



Clockwise from left: Russ (on the left) has been logging his miles since he was a teenager. He was 6th in the 1955 National 25-mile TT, with a time of 58:35. Russ today with his repaired Holdsworth. Russ made the cover of *Cycle* (April/May 01) and appeared in the Farnham Road Club Magazine



Feature

The million-mile man

Cycling UK member Russ Mantle is the first person in the UK to document riding a million miles by bike. **Christina Bengston** caught up with the legend

A million miles: it's the equivalent of circumnavigating the earth 40 times, or travelling to the moon and back twice. The average car owner will likely drive less than half that distance in their lifetime.

Cycling that far is a staggering feat, but talking to 82-year-old cycling legend Russ Mantle, you'd think it was no more impressive than cycling to the shops. "It's my only means of transport, so I naturally do a reasonable mileage," said Russ. "All I've done is keep going. There's too much reliance on the car these days. People say the roads are too busy. Well, they are the culprits."

I stopped in to see Russ when he had 850 miles to go. (He has since completed the million on 7 November.) He's the first person in the UK to document cycling such a mileage; only Freddie Hoffman in the USA has previously claimed a million miles. The next highest recorded distance of the 300,000 Mile Club was that of Russ's good friend, Chris Davies, who previously topped the leader board with 916,761 miles. Chris



CHRISTINA BENGSTON

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Christina's cycle commute to work is a round-trip of 14 miles. She'll have to do it 71,429 times to reach a million!

convinced Russ to join the Club and Russ is now firmly the front runner, nearly 200,000 miles ahead of the next active contender.

Russ has recorded his cycling journeys meticulously since 1953. He has a remarkable ability to recall his many cycling adventures in every detail. He can reel off the dates and distances of all his tours, the heights of passes, and remembers every race he ever won.

"My record touring day is from Aldershot in Hampshire to Wales and back in a day: 260 miles. I started off in the dark at something like 3am and got back half an hour before lighting up time at 9.45 pm," Russ said. "Another long ride was 256 miles from here to Weston-super-Mare and back."

But you don't accumulate a million miles by going on a few long rides. Russ's average mileage per year has been 14,700 miles – year after year after year. The most he's recorded in one year was 22,550 miles in 2001.

A QUICK START

Russ was given his first bike by his father in 1951, at the age of 15. It was a Hercules upright. When he started earning a wage, he wanted a racing bike, so he bought himself



Photographs: Rob Spanning & Russ Mantle



a Coventry Eagle. It would be the first and last complete bike he bought. "Since 1952 onwards, I've always built my own wheels," he said. "I've bought the frames, bought bits, and put them together."

Russ explained that he's always been good with his hands, owing to his long career as a carpenter and joiner, which began with a five-year apprenticeship in 1952. In 1959, he travelled to Malvern, Worcestershire – by bike, of course – to begin two years of National Service, first in the UK then later stationed in Germany. But the army didn't put the brakes on his cycling ambitions. "I rode for the army," Russ said. "I came back twice to ride a few five-day stage races for the army, and I won a fair few army races."

Russ's racing life wasn't confined to his army years. "I raced from 1953 to 1968, then I had three years off racing, and started racing again in 1972 for another four years."

His accolades as a time-trialist are impressive. In the 1955 National 25, he achieved his highest championship placing, coming sixth with a time of 58:35. Over his racing career he also set three club, seven course, and eight event records. The evidence of his racing talent surrounds Russ's sitting room, where over 100 medals are displayed.

Russ's final race took place in 1975. He won it. Then he retired from racing. What made him stop? "I wasn't with it anymore," he said. "I just didn't have that urge in me. I remember the early days of my racing when I was young. I was bursting with life. I was on the starting grid for a race and away I went, zoom. But that had gone from me. I wasn't enjoying my racing anymore so I decided to stop."

LEADING THE WEST SURREY

Russ's cycling distances only increased once he finished racing. A life member of the Farnham Road Club, West Surrey CTC, Cycling UK, and the

Russ' wheels

Russ now rides two bikes primarily: a Holdsworth he bought in the early 1980s and a Rotrax he got in 1996. "I use the Holdsworth bike the most. I bought the frame only and built the bike. It has six gears."

An accident over 30 years ago broke the frame in half. He repaired the break using a piece of sheet aluminium.

"Notice the size of the gears and the sprockets. It's a 34 at the back. I've made my own inner ring. On TA chainsets, the smallest inside ring is 26 but out of sheet alloy I've made my own 24 tooth. The outer ring is still small, only about 38. I freewheel down hills and never need to go fast."

300,000 Mile Club, he acted as the run leader for West Surrey CTC for 20 years from 1970 to 1990.

As with his own cycling records, he kept meticulous records from his days leading the West Surrey runs, carefully tallying up everyone's points for each ride. Russ showed me some of the cycling diaries he's kept since he started recording his distances in 1952. They are packed full, not just of his mileage, but also wind direction, temperature, even where he stopped for elevenses.

It hasn't always been freewheeling for Russ. He's had several pretty serious crashes, resulting in a broken arm, pelvis and hip, a damaged jaw, a cracked rib, and a punctured lung, not to mention several times he was knocked unconscious. Despite the broken hip putting Russ out of action for nine weeks, that year he still managed to record an impressive 16,382 miles.

In 2016, his cycling future was nearly in doubt when on day three of a five-week cycle tour of Wales, he suffered a suspected heart attack. "I felt so weak. We were going up this long hill and I had to stop," Russ said. "I got to the top of the hill and stopped by a wall. I went to steady myself to get off the bike and I just went over."

None of this has stopped him from riding. "It's my only way of getting out and about," he explained. Despite losing a lot of his strength since this last incident, he still cycles around 120 miles per week.

HERE, THERE, AND EVERYWHERE

Russ's cycling touring is even more prolific than his racing days, usually cycling alone. "I once did the Pyrenees end to end, the Spanish and the French side, from Bilbao in Spain, zig-zagging back and forth over the border. Then I doubled back and did it again."

Another lengthy tour took Russ from Surrey to the far north of Scotland and back again, riding the whole way – a total of 1,500 miles.

"My favourite area is probably the French Alps," he said. "Anywhere with mountains I love." Russ showed me a record of all the passes he's cycled. "There are three 9,000 footers in the French Alps; I've done them all. I also really like Ireland. I've done four tours of Southern Ireland. The south west of Ireland is the best part – lovely to tour around."

Before I left Russ to get back on his bike, I asked him if he'd carry on cycling after he reaches the million-mile mark? "Of course," he replied. "It's just another milestone. I'll keep going." ●



How do I get into the 300,000 Mile Club?

The 300,000 Mile Cycling Club was founded in 1962 by Frank E Fischer to provide a permanent record of the distance members covered.

Administrator Wilf Lawson told me how it works: "All the distances claimed should be done by human power alone, and moving from place to place – that is, not on exercise machines or cycles mounted on rollers." The category of machine, the surface ridden, and the purpose of the ride do not matter.

"A lot of our older members will have started with wheel-driven mechanical mileometers. I think it

was the 1980s when bike computers arrived with so many more features but operated by a magnet on the wheel giving a electrical pulse in a pickup.

"To gain membership, we ask applicants to provide as much detail as possible. This should at least be annual mileages, though we would prefer monthly or weekly breakdowns. Examples of charts and diaries kept would be good, and any other evidence."

Read more at 300k-cc.co.uk.

i More info
 Watch Russ cycle the very last leg of his million-mile journey:
cyclinguk.org/news/82-year-old-first-brit-cycle-million-miles