



Circus Maximus

Racing Italian Style: The Giro d'Italia

*A Roman holiday
on wheels*

By Charles R. Kelly

Italy provides a nearly infinite variety of backdrops for its annual Tour, the Giro d'Italia, from Alps to rolling farmlands, from modern, industrial Milan to ancient and beautiful Verona, from the graceful wooden curves of the Vigorelli velodrome to the crumbling marble of an ancient Roman stadium.

The bike race is the jewel, the centerpiece of the Giro, but it's hardly the whole show. The event exists to make money, and to this end 180 men fight a bloody, personal and painful war, which provides gripping drama, while 180 jerseys carry the names of dozens of corporate sponsors, as do the 40 follow cars.

The barriers that hold the crowd off the course, hundreds of meters long, are plastered thickly with advertising. Advertising needs people, and no effort is spared in getting spectators to the roadside for a 30-second look at the race,

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which comes with a half-hour of advertising. The view may not be great, but what other sport can offer the spectator his choice of thousands of miles of free front-row seats?

Two models in jump suits precede the riders, standing through the sunroof of a car; these are the Misses IRGE, the official sexism symbols of the Giro. Their primary mission is to ride ahead of the race and throw out thousands of hats bearing the IRGE company logo along the hundred or more miles. They will be on hand to kiss the winner of the stage while he sprays spumante on the crowd. Then they will kiss the points leader, the mountain leader, and the General Classification leader. Take me to your leader. At no time is any hint given as to what product or

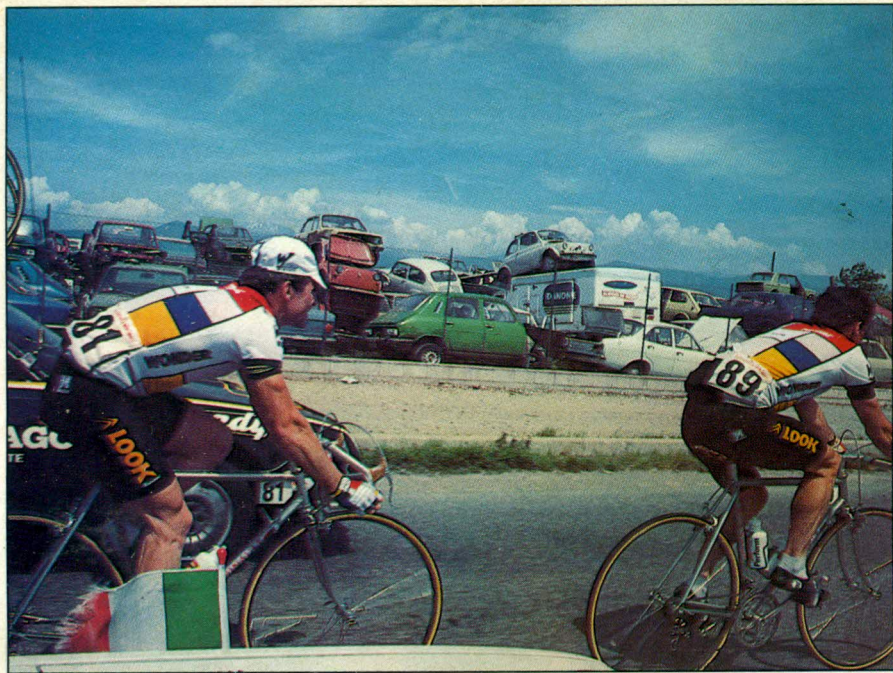
service IRGE supplies other than models for kissing racers.

The number of spectators for any road stage is uncountable. For a hundred or more miles there are people lining the roads in the more densely populated areas, although the crowd thins out in the mountains or between villages. Every bike club within 50 miles of the route is in attendance, well turned out in matching jerseys and bicycles. Last year's winner, Francesco Moser, is easily the most popular rider in the race, and his fans go

to great lengths to let him know he is appreciated. Signs announce the presence at roadside of Moser clubs, and in the region of the Alps he calls home, his name can often be seen painted on the road in six foot letters.

Although cynics suggested that the course had been designed for Moser, avoiding the long steep climbs where he might lose significant time, the Italian favorite had to settle for second place when all the chips were counted; there would be no repeat of last year's stunning victory on the last stage time trial. Moser kept the leader's pink jersey, the "Maglia Rosa," only through the prologue and the first stage, surrendering it on the second stage to former world champion Giuseppe Saronni. From Saronni it





Bernard Hinault (here being towed to the front by a domestique aptly named Vallet) won the Giro, foreshadowing his Tour de France win a month later.

The Giro

moved to Roberto Visentini before settling on the shoulders of France's superstar, Bernard Hinault.

Nestled in third overall was American Greg LeMond, Hinault's heir apparent. Having a former world champion in a supporting role is a tremendous advantage for Hinault, an example of the depth (and the price tag) of his team, La Vie Claire.

Perhaps most impressive though, were the phenomenal performances by Ron Kiefel and Andy Hampsten of the 7-Eleven team. This was particularly impressive since this was the first showing by an American professional team at this level of racing. By the end of the race, both riders had won stages, and Hampsten finished in the top 20 overall.

Kiefel won on the 15th stage, dropping ex-world champion Gerrie Knetemann

and none other than Francesco Moser in the process. Hampsten's solo victory came on the mountainous 20th stage. While no one was painting their *names* on the road, their high placings made a definite impression on both the European teams and the press, since both riders are first year pros.

While the Americans were getting their first taste of top professional racing, the local villagers enjoyed the spectacle of it all. The race goes through the middle of the small towns along the route. It's the biggest event of the year for these otherwise sleepy villages, and only a hermit could ignore the activity. The schools are emptied for the occasion, and groups of children cheer anything that moves or has advertising on it. On rainy days the children wear identical white raincoats, and when the people come by ahead of the race giving out hats . . . It's impossible to give just one child in a group a hat, so they all have them. The effect, with the



For spectators, the Giro is more sociology than sport. A day of picnicing and conversation in the sun is punctuated by one brief blur of wheels and lycra.

The Giro

white coats and matching hats, looks like the assembled staff of a midget hospital.

Even though no other type of sporting event has so many immediate spectators, it is unlikely that most who see it can tell what is going on. Actually the Giro can only be adequately followed on television. But if the race is unfathomable from the spectator's standpoint, the heroes are accessible, because the crowd can get close enough to touch their favorites, especially after a finish, when thousands of fans who have waited hours to see a 15-second sprint vault the barriers to ask exhausted riders for autographs. The stars, especially Hinault and Moser, are magnets for people, and if they stop moving, people gravitate to them until they are lost in a swarming crowd. In the hours following a stage finish, fans have the equivalent of an unlimited pit pass, as team mechanics set up shop and clean and repair hundreds of bikes on the streets and in hotel parking lots before an appreciative audience.

As stragglers limp in, today's victims of the relentless Giro lick their wounds. In 18 hours they will line up to do it again.

The nature of the race makes it difficult for even the working press to get very close to the action, so the journalists who must crank out a couple of thousand words every day use several alternatives to direct observation. Some ride in the caravan or a few miles in front of it with CB radios tuned to the race frequency, keeping track of all the attacks and lead changes without even seeing the peloton. Others ensconce themselves comfortably in hotel rooms and watch the daily live TV coverage filmed from a motorcycle and a helicopter, venturing out after the race in search of interviews.

On a particularly rainy afternoon, the press covering the finish huddles under the reviewing stand and watches the breakaway on television, their backs to the finish line. The lead cars go honking past, but no one turns from the TV; finally, the sprint finish, and still no one turns from the small screen, preferring that view to a wet and crowded glimpse of the real race as it goes by 15 feet away.