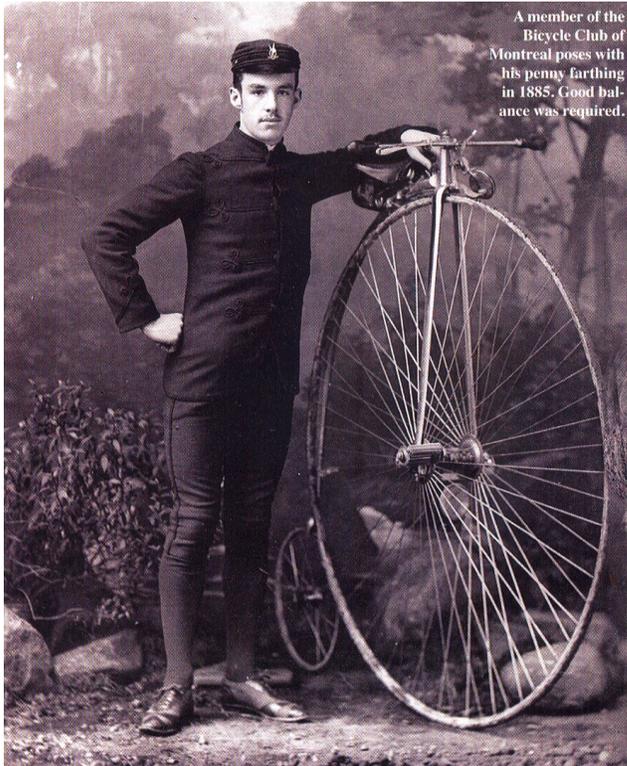


Wheelmen ride bicycles

Canada's leading bike race is part of a long cycling tradition in this country.

Christopher Moore

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A member of the Bicycle Club of Montreal poses with his penny farthing in 1885. Good balance was required.

“It was definitely a special day, going up to the start line in Brest,” says **Ryder Hesjedal**. “I was about the fourth Canadian ever in a Tour de France, and only a couple had completed the Tour.”

These days anyone with cable or satellite can watch day-by-day coverage of the Tour de France, the 107-year-old combination of sports competition, travel tour, and endurance trial. I get hooked every July, but particularly since 2008, when Hesjedal, of Victoria B.C., became the first Canadian in more than a decade to ride the Tour.

Canada's history of cycling is about as old as the bicycle itself. Canada has long been tied into new global technologies, trends, and fads, and as soon as something like a

bicycle – two wheels, pedals, handlebars – was invented in Europe in the 1860s, examples began turning up in Nova Scotia, in Ontario, and across Canada.

Before chain drives and gears were invented, pedals were connected directly to the front wheel, and the only way to increase speed was to enlarge the front wheel as much as possible. As a result, the *penny-farthing* was born. These spectacular machines – giant wheel in front, tiny wheel in back – were expensive, and riding one was a high-wire act. The bold young gentlemen, who founded wheelmen's clubs, first in Montreal, then across the country, thought of themselves as a special breed.

In the 1890s, the invention of chain drives and inflatable rubber tires produced the “safety bicycle” – the bicycle, as we know it today, more or less. Suddenly, everyone could rise and cycling exploded across the Western world, including Canada. In the 1890s, Canada had scores of small-town bike manufacturers. Tens of thousands of enthusiasts biked. Some of the Klondike gold rush miners even took bicycles to the Yukon with them.

The social impact was huge: Cheap, carefree transportation was available for everyone in a way that had never existed before. Some said bicycles did as much as the suffrage movement to unleash the independent spirit of women.

But the craze didn't last. Bike sales crashed early in the twentieth century as the automobile and streetcars took over. Hundreds of bike builders in Canada consolidated

into a single Canadian brand: *CCM*. The Canadian Cycle and Motor Company would dominate the market for most of a century. Biking became a hobby or a kid's thing in most of Canada.

York University geographer Glen Norcliffe is a historian of cycling who is sometimes seen riding his penny-farthing across southwestern Ontario. ("A penny-farthing gives a very quiet ride," he says. "No click of the gears, no chain, just the rush of the wind.") When I asked him about the history of the bicycle racing, he laughed. "If you put two cyclists together, well, pretty soon..."

Indeed, bike racing has a long Canadian pedigree. In the 1930s, Canadians like **Doug** and **Torchy Peden** of Victoria starred in the hugely popular North American six-day bicycle races (two-man teams rode Monday through Saturday, to avoid Sunday racing).

In 1937, **Pierre Gachon** joined a British team and became the first Canadian ever to venture into the Tour de France. Unfortunately, 1937 saw the *derailleur* introduced to Tour bikes, meaning riders could shift gears without dismounting. Without the new technology, Gachon was hopelessly outmatched. He withdrew on the first day. To make things worse, official Tours records still identify Gouchon as British.

Recreational cycling boomed in the 1970s, when "everyone had to have a ten-speed" (as William Humber's history of Canadian biking, *Freewheeling*, put it) or later, a mountain bike. Gradually, North America rediscovered the bike as commuter vehicle. Cyclists began to fight for space on Canadian city streets.

Canadian racers came back to prominence, too, led by **Jocelyn Lovell** and then by **Steve Bauer**, Olympic silver medallist in 1984. **Clara Hughes**, who won double bronze in cycling at the 1996 Olympics, followed them – this was before Hughes became a medal-winning Winter Olympian in speed skating. Also, in 1996, Alison Syder won Olympic silver in mountain biking.

In the 1980s, **Alex Stieda** and Steve Bauer became Canada's first serious Tour de France competitors. Starting in 1985, Bauer competed in eleven consecutive Tours. These were the pre-**Lance Armstrong** days, when North Americans were barely accepted on the Tour. But Bauer became an European celebrity, placing fourth overall in the 1988 Tour at a time when there were questions about the doping habits of some of his rivals. Bauer frequently wore the leader's yellow jersey.

Today, Ryder Hesjedal is Canada's leading international bike racer and is an established Tour de France competitor.

He started off as a mountain biker in B.C. and says he initially had little knowledge of Canada's riding heritage.

"When Steve Bauer was at the Tour, I was about ten years old," he laughs. But he thinks the future for Canadian racers is bright. "There are possibly more young racers than there have ever been. Canadian cycling is in a really good place."

Indeed, there may soon be a Canadian team at the Tour de France. High-tech entrepreneur **Jim Blasillie** does not have his NHL hockey team yet, but he's supporting **Spider'Tech**, a new Canadian racing team. It has some history behind it, too – its director of racing is Steve Bauer, and it is aiming for the highest levels.

Meanwhile, it's up to Hesjedal to carry the maple leaf up the Alps and Pyrenees and down the Champs Élysées. I'll be tuning in.