

Jacek Berruti (right) believes this vintage Alcyon bike was part of the Alcyon-Dunlop team's 1927 Tour de France-winning set of bikes



Alcyon days

L'Eroica icon Jacek Berruti explains why the simplicity and reliability of his vintage steel Alcyon steed continues to invoke the heroic, nearly a century after it was made

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In a bid to spice up the 1927 Tour de France, race director Henri Desgrange unveiled the team time-trial format for all flat stages. With teams setting off every 15 minutes, the idea was to encourage the big stars to go for broke on the grounds that they could not see how their rivals were faring.

The French Alcyon-Dunlop team proved themselves adept at this new-fangled discipline, most notably winning the whopping 285km leg between Les Sables and Bordeaux. And once the race hit the mountains and the riders reverted to starting *en masse*, it was the team's Luxembourg star Nicolas Frantz who established a commanding lead with wins in the Pyrenees and Alps.

Jacek Berruti believes the bike he picked up for next to nothing in a vintage market in Milan in 2003 was one of those used by the Alcyon-Dunlop team in that era.

'The owner was probably not Frantz himself and no one knows for sure if

this bike was used during the 1927 Tour, but research in my father's library of old books showed that Frantz used a bike just like this one.'

With his bushy handlebar moustache, tweed cap and oversized goggles, Jacek's father was the late Luciano Berruti, the living embodiment of the Eroica vintage bike race that was born on the famous *strade bianche* of Tuscany and which has since been exported all over the world.

Jacek's first encounter with his bike was love at first sight: 'Everything was perfect – only old and worn. Above all, it was complete: the frame, hub, pedals, crankset, wheels and original Brooks saddle – even the chain and handlebars. I only needed to change the tyres. My father was one of the biggest experts in vintage bikes in the world and he advised that I buy it.'

The subsequent addition of a number six was a nod to Frantz's start number in the 1927 Tour. Jacek has now ridden 15 editions of L'Eroica on this trusty steed, for which he dons a replica woollen ◊





Berruti still rides the Alcyon and says it's easy to maintain – it has no gears and only needs oiling once a year



Alcyon-Dunlop jersey. He says he is driven to experience exactly what the riders of Frantz's generation felt while riding on the white roads.

'When you ride this bike, you use your whole body. You push and pull. It's different cycling to today. It was designed for stages of up to 400km on gravel roads. Needs were different. Above all bikes in those days had to be comfortable and reliable.'

Stringent Tour regulations during the 1920s meant riders were required to do all repairs themselves.

device is *strappachiodi* – the part of the hammer used to pull out nails.

'Riders back then were not so honest,' Jacek explains. 'They rode through the night and would drop nails on the favoured part of the road. But winning would put food on the table for their families. You must remember it was not sport back then – it was a question of survival.'

Alongside his day job as a project manager for Continental, the automotive company, Jacek also runs the vintage bike museum his father

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'I've never had to repair this bike and I've never broken anything,' Jacek says. 'The design is so simple, you can easily do any maintenance it needs.'

That includes small ports into which oil can be added to grease the hub and bottom bracket – something Jacek does once a year.

When it comes to maintenance, it helps that there are no gears.

'It's 46 on the front and 20 on the back. If you want to change the gear ratio, you must stop, unscrew the rear wheel skewer, and reverse the wheel. Then you have 18 on the back.'

It's a manoeuvre Jacek has only done once before – during a hellishly cold and wet edition of the Milano-Sanremo Storica. Having set off at midnight he finally succumbed, 15 hours and 290km later, on the Poggio.

Another neat gimmick is a steel clip that floats behind the forks to dislodge any sharp bits brought up from the road on the tyre. The Italian word for this

opened in Cosseria, near Savona in Liguria. His Alcyon is one of 60 bikes in a permanent collection that also includes vintage jerseys and other cycling memorabilia. But it's when riding the Alcyon bike on the Tuscan white roads that he feels happiest.

'What really matters in life? We should reduce everything to the essential – just like the bikes of the past. If I have no gearset, I can't break it; if it's heavy, I can't break it. This bike is so comfortable you can stay on it forever.'

Try telling that to Frantz. A year after his first Tour win, he became the only rider in history to wear the yellow jersey from the first day to the last, despite a scare that saw him ride 100km of Stage 19 on a borrowed bike after breaking his frame going over a railroad track.

After a third consecutive win for Alcyon-Dunlop in 1929, Desgrange ditched the TTT. A ban on trade teams then drew the curtain on those halcyon days of Alcyon domination. ©