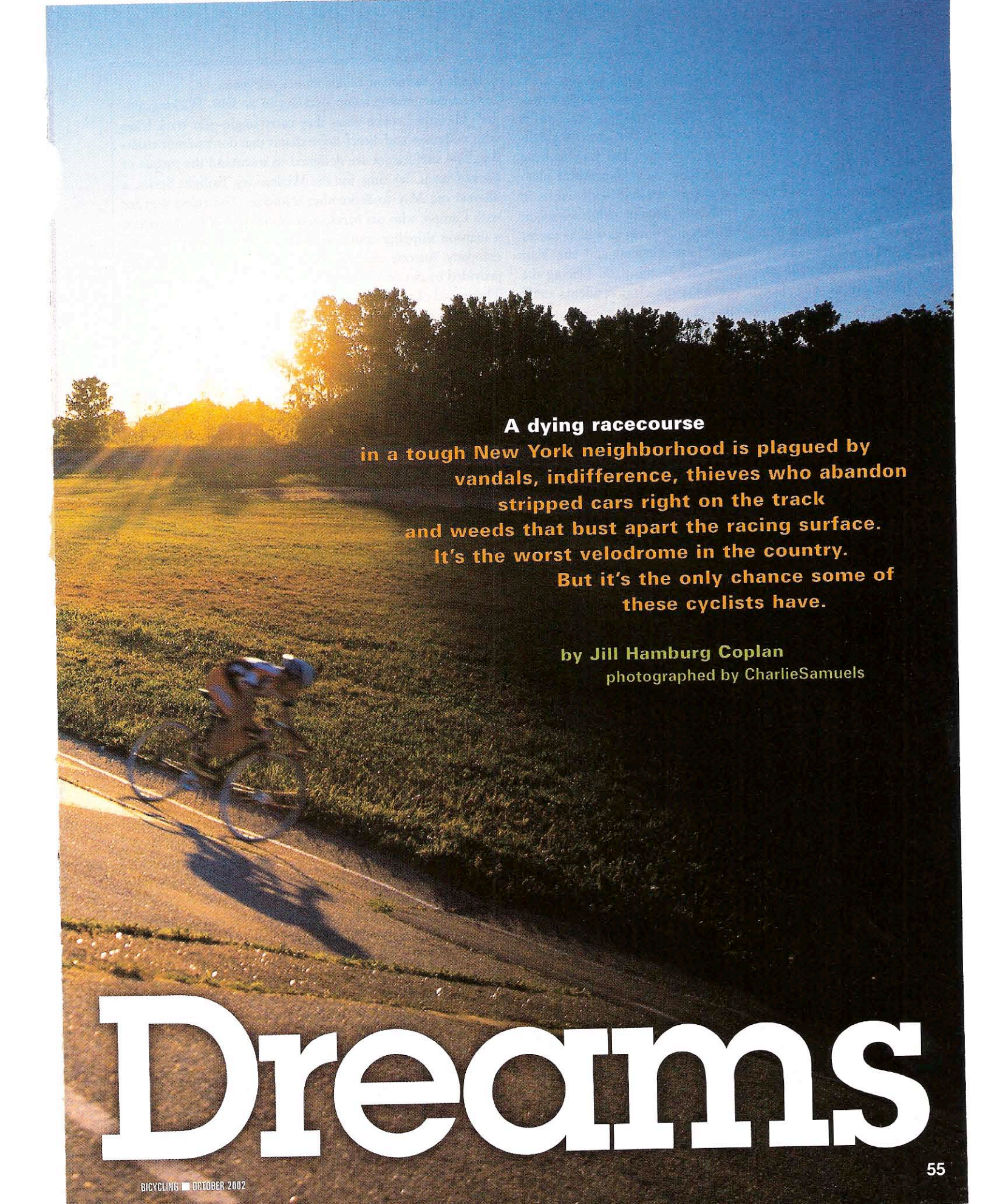


Wednesday-
night racing
at the Kissena
Velodrome.



Track of

A photograph of a cyclist riding on a track. The cyclist is in the lower-left quadrant, wearing a blue and white jersey and a blue helmet. The track is a paved path that curves through a grassy field. In the background, there is a line of trees silhouetted against a bright sunset sky. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a strong lens flare and casting long shadows. The overall mood is serene and focused.

**A dying racecourse
in a tough New York neighborhood is plagued by
vandals, indifference, thieves who abandon
stripped cars right on the track
and weeds that bust apart the racing surface.
It's the worst velodrome in the country.
But it's the only chance some of
these cyclists have.**

by Jill Hamburg Coplan
photographed by CharlieSamuels

Dreams

To find the nation's worst cycling track, you'll need a veteran outer-borough New York cabbie to take you 12 miles out of Manhattan to the Queens neighborhood of Flushing. Tell him to head for Kissena Park, an unremarkable playground of tennis courts and overgrown ball fields. Here, in one of the city's most culturally diverse neighborhoods, you'll pass people playing cricket and bocce as well as soccer and baseball. The Chinese Moon Festival and the East Indian celebration of Durga Puja use the park. During the day, the neighborhood's lower-middle-class residents stroll to benches along a small lake.

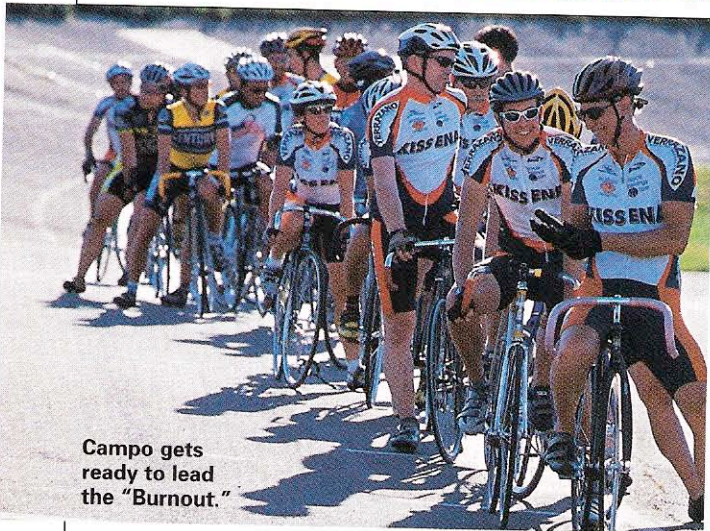
It's a no-man's land at night. You'll find the Kissena Velodrome in a wetland near the park's southeast corner. Head through an unmarked gate and down a long drive to reach the track. It's a forlorn place; teenagers like to smoke pot on the three remaining bleachers, and joyriders often strip stolen cars in the parking lot. There are no lights or water fountains, no scoreboard or bathroom (riders of both sexes use the same well-trod swamp path), no fences. Unleashed dogs and kids on motorbikes sometimes get in the riders' way. Two years ago, a

haul out Sheetrock or an abandoned television.

The competitors begin trickling in at 5:30. Walking gingerly through broken glass, they carry single-gear track bikes with no brakes and direct-drive chains that don't permit coasting. The stiff frames are designed to withstand the torque of banked turns. It's time for the Wednesday Twilight Series, a 38-year-old May-to-September tradition. The riders register with Campo, who sits barefoot in his makeshift headquarters, a maroon shipping container donated by a Danish shipping company. Anyone can race; nine loaner bikes, most of them provided by two local racing clubs, lean against the container. The crowd of registrants swells to 50 women, juniors, seniors and masters—some New York natives, along with immigrant former champions from the West Indies, Greece, Central America and Africa. One by one they mount their bikes for a warm-up, gradually forming a single paceline.

This 400-meter oval feels different from any other track. Swooping high on the 17-degree bank of the first turn, you catch a glimpse of towers and a smokestack and then brace yourself: Each turn is rutted with more than a dozen gaping cracks that slice the track from top to bottom. By mid-summer, the cracks sprout six-inch tufts of weeds—a frightening hazard

Turns are rutted by dozens of cracks. Six-inch tufts of weeds threaten riders going shoulder-to-shoulder at 30 mph.



Campo gets ready to lead the "Burnout."

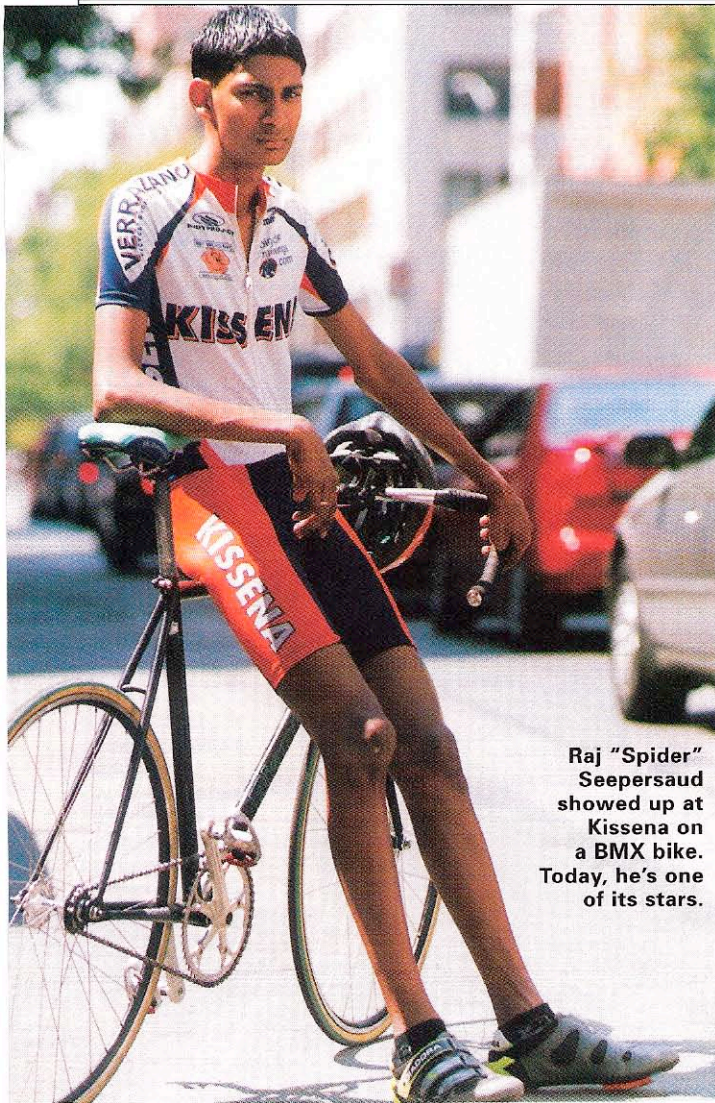
at race time, when riders are shoulder-to-shoulder in a pack going 30 miles an hour. If you swerve high on turn two, you brush against thickets of clover and chicory. Next it's the backstretch, and a headwind off Flushing Bay, before you fly over the bump of a sewer pipe in turn four that gets you airborne during the final sprint. To come down badly, just when the riders are going their fastest, is to leave in an ambulance.

This godforsaken track has served as a haven for cyclists and neighborhood teens for four decades. The coaching is strictly volunteer, the velodrome gets no support from the city of New York, and the place is as much an illegal junkyard as a sports facility. And yet, despite it all, the track serves as a rugged incubator for international competitors. Among the kids who got their start here are some of the finest racers in the world—on road as well as track. But unless Campo can find some money for repairs, Kissena will continue to deteriorate.

Stepping out of the container, he signals race-time with his megaphone siren, then straps on his shoes in the infield. "Brother John!" shouts a long-limbed young rider, who comes up and gives Campo a high-five. It's Raj "Spider" Seepersaud, 19, a Guyanese Indian who appeared out of the blue last August, his first year in the States. When Raj showed up during a Saturday training session on a BMX, Campo immediately approached with a loaner bike. Campo says that's how he recruits all the kids. "Whenever I meet them—on the road, on the street, at races—I pester the hell out of them," he says. A few have abused his welcome by walking off with Campo's tools and some bike components. "Some people take kindness

pair of fugitives ran through a bike race, followed by a SWAT team; a botched jewelry-store robbery had left one man dead. But on Wednesday evenings in the summer, this is the only place in the New York area—and one of just 18 tracks in the country—where you can still see velodrome racing.

On one such Wednesday, the track's volunteer director sweeps up in the late-afternoon sun. A slender 6-foot-4, John Campo looks much younger than 55. He's a union carpenter with the muscular forearms of his trade and a hint of Brooklyn in his voice. A ponytail peeks from his black bandana. He uses a donated broom to push broken glass, bottle caps and Slurpee cups into piles. It's not so bad right now; sometimes he has to



Raj "Spider" Seepersaud showed up at Kissena on a BMX bike. Today, he's one of its stars.

for weakness," he laments.

Raj was one of those who stayed. "He trusted me, from the very first time," Raj says, laughing and shaking his head. Since then, Campo has taken Raj on training rides and maintained his bike. "I know the track is only going to be a springboard for other things. It's never going to be a world-class track," Campo says. "But it's going to be a great place for people to start. It's always been a great place for people to start."

Campo is a Kissena evangelist. He spends his free time showing up wherever there are bikers throughout the New York area. He hangs out at cyclists' favorite coffee shops along the Hudson, frequents a popular rest stop for riders in Central Park, waylays riders in Brooklyn's Prospect Park, pops into messengers' dive bars and chats with Midtown cyclists at red lights. Everywhere he goes, he talks up the track. And people come: In 2001, his first year as director, the number of racers grew five-fold, to 175. He drew in women triathletes, road rid-

ers and body-pierced messengers. He enlarged the women's field from a couple of racers to more than a dozen. He introduced weekly Peewee races on tricycles. And he pursues the juniors, partnering with a social-service organization, talking smack to troublemakers on the bleachers, and challenging those he calls "wise-mouthed, rude, physical kids" to stick to his wheel on road rides up into the Hudson highlands. "I'm out there with kids in sneakers on broken bikes who are so far from racing," he says. "But I love my bike. That's how it has to start."

Referee Don Winston, an engineer by day who's serving as tonight's announcer, uses the screeching megaphone to start the first event: "All riders to the line for an open 15-lap Burnout! All riders to the line!" Winston works from the infield; the metal officials' stage has been bent into wreckage by vandals and infested by bees. This is an open race, meaning everyone—the top A category, along with the Bs and Cs, juniors, masters and women—will all ride together. Those who can't keep up with the pack must drop out. It's one of several events held at the track, which include the Miss & Out (last across the line each lap is eliminated) and the Madison (a team relay where the rider exiting the race grabs his relief by the wrist and hurtles him forward)—all designed to appeal to spectators in the faded tradition of stadium bike racing.

Kissena is a far cry from the velodromes of the sport's heyday, early in the twentieth century, when cities such as Newark, Indianapolis and Milwaukee drew cycling spectators 20,000 at a time. A night at the races meant live bands and stars in the stands; Bing Crosby, Ernest Hemingway, Will Rogers, Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks and Enrico Caruso were fans. But the heroes were the Six-Day racers, 11 two-man teams who competed for 147 nonstop hours on small, steep indoor tracks. Teammates took turns riding and catching naps in bunks offstage. Crowds roared at the sprints, breakaways and spills, and paid a hefty \$2 to get in for the last few hours. The top Six-Day racers were international celebrities earning thousands of dollars in a single night, at a time when laborers made 15 cents a day.

It all crashed with the stock market. Promoters went bankrupt, and other sports came to the fore. Within a few years, the wooden tracks had gone up in flames. Today, there are few professional track racers, and 17 of the 18 velodromes in the country have been built since 1960. (The track in Kenosha, Wisconsin, is the only twenties-era track to survive.) The best include the 7-Eleven U.S. Olympic Training Center Velodrome in Colorado Springs and the Lehigh Valley Velodrome in Trexlertown, Pennsylvania. The worst, by consensus, is Kissena.

It was built by Robert Moses, the New York public-works czar, for the 1964 Olympic trials. An international audience came from the World's Fair in nearby Flushing Meadow Park,

**"I want the wise-mouthed, rude renegades.
The misfits in sneakers on broken bikes.
That's how it has to start."**

packing bleachers that spanned nearly half the oval. The track was surrounded by a perimeter fence of wooden slats, and the surface was as smooth as fine sandpaper. An officials' stand in the infield was festooned with banners, and streams of flags were draped above the finish line. New Jersey boy Jackie Simes, the son of a Six-Day racer, was the day's big winner, qualifying for his first Olympics.

The Twilight Series kicked off that year; six years later, Kissena hosted the U.S. track nationals. But by mid-decade,

In the '80s, Kissena produced Olympians, including Nelson Vails.

the New York fiscal crisis left the facility all but orphaned. The region's racers left for a better track when the Lehigh Valley Velodrome opened in Trexlertown, Pennsylvania, in 1976. By the 1980s, thieves were driving cars onto the Kissena track and torching them. One burning car melted a section on turn four. Still, Kissena produced luminaries: Nelson Vails, Harlem-born Olympian and international sprint champion; Leonard Harvey Nitz, a reigning star on the track throughout the '80s; Mike McCarthy, a 1996 Olympian and pro on the road; and George Hincapie, who rides with Lance Armstrong on the U.S. Postal Service team. Kissena's Kirk Whiteman and Vincent Oliver, both of Brooklyn, won the national track championship in 1996, two of five African-Americans ever to win a gold medal. And now it falls to John Campo to spawn the next generation.

The Burnout begins slowly, as Campo leads the line of 40 riders. They'll stay at this pace for five laps before the pack speeds up and the race really begins. For those who know Campo, the scene is symbolic; he sets the pace for the enterprise and hopes the riders—the masters and the kids—will follow. Especially the kids. "I want the kids who are not tall enough for basketball or fast enough for track," Campo likes to say. "They ride skateboards and put rings in their ears. They get chased around by the cops. They want to get away from society and from organized things. Those are the kids I want. The renegades, the messengers, the misfits."

Campo himself was one of a kind as a youth. He grew up in Brooklyn, the oldest among three children of Italian immigrants. He saw his first bicycle race at age 7 and, at 12, began riding centuries into upstate New York on a one-speed beach cruiser with coaster brakes. When he was old enough to make a living, he played a banjo in bars and cut a folk-rock record in Nashville. He shared a New York loft building with a record-company exec, and partied with Janis and Jimi and the Grateful Dead. He switched to jazz guitar and toured Europe and Asia, but the life was brutal. By then he was a married man. He turned to carpentry.

Today, the Campos live in the Bowery in an old flophouse John paneled in mahogany; they co-own the building with filmmaker Jim Jarmusch. By day, he's on the 35th floor of the MetLife building, installing perimeter walls and security

U.S. VELODROMES

19 PLACES TO CHASE YOUR DREAMS

CALIFORNIA

ENCINO VELODROME, ENCINO Free weekly clinics for kids 17 and younger. 818/881-7441; www.encinovelodrome.org
HELLYER PARK VELODROME, SAN JOSE Races Wednesdays and Fridays during summer; weekly beginner clinics year-round. 408/226-9716; www.ridethetrack.com

SAN DIEGO VELODROME, SAN DIEGO Home of national sprint team; winter training camp. www.velodromes.org

COLORADO

7-ELEVEN UNITED STATES OLYMPIC TRAINING CENTER VELODROME, COLORADO SPRINGS Open every day from April to October. 719/634-8356; www.colorado-velodrome.org

FLORIDA

BRIAN PICCOLO VELODROME, COOPER CITY Home of 2002 National Collegiate Cycling Championships; 954/437-2626; www.businesscycles.com/velofax.htm#open

GEORGIA

DICK LANE VELODROME, EAST POINT In danger of being closed and torn down. www.dicklanevelodrome.com

ILLINOIS

ED RUDOLPH NORTHBROOK VELODROME, NORTHBROOK Races through summer. 847/291-2974 ext. 7; www.northbrookvelodrome.com

INDIANA

MAJOR TAYLOR VELODROME, INDIANAPOLIS Weekly summer races. 317/327-8356; geocities.com/majortaylor-velodrome/index.html

LOUISIANA

BATON ROUGE VELODROME, BATON ROUGE Weekly races September to October. 225/272-9200; www.batonrouge-cycling.com/velodrome

MICHIGAN

THE VELODROME AT BLOOMER PARK, ROCHESTER HILLS Opened May 3; live bands perform at Friday-night races. 248/425-7536; www.lmb.org/velo/

MINNESOTA

NATIONAL SPORTS CENTER VELODROME, BLAINE 250-meter wooden track. 763/785-5600; www.nscsports.com/velo

MISSOURI

PENROSE PARK VELODROME, ST. LOUIS Used for training, but badly needs resurfacing. 314/289-5300

NEW YORK

KISSENA VELODROME, FLUSHING You read all about it here; now go ride it. www.kissena.info

OREGON

ALPENROSE VELODROME, PORTLAND Catch North America's only Six-Day Race here next summer. 503/661-5874; www.obra.org/track

PENNSYLVANIA

LEHIGH VALLEY VELODROME, TREXLERTOWN Numerous international races each summer and 2002 National Championships. 610/967-7587; www.lvvelo.org

TEXAS

ALKEK VELODROME, HOUSTON Open to public year-round; races March–June and August–October. 281/578-0693; www.ci-houston.tx.us/department/parks/alkekvelodrome/index.htm

WASHINGTON

MARYMOOR VELODROME, REDMONT Women and junior classes are free. 206/227-5383; www.marymoor.velodrome.org

WISCONSIN

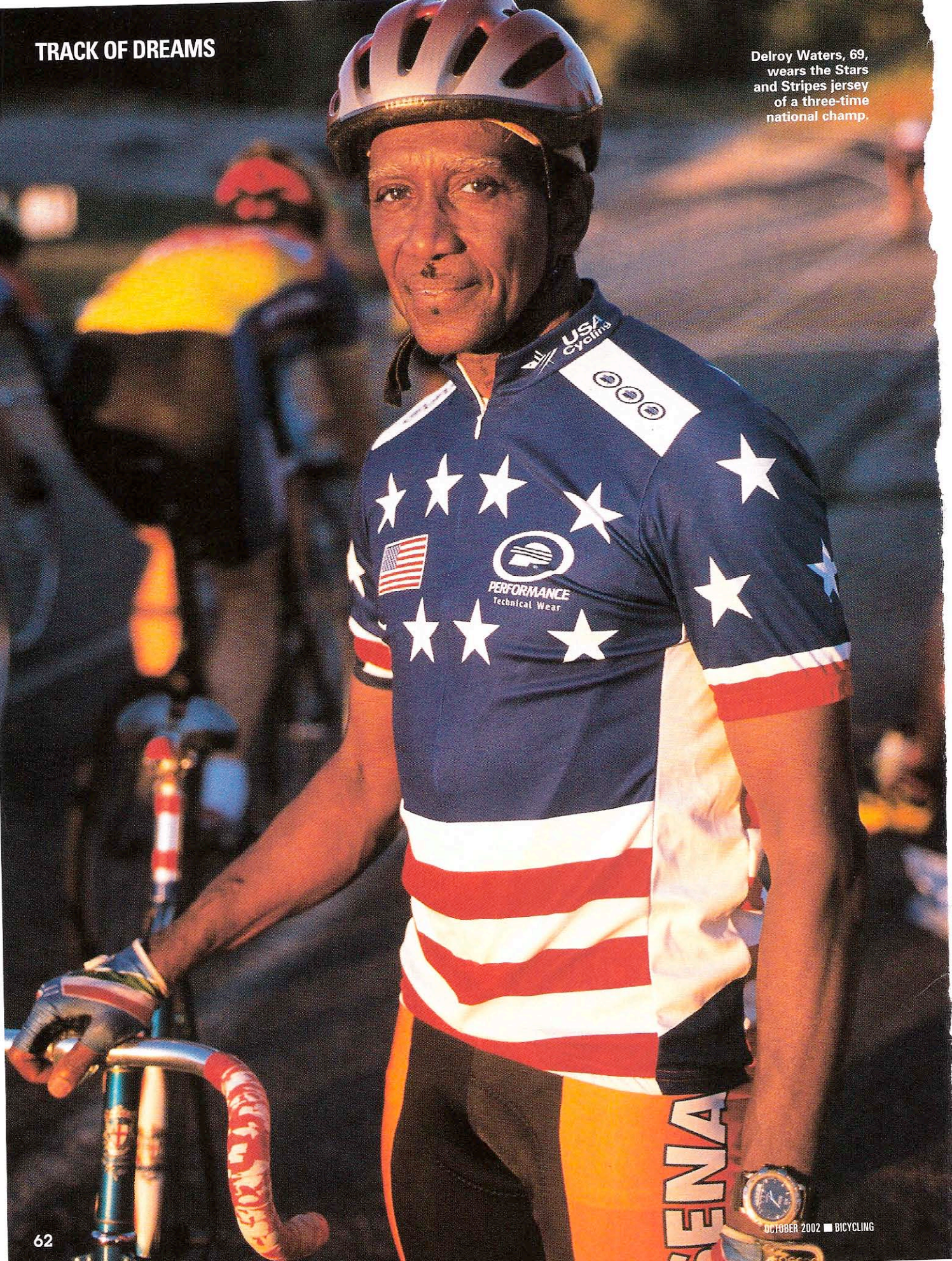
WASHINGTON PARK VELODROME, KENOSHA Nation's oldest operating velodrome. 262/652-2522; www.kva.pair.com

PLUS THE ONE THAT GOT AWAY...

BROMONT INTERNATIONAL VELODROME, BROMONT, QC Built outside Atlanta for the 1996 Olympics, then bought by Disney, which sold and transported it to Quebec in 2000. 450/534-3333; www.fqsc.net

TRACK OF DREAMS

Delroy Waters, 69, wears the Stars and Stripes jersey of a three-time national champ.



Campo's wife, an artist, says Kissena is his creative act: "He's found his own personal vocabulary for self-expression."

hardware. A shop steward now, he still gets flack for leaving early on summer Wednesdays.

"I can't quite figure out what drives him," says Dave Perry, a New York cycling fixture who owns Manhattan's Bicycle Works and races at Kissena. "He's not a good organizer. He doesn't have e-mail. He's a rider, a jazz musician, a hipster New Yorker."

Campo's wife, Michelle, who's an artist, says his Kissena work is a creative act. "You've got to find your own personal vocabulary for self-expression," she says.

Sometimes, though, when the temperature is in the nineties and turnout is low and the entry fees don't begin to cover the cost of insurance and permits, Campo's zeal fades. He sometimes talks about closing the place down. Resurfacing the track costs \$45,000, and it will need a new surface in no more than five years. The city won't help. After he asked it for funding, the parks department raised the fee for holding races 20-fold. The city cuts the infield grass and empties the trash, but that's it. And there's little hope for more: New York faces a \$3-billion deficit. Nor can Kissena rely on private donations. "Poor immigrant communities don't have access to private contributors," says Joyce Purnick, a columnist for the *New York Times*. "They have to rely on city-government funds, so those parks suffer."

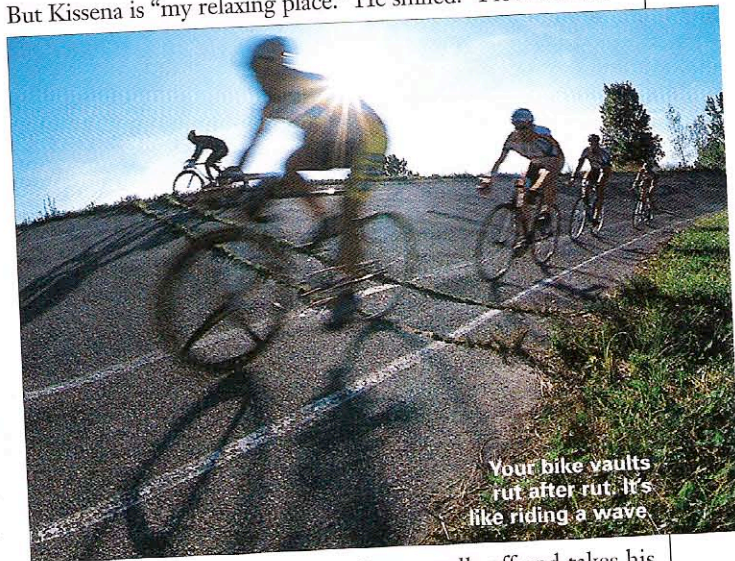
Wheelmaker Spinergy Inc. and eyewear company Rudy Project have donated gear. But the corporate world has ignored Campo's letters. Except for one-time events, the city won't allow company logos on park property. "I've got no chance with corporations," he admits. "They're all wheelers and dealers. I'm a construction worker. Who's going to listen to me?"

If only they could see the track, and watch a race.

Kissena's leading lights are all together, wheel to wheel, in the Burnout. They include London-born Jamaican Delroy Walters, 69, who won a silver medal at the 2001 Worlds in Manchester, England. Robert Olivera of Trinidad raced for the Army's cycling team in 1971. Toward the rear is Connecticut junior Frankie Celenza, 15, a tow-headed high school student with attention deficit disorder; his dad thinks the bike is teaching him to focus. On the sidelines is Guyana-born coach Charlie Jennings, 55, who qualified for the 1972 Olympics.

Missing are 10 black and Latino youths who were supposed to make it here from the tough Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood. Part of a joint program with Kissena and Recycle-A-Bicycle, a nonprofit, the kids worked out in a spin studio over the winter and roller-raced in the spring. The idea was to inspire them with America's only minority-filled racing scene. "Track racing in other places is white, upper-middle-class," says Recycle's Jared Bunde, 25, himself a slacker messenger who rose to national caliber through Kissena. What better role models could there be? But there's no van or driver to take the kids to the Twilight Series. The role modeling has to wait.

Raj, on the other hand, is a success story. He's racing, spinning easily in the middle of the pack. He began last season, in the learning, or C, category, and made it up to B. Tonight, he's been upgraded to the A field. A local road team is courting him, giving him gear and a Jamis road bike. Life is looking up. He moved with his brothers and his mother, now a nurse's aide, from Guyana to cramped quarters a few miles from the track. He works at a Long Island bike shop an hour away by train; he studies for his high school equivalency exam during the commute. Before the race, Raj said he found New York frightening. But Kissena is "my relaxing place." He smiled. "I love it here."



Your bike vaults rut after rut. It's like riding a wave.

The five easy laps are over. Campo pulls off and takes his place at the back of the line, and the pace starts to pick up. Gaps open, and soon the pack is showing wear and tear. A group of slower riders falls behind, and when Winston calls them out with his megaphone, they swing uptrack, shaking their heads. The race is down to ten.

Campo is still in, bowing low over the bike, tight and economical. He banks into turn one, his pedals millimeters from the rough surface, and hits the washboard, levitating a few inches off his seat as the bike vaults rut after rut. Around turn two, he passes the patch of asphalt he laid this season to fix holes dug by the spinning wheels of an ATV. Down into the backstretch, he faces the wind and the roar of jets taking off from LaGuardia. But the tall grass smells sweet here, and the late-day sun lights the clouds. Turn three, turn four, then the sewer-pipe bump—it has already thrown one veteran rider this season. Campo rolls over it like he's riding a wave. Right now, it's Campo's track, and as the wind slips over his skinsuit on this perfect summer evening, it's the greatest track in the world. ■

New York writer Jill Hamburg Coplan has been visiting Kissena since 1997. Her 2-year-old son debuted this summer in the Peewee division.