



John Vande Velde at the Vandedrome, Del Mar Fairgrounds

Sleek Bodies in Circular Motion

Track Bicycle Racing at the Del Mar Fairgrounds

In European cities like Zurich, Paris and Milan, track bicycle racing is a staple of the winter sport and social calendars.

Promoters bring top cyclists to town for weeklong velodrome events — called six-day races — that mix sybaritism and suffering. Dining tables

are set on the infield of the indoor tracks; racing aficionados jostle for *vin du pays* and

foie gras while music blares nonstop. On the tracks, shave-legged cyclists — sleek bodies trapped in perpetual, circular motion — bust their guts for money and prestige.

John Vande Velde, a two-time Olympic cyclist, hopes his new bicycle track, in operation at the Del Mar Fairgrounds through March, will lure San Diegans to European-style racing.

The "Vandedrome," touted as the "world's first portable, expandable velodrome," is a wooden, 153-meter-long track built for indoor venues. Here, it just fits the dimensions of the Del Mar Fairgrounds' Equestrian Arena — that outdoor track where the ponies run. The 53-degree banked corners are tight and extremely steep, which makes for fast, and potentially crash-filled, racing.

Races at the new venue are short, from one kilometer to ten miles in length. Men and women race on the same teams. "We've Americanized the sport," says Vande Velde, "so that it will appeal to our audiences. You'll see all the thrills and spills right in front of you."

And, in place of tables loaded with *vin du pays* and *foie gras*, the Vandedrome's infield offers a beer garden.

Vic Copeland agrees that the track is tailored for spectators. Copeland, a 53-

year-old Rancho Santa Fe optometrist, is also among the most-feared master cyclists on the planet — he won every track event plus the road race and time trial at the Masters' Worlds competition in Brisbane, Australia, last October. He remembers that in an early training race at the Vandedrome, riders made it to the first corner and half the pack went down. "At first," says Copeland, "it is a very intimidating track to ride on. From the top, there's a long way to fall." However, he added, "From the spectator's point of view, it's very exciting."

Besides appealing to our blood-lust, Vande Velde hopes to attract audiences by importing some of the continent's top cyclists. Along with local studs like Copeland, the top-ranking U.S. and Canadian national teams, and the Saturn and Chevrolet-L.A. Sheriffs' professional squads are slated to compete.

Later this year, the U.S. National Team will train in the concrete velodrome overlooking Florida Canyon in Balboa Park, and the fact that they are spending time on the Vandedrome rather than the Balboa Park track bothers some local cyclists.

Walt Speith, president of the San Diego Velodrome Association, voiced concern that the new track might steal riders and spectators from Balboa Park. Yet, San Diego Velodrome coach Tony Olsen said that while there are some scheduling conflicts between the two tracks, he thinks that anything that draws attention to cycling is good. "I hope the Vandedrome takes off," says the good-humored coach. "I don't see how it can do anything but help."

Vande Velde's European import is actually an American invention. From 1900 to the 1930s, six-day racing was hugely popular in the U.S., regularly selling out arenas like Madison Square

LOCAL EVENTS

Calendar

LOCAL EVENTS

Garden and the Boston Garden. Vande Velde envisions his venture reigniting the nation's bygone passion for indoor bike racing.

Del Mar Fairgrounds officials hope it will, too. One reason Vande Velde was given permission to install his track is that Del Mar wants to be known as a "world-class, multiuse arena," in the words of Fairgrounds General Manager Tim Fennell. (During the off season, the company's revenues are affected by off-track betting at local Reservation casinos.)

Besides offering a chance to watch professional racers, the Vandedrome is open for public racing and training (riders must take an orientation class). One of the sleek bodies in circular motion could be yours.

— Mark Johnson

Track bicycle racing

Weekends through

**March 12, 1:00 to
4:00 p.m.**

February 18, 19: two-day

Team Challenge;

March 11, 12: two-day

Masters' Omnium

**The Vandedrome, inside
the Equestrian Arena,
near the north end of
Del Mar Fairgrounds main
parking lot,**

2260 Jimmy Durante

Boulevard, Del Mar

\$5.50 grandstand seats,

\$8.00 infield

792-4340