

Slinky



Sri Lankan standard racers

Welcome to the second issue of Slinky, an infrequent digital magazine published by myself - Steve Thomas.

In this issue I take a look into the fascinating and passionate world of Sri Lankan bike racing - or to be more accurate the "standard" bike racing scene.

For me this was something of a heartfelt mission, and I hope that you'll enjoy reading about the project as much as I did completing it.

Steve

Old Standards



A former National Road Race Champion in full flight



One long awaited morning, Sri Lanka

My grin of admiration and deep sense envy stretched from either side of the tuk-tuk which I was hanging out of while taking pictures. I just wanted to throw down my cameras and hop on a bike and join them; but my own ride was somewhere around about a dozen back streets away, and the moment would have passed before I could even re-trace my myriad of side steps and turns.

There they were, hundreds of them in strung out small groups and riding solo through the bust morning chaos and haze of the Colombo suburbs. It was no ordinary morning chain gang, as these guys were nearly all hammering along on 50 odd year old steel roadster bikes; single speeds garnished with rust and with wheelbases longer than a Smart Car. These were the near mythical “standard riders” I’d been searching for.







A year earlier and I'd been pedalling along a busy southern coastal road in Sri Lanka at not too long after daybreak. Rounding a corner and shimmering between a bus and a tuk-tuk and I caught a glimpse of a lone "standard racer" passing in the opposite direction. By the time I could even contemplate turning tail and chasing him down the window of opportunity had closed firmly shut. As my near month long trip was approaching its end that was to be the only glimpse of this retro riding scene I was going to get.

Earlier in my trip a friend had sent me a link to a YouTube clip of a small group of standard bike riders. That clip was just a few seconds in all, but it was enough to fire up my enthusiasm to track them down.

A year on and I set off once again for the exotic spice island of Sri Lanka, a former British colony blessed with dramatic scenery, doused in multi faith culture, and not so long ago ravaged and torn in every direction by a brutal and lengthy civil war. Right at the top of my to do list was to seek out these roadster riding locals and to find out what it was all about.





Sure enough I'd heard of similar things in remote pockets of Africa, but deepest South Asia was a world away from this, and I was drawing a barrel load of blanks when trying to track them down.

Logically the best starting point would seem to be the national cycling federation. But having lived in Asia for many years, and knowing full well of the unspeakable pitfalls and side tracks inherent with state organised sport I didn't hold out much hope of scoring any luck. Eventually I strained a forced second hand response; one of denial that these riders still existed in this modern day age, which totally belied what I was witnessing in person.

Local high-end bike dealers yielded a similar response, and it suddenly clicked that they seemingly wanted to deny their existence for obvious reasons. It was suddenly all so very systematically Asian. This was simply not what they wanted me to portray. I was to come along and meet their selected representatives and show the prosperous state and commercial side of happy cycling, not the reality.





By chance I mentioned my quest to a locally based expat tour operator, who told me that every time he went to the airport there were hundreds of these guys on the roads. Follow this up by showing my guesthouse owner the YouTube grab and the word was out. By that evening a local tuk tuk driver had shown up to escort me to the house of “Babi” a local “standard racing” legend.

Turning into a small side street and we came across a general store, this was where Babi, and his multi-generational cycling family lived. Drivers and storeowners by midday, and standard racers before breakfast. It was a long and fast family tradition.

Three brothers lived there in the cluster of houses, all pushing 50, and lifelong devotees of cycling – standard and normal. It seemed to make little difference to them what kind of bikes they had to ride. Outside of the house were a couple of absolute classic 1950’s roadsters, a Rudge and a Raleigh; “These are about 50 years old, they were my father’s before this.” Lakshman De Silva, the elder brother of “Babi” told me.







On the streets of Sri Lanka you see thousands of these classic old roadster bikes, usually carrying a family or laden with wares to buy and sell; they are certainly not unusual. Here bikes are a way of life, a necessity, and cars are just too expensive for most Sri Lankans,

Racing these heavyweight single speeders, that was a whole new game; "I don't know how or when it all started, but it certainly goes bag a long way. We all grew up with it as our father was a racer, and Babi was a big champion here – in 1984 he was Sri Lankan Champion, on a normal bike."

A few minutes later and Lakshman proudly emerged from his house with a classic Colnago Master, which he estimated dated back to the early 1980's; "My friend went to work in Italy, and I saved up and he sent it to me. Back then the only way we could get hold of real racing bikes was to have friends in Italy, and of course they were expensive. Now it's a little different, as there are lots of bike shops selling regular racing bikes."





Overall the national federation controlled racing scene in Sri Lanka is pretty sparse, and as controlled as you might expect anywhere else in the world, which is quite restricting for up and coming riders; they simply get race hungry.

In the past there has been a Tour of Sri Lanka stage race, but organisational problems mean that it rarely makes kick off any more. This probably goes a long way towards making the de-regulated standard racing scene so popular; "I don't know how many standard racers there are in Sri Lanka, probably thousands, and it all happens by word of mouth. There are no official organisations or websites that I know of, things are all regulated locally and." Lakshman tells me.

Races do happen throughout the year, but the prime season was just around the corner; "There was a race last weekend here, about 75 riders in all. The main season is around the Sinhalese New Year (April, along with the Buddhist New Year). During that time all of the towns and villages hold races, there are lots all around the country."



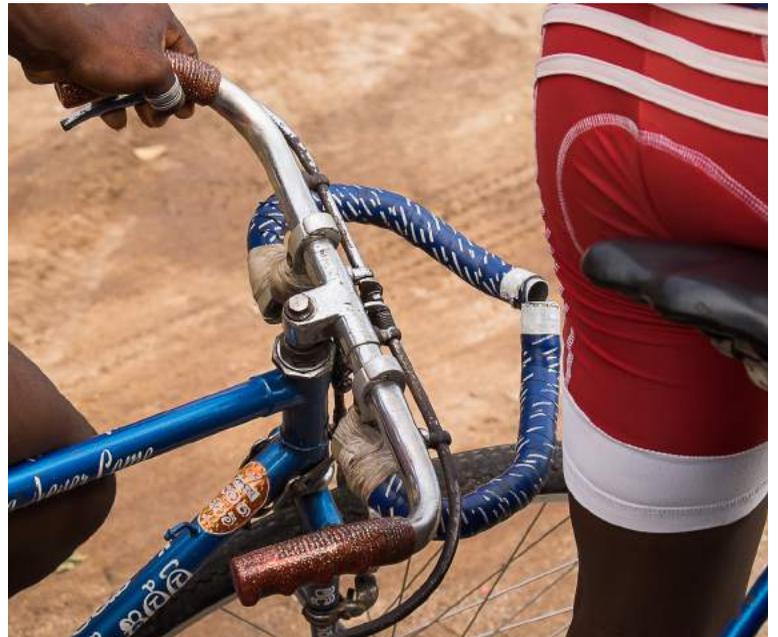




Given the intense heat of the Sri Lankan flatlands it's hard to imagine riding any serious distance on these hefty old steeds; "Last week the race was about 80km, next week it's 130km, and there will be more than 100 riders there. Go back 20 years ago and we also had 6-7 day stage races, sometimes in the mountains too." Which is tough to imagine on any single speeder, let alone a 17kg 50-year old bike.

"Standard bikes" is the term used by locals, and to most extents they are just that; "There is a regulation 48x18 gear, and races run at around 35kph on average. In the past we mostly had Brooks saddles and rode bikes as they came. But it's hard to find original parts these days, we have to use cheap Chinese spares. Luckily tyres are readily made locally."

Although the bikes are standard many have been adapted over the years, both out of necessity and through fine-tuning and for weight issues. Rod brakes and heavy roadster tyres are obligatory, and part rusted steel handlebars with added "spinaci bars" and lighter components are also the norm.







Many still use cottered steel cranks, but some have switched to aluminium chainsets, and most come with clipless pedals, 1980's alloy seat posts and aging saddles. A few have also managed to procure alloy rims, hubs, and even front quick release hubs.

Make no mistake about it, these guys are serious about their cycling, they just do not have the funds r resources to sharpen their game with ultra modern mega bucks bikes and bits. This is exactly why it struck home with me; It's more or less a level playing field, which is a far cry from the way things have become in mainstream cycling during the past 20 years.

Passion and love for cycling is what drives these riders. The chances of any one of them ever making it to Europe to race are even more slender than the rods on their brakes, and making money from sponsorship is a negligible option. These guys love cycling. They live to ride these standard issue bikes. They follow the Tour de France, scour after glossy magazines and skimp by with kit we'd have thrown out a decade or more ago. It took me right back to my own youth, and rekindled a passion that is often lost in the fickle and expense of modern day cycling.





During that same morning we passed a middle aged guy on a high end Cannondale. Seconds later a standard rider soared past. His retro bike was so rusty that you could imagine it crumbling beneath him. His flapping Team GB/Sky shorts and jersey were in tatters, and his shoes not far behind. It was a magical and awe inspiring moment, and one that made me realise what cycling is really all about – if only Sir Dave Brailsford could see this.

On any given morning you'll find masses of these riders duelling it out between themselves and the rush hour traffic, and I was lucky enough to join Babi and his brothers, as well as other younger hopefuls on these roads; "I still ride around 60-80km each day, on a regular, and on a standard bike. I also race at times, we have categories for over 40's and over 50's, and for women, so I can still compete." Babi grinned.

Heading back for breakfast and I caught sight of three young guys just winding down from their daily training session, so I decided to hound them down. One was wearing the 2013 National Champions jersey.



Humbly and with an air of confusion we set off together, me hanging out of the tuk-tuk and these guys thrashing it out for all they were worth behind us. The roads are busy, but they seem to garner respect for their endeavours, yet nobody quite knows why they ride these self same roads every day. There are much quieter options just off this main strip. Perhaps it's that trill of the chase that spices things up some, and the fact that you know that on any morning of the week you can find yourself in good and plentiful company.

Turning off the main road they dismounted and entered a non-descript garden. An old bearded man with wild hair and wearing nothing but a grubby sarong greeted us with a huge smile. This place is the daily breakfast stop for many of the local riders, a true Sri Lankan cyclists café, equipped fully with none of the thrills.

Open plan and basic, with jaded and ragged images of Jesus and Jan Ulrich adorning the wall. It was a surreal moment; I'd never seen anything like this. It was a whole different world – and yet the stack of standard bikes perched against the wall made it a real home from home.

Roti and curry were served up along with the obligatory cup of sweet Ceylon tea. The owner emerged with a thumbnail sized hand carved bicycle, made from the coconuts in his garden. It was my welcome present.

Beneath that jaded poster of Ulrich his wife looked on. They had no real idea of who I was or why I was there, but they were so happy to see a foreigner obviously as passionate about cycling as they were. I didn't dare to tell them that once I'd ridden alongside Ulrich many years back, it just would not compute. We were a world away from bike racing as we know it; and yet there were so many obvious parallels.

Over breakfast I learned that there would be a race nearby in 2 days time. It's all communicated by word of mouth here, so nobody knew the exact details. Somewhere around 10am from the next village 100 or so riders would line up for a 9-lap 130-km road race, with lead cars, semi-closed roads and all the frills.



The rider told of a coming race, sadly it was called off following the death of a local racer.

It was a sombre note to end on, but the reaction of the riders and the camaraderie, it was all very real. During that week, for the first time in many years I witnessed what cycling was all about, at least for me. The community spirit and passion of these guys is as pure as homemade moonshine and the after effect lasts even longer.

I will be back, and this time I hope that it will be on two wheels, and fuelled with the passion and enthusiasm that got me riding all those years ago.





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