosha Evening Newspaper*, the article “Passing It On to You” was a plea for a new track in Kenosha. With the rumors of the closing of the Whitecomb Track due to the fact that the lease would be up, veterans such as Nobel Tarbell were concerned about having a track to keep the tradition of bicycle racing going in Kenosha. J. A. Whitecomb (father of bicycle racing) brought the tradition into Kenosha with Camp William’s Whitecomb Track. When it

opened in 1924, the Whitecomb Track at Camp William made Kenosha the Midwest center for the sport of bicycle racing.⁷² The veteran bike riders wanted to know who was going to step up and build a new track. A group of veterans in Kenosha were on a mission to campaign for a new track after the Whitecomb Track would be closed due to the lease ending in 1926. Racers from all over the Midwest—from places like Milwaukee, Chicago, La Crosse, and Madison—came to race on the new track at Washington Park. When Whitecomb Track closed in 1926, Washington Park Velodrome opened in 1927 and did not disappoint the riders. Riders from Kenosha and around the Midwest called Washington Park “the best track in the Midwest to be ever built.” Fans who have followed the destinies of the bike races here in the past years are aware of the outstanding riders in Kenosha. The veterans are sold on the idea of a new track in Kenosha to “turn a dream into a reality.”⁷³

The veterans would get their wish of a new track. The natural arena on Washington Road became the center for Kenosha’s bicycle racing after the Whitecomb Track closed in 1926. Nick R. Wade was a very important person in the sport of bicycle racing in the late 1920s, and without his bold effort and determination to keep the bicycle’s racing in Kenosha long-lasting, it would not have been the center of bicycle racing in Wisconsin. Unfortunately, the lease for the land for the Whitecomb Track was for only one year. The track was forced to close in 1926. However, the popularity of the sport had grown considerably; the tradition of track racing needed a new venue. Nick Wade, a respected member of the bicycle-racing community, promoted the idea of a velodrome at Washington Park. Nick R. Wade subsidized

⁷² *Kenosha Evening Newspaper*, 1924.

⁷³ *Kenosha Evening Newspaper*, 1925.

a project that would produce a quarter-mile velodrome for the bicycle-racing fans and riders of Kenosha in Washington Park. The best bicycle racers in the Midwest dedicated one-fifth (333 meter) of Mile 9 as dirt track, and it was done with class. In 1927, Washington Park Velodrome held its first national championships; and later, it would hold seven more. The Washington Park Velodrome held more nationals than any other track across the nation.

The *Kenosha Evening Newspaper* wrote that “patrons of Kenosha sport, particularly the outdoor activities, are pouring out high-sounding praise these days for the Kenosha advancement association’s efforts in bringing about the development of the natural resources at the Washington Park into what is a magnificent stadium.”⁷⁴ The best bicycle racers in the Midwest on Sunday dedicated the one-fifth-mile dirt track. The Washington Park Velodrome was really needed in the city of Kenosha, and the dedication of the velodrome was done with class. Nick R. Wade was a very important person in the sport of bicycle racing in the late 1920s, and without his bold effort and determination to keep the bicycle racing in Kenosha, it would not have been the center of bicycle racing in Wisconsin.

There were so many possibilities as to what could be done at this new facility. It would not just be open to bicycle race but also to baseball, track, soccer, football, pageants, and any other sort of recreation. Whatⁱ was good about Washington Park is that people in Kenosha know about the park and its location. Known as the bowl because of its shape, it had sloping hills on three sides and can be used for sporting events as long as the ground is leveled and new grass is put in. Another idea for the park was to cut in bleachers for spectators of bicycle-racing events. The bleachers would be put into the hillside so that hundreds of spectators would

be able to have seats for the races. By the summer, it was said that this work would be started and then finished in the fall. Unfortunately, this work at Washington Park was never done.

Today, the tradition in Kenosha still subsists, but the popularity is small. As seen in the 1920s, bicycle racing was one of the most popular sports in America. I cannot completely prove that that was the most popular, but as the numbers show, they were paid the highest salary among other athletes. Today, the sport has made a complete U-turn to become almost extinct. Like many events in history, popularity grows and fades, and this was also true for bicycle racing. As seen by the amount of press coverage, the sport of bicycle racing on national level was booming in the United States in the 1920s. It reached a low point and almost extinction in the late 1930s and 1940s.

Conclusion:

Many factors have played into the decline of velodrome racing over the years. I suggest three possible reasons that caused the decline in velodrome racing: the Great Depression of 1929, WWII, and NASCAR automotive racing. The Great Depression and its damaging effects helped hinder the sport's progress due to massive unemployment in Kenosha as well as in the United States as a whole. Programs such as the Works Progress Administration Program dealt with the problem of unemployment. However, the Washington Park Velodrome was not included in this program. During this time, the sport of bicycle racing was stopped, and it looked gloomy for the future of the sport. Fortunately, the sport reemerged in the late 1950s and early 1960s but never regained complete dominance in the United States. WWII is my

⁷⁴ *Kenosha Evening Newspaper*, "Washington Park Oval Track," 1927.

next theory of why the sport declined in popularity. During the war, the men were gone in Kenosha in an effort of winning the war. Recreation was put aside, and unfortunately, this included bicycle racing for the most part. This decline in popularity ran well into the 1960s. But slowly, the sport began to come alive again, and a revival came from an unexpected source. Ice speed skaters were looking for a way to stay in shape during the summer months in the Midwest.⁷⁵ Bicycle racing is an excellent way to keep legs at their physical best, and this is why speed skaters developed an interest in the sport. The sport is still around today but is in terrible shape due to the lack of interest. But bicycle racing did not fizzle out and was “truly the sport that would not die.”⁷⁶ My other theory is due to the emergence of NASCAR and its popularity in the recent years. The sport of NASCAR took over bicycle racing in the United States because of the invention of the car and the excitement that comes with faster speed. The sport evolved in time, bringing faster machines to the track.

The sport of bicycle racing only truly exists in Europe as a mainstream sport. The sport of bicycle racing was truly at its peak throughout the 1920s and slowly declined in late 1920s and 1930s. The Depression hit the sport hard in 1929, and even though it recovered in 1930, it was not enough since World War II slowly put the sport to sleep. Will velodrome racing ever make a comeback as a popular sport in the United States? It is hard to tell, but bicycle racing continues to take place at Washington Park and other places in the Midwest. In the past few years, bicycle racing has returned to the national spotlight due to Lance Armstrong. He was the first American to win the Tour de France and has won seven races. A recent article in the

⁷⁵ Susan Sutherland, *No Brakes* (California: Iris Press, 1995), 47.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 46.

Chicago Daily Herald stated that a local cyclist circle was going to be renovated in hopes of bringing bicycle racing as a sport in Barrington High School.⁷⁷ Could bicycle racing slowly be on a comeback? Only time can tell if the sport will be back into the mainstream in the United States. Unfortunately, the sport will never be as popular as it was in the United States during the 1920s.

From the early stages of the 1890s to 1930s, Kenosha has not only engaged local attention but also national by making it the center for the highly popular sport of the day. The true heroes of the 1920s in Kenosha were J. A. Whitecomb, Robert “Bobby” Thomas, and Nick R. Wade; but without the Wheelmen of the 1890s, these men would have never experienced the excitement that both tracks brought them during the 1920s. These Kenoshans put Kenosha on the map, making it the center of bicycle racing in all of Wisconsin, and brought Kenosha on the national setting. People such as Carl Wilkins, Robert Pharr, and Tony Rufflo, of Kenosha, as well as the many others who live in Kenosha and in the Midwest who truly love the sport, will not let this great sport die. Without the leadership of these people, Kenosha would have never been as truly great as it was at the time.

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