

The Legacy **Issue 2: RW Trainer King Ryan – the Man Behind the Success**

by Bill Cline
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Behind every great team or champion there is a great Directeur Sportif—as Bruyneel is to Armstrong, or Guimard was to Hinault. King Ryan filled that bill for the early Reno Wheelmen. Today, Ryan would likely be called a Directeur Sportif, DS, manager, or coach, but in his day he was simply the “trainer.”

While not much basic, personal information exists in the written record on King Ryan, his name appears often in nearly every account of the early RW exploits. From these accounts, there is also no doubt that being the “trainer” meant that Ryan managed the affairs of the racing team, conditioned his athletes and was a keen strategist and tactician. He elevated the RW from being just an ok local squad to a consistent Pacific Coast champion. There was even a bit of mother hen in the trainer, too. A true DS to the bone. Even after he disappeared from the scene after the 1904 season, his stamp remained firmly on the RW.

On July 3, 1900, as the team boarded the train bound for Sacramento, Ryan ensured that the boys stayed away from the “seductive steam” of the locomotive. He also insisted the boys drink nothing but the water from the barrel he brought along—only the familiar, pure, healthy Reno water for the boys. (Nevada State Journal, “The Great Relay Race: How Reno Became the Coast Champion, July 6, 1900) After the victory, as the team and all its many supporters took over Sacramento in celebration, Ryan was right there with them.

Unfortunately, right on the heels of that glorious first day of major victory, Ryan's night ended in catastrophe. While celebrating, Ryan severely injured his left hand after a mistimed batch of fireworks exploded. Initial reports had him losing two fingers in the incident. As the lads left to board the train home the next day, they all said goodbye to Ryan, who had to stay behind for medical attention. As part of the community celebration on the evening of July 5, it was decided then and there to hold a benefit for the trainer and the following telegram was immediately dispatched to Ryan back in Sacramento:

“...At a large and enthusiastic reception to the victorious Reno relay team here tonight resolutions were unanimously adopted congratulating you on your noble work with the team. We sympathize with you in your sore affliction, and assure you of financial support.”
Signed Citizens & Wheelmen's Committee, J.E. Bray, Chairman. (Nevada State Journal, “Benefit for King Ryan,” July 6, 1900)

None-the-less, just two months later on September 17, 1900 the RW relay team had to turn right around and fend off a challenge to their championship, and King Ryan was back at the helm. The RW had to go against none other than the Olympic team of San Francisco.

September 17 was the first day of the Nevada State Fair, and the race “was the chief attraction of the opening day.” (Nevada State Journal, “Reno is Still the Champion,” Sept 18, 1900) Nearly 3500 lined the race track at the fair grounds, the largest opening day attendance in fair history. (Nevada State Journal, “State Fair Pick-Ups,” Sept 18, 1900) However, it seemed few in the massive crowd expected the RW lads to prevail. Afterall, it was little Reno against giant San Francisco. San Francisco. Its nearly 400,000 inhabitants 100 times that of Reno. San Francisco. The city of opulence, the arts,



*RW trainer King Ryan supporting George Kornmayer.
With permission, Nevada Historical Society.*

cosmopolitan before that description became cliché, not to mention home to the Olympic team, "...the acknowledged best team that the big State of California could produce." (Nevada Evening Gazette, "Reno Keeps the Championship, Sept 17, 1900, front page).

Early on the tactics of the Olympics was clear—let Reno go out first and ride their wheels. Clearly the Olympics were trying to forestall the proceedings for its anchorman E. Ross to finish off the RW. Ross was SF's noted sprint and 5-mile time trial specialist, called the "phenom" by the Nevada State Journal. Everyone at the track that day knew it. Bill Thompson went out first for Reno and switched out after his five miles with a near perfect pass to Art Keddie, but the Olympics were right there. Keddie's power in Sacramento, ripping the 5 in just 12:20 was replaced by a thoroughly tactical, languid ride as his opponent sucked wheel the entire way and refused to take the lead. Time, 15:03. Jap Hart took up third for Reno but as that pair evolved, there was not much difference to show as the tactics of the Olympics remained. Early in Hart's third rotation trainer Ryan "...saw something unusual must happen or the Reno boys would lose the championship." (Nevada Historical Society Papers, Vol II, 1917-1920, p. 161)

Ryan pulled aside Art Peckham during Hart's ride and told him to use his wheel with the massive gear. Peckham was to allow for a "miserable pickup" following Hart and let M. Davis, his Olympic competitor, take over a seemingly insurmountable lead. Ryan knew it would take Peckham time to get the big gear rolling, but also knew Art had the legs and the lungs to make it work. In time, Art would more than make up the difference he would concede and pass at such a speed that Davis would be unable to latch onto his wheel. At least, that was now the plan. Would it work?

Ryan must have also suspected that by sucking wheel so thoroughly through the first three rotations that SF could not have been as strong as everyone suspected. Indeed, the Olympics had gone against the Garden City Wheelmen of San Jose the day before—a squad that itself would become the RW's main competition. Further, they were now also at Reno altitude. Instead put them out on their own, let them break their own wind, don't let them put it in the hands of Ross, just get them off our wheels early and see if they can stay with us. It had to work.

Around came Hart to make the pass to Art Peckham. As expected, the Olympic's pick-up was nearly perfect, but Peckham struggled mightily to get the big gear rolling. Nearly 3,500 spectators gasped in shock when Peckham wobbled away chasing the pick-up. Surely he was going to put his bike flat down on its side; this had to be the beginning of the end for the home side.

As Peckham struggled to right the ship and get moving, no one in the crowd could have suspected that this was the plan, particularly the club from San Francisco. Sure enough though, after about two and a half laps of his five, Peckham picked his spot and swept past Davis on the back-stetch at 40 mph! No way Davis could catch on—Peckham passed like Davis was standing still! King Ryan was sure Art would blow and tried in vain to slow him down just a tad to preserve his well-earned margin, but to no avail. Art was on a roll and finished a good quarter mile ahead of Davis, a full 1:05 to the good. He made his pass to teammate Frazer without missing a beat. From that moment the Reno lead continued to build round by round with times consistently in the low to mid 13 minutes. Each round added more and more margin to the victory. Sure enough, the Olympics got caught-out and could not hold their own without a Reno wheel to follow.

By the time the RW tenth man James Peckham came through to finish their 50 miles, Olympics sprinter Ross still had 1 5/8 miles to go, riding the last lap and a half on an empty track. While Ross finished alone, the assembled throng sat in silence until he finished. The spectators thoroughly repected Ross and rightfully so. He proved to be the stongest on the day, finishing his five miles in 12:46, and boasting the day's fastest single mile at 2:19. As soon as he finished, though, the celebrations began. (Compilation of accounts from Nevada State Journal, "Reno is Still the Champion." Sept 18, 1900; Nevada Evening Gazette, "Reno Keeps the Championship," Sept 17, 1900 front page, and the Nevada Historical Society Papers, Vol II, 1917-1920, pp. 160-162.)

The gracious victors royaly hosted the boys from San Francisco that night and showed them the local sites—if through the bottoms of upturned drinking glasses! (Nevada State Journal, "Enjoyed Their Visit." Sept 18, 1900) The night was capped off with a banquet at the restaurant of the day, the Arcade, hosted in part by the US Congressman from Nevada Francis Newlands.

Ryan's plan to catch-out the Olympics well-before the final round proved decisive, and was a stroke of brilliance.

After all, knowing your assets and their capabilities on a given day are the hallmark of a great DS. Ryan continued to build what would become the respected Reno Wheelmen. He'd be there for numerous defenses of the Pacific Coast Championships, as well as those occasions when they had to try to wrestle it back from Garden City. The loss to Reno that day in September 1900 may have also contributed to the early demise of the Olympic team. It ceased to exist after 1903. But other northern California clubs stepped up to challenge: Garden City, Bay City, the new Century Club of San Francisco, and Capital City. In addition, the RW also continued to take on local challengers from Carson City. In all, King Ryan's work resulted in 22 trophies for the RW still held in trust by the Nevada Historical Society at the museum in Reno.

Ryan essentially disappeared after the 1904 season. The lure of the gold find in 1902 in what became Goldfield, NV proved too strong a magnet. Goldfield grew to be the largest city in Nevada in the first decade of the 1900s, boasting over 25,000 inhabitants with a gold mining boom that remained active until 1940. Today, it is a near ghost town and home to only about 440. An interesting twist of irony: it is not known if Ryan was working the gold fields when the father of teammate Benton Sparks—Gov. John Sparks—called in Federal troops to quash a workers' strike there in 1908.

Even in his absence, the lads had a few more successes following the protocols laid down by Ryan. King Ryan was obviously admired and respected by the town's folk and team alike. The Reno Evening Gazette characterized the trainer as "the famous King Ryan" (Nevada Evening Gazette, "Painful Accident," July 5, 1900) while the Nevada State Journal described the apparent emotional departure of the team sans Ryan upon its return from the Sacramento victory as a sign of true admiration (Nevada State Journal, "Benefit for King Ryan," July 6, 1900).

Indeed, behind every great rider and team is a great Directeur Sportif, none better at that moment than the Reno Wheelmen's King Ryan.

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PS. I am looking for anything additional anyone may have about King Ryan, or indeed, any other information on the early RW. Thanks to the Reno Rambler for his recent post on renowheelmen.org. Check out that photo gallery on Flickr—a sign of things to come in *The Legacy*.