



Out of the ordinary

Cycle magazine doesn't normally cover competitive cycling. But the Knutsford Great Race isn't a normal bike race. **Charlotte Barnes** took part

'A unique event held every ten years, featuring Original Dandy Horse Machines, Bone-Shakers and Penny-Farthing Cycles.' That was the blurb for the Knutsford Great Race, which drew crowds in the Cheshire town in September.

I travelled there with my friend and fellow penny-farthing rider, Kat Jungnickel. We'd entered the event as a team with another rider, Andy, but his penny just wasn't up to the job of racing, so he offered to do duty in the pit lane, providing (as he put it) 'immortal support and rub downs'.

My bike was made by Joff Summerfield, a CTC member who taught himself the unusual skill of making high-wheelers in order to build a machine to tour the world on. He'd raced at Knutsford in 2000 and was back again for 2010, complete with his road-battered, round-the-world penny and wearing his signature pith helmet. Several more of Joff's machines were being raced this year and were definitely the newest of the bicycles on display.

Setting out on a few warm-up laps of the course, Kat and I were alarmed at the tight corners and poor surface we were going to have to race on. The triangular Moorside circuit was about 700 metres long and most of it was little more than footpath. Although Kat had raced her penny before, I had not and I wasn't prepared for some of the improbable lean angles that were on display by some of the more experienced pilots as they flew round the corners.

The hot favourite for the individual trophy was Josef Zimovcak, a Czech rider who, it was rumoured, had ridden the route of the Tour de France on his penny-farthing and who had kept going after breaking his jaw and a rib after a bad fall on one of the mountain stages! Penny-farthing racing isn't for the faint-hearted; the ever-present danger of taking an 'imperial crowner' (an unintentional and rapid forward dismount over the handlebars) can leave riders



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with terrible injuries.

Victory would go to the rider completing the most laps in two hours. A similar prize was offered for the fastest team. After a neutralised lap, the start was signaled by the sound of a Napoleonic-era canon and the race was on. With her greater experience, Kat led out for our team and rode the first dozen or so laps at breakneck pace. As she was starting to tire, she was pulled into the pit lane by our team soigneur Andy, who switched the RFID tag (Radio-Frequency Identification) from her bike to mine and sent me off on my way to do battle with the 86 other machines on the course. After this, we took turns.

Although initially terrified of going elbow to elbow with so many other high-bicycle riders, I soon realised that racing a penny is not entirely dissimilar to a criterium race on a conventional bicycle, and it wasn't long before I was sprinting down the straights and leaning into the corners like the rest of the fast riders. Sadly, there were several serious crashes during the race, one of them apparently caused by the Czech rider, for which he was disqualified.

As the canon sounded again to end the race, the individual winner, Jim Brailsford, had managed a stunning 107 laps. Kat and I had completed 105, further than any other team, winning both the team trophy and the ladies' trophy. On the back of this success, we're going to Tasmania in February to compete in the legendary annual penny races at the Evandale Village Fair. It's a long way to go to race a high bicycle, but we've got a title to defend!

You can read more about the event on Charlotte's blog at <http://bicycleslut.wordpress.com/2010/09/08/the-knutsford-great-race-2010/>