

## PLOD ESSAY: Hefty Stuart, Wonthaggi Cycling Champion

At 10 am on the last Thursday in January, crowds gathered in McBride Avenue to watch the start of the second stage of the 2019 “Jayco Herald Sun Tour”, a professional bicycle race held in Melbourne and regional Victoria and sanctioned by the *Union Cycliste Internationale* or UCI. The second stage of this year’s race started in front of the Coffee Collective at exactly 10 am and went from Wonthaggi to Churchill, a distance of 127 km, which included some steep gravel climbs and the long ride up Farmer’s Road near Mirboo.

The Tour, originally known as the **Sun Tour** after *Sun News Pictorial*, is a stage race that has been an annual event since 1952, when the first 6-day race was held in October of that year. The race continued to be held in that month for more than 60 years until the date was shifted to February to accommodate international riders. This year’s race was the 66<sup>th</sup> edition of the race (there were no races in 2010 and 2012), and Dylan van Baarle from the Netherlands won it.

Wonthaggi riders have always taken part in the race for there is a proud cycling history here beginning as early as 1910, when, according to the *Powlett Express*, “Movement was afoot to establish a Wonthaggi Cycling Club.” Not long after that, weekly handicap races starting from the Union Theatre on Saturday afternoons took place. In 1926, the July 7 *Melbourne Sporting Globe* reported that Bruce Small had arranged the “Malvern Star” an annual open race from Wonthaggi to Melbourne, a distance of 86 miles. Even though Mr Small had intended to stage his race along the Dandenong Road from Oakleigh through Gippsland, “strong inducements were held out to him to make Wonthaggi the starting point, as cycling is booming in the mining district.”

That first Malvern Star race attracted 116 riders and it took the winning rider 3 hours

and 20 minutes to complete the race. Although he rode the distance in the fastest time, Hubert “Oppy” Opperman, the great road king of Australia, finished sixth.” (*Daily Telegraph* Sept. 1926)

In 1930, a Carnival was arranged by the Wonthaggi Fire Brigade on the day of the Melbourne-Wonthaggi road contest. It was held on the local sports ground and a large program was arranged, the proceeds of which would be divided up between the local fire brigade and the Wonthaggi Hospital.

In 1939, a special 100-mile Wonthaggi-Melbourne race organised by “Oppy” Opperman was held under the auspices of the Victorian Amateur Cyclists’ Union. It was the only continental style, big open event in Australia that year and was, therefore, an historic occasion with a combined entry of 136 riders.

The Wonthaggi Cycling Club held many cycling events including Road Tours from Wonthaggi to Inverloch or Wonthaggi to Cowes and back. It ran its own Wonthaggi Tour for Gippsland riders and always expected strong opposition from everywhere. Bill Armfield,



**Hefty Stuart**

secretary of the Club, planned circuitous courses with riders passing through the town at least seven times for the Wonthaggi Tour in 1940. In fact, that event drew one of the largest crowds ever seen at a cycle race because word had got around that British Empire Sprint Champion, Herb Guyatt, would compete in the road race. He defeated his co-scratch marker, Keith Slavin by half a wheel with Ivan Watson three lengths further back. Guyatt secured fastest time honours as well as first place. After the race, he donated the trophies back to the club to be handed down the list of riders.

Many events were scheduled to be held in support of town fixtures like the Hospital Fete

or May Day celebration of the 40-hour week or the Fire Brigade. For instance, in the early 1930's cycling was featured in the Wonthaggi Hospital Sports. At a special race called the "Canberra Cup" scheduled for the day, James Scullin, Prime Minister of Australia, attended to witness the race and hand over the cup to the successful rider of the race.

Wonthaggi had many champion cyclists known by everyone in the town and who drew crowds wherever they rode. The fame of several extended out to Melbourne and even the world. The riders excelled in road races, stage races, match races, pursuit races whatever was going. They had names like Peter & Tom Lindsay, Tom Fitzgerald, Jack Clancy, Keith Slavin, Joe Main, Billy Hitchinson, John Evens, Richard Mullins. Jack Clancy, who won the trophy for the first country rider at Oakleigh in 1940, in fact, opened a new bicycle and radio business on McBride Avenue that year. Dickie Collins was an early champion, but he had to retire hurt after only a short career. During his short career he achieved many successes including beating J Watson (Amateur Champion of Australia) in the Wonthaggi Cycling Club's 17-mile road race to Inverloch and back. "On the homeward journey he showed what he was made of. He sat down and rode a splendid race and broke the race record." (October 1931)

But the most beloved Wonthaggi rider of all, it seems, was Wally "Hefty" Stuart. Hefty was part of a trio of crack Australian riders –

Oppy Oppenham, Ernie Milliken and Hefty – who went to England together in the 1930s and astonished the British Cycling Fraternity. Ernie Milliken did it by breaking the unbreakable London-to-Brighton-and-back record, which he did by 14 minutes. Hefty then beat the Portsmouth-and-back record by 25 minutes and Oppy did the same in his Bath-and-back ride.



**Clancy, Slavin, Main**

The Poms reckoned it had to do with style. The English riders were "stylists", small of physique and seemingly effortless in "spinning the cranks." The Aussies were tough strong riders who, when they come to a steep hill, "they got off the saddle and thrust in the method confined to errand boys in this country—very powerful but very tiring method of progression. They have physique that is able to take punishment without physical injury and iron will that so often goes with the strong man..." (Article in a London paper written by Alan Gregory). While overseas the three competed and were featured in the World's Championships in Belgium in 1935.

They came home absolute heroes. But tragedy struck only a few years later when Hefty went to Olympic Park in Melbourne for some demonstration rides. His back tyre suddenly punctured and he fell. A race escort motorbike clipped his wheel, ran over him and killed him.

After that the wind seemed to go out of Wonthaggi cycling until 1954 when the Wonthaggi Cycle club conducted the W.F. "Hefty" Stuart memorial road race over seven laps of the Tour of Wonthaggi course. There was only a small field of ten riders who raced under gruelling conditions. Peter Baker won, after an almost lone ride. His time was one hour and thirteen minutes.

– C. Landon



STUART LEADING SCRATCH BUNCH OVER THE LINE AT THE END OF THE FIRST HUNDRED  
 TIME 3 HRS 47 MINS 35 SECS - AN AVERAGE OF 26.4 MILES PER HR  
 VERY FAST CONSIDERING THE WET CONDITIONS  
 H.WOOLRICH second - H. OPPERMAN third  
 Permission by J.Hitchmough