

WHO IS CINO CINELLI?

by D. O. Cozzi

In a gritty suburb of Milan, Italy, surrounded by garishly new low-rent high rises, the ruins of 18th century farm buildings, junk yards, chemical plants and iron foundries, there is a short squat row of dingy ocher buildings. Access is through the inevitable rusty iron gate and cluttered yard fringed by anemic shrubs. Everywhere there is the smell of the Lambro River, its milk-chocolate waters skirting the back of the buildings by the width of an eroded retaining wall.

The buildings contain one of the most important, and famous, and little known competition bicycle factories in all of Italy, perhaps the world. The only sign of ownership is found in a one- by three-inch plastic plaque nailed to the door leading to a pair of cramped cubicles. Dusty ledgers and squeaking furniture frame an office girl in a black smock who glides silently from one task to another. In another office, its walls papered with photographs and shelves and drawers bulging with bits and pieces of bicycles, Cino Cinelli, proprietor of the enterprise barks into the telephone at a supplier whose latest mistake will throw deliveries back a month or so.

Cinelli's activities require the comfortable anonymity he has created around his company; it "helps to avoid angering the customers." Although Cinelli builds bicycles, the mainstay of his livelihood comes from the development, manufacture and sale of accessory parts: handlebars, saddles and pedals. He says he builds these components the way he wants solely because he thinks they should be built just that way. This brief phrase reveals much of the man and his lifetime philosophy.

Cinelli was born along with six brothers and three sisters on his father's small farm a few miles from Florence 60 years ago. His first professional encounter with the bicycle came during his early teens when he began racing in the shadow of his older brother Giotto. It didn't take him long to start beating Giotto, and the rest of the field too, and so the bicycle became Cino's means of subsistence.

Until early 1945 Cino Cinelli built a very successful career around racing bicycles for factory teams on roads and tracks throughout much of Europe. He was one of the first to define the potential of Fausto Coppi, beating him handily on more than one occasion during the years they raced against each other. When he wasn't pedaling, Cinelli managed his salaries and considerable prize monies with acumen, enabling him in October, 1945 to abandon bicycle racing forever and become a manufacturer.

The original company was formed with three partners and tooling and employees acquired from a frame builder fallen on hard times. In the beginning there were 20 workmen, a number that has increased only slightly over the years. To captain the frame-building activities Cinelli convinced the chief frame mechanic at Bianchi (for whom he had raced for over a decade) to join forces in the brave new venture.

Brave it certainly was, for in the Milan of 1946 little else than bomb rubble was to be seen. But somehow what was required was found; miracles were the order of the day, and by 1951 a move was made to the present facilities.

A year later Cinelli bought out his partners and began building his company alone, free of constraints or counsel. Working 12 to 14 hours per day, six days a week plus Sunday mornings, Cinelli found the press of business so demanding that for the first 14 years of his activities as a manufacturer, he suspended bicycle riding, for pleasure or otherwise, completely. Then one day he reached for the telephone and a jolt of pain shot through his arm and shoulder. Simul-



taneously, the fact that he was 20 pounds overweight came sharply into focus. The next morning work started on a new frame, and by the end of the week Cinelli was back to pedaling a bicycle. The 20 pounds and assorted aches have faded from memory.

The Cinelli of today is a man of monolithic solidity who moves with the lithe agility of the former athlete. He views the things and people around him with intense curiosity, sometimes shadowed by a pair of tinted glasses, but never dimmed. Like many persons of advanced age, he has a voracious appetite for the new. The rhetoric is quickly stripped away, the principles examined in detail, and a judgment passed.

Cino Cinelli speaks almost exclusively in the first person singular when talking about the business. He created it, ministers to its health and plans its future. He personally controls every detail of every day's activity. His employees snap to commands in a worried haste just as they always have. Virtually no one working for Cinelli is less than 40 years old; most of the workers have been there since activities began. The chief frame mechanic has had a file or brazing torch in his hands every working day for the last 60 years, and although he receives a government pension, he still comes to work for "Signore Cino." The extended loyalty of his employees is a clear indication that Cinelli plays the role of the benevolent tyrant with

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consummate skill. It is the only management system that has ever functioned in Italy, or probably ever will.

Cinelli addresses his occasional visitors in much the same way as he does his employees. After all, they are on his property and therefore subject to the same regulation. The conversation is precise, concise, probatory and brilliant. And it is always framed in extreme courtesy. Trading opinions with Cino Cinelli is an enchanting experience; fascinating as it is exhausting; satisfying as it is sometimes frustrating.

The pressures of professional bicycle racing, the rough and tumble of business and the politics involved in presiding over the Italian professional riders' association for 24 years have given Cino Cinelli a very thick skin. I think it's just the first line of defense of a genuinely nice man. Cinelli is a man on whose opinion regarding bicycles you can bet your life, as most of the successful have.

He talks about production: *We manage to fill about 20 percent of the orders we get. . . . A little here, a little there, try to keep everyone happy. . . . I want quality more than quantity; maybe that's why we have more customers than parts to sell. . . . The company is producing as much as it can right now, and I don't want to expand it. . . . As a result, I've had to turn down some interesting offers, but it was the best thing for all of us.*

And his convictions on bicycle design: *If the world hour record is ever to get beyond 50 km, it will take smaller wheels, longer cranks, and tipping the rider forward to reduce his frontal. . . . I built a bicycle like that in 1960, and it works fine, but no one wants to use it for fear of succeeding and having it subtract from their personal achievement. . . . Anyway, longer cranks, 185-190 mm, will be used one day soon for road racing and on the tracks. . . . Super-light weight is fine too, but never if it costs rigidity.*

And finally, himself: *I do about 20 miles a day on my bicycle. . . . I use these little early morning sprints to test out ideas. . . . When there is a holiday, I drive down to Florence, and with my brother Giotto ride 50-60 miles through the country, which is about all I really enjoy doing. . . . Bicycle manufacturers have invited me to visit their factories in the U.S.A. and Japan, all expenses paid, but I've never been interested enough to do it. . . . The future? I guess the future is in the hands of my son. . . . He's a good boy, and even if he doesn't know or care much about the mechanical end of this business, he'll get along all right. . . . But I'll never retire. . . . What would I do? . . . I guess I've been pretty lucky; all my life I've been able to do something I've wanted to do, the way I wanted to do it; and there has always been someone willing to pay me for doing it.*

Cino Cinelli's eyes sparkle like the facets on a diamond as he smiles while saying this. It's hard to think otherwise.



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