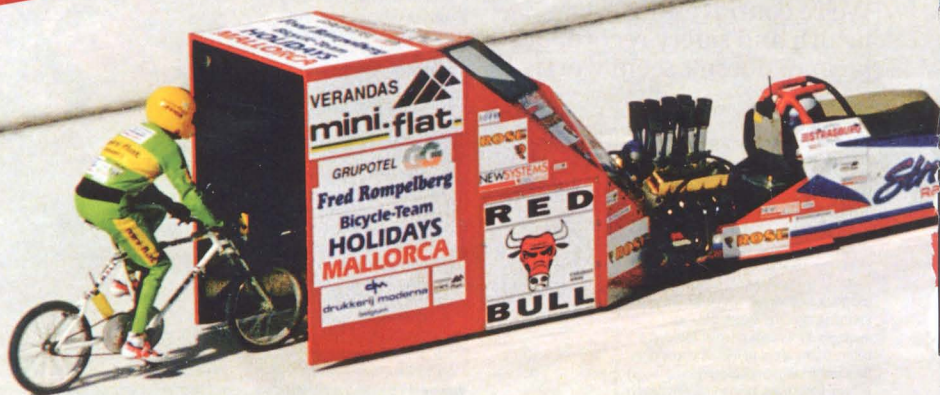
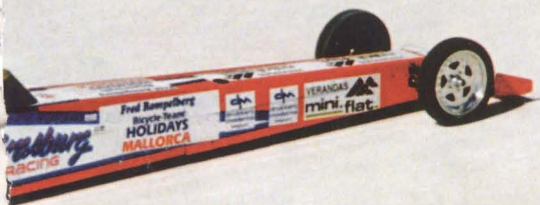


Speed



A mile a minute was the aim in 1899, and cyclists have been setting new records for paced and assisted speeds ever since. Les Woodland looks back at the exploits of the fastest pedallers on the planet...

kings



vehicle at a staggering 166mph. That he's just the latest in a long line of men who've broken records, and themselves, is testament to the

"I was riding in a maelstrom of swirling dust, hot cinders, paper and other particles of matter"

fact that humans love to ride fast.

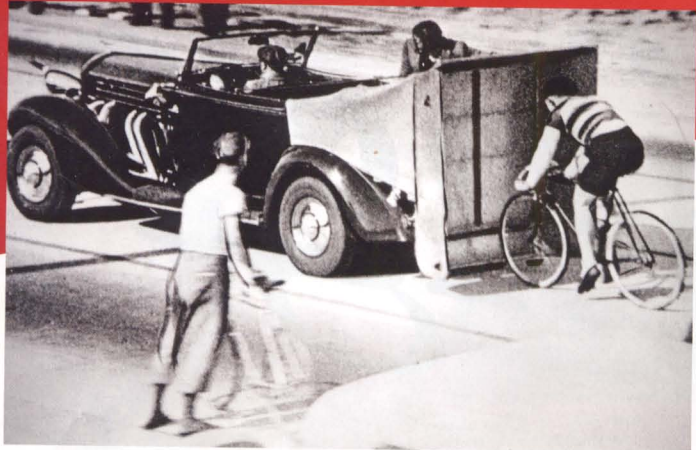
Charlie Murphy, for instance, insisted there was no limit to the speed a man could ride a bicycle. Take away air resistance and all that was left was to pedal faster and

faster. If a steam engine could cover a mile in a minute then so could he.

Everyone laughed, of course. There goes that New York kid mouthing off again. But the Long Island Railroad sniffed publicity and laid a two-mile path of 10-inch planks between the rails. Then they fitted 11ft side-wings and a roof to the back of the last carriage. Murphy wheeled his Tribune bike and its 104-inch gear into the New Jersey daylight on 30 June 1899, and told Sam Booth, the giant, brown-eyed driver, to steam as fast as he could. Six times the locomotive fell short of 60mph. Its weight made the wooden track sink and rise like a wave, but on the seventh attempt it got there, and Murphy mastered it. »

Before I attempted the record," said Fred Rompelberg, "I took my wife on to the motorway and went up to 220kph [140mph] in our normal saloon car. She gulped and said: 'You want to go 40kph faster than this? On a bike?'"

Eccentric Dutchman Rompelberg is the fastest cyclist in the world. He's ridden an unpowered two-wheeled



In 1935 Frank Bartell rode to a world record of 80.5mph

"I was riding in a maelstrom of swirling dust, hot cinders, paper and other particles of matter," he said. He began to lose speed. An official yelled through a megaphone. Murphy looked up and fell back even more, then accelerated to catch up. "I could feel myself getting weaker every second. I saw ridicule, contempt, disgrace and a lifetime dream gone up in smoke. I saw the agonised faces, yelling, holding out stretched hands as if they would like to get hold of or assist me somehow. I expected to go off the track, travelling faster than the train, with the terrible storm of dust, pebbles, hot rubber and

his had 57. It was of quarter-inch steel plate and cleared the ground by an inch.

He had a 20in front wheel and a 25 $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch gear. He was only 5ft 3in tall, so he used 6in cranks. The reduced leverage took longer to get to speed but he could turn the cranks faster when he got there. Stuart Benstead, who had a go on it, said: "Mr Letourneur sportingly agreed to let me try it out in New York's Central Park. Despite an enormous push from him, I don't suppose I made one complete revolution of the pedals."

Letourneur picked a highway in California. The problem? The limit was

40mph. The solution? Ride early in the morning and hope traffic got out of the way and cops didn't notice. A motorbike club marshalled junctions and chased away chickens. He clocked 108.92mph, his arms bruised from the buffeting air. It took nine miles to get up to speed, hold it for a mile and then slow down.

He said: "Once you get up to that speed, you feel you can stop there for a month. You think you are going to leave the ground and you have a tendency to fly. Everything is white, although you can see the trees looking as though they are leaning over. You get so scared."

The police turned up but by then everyone had fled. They weren't the only ones disappointed: the ride was in May 1941 and Letourneur and Spencer shared only \$1000 because the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor in December and ruined their plans.

Tooth pace

José Meiffret's bike didn't look a lot different, except it had 130 teeth. The rims were wood and he had a freewheel to avoid crashing if the chain jammed.

Little José, another Frenchman, all 'wistful eyes and a troubled expression' and looking 'more like a Colombian mountain climber than a motorpace rider', chose an autobahn outside >>

Letourneur clocked 108.92mph. It took nine miles to get up to speed, hold it for a mile and then slow down

cinders. It was getting to a point where I could expect anything."

And then, the finish. Booth shut off the steam and Murphy crashed into the train. Helpers caught him by the arm and pulled him to the platform covered in soot and blood.

Petrol heads

In 1935 Czech rider Frank Bartell used a pace car instead of a train to set a record of 80.5mph. Two years later, in 1937, Frenchman Georges Paillard used a motorbike on the Monthéry car track to reach 85.8mph. Alfred Letourneur, also French but living in America, chose a car. As an orphan he had run away from his stepmother, got round to being a bike racer and grown into a track star.

In the USA he found a former racer – Willy Spencer – and a film company offering \$25,000 to beat 100mph. That paid for a racing car with a 5ft shield. Letourneur looked through a glass screen the size of a paperback. His chainring was the size of a 114-tooth ring, but track rings then were inch pitch (an inch between each tooth) and



Bartell's 1935 record setting bike, a Lincoln Boulevard

John Howard spent \$100,000 getting this bike up to 152.28mph in 1985



Friedburg in July 1962. He had beaten the record four years earlier but it brought neither the fame nor money he needed. He became depressed and considered suicide. Even when he made his final speed attempt, he carried a death note: "I am a poor man, an orphan since 11, and I have suffered much. Death holds no terror for me. This record attempt is my way of expressing myself. If the doctors can do no more for me, please bury me by the side of the road where I have fallen."

The writer Clifford Graves recalled: "Meiffret adjusted his helmet, mounted the bike, and tightened the toe straps. Getting under way with a gear of 225 inches was something else again. A motorcycle started pushing him. At 20mph, Meiffret was struggling to gain control. His legs were barely moving. At 40mph, he was beginning to hit his stride. At 50mph, Meiffret dismissed his motorcycle and connected neatly with the windscreen of the Mercedes. His timing was perfect. He had overcome his first great hazard."

He overcame the ultimate hazard at 127.34mph for a kilometre, pedalling three turns a second. France considered it the athletic achievement of the year – even though Letourneur never forgave him, claiming the timing was shaky.

Dragging out speed

The record has changed hands several times since, each time at greater expense. John Howard spent \$100,000 at Bonneville Salt Flats in July 1985 and got to 152.28mph. "The world was reduced to a streaming white ribbon that I vaguely saw through the Plexiglass window of the car's fairing," he said. The ride took him to Johnny Carson's *Tonight* show and the more mundane achievement of being named man of the year by US bike shop owners.

Fred Rempelberg also chose Bonneville but rode behind a dragster. He fell off at 125mph. He broke two bones in one hand but a week later tried again. This time he fell even faster. His wife said: "I heard him groan, so I knew he was alive. The doctors found 24



broken bones all over his body and they wanted to keep him in hospital for a month. Five days later we were back home and another five days later Fred was training on his turbo again."

By October 1995, having broken a shoulder in the meantime, he got to 166mph, riding on motorbike wheels, turning 70x15.

Can it be bettered? Rempelberg says yes, and he claimed he had been offered \$2 million to try.

A British attempt seems unlikely. Dave Le Grys got to 110mph behind a Rover SD1 on the unopened M42 in



Dave Le Grys set a British record of 110mph on the unopened M42 in 1986



1986. It's a British record but it's still a long shot short of Rempelberg.

Not all the record holders were exceptional riders. Letourneur was a six-day rider, a track record holder, as was Bartell, but Murphy was a regional rider, and Meiffret said the record needed only ordinary talent. Le Grys agreed: "It's more of a challenge of nerve than athletic ability," he said. And a big wallet for a car that can go that fast with "a 5ft by 4ft shed" on the back.

Will it be broken again? Probably – there's bound to be someone out there thinking 166mph isn't fast enough. **ALUS**

Above and left: Fred Rempelberg broke numerous bones on his way to setting the current world record of 166mph

Riding early to avoid the cops, Letourneur reached 108.92mph – 68.92mph over the speed limit

