

# ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE MOUNTAIN

**As he cruises Southern California's back country, he looks like the last survivor of a forgotten tribe of mountain men or a leftover from the hippy movement.**

**But Victor Vincente of America was once one of this country's top cyclists and a young man determined to become the first American to race as a pro in Italy.**

**By Owen Mulholland**

**T**he year was 1961, a significant one for American cycling. On June 26th, in Lakewood, California, a child named Greg LeMond was born. Three months earlier, a 20-year-old Californian named Mike Hiltner became the first American in 90 years to win a bicycle road race in Italy. Now, 22 years later, LeMond has beaten the Italians and everyone else to become World Champion, and Mike Hiltner is known as Victor Vincente of America, the "Dirt Guru" — his professional racing ambitions forgotten a long time ago.

But Hiltner, like LeMond, was truly a talented champion who, as the old cliché goes, was way ahead of his time. What happened to Hiltner's ambitions is the story of American cycling's Dark Ages.

Mike didn't grow up wanting to be a racing cyclist. The general public had never heard of the sport. Like almost everyone who was in bike racing in the '50's, Mike sort of fell into it.

Dave Waco, a popular Southern California rider, remembers that spring day in 1957. "I was returning from a training ride when I saw this kid up ahead. I was surprised how hard I had to go to

catch him. We talked about racing which he didn't know anything about. He was real interested though. Sometimes I regret that day. After his first two races, I don't think I ever beat him again."

Unquestionably, 16-year-old Mike Hiltner was a natural. "I was kind of a shy, aimless teenager," Victor recalls. "I found something I really loved. I was just happy to ride all day."

In those days of hot rods and little surfer girls, a teenager guy who wanted to ride his bicycle all day just didn't fit in, especially in Southern California's San Fernando Valley, where teenagers were expected to spend every moment drag racing, surfing or chugging beer. The fact that Mike was first chair flute in the high school orchestra didn't do much for his social status, either.

But for him, escaping on his bicycle was what he really wanted to do. The excitement of racing lured him like a magnet. He was certainly different from his peers, a characteristic that would stay with him throughout his life.

In those days there was very little systematic development for young racers. Beginners would read bits in European magazines about how the pros trained, or talk to older riders and otherwise do whatever their intuition and energy dictated. There were no American cycling magazines, no coaching, no stage races, no nothing.

For American racing, young Mike didn't need much refinement. "I was so full of energy," he said. "Before a race I would almost shake."

Dave Staub, a Pan Am and Olympic Games cyclist of the era still says that Mike was the strongest rider he'd ever ridden against. "He could drop you anywhere, anytime. On the flat, up hills, even in the sprint, he was incredible."

At 18, Hiltner became the youngest winner of the biggest stage race in North America, Canada's Tour de St. Laurent. In those days, the large Italian and French Canadian communities provided most of the riders. And they were good, many of them even ex-pros from Europe. Amazingly, Hiltner won four out of ten stages.

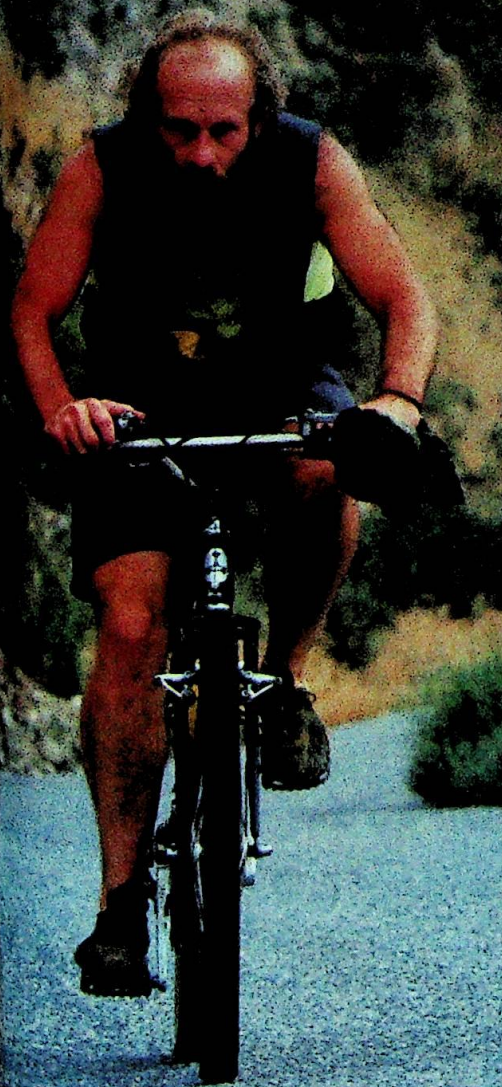
In that same year, 1959, he won the Tour of Somerville classic in record time and made the Pan American Games team. But Mike knew that a more regular approach was needed if he was going to progress further. His goal was to get to the Rome Olympics, and from there — full time in Europe.

To get ready, he hooked up with Lars Zebrowski, a northern California legend who was known for his disciplined training methods. Lars was so systematic, so the legend goes, that when he burned his ankle on a floor heater, he turned around and put a matching brand on the other ankle. The legs must always be in perfect balance, you know.

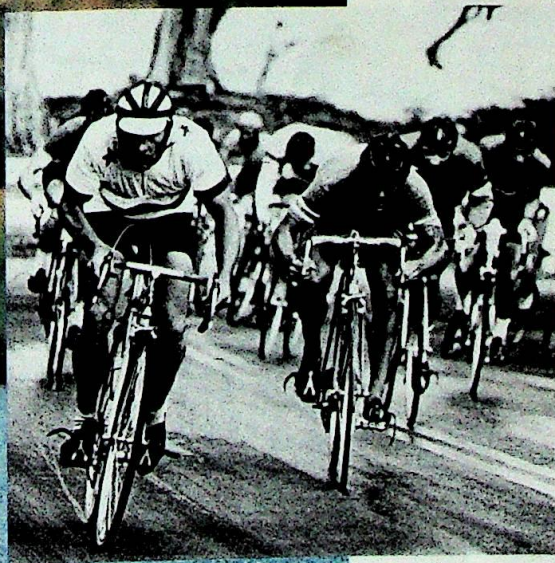
The two holed up in a cabin on Tunitas Creek, a redwood canyon 25 miles up the rugged California coast from San Francisco. Four times a week they went on 80 to 100 mile training rides, coming down to civilization only to ride whatever races were around.

By the time the Olympic Trials came around, they were in a class by themselves. They rode a two man 100 kilometer trial in two hours and 35 minutes to easily qualify for the team.

To make the Olympic team was then the highest aspiration of every American cyclist. Very few gave any thought what lay beyond. That beyond was Europe. Everyone knew that there they raised a subspecies of Homo Sapiens especially evolved for



Mike Piper photo



Mike Hiltner was perhaps the best American racer of the early 60's. But he suffered from the lack of structure that existed then in American cycling.  
Fisher photo



bike racing — they were tough, fast and untouchable. Americans who had tried to make it in Europe came back crushed, confirming everyone's worst fears.

Hiltner had to find out for himself. After the Rome Olympics — the U.S. 100 kilometer team finished 11th, still the best U.S. Olympic performance in that event — he moved to Florence for the winter. He was practically broke. The language was a constant struggle. The apartment was more a refrigerator. And, worst of all, his Italian racing license got snarled in red tape. Without that license, he couldn't race.

Just days before the first race, Mike's license came. All his training and privations hadn't been in vain. He won that race, establishing a new high water mark for American cycling. He won four more races that year, riding for one of the many small teams in Italy.

It was that first year in Italy that also exposed Hiltner to a system that was steering the sport towards disaster.

*«Everybody was doping,» Victor relates. «The team trainer was the one who gave you the stuff. They usually said it was 'the latest thing from Switzerland.' We would put it in our water bottles for a hit near the end of the race. Everybody called it 'la bomba.'»*

Until he'd come to Italy, Hiltner had never taken anything. But he went along with what his trainer told him to do, figuring it was all part of the game. In one race that year, Hiltner was so charged up that he came around a turn and crashed into a wall. *«They carried me away, whistling,»* Victor recalls.

In 1962, Hiltner switched teams. His new Toscano/Atala squad was backed by a consortium of doctors. They allowed no doping. That year Hiltner didn't win any races. He came back — tired and blown out — to ride the Tour de St. Laurent, the big Canadian stage race he had so brilliantly won in 1959. He did poorly.

*«1962 was a disaster,»* Victor recalls. *«I think all that dope I'd taken had blown my body.»*

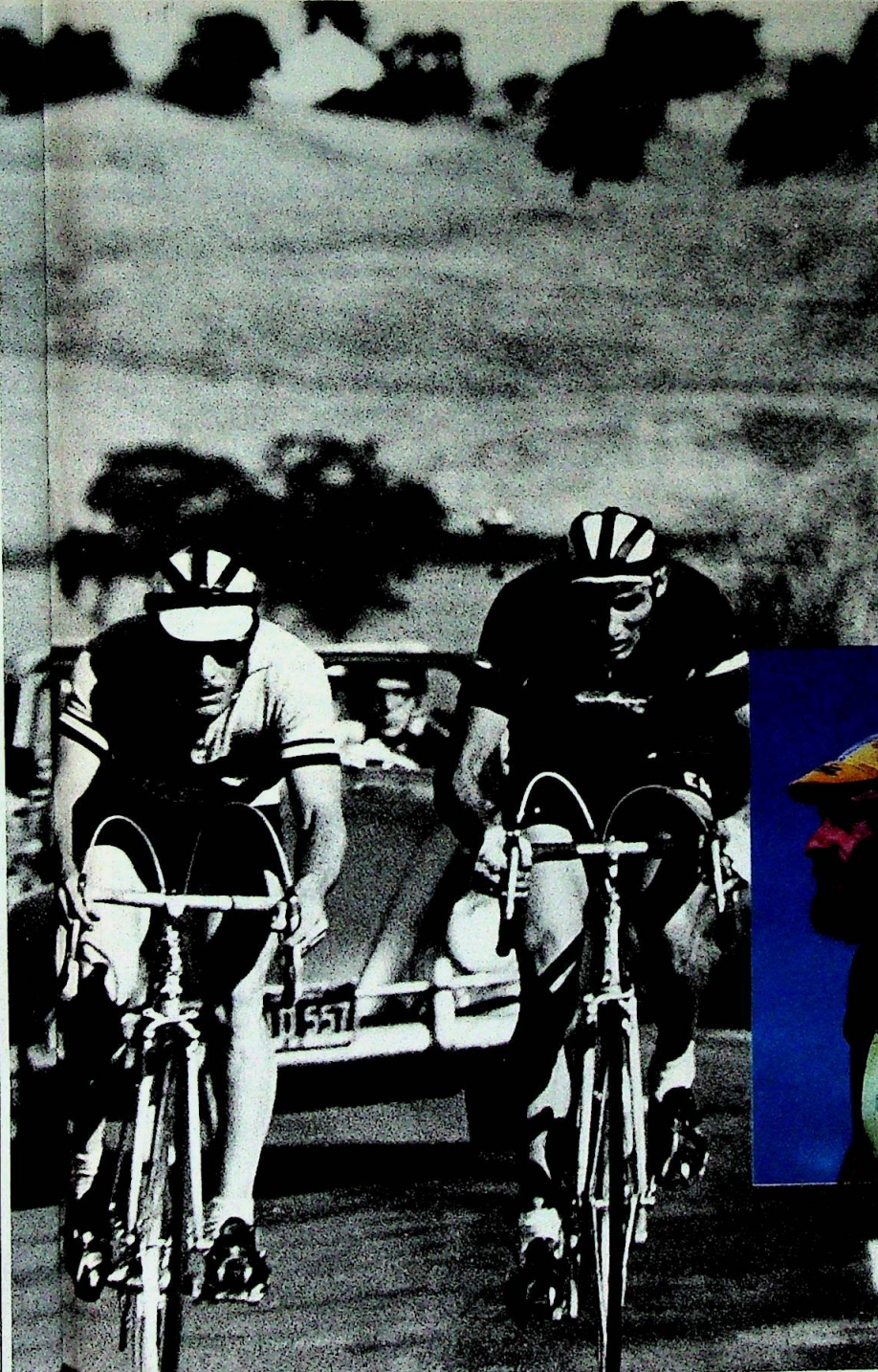
In 1963 he returned to the front line. He made the Pan Am team. But in Sao Paulo, he was *«derouted,»* as the French say.

*«Up to then my romantic life was pretty much non-existent, or fantasized. I hoped some woman would drive by and take me home.»* At the Games village there was a telephone operator: *«One day we waved at her as we rode by, and she waved back. That did it, although it took six months for us to get married.»*

They returned to the U.S. that winter and for the next two years, Hiltner took the high road of American cycling by making the '64 Olympic team and winning the first ever United States Road Championship the following year.

But the ultimate challenge, landing that pro contract in Europe, still burned in his heart. After the 1965 World Championships in Spain, he stayed on for the winter track season in Germany. He became a decent indoor track rider and even won the Muenster City Championship against some of Germany's best track specialists.

By the spring he was back in Italy riding with the strong Alpha-Cure club in Florence, determined to ride well enough to be offered a pro contract. He won two races and rode a magnificent World Championship on the diabolical Nurburgring course in Germany. He faded only after leading the



*In 1966, Mike had an excellent year in Europe, winning two races and riding a magnificent world championship. But he was disappointed when nobody offered him a pro contract.*

*Fisher photo*

*After the Rome Olympics in 1960, Mike Hiltner settled in Italy. That season, he became the first American to win an Italian race in 90 years.*

*Fisher photo*



*Victor Vincente of America can identify with Greg LeMond; «I feel I know his intensity», he says.*

*Mike Piper photo*

field into the last lap. His performance that day was the best by an American at world level up to that time.

Hiltner went back to Italy to sell himself as pro material. There were no buyers. Discouraged and accompanied by a wife who was burned out on leading the life of an itinerant bike racer, Hiltner returned to Brazil and confronted the exit sign over bike rider's career: *«Get a Job.»*

Victor Vincente of America is an artist. He lives in a little house in the bustling San Fernando Valley with his second wife, Helga. The small lot is covered with plants and trees, nearly obscuring the rather typical dwelling. In the garage, Victor occasionally designs and builds mountain bike frames. He writes poetry and sometimes plays the flute.

His goal now is not so much to succeed with his small graphic design business — by all accounts he has real talent in the field — but to find the same intensity for it that Mike Hiltner once has as a single-minded bike racer.

*«I'm still somewhat puzzled,»* he admits, *«that I haven't found the way to redirect that energy that I still have. I do often think that bike racing was the only thing that was right for me... all my energy went into it.»*

Back in Brazil in 1967, Mike Hiltner soon found he couldn't adjust to a domestic life that pointed toward routine, extended families and domestication. By 1970, he had saved up enough money to fly home... alone.

His racing career was over. His marriage had not worked out. The public recognition that he had struggled so hard for as a racer had not materialized. Partly out of rejection of his failed expectations, and partly out of the still strong need to make his mark in the sport, Hiltner came up with the biggest challenge he could tackle — and win.

It was in the form of a 36 day and 8 hour ride from Santa Monica to Atlantic City and back in 1975, by

many accounts, the first real double transcontinental record. During that ride, Mike Hiltner was laid to rest for good. As a personal reward to himself for the metamorphosis, Hiltner legally changed his name to Victor Vincente of America, the «vincente» from the Italian word for speed.

Today, at a balding 42, Victor Vincente appears to be as far from Mike Hiltner as two lives would allow. That brings him peace-of-mind. It also allows him to live in a world where his former single-mindedness never quite paid off. Sure he still loves to race a bike, but in local mountain bike races with no structure, no rules, no keeping score. And he wants to go in other directions. He needs to go in other directions.

But Victor Vincente of America will never be able to totally rid himself of the body-and-soul athlete that he has always been. If it were today, he might easily be riding shoulder-to-shoulder with Greg LeMond, a suggestion that ignites a spark in him.

*«I sure do admire and envy LeMond,»* Victor admits. *«He's exactly what I had always hoped to be. I identify with his spirit. I feel I know his intensity, his feelings for riding.»*

No doubt he does. The difference is that LeMond's personal and competitive world has helped him mesh with the sport's current structure.

Two decades ago, Mike Hiltner's personal and competitive world put him too far out of sync — a situation that by now has become part of his lifestyle.

As Victor Vincente says in one of his poems:

I will be seen  
standing free against the sky  
I will be loved  
floating light in life  
I will be remembered  
when you pass by and feel...

Mike Piper photo

