

The Urago Years 1948 to 1954

The Urago years refers to the name of the racing bicycles I used during these years. Urago was a French bicycle built in Niece and imported by Mike Walden and Gene Portusi to their Continental Sport Shop that was located on Michigan Avenue just west of Livernois in Detroit. Mike and Gene were partners until 1951 at which time they split up on less than friendly terms.

In 1948 I purchased my first real racing bike. It was a used Urago for which I paid 70 dollars. It had a three-speed derailleur gear mechanism. During that era we raced on fixed gear bikes about as often as we used multi speed geared bikes. Thus I was often removing the derailleur and converting my bike to a fixed gear. My bike of the previous year was a Humber that had a three-speed hub gear. I sold that bike to a neighbor kid for 50 dollars thus I had most of the money to buy my 70 dollar racing bike.

During the summer of that year I worked for Western Union delivering telegrams. I worked out of the office located on Grand River and the Boulevard. Mike accused me, and my buddy Don Mitasky, for being Professional bikers as we were on our bikes 8 hours per day. There is no doubt we did get a lot of miles in while doing our job. I don't recall a lot of specifics concerning that year but I do recall at the end of the year we put on Roller Races in Convention Hall that was located between Woodward and Cass. Anyway it was during those races that I finished fifth and was awarded a trophy. This was my first ever bike trophy and it was a very good feeling to have won it, albeit for fifth place.

In 1949 I entered the State Championships that were held in Chandler Park. I was a Junior, those under 17 years of age. I'm not sure who got first and who got second but I got third and thus a State Championship Bronze Medal. I think the Gold and the Silver were also Bronze.

1950 was my first year as a Senior and as luck would have it I crashed on my face two days before the State Championships. I knocked out one tooth and had two that were partially broken. I wasn't in condition to race that year in the State Championships but at the end of the year I did win the Club Championship in races that were held on Belle Isle. During those years Mike was our on the bike coach. Bike handling was a big part of the training and learning how to ride between two riders that were attempting to keep you from doing that was part of the training. Mike was the best at doing that when two riders were riding together he would run up the middle and hit one rider with his head and shoulder. As soon as the rider veered off Mike was thru the hole. Now not many of us ever succeeded in doing what Mike did but we got the idea and we all knew that at some point you had to get out of a boxed in position or lose the sprint.

1951 was another year of racing and training with Mike and it was likely just another year of being close in many races but never winning much. During this time Mike taught us how to do Madison hand slings and we had team races on Outer Drive going around the Islands. Sprint training was also on Outer Drive in Rouge Park between Plymouth and Schoolcraft. There was a 90-degree turn on the course so it wasn't just a straight run but required speed as well as bike handling in a corner. The finish line was at a bridge over the Rouge River.

At the end of 1951 I expected to get drafted so I got a driveaway car and went to Miami where I stayed for about six weeks into mid February before returning. I went back to Work when I returned and continued until May when I decided to quit so that I could train for the State Olympic trials. I had ambitious plans of going to Muskegon then taking the ferry to Milwaukee then returning via Chicago. Well reality kicked in after 125 miles on Grand River into a vicious

head wind. I think I gave up my goal somewhere east of Grand Rapids. I got a motel and slept soundly. The following day I went north to my sister Virginia and her husbands parents farm. I had been there once and managed to locate it. The following day I rode back to Detroit on my first ever 200- mile ride. Though I didn't come close to finishing my original goal I guess I did get in decent shape as when the Olympic trials came up I managed to finish 6th and thus qualify for the final trials to be held in June in New Brunswick New Jersey.

Backing up to Memorial Day weekend I went to the 1952 Tour of Somerville with my buddy Gaston Prieur and another buddy whose name escapes me. Neither of them were bikers. I rode the tour and did zip. We then went to Philadelphia and I raced there as well. Next we went to Washington D. C. I don't recall if I raced there or not but after a week I decided to ride my bike home to Detroit. I believe it took me five days to make the trip at about 100 miles per day. After finishing that ride I figured I was in as good a shape as I was likely to get for the final Olympic trials.

Ken Stoddard drove me to the Olympic trials. They consisted of two 120-mile races held back to back on Saturday and Sunday. The course was 12 miles, 10 times around. There was one major climb on the course. On day one I made it up the climb 8 times in the pack on lap 9 I was off about 50 meters at the top. I started the descent with three others who had also been dropped. We formed a pace line to attempt to close on the pack. I sat in third position. A dog came out and took the lead rider down. The guy sitting on his wheel went over the lead rider, as did the guy in fourth position. I went inside and missed the mass of fallen riders. Lucky for me but that left me alone to chase the pack. For some time the distance to the pack was steady but gradually I lost my guts and the pack slipped slowly out of sight. So much for the Saturday race I went in at the end of lap nine and watched the finish of lap ten.

On Sunday I managed to stay in the pack for 9 laps on the climb then lost them on the final climb and had a virtual replay of the previous day chasing the pack then seeing it slip slowly out of sight. As I crossed the line I had finished two minutes down on the pack.

When Mike and Gene split up Mike moved his store to Livernois south of Six Mile, across from U of D. Most of the racers at that time followed Mike as Wolverines. Gene then started a rival club that he named the Spartans. The Spartan Club lasted about ten years then folded and the remaining Spartans became Wolverines.

In 1952 I had purchased two custom built Urago's, one road one track. I think the road bike cost 175 dollars. It had an eight speed Simplex derailleur. That was top of the line at that time. That year in the State Championships I got 3rd behind Clair Young and Karl Wettberg. I won the five-mile race in a breakaway and scored well in the ten-mile race as well with the assistance of Clair and Karl who had first and second sewed up on points.

In October of '52 I went to the Elgin to Chicago handicap road race. The race was 50 miles and was divided into packs with handicaps from 28, 21, 14, and 7 minutes over scratch. I was assigned the 7-minute handicap that was known as Dog Mark. Few winners ever came out of Dog Mark as scratch usually won the time prizes while the place prizes went to those from the 28, 21 and 14 minute packs. That year we in Dog Mark beat all of the Scratch Pack save two breakaways who beat our time by two minutes. I was third in the sprint and thus 5th fastest time overall and also 17th place overall. I received trophies for 5th time as well as 17th place and an Elgin Watch as well as first place on the team of five riders who had scored highest in the race. This was my ultimate day in Bike Racing and the only race in which I ever finished in front of Clair Young.

By 1953 I owned a car, a '53 Desoto, and each weekend thru the year it was filled with 5 or 6 other bikers for forays to out of town bike races. Naturally we were in town for the State Championships in which I once again got third. The fact that I got third was amazing enough what with my lack of a sprint of any significance. That year the National Road Race was in St. Louis in which I managed to finish 6th.

At the Tour of Somerville that year it rained throughout much of the race. I was still in the pack on the final lap. Turn 3 was an acute angle and someone crashed in front of me. I layed my bike way over in an attempt to go inside the crash but my tires would not hold on the wet pavement. I went down and slid across to the opposite curb that when I hit, blew my front tire. There was just one turn remaining and a few hundred meters to go after that to the finish. So once again I did zip but on the bright side I was in the pack to the end, which is no small feat in that particular race.

In 1954 I was working at Ford Engineering and I talked a buddy Ted Mace, who was not a biker to go on a significant tour with me. Ted agreed and bought a Urago racing bike and all the stuff we needed to do a long distance tour. Once again I secured a drive away car to be delivered to Lewiston Idaho. We loaded our bikes and luggage in the trunk and headed out across the country. I took advantage of the car to see some of the country I had never before experienced. To begin we went north to the Straits of Mackinaw where we took the ferry to the Upper Peninsula. We headed for Mount Rushmore then to Yellowstone. At that time the park was full of bears and they caused bear jams as they cruised along the line of cars hopping for handouts. We then went north to Glacier Park and then across the neck of Idaho and south to Lewiston.

The bike portion of our tour began at that location and headed west toward Walla Walla and then on to the Columbia River and west to Portland then west to the Ocean and south on Hwy 101 thru Oregon and northern California till we reached the Golden Gate Bridge. My front wheel fell between the slats of the expansion grate and knocked out three teeth. That effectively ended our tour and after three days we flew home to Detroit.

A couple weeks after returning to Detroit I went to a race in Washington D.C. It was held on the ellipse between the White House and the Capitol Bldg. It was a track bike race and in a sprint I got tangled with another rider and we both crashed near the finish line. Since we were close to the emergency crew we were scooped up and had our wounds attended to. Mike Walden suddenly appeared and said, "what the hell are you doing there?" "Get on your bike you get a free lap." I immediately responded and got on my bike and finished the race all the while with bandages flapping in the breeze.

One of the standard places that get abraded when you crash is on your hip area and it is a difficult place to heal as it was at the belt line. I often said in later times that the hip abrasion was more painful then having my lip cut and my teeth knocked out.

As things came to pass 1954 was my last year of competition at a national level as in March of '55 I got married and quickly entered the Minor Leagues so far as bike racing was concerned. Thus 1954 was the end of what I termed the Urago Years when I filled the pack with the big boys and gave them someone to beat across the finish line.

Though I was in the Minor Leagues I never gave up riding and I credit the bike with maintaining my sanity what with pressures from home, children and a work life.

TJ Hill, bicycle aficionado

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