

# Frans Pauwels—Founding Father of Portland Bicycle Racing

**A Dutch immigrant introduced European-style racing in the 1960s and influenced generations to get on a bike and ride**

by Kelley Dodd

Inside the front door of the bike shop is a wall of old photos, many depicting a handsome racer covered in dirt and sweat holding a victory bouquet, and a glass case displaying medals, ribbons, plaques, and awards—evidence of a long and successful bike racing career. “This is just a tiny fraction of my Dad’s trophies,” says Dirk Pauwels.

Kissler’s Cyclery, owned and run by the Pauwels family since 1959, closed its doors last year and joined forces with the Washington County Bicycle Transportation Coalition to open the Frans Pauwels Memorial Community Bicycle Center in honor of the man who worked tirelessly to promote the sport of cycling. Dirk, who took over the business from his father, is semi-retired but continues to work part time fixing up donated bikes to give to kids in need and participating in bicycle safety clinics and helmet fittings. Like his father, he has devoted a lifetime to cycling, “I started working at Kissler’s with my Dad when I was a kid, putting bikes together for twenty-five cents a piece.”

Six-feet tall, tan, and lean with powerful legs and a strong Dutch accent—Frans Pauwels was an impressive figure. Kids who discovered Kissler’s Cyclery in downtown Portland in the 1960s gravitated to the store to marvel at the foreign cycling magazines, like the *Miroir du Cyclisme*, and tour posters, radio coverage of European bike races, and exotic bike frames hanging from the walls. Those kids knew Pauwels was the real deal—a professional bike racer—and they wanted to be like Frans.

A small number of bike shops, owned or operated by European immigrants, opened across the United States after World War II—Oscar Wastyn in Chicago, Antonio Gatto in San Jose, Thomas Avenia in New York. These men and their shops served as



Frans Pauwels, member of the Cycles OK pro team, circa 1947

sources of expertise and suppliers of state-of-the-art equipment in their communities, and they sparked a resurgent interest in cycling in the 1960s. In Portland, Oregon, that spark was Frans Pauwels.

Pauwels was born in 1918 in the small town of Hulst, The Netherlands—mere blocks from the Belgian border. Dirk has visited the town where his father was born, describing the area as “scattered villages of maybe a thousand people where cycling was the norm—it was the easiest way to get from village to village.”



Pauwels (center) after a stage win in the Vuelta a España, Madrid 1946

Pauwels started his racing career as an apprentice at age fourteen. He turned professional and joined the Dutch national team in 1936, mostly participating in Kermesse races—fifty- to sixty-mile circuit races—a popular part of village festivals. Professional racers could make a living going from town to town and competing in two or three races a week. He made his way up the ranks during a time when there were about 400 professional racers in Holland, and he participated in the major European road races—the Tour of Spain (The Vuelta de España), the Tour of Switzerland, and the Tour de France—from 1936 through the late 1940s. He was known to be a devastating sprinter.

What would have been his greatest racing victory was snatched from his grasp on the sixth day of the seven-day Tour de Catalonia in May 1940. As Pauwels led the pack of racers through the Pyrenees Mountains, officials halted the race. Germany had invaded The Netherlands. “We somehow finished that leg of the race,” Pauwels told a reporter in 1962, “but we got together immediately afterwards to decide what to do.” The five riders from Holland and Belgium hired a taxi to take them 350 miles to the border before it closed at midnight, their bikes strapped to the roof. The cyclists went home to join the war effort.

During the war, Pauwels worked as an interpreter in collaboration with the British Army, even though he knew little English, and was a link in the European escape network, helping Allied servicemen and refugees cross the Dutch-Belgium border. He also used his bicycle to smuggle food back to his village.

After World War II, Pauwels continued to compete in international races, winning three stages and placing twentieth in the Tour of Spain in 1946 and eleventh in 1947. He retired in 1950 at age thirty-two during a time when he was racing against Fausto Coppi and Louison Bobet.

Pauwels moved his family to Portland in 1953 with the help and sponsorship of his cousin, Ed Verdurmen, who gave him a job pumping gas. “I came to America with my wife, three children, two suitcases, and \$500,” he loved to tell his

grandchildren, remembering his humble start in the U.S.

While pumping gas at his cousin’s filling station in a small suburb of Portland, Oregon, Pauwels was astonished when a small group of cyclists rode by. At that time, only children rode bicycles—cruisers with balloon tires for riding around the neighborhood. It was the first time he’d seen ten-speed bicycles since moving to the United States. [Cycling had been a huge attraction and pastime in the U.S. at the turn of the century, but it had fallen from favor after two World Wars, the advent of the automobile, and the Great Depression.]

When the riders came by the gas station, Pauwels asked where they came from and where they met for rides. “My dad was so excited to see a ten-speed bike here he immediately asked to join them for a ride,” says Dirk. They told him about Kissler’s Cyclery located in downtown Portland at SW 3<sup>rd</sup> and Jefferson. He arranged to meet the cyclists and discovered the shop was looking for a mechanic. He took the job, and several years later, in 1959, he bought the business. He later moved it one block to SW 4<sup>th</sup> and Jefferson.

His first order of business was to import European bicycles. “He wanted to bring in bikes that would really move,” says Dirk. Multi-speed bikes were being produced that allowed a rider to exert a fraction of the effort compared to the cruiser-style popular in the U.S. Some of the early brands he brought to Portland were Peugeot, Helyett, and Geminiani from France, Frejus and Olmo from Italy, and Raleigh from England. His next move was to get more people involved in cycling, especially children.

In 1962, Pauwels convinced Carl Cadonau, son of Alpenrose Dairy owner, to add a dirt racing track to the growing number of attractions on the dairy property located in Southwest Portland. Adding to the baseball diamonds, a rodeo arena, and pony rides, Cadonau bulldozed a quarter-mile track below a duck pond and through the trees to create the Tour d’Alpenrose. Kids throughout Portland found out about bike racing at the dairy from the milk delivery box—the Dairyland Gazette flyer announced





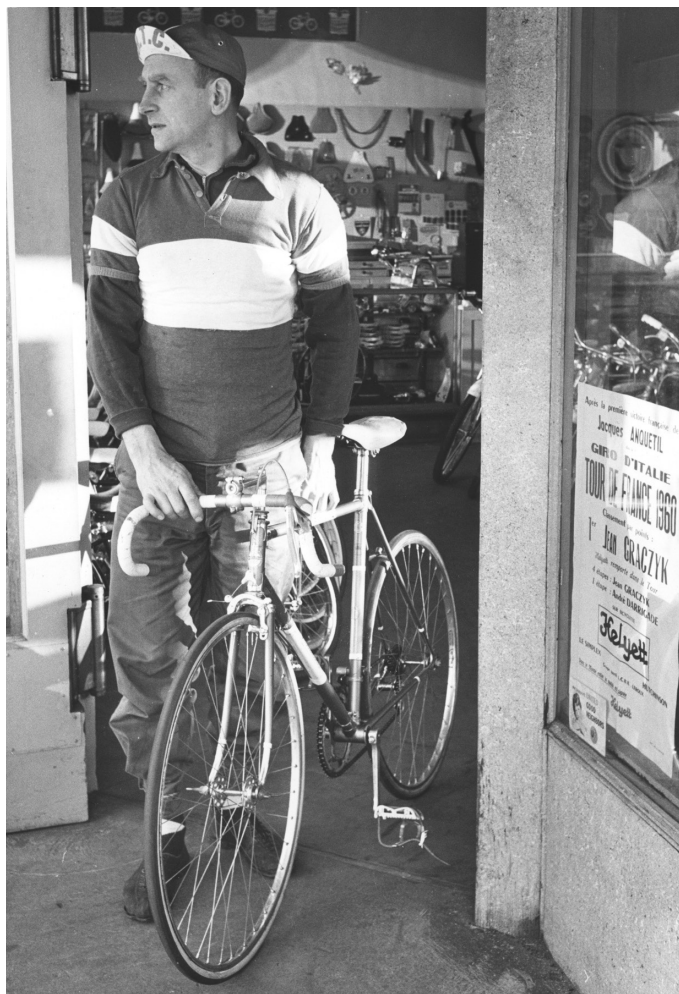
Pauwels with wife Eugenie (far right) after winning a Kermesse race in Belgium



Cycles OK pro team, circa 1947. Left to right: Gerrit Schulte, Albert Hendricks, Eugene Kiewit, team owner Jos Vinck, Karel Kaers, Theo Middelkamp (cousin of Frans Pauwels), Frans Pauwels, unknown, Jos Labrosse, unknown.



Frans Pauwels and his father Rudolph after he won the 100-mile road race in Antwerp, Belgium



Pauwels in front of the downtown Kissler's Bike Shop, circa 1960

coming events and news. Dirk remembers that first track, nicknamed the Tour de Fleur, “It was so dusty and dirty, and water would seep onto the track from the duck pond. We’d have to clean up the moss or riders would crash.”

One kid, who received a notice in the milk box, showed up to race the Tour de Fleur. At age fourteen, Nick Zeller won the race. “I had a job as a paperboy,” says Zeller. “I delivered papers on my Stringray and realized I was pretty fast.” He would go on to win numerous Oregon State Road Championships, become a member of the 1967 Pan American Games Road Cycling Team, and train under Pauwels’s tutelage.

The dirt track at Alpenrose continued to attract racers every week, and Pauwels knew he could bring real racing to Oregon with a better track. Dirk, who had also become involved in bike racing, remembers his father saying, “If we had a track here, we could make it grow. We could bring the Nationals here and put Portland on the map.”

In 1967, Cadonau agreed to invest \$30,000 and build the Olympic-style Alpenrose Velodrome. Pauwels went to work, with the help of Mayor Terry Schrunk, to bring the National Bicycle Championships to Portland. Quoted in a *Sports Illustrated* article from that year, Cadonau said, “Our fellows finished laying cement one week before the race. The painting was done this week, and the striping was done today. That 41° bank looks severe, but it helps the riders. You go into it at a speed of 26.7 miles per hour to be perpendicular to the surface.”

The 1967 Nationals were a huge success complete with a stunning victory by hometown racer Steve Maaranen winning the ten-mile senior race in a split second upset over favored Jackie Simes from New Jersey.

Pauwels employed racers like Maaranen, his son Dirk, and Zeller. “When I was working as a paperboy,” recalls Zeller, “I could make \$25 a month if I was lucky. Frans paid me \$25 a week. I thought I was a millionaire.” The shop had become a Schwinn dealership, ranking ninth in the nation in sales, and Pauwels paid for his employees to go to the Schwinn School to study bike mechanics.

To further encourage cycling and road racing, Pauwels sponsored racing clubs, the Pacific Cycling Club (PCC) and the Multnomah Touring Club (MTC), out of Kissler’s Cyclery. Other bike shops around town also sponsored racing teams, and each shop wanted the best group of guys riding for their club. Phil’s Bike Shop on NE Broadway, owned by Phil Hohnstein, was home to the longstanding Rose City Wheelmen. Looking back, Zeller is convinced that “the reason Portland is such a bike-friendly city and has the infrastructure it does is due to the rivalry between Frans and Phil. Phil was there at every race with the starting gun, and Frans was either in the race with a bunch of youngsters or on the sidelines offering advice.”

Pauwels knew how to instill confidence in his racers. He coached Zeller, Maaranen, who became a U.S. Olympic team member in 1968, and many others to compete in state, national, and international races. He held nightly coaching rides on Mt. Tabor in SE Portland where he taught the basics of hill climbing and cornering, and he held roller races at his shop in the winter months. Racers could compete against each other or against the clock on training rollers. His philosophy was simple enough—prepare well and go out there and ride hard.

According to Zeller, “Frans said you got to ride the miles. I did forty miles before and after work—10,000 miles in 1967—to get ready for the Pan American Games.” Pauwels told him, “You know you did those miles, and you’re tougher than the other guys. The toughest guy wins.”

Pauwels was a gifted tactician who knew how to win bike races. He passed along racing strategy and training tips that Zeller, who continues to cycle and tour, uses to this day—ride low gears and spin and ride a fixed gear in winter. “We didn’t have any scientific coaching. You just rode your miles—none of this heart monitor stuff,” says Zeller. But the most important thing he learned from Pauwels was to believe in himself.

Pauwels was a successful bike shop owner, started the Alpenrose Velodrome racing circuit, coached up-and-coming cyclists, served as director of the



Amateur Bicycle League of America, and still found time to lobby for bike paths and cycling advocacy. It helped that his shop was located across the street from City Hall.

He wanted people to see bicycles as something other than a toy, as something to be used for sport, fitness, and transportation. Pauwels loved all aspects of cycling and saw a huge potential in Portland. According to Dirk, “He was the pioneer bike commuter. We lived in the Raleigh Hills neighborhood, and his commute was about five miles down Barbur Boulevard.” But as Frans told a reporter in 1962, commuting in Portland was not easy. “People are always drawing alongside in their car and offering me a ride. They seem to feel sorry for me,” said Pauwels. “And several times I’ve been ordered off the road by the police who think a cyclist is a traffic hazard.”

His advocacy led him to Salem where he lobbied for wider roads, including bike lanes, and bike safety. Dirk remembers that his father loved politics. “It was competitive, and he had a captive audience,” he said laughing. “People were really interested in what he had to say about cycling.”

Pauwels continued to compete throughout his life. When he was in his mid-forties, he teamed with Zeller in the two-man Madison races at Alpenrose. He participated in road races at the PIR track at Delta Park and won three jerseys in the U.S. Nationals in his age group—he raced until he was seventy-four years old.

Jerry Powell, a longtime racer in Portland, remembers competing with a sixty-year-old Pauwels in 1978. It was the Veteran’s Race at the Sherwood Criterium. “A third of the way into the race, I felt like I was doing okay, so I took the inside line on a corner. I caught a shoulder and went flying. It was Frans. I asked him after the race why he threw me, and he said, ‘Because you shouldn’t have been there.’” Powell learned his lesson and went on to train with Pauwels. He also learned how to control his speed in a pack without using his brakes and how to corner smoothly without losing speed just by following Pauwels around a course.

Pauwels “retired” from cycling, leaving the bike business to Dirk, only to take up skiing, tennis, and marathon running. Dirk says, “He couldn’t just play it, he had to compete. He was always striving to be the best he could.”

“I’d see him,” says Zeller, “well into his seventies, still riding on the Beaverton-Hillsdale Highway. He wasn’t going fast, but he was still riding. He was such an inspiration.”

Today, Portland is considered by many to be one of the most bike-friendly cities on any continent. More than a dozen framebuilders craft cutting-edge bicycles in the city. Bike races continue to be held every week at the Alpenrose Velodrome, and Portland is home to more than thirty amateur racing teams. Frans Pauwels would be proud of this heritage.



Pauwels and Nick Zeller competing in a Madison race at the Alpenrose Velodrome in 1967

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Kelley Dodd is a graphic designer, occasional writer, and bike commuter in Portland, Oregon. She wrote this story for her husband, Andy Newlands of Strawberry Bicycles, who bought a Frejus racing bicycle in 1963 from Frans Pauwels.