

– MECHANICAL DOPING “NOTHING SHORT OF MOTOCROSS” –

Is there anything more rank in cycling than using a motor in a bike during a race? It's the latest in a long history of 'innovations' brought about by the desire to gain an advantage...

The ponytailed professor entered Paris and fell over exhausted. Man lost to machine, modern American technology triumphing over European sophistication. In his memoir, *We Were Young And Carefree*, Laurent Fignon wrote: “Firstly, as everyone knows, LeMond was unrivalled as a time triallist, much better than me when it came to riding alone and unpaced. In addition, he was using a very special bike equipped with handlebar extensions with elbow rests, giving him a far more aerodynamic position, and four support points – pedals, saddle, bars and elbow rests – which was totally revolutionary but also strictly against the rules.”



PHOTO: Graham Watson

MIXING CYCLING AND MOTORS...

A motorpaced race was part of the world championship schedule up until 1992. Rainer Podlesch demonstrates this curious aspect of cycling at the 1982 worlds when he finished third.

There's no link to the new phenomenon of mechanical doping but it's interesting to note that, in 1988, the gold and bronze medallists in the motorpaced event at the worlds – Vincenzo Colamartino and Roland Renn, respectively – were both later disqualified for... yep, doping.

Fignon protested the eight-second loss, but LeMond's troll-tipped helmet pocketed between shoulder blades, arms bowed on triathlete handlebars, sent the Luddite-loving Parisians into a furious frenzy. In the end, it made no difference. The next season, every time trial rider was turbo-ing on LeMond technology.

Years later, the same man who created those infamous aerodynamic handlebars, Boone Lennon, failed to persuade Andy Schleck to technologise up. The lithe Luxembourger lost to Alberto Contador only to win two years later when the Spaniard was found guilty for climbing on clenbuterol. The gods of doping giveth and they taketh away.

Eco-cycle makes hubs that pump enough electricity to charge a laptop so that one only has to unclick the rear wheel and email away. Meanwhile, Italian mechanical doping dealers say Femke Van den Driessche's cyclocross battery boost is archaic. Toss in \$200,000 and you have electro-magnetic hubs that not even the best heat-guns can detect. Imagine if Eco-cycle could make self-charging hubs. Store the 50 watts from the after-work Friday ride for use in the Saturday criterium.

Staging areas are filled with fathers and sons ogling premium carbon-fibre and tri-spokes, two-wheeled

machines that cost more than the four-wheeled cars on which they are stacked. So, what is mechanical doping and who is the mechanical doper?

We open this very magazine to inspect the latest Specialized/Trek/Pinarello centrefold and dream of how it could enhance our weekend performance. A good bike gives us more than hope, it suggests that while we might not ride *like* the best, we can at least ride *on* the best.

LeMond was a great cyclist. The handlebars made him greater. But even as a middle-class youth he was destined for greatness.

Nineteen-year-old Van den Driessche's parents had a full-home trailer with a witty logo of their bankrupt roofing company on the side, 'Wij dekken alles, ook dakken' – 'We cover everything, even roofs'.

Every amateur cyclist knows the van den Driessches. Brothers. Sisters. Father. Overnighting at every race. Together. Waiting. Scouting. She was already good. A potential star in a country of cycling fanatics.

Eddy Merckx says a six-month suspension and 180,000 euro fine is too light a punishment for Femke Van den Driessche. But who can blame the Van den Driessches for trying to get ahead? Even Eddy's son, Axel, now of Belgian nobility, who wanted nothing more than to do better than his father, a Merckx son with everything at his disposal, was charged with chemical doping.

The Dutch newspaper *NRC Handelsblad* tested the battery packs used in mechanical doping. The verdict: batteries are heavy. Large, exposed batteries can last 50-75 minutes. If concealed inside a frame, much shorter. Only 200 watts for 15 minutes.

Every day, fleeing a flat, riders hang behind a car to catch up to the peloton. But what if all riders had that 15 lithium-powered minutes? A post-crash kick. In 2010 when Contador unbecomingly sprinted away from Schleck's chain

trouble, morals aside, mechanical doping could have righted a chemical doping wrong.

Eddy Merckx calls Femke Van den Driessche's cyclocross treason nothing short of motocross. And perhaps he is onto something. Perhaps we should create an entirely new circuit for dopers, a circus circuit where anything goes. Mechanical doping, chemical doping, men and women alike, steroid freaks drag-racing \$6,000 machines with \$200,000 engines.

Since LeMond's handlebars we've had electrical powered gears, GoPro helmets, communication ear pieces, aerodynamic wheels, aerodynamic bars, click-in pedals, hundreds of kinds of fabrics and composites. Technology is cycling advertisers, cycling revenue.

Contador calls mechanical doping, "science fiction, a joke." LeMond advocated that the UCI should start using heat guns. But the truth is, cycling has always been about advantage, even if it is only by eight seconds. It is also time to ask ourselves, what do we want from cycling? Is it the man, the machine, or the two together. And who draws the line? The defeated French professor falling onto the cobble street or the underdog American who knew exactly the technology it took to win?

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