

In 1955 Wheelers' member Sylvia Hayden (née Wybrow) was one of a 6 woman British team to ride the 5-day "Tour Feminin Cycliste". After the event she wrote an article for the club's Mudguardian magazine. This is reproduced below.

This article subsequently formed the basis of a Sunday Times article (23 July 2023) by Elgan Alderman.



*British Ladies team at the Tour Feminin 1955. L/R. Daisy Franks, Joy Bell, Eileen Gray, Sylvia Wybrow, Beryl French, June Thackray and overall race winner Millie Robinson.*

UNOFFICIAL WOMEN'S TOUR-DE-FRANCE  
by  
SYLVIA WYBROW

I would like to tell you something of my adventures in France where I spent five days of hard racing in the "Women's 5-day Tour Feminin Cycliste". Firstly, I considered myself very fortunate in being selected for the team and was very surprised when I was informed that I would be going. Needless to say I was thrilled and straightway made all the necessary arrangements.

I met the rest of the team, Millie, Daisy, June, Joy, Beryl and our very good team manager Eileen Gray and mechanic Tom Crowther at Victoria Station where we departed by train to Newhaven and then by boat to Dieppe, a large fishing port on the coast of Normandy. We had a very pleasant trip across the water and sat on the top deck in the sun discussing the various stages that were to befall us. We ate very little during the journey as we went from Newhaven by a French boat and the food they had to offer was far from appetising. Apart from that, we each felt somewhat nervous and experienced the

typical 'racing man's nerves' which more often than not show themselves before big events. We didn't see much of Dieppe as we came straight off the boat on to the train and fought our way along narrow corridors to find ourselves an empty compartment. Here quite an amusing incident occurred, amusing now but not at the time. We each carried our own baggage all the way from the boat, shuffling along as best we could, and finally dumped it on the compartment floor. Then a little scruffy porter nipped in, whipped our baggage on to the rack and smartly held his hand out for 100 francs. We were staggered, and told him none too politely where to throw himself, but not understanding us he continued to demand his money, pointing to the baggage he had lifted on to the rack. We finally paid up and resolved to keep well away from porters for the next five days.

We arrived at Paris St. Lezair station just as it was getting dusk and were met outside by 'Tino', a little Frenchman who had come specially to welcome us. He was the Swiss riders domestique and was very small, dressed in cycling togs and walking with a limp. He was very excited and ran around in circles getting to know us and telling us all the latest news about the race. Eventually he asked us to follow him to the organizers' headquarters where we had to 'sign on', We arrived at Brummels, a huge sports store in Paris, and there we met some of the leading French cyclists, together with the organizers and press photographers and reporters.

We signed various papers and collected our start sheets and cycle numbers and then posed for the French press. The excitement was indescribable. Cyclists came from every corner to welcome us and even went to the extreme of asking us if we had brought Princess Margaret with us! This of course brought good humoured laughs from everyone.

Bidding our goodbyes to everybody, we departed to the pavement below where we hailed a taxi to take us to our hotel and our first good meal of the day. Mealtimes in France were very drawn-out affairs. We shook hands with everyone first (most of the other riders were there before us) and then we found our places and sat down to a five course meal, which we all agreed was well worth waiting for. Most of the food was served in oil, which we were not particularly fond of, and at every meal we had huge steaks, but the French do not cook like the English and we found every steak we had was red raw inside, so we started to ask them to 'well cook it'. Going from the sublime to the ridiculous, they were then served up charcoal black. We couldn't grumble though, as the French organizers of the event were paying all expenses, including all food, hotels and travel, so we made do as best we could.

Although we slept in Paris that night, the first stage started at Rambouillet which involved a 30-mile drive by coach. A very

pleasant trip it was, taking us past the Arc de Triumph and Eiffel Tower and along the Champs Elyseés and also across the bridges over the Seine. The whole time the French girls were singing and dancing about - they didn't seem to have racing man's nerves like the English.

Arriving at the start, we went over to the table to sign on and then collected our bikes from the bike waggon and rode them up and down to test the gears - and the Pavé. Yes, we started the first stage on Pavé - Sylvia's nightmare.

At the start of each stage the chief commisar stood up in an open car and called each rider by name over the microphone and we signalled to him that we were present by raising a hand. We all lined up ready to go, the police on motor bikes and marshal's waggons out in front, the riders in the middle and a caravan of about 20 cars behind, consisting of mechanics, team managers, press photographers and the jolly old banana waggon. There were whistles, trumpets and horns blasting away as we rode through the town at neutralized pace to the start proper. Here the red flag was dropped and away went the peloton at a furious rate, the riders finding themselves a comfortable position in the bunch.

The first stage was 77 kilometres over fairly flat country with some dangerous bends to negotiate. The pace was very fast with Millie doing far too much at the front. We others took our turn at the front but when we beckoned to the French girls to do their bit they shouted "NO, NO!!" to us, so we either had to drop back or press on, sharing the work between we six. We decided that to share the work would be best as the pace dropped to a crawl when we dropped too far back and it made dangerous riding in the bunch. Nearing the end of the first stage there was a nasty crash on a straight piece of road when Daisy touched the wheel in front. She crashed heavily, bringing down about four other riders. I had a narrow escape and only managed to avoid coming down by scooting along with one foot dragging on the road to push myself away from the pile of bikes and riders. The French girls sprinted like mad when they heard the crash, but Millie was with them and I regained the bunch a few seconds later. We were the only English girls in that breakaway for some time, but June chased and caught us within a mile. She had also been brought down in the crash. We continued to the finish at a very hectic pace as the chief commisar had just passed us in his car and informed us that we only had a short way to go. On reaching the town we had to go right through the 'Arriveé', make a circuit of the town and then back to the finish. There was a complete mix up with the French girls just before the finish - instead of turning left they went straight on, taking June and me with them as we were on the off-side. We quickly righted ourselves and sprinted for the line but Lily Herse had a clear win with Millie 2nd. June finished 8th with a small bunch and I was

13th. Beryl came in a little later and Joy some minutes after that, having lost her pedal early on and spent the larger part of the stage chasing the Peloton,

After the stage, we were each presented with a carnation "buttonhole" and handfuls of bananas from the banana waggon and then we drifted round to the local baths for a hot shower. After our showers, which we had at the end of each stage, we were taken by waggon to eat at the hotel where arrangements had been made for food to be provided for all the riders. This procedure was carried out at the end of every stage, making things fairly simple for all of us. We usually slept in the same building, usually an hotel, but on one occasion a huge chateau and on another a convent! We slept fairly well on the whole, but at one place the French girls started tipping each other out of bed and then the bed would collapse and they would try to put it together. It was funny to watch, but at the same time we weren't getting much sleep.

The second stage was a little longer than the first and again Daisy unfortunately crashed, more seriously this time, bringing more riders down. We were travelling at about 30 m.p.h. round a long hairpin and she really tore lumps out of herself as she hit the road. I couldn't believe I had got through without coming off as well, because it happened in front of me, but luck was with me and I got by and back in the bunch. Daisy wasn't quite so shattered as her machine and Tom, our mechanic, grabbed Jeanine Lemaire's bike for her to finish on. It was far too big for her and she couldn't operate the gears as they were of the handlebar control type so she had a difficult time finishing. She did finish though, very pluckily we thought considering her condition, but she decided to pack afterwards as it was becoming difficult for her to walk and use her arms properly.

Jeanine Lemaire, the French 500 metre world record holder, had retired early in the race owing to her crash with Daisy on the first stage. She had fractured her collarbone and decided it was no joke riding in that state. The French riders were very temperamental over such things and cried for hours if anything went wrong. One little girl came in last on every stage and usually about 20 minutes down and she cried every night, right through the meal time too, and nobody could pacify her. Millie and June would always: give her their winner's bouquets and that would always bring smiles.

The stages were very much the same each day, only the distance varying slightly. Sunday saw us with our time trial at 8.30 a.m. The riders started at two minute intervals, each having their own following car complete with mechanic, followers, and a spare machine if you had one! Our names were displayed on top of the car which was not allowed to pass the rider at any time unless she punctured or had trouble. Our time trial was

approximately 15 miles, straight out, and we were not allowed to wear silk vests for this as they provide less wind resistance than wool, so we all rode in wool vests. Times on the whole were very fast, Millie walking away with it in 39.6, making her position at the top of the general classification very secure. June was second with 39.38 and one other 39 minute ride was returned. There were several 40's and I came home 14th with 41.17. I was disappointed as it put me back two places in the general classification, but I couldn't brood over it and resolved to do my best to pick it up in the road race later in the morning. We had just half an hour before starting this, so we drank tea and ate slices of solid rice pudding to keep the hunger knock away before going out to our bikes and lining up for the last stage.

The distance was 30 miles over some of the prettiest country we had been in all the week, but we hardly had eyes for scenery and just hammered on for fear of being dropped. There were one or two breakaways on this stage and it really was a fight to get back on because of the following cars and press cars which jumped between the riders and the breakaway group. It happened to me on a downhill swoop, as I steadied myself round some of the dangerous bends. I lost ten yards on the bunch and two press cars jumped in the gap. I had to chase on my own for a mile and a half, shouting to the car drivers to get over and making frantic signs which eventually they obeyed and I got through a small gap on to the back of the bunch. We finished in Mantes in the main highway, and what a sprint for the line we had. It must have looked somewhat like a ten-up sprint with us all stretched out across the road. Lily Herse flashed across the line first. Joy made a supreme effort and came second. June was 4th, Millie 5th, and I came 6th. We were all given the same time so I pulled back two places in the general classification.

After gathering ourselves together for photographs and flowers, etc. we were introduced to Charles Pelissier, the great man in cycling. He took us to his café-cum-pub (as : they are in France) and treated us to drinks all round. We felt pleased it was all over as it had been a great mental strain over the five days, particularly the crashes and the pavé. It was a relief to know we had finished, and finished well, as indeed we felt we had done well between us. Millie had won the 'Tour', June was 2nd and I was placed finally 7th. Beryl was 9th and Joy 25rd and Daisy unfortunately had retired on the second stage.

The stage I shall always remember was the fourth, from Vimoutiers to Gournay-en-Bray. It was 70 kilometres and at 18 kilometres we went through Rouen, a town we had been warned about all the week. We had two miles of huge ugly cobblestones to go over, and not only that but tramlines as well, big gaping ones. There were several crashes around me and it

really was a nightmare as the pace seemed to increase rather than slow down. There was a complete breakaway during this stage and I got dropped disastrously coming out of Rouen. A bunch of seven got away and I was in a bunch of five chasing like mad for the rest of the way. Beryl and I were together and Solange Brun, a very strong French girl, Elsie Jacobs, the Luxemburg champion, and one other girl. Beryl, Solange and I did all the work at the front, the other two refusing to come up, so we had two passengers. We really thrashed ourselves to get back on the bunch and at one time were exactly a minute down, but with the following cars and 'Tino' on his power assisted machine telling us every mile how many seconds we had gained we finally got back to the bunch with a mile to go to the finish.

All the following cars, press, and even the French Army who had got themselves mixed up with the caravan, cheered and blew their horns because we had caught the bunch. We only had a short way to go to the finish so I sat in and had a rest. Millie made a spectacular break to win that stage by a clear 100 yards from Lily Herse. I came in 11th, successfully winning a private sprint with Rene Vissac, another French champion of the shorter distances.

Well, so ends my first internation stage race. I have gained a terrific amount of experience and I owe a lot to my Clubmates for the help they gave me with equipment. My gears worked beautifully and I had the best of tubulars with me. I had no mechanical trouble whatsoever and IT would like to thank you all for the help you gave me and the interest you have shown. I must say I nope this isn't the first international race the Club is closely connected with.

Here's to a very pleasant social season.

SYLVIA.