

Former bike racing champ Oscar Juner still rides at 81



Oscar Juner, a member of bicycle racing's Hall of Fame, test rides a Schwinn in San Mateo.

EXAMINER/JOHN STOREY

THE WHEELS KEEP TURNING



Oscar Juner, shown being questioned by a highway patrolman, broke both wheels on a metal roadway grid attempting to ride across the Golden Gate Bridge the day before it opened in 1937. Bearing the bruises of the sport on his left leg, Juner takes a turn in a six-day race in Chicago in 1936.

By Al Morch
OF THE EXAMINER STAFF

Oscar Juner, 81, rolled up his pants, showed a youthful appearing leg and said: "There's no varicose veins, and I just came from the doctor for a checkup, and he said I'm in perfect health."

Juner has been a long-distance bicycle racer since he was 16, and believes this is the road to good health and longevity.

"I have the blood pressure of a teenager, good muscle tone, a low resting pulse rate and I sleep like a baby," said Juner, who has driven from his home in Pacifica to Talbot's Cyclery in San Mateo four days a week for four years.

There he test-rides bikes after they're assem-

bled in Talbot's large shop located one flight up from the selling floor. And you should see Juner climb those stairs — like a mountain goat.

Juner gives the bikes a good test, too, he said. "I put a couple of miles on them, then bounce them over the railroad tracks that cross some of the streets here. I want to make sure a customer gets a perfect machine."

Although Juner is not a salesman, he's high on Schwinn bikes, having ridden the Paramount racing model in a number of six-day races in 1945.

When he opened his bike shop, American Cyclery, next to Kezar Stadium in 1941, he became a Schwinn dealer, and remained one for 50 years until he sold the store four years ago.

"Schwinn, which is celebrating its 100th anniversary, and Columbia, I always thought, were the two best production bikes made in America," he said, straddling one of Talbot's Schwinn Cruisers, a 1952 classic that is being reproduced by Schwinn's new owners, the Zell/Chilmark Fund and Scott USA.

"When it came out in '52 it cost \$49.95. Now it'll cost you \$259.95. But it's still worth the price," said Juner, who won the National Six-Day Championship in Chicago in 1936. For that, and his enduring competitive spirit, he is in bicycle racing's Hall of Fame at Somerville, N.J.

Juner was never a road racer — "too much danger from auto traffic, and if you got a flat you'd have to walk 20 miles or so to get home." He stuck to the wooden oval tracks that seemed to be everywhere in the country in the 1930s and early 1940s.

A Third Division infantry sergeant during World War II, Juner was wounded in France in



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Wheels keep turning

1945, 3 miles from the German border. When he returned to the U.S. he re-entered racing, but discovered that the interruption by the war had caused the sport to fade in the U.S. It only continued in popularity in Europe, especially France, Germany and Italy.

"In Newark (N.J.), my hometown, before the war there were four tracks, and there was frequent long-distance races at New York's Madison Square Garden. People turned out for it. It's been called the world's toughest sport. Its participants and top soccer players are in better physical condition than those in other sports."

Except for scrapes, bruises and splinters from the banked soft pine wooden ovals, Juner was never injured, although he took some terrific spills. "When you're an amateur you're more dangerous because you're competing with other amateurs, and you both have the same goal — to turn professional

and earn some real money. Professionals respect each other because it's their livelihood."

Juner came close to getting seriously injured when, as a stunt to publicize a six-day race at San Francisco's Dreamland, he rode across the Golden Gate Bridge the day before it opened in 1937. "I hadn't counted on the bridge's roadway grid plates, and when I hit one, I broke both my wheels," he said, adding he made the papers, but it might have been an obituary.

The son of a baker, Juner rode his first professional race when he was 21 in Montreal in October 1936. "I had three brothers and a sister. We all rode bikes, but from the time I could remember, I wanted to be a racer. They didn't."

His father, he said, did not discourage him. "At a time when the average male worker was making \$25 to \$30 a week," a six-day pro bike racer would make \$800 a week.

"And if you appeared in a pro race at Madison Square Garden, you got \$1,000 a night. Why not? Every night some 18,000 people

paid to watch you for six nights."

Racing had its hardships too. Riding in teams of two, a rider managed to get five hours sleep a day. "But not all at one time. And the accommodations were often terrible. But when you've ridden something like 2,800 miles in six days, hitting speeds of 38 miles per hour, you could sleep on a board."

Juner, who has trained kid bikers for the Junior Olympics, has been married twice. His second wife died 15 years ago, his 49-year-old daughter died of a heart attack four years ago, and his son, 35, was killed in a car crash 18 years ago.

"I've had some tragedy, but I wouldn't mind getting married again. I'm in good shape, except I'm a little overweight," he said, displaying an ample pot belly.

"Six-day racing is the sport for people who love to eat. It was not unusual to consume 10,000 calories a day. You'd be eating even when you were racing. It burns a lot of calories. Now I've slowed down, but I'd be slim in no time at all if I picked up the pace," he said.