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## A Harlem Tradition: Risking Scraped Skin for Cycling Glory



Ozler Muhammad/The New York Times

The Harlem Skyscraper Cycling Classic around Marcus Garvey Park is the oldest continually held bike race in New York. A light rain produced several spills.

By J. DAVID GOODMAN  
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Josiah Strawn, a 5-year-old, his race number still pinned to his shirt, leaned against one of the barricades that encircled Marcus Garvey Park as a pack of fast-moving racers hummed by.

“He rode the race,” his father, Ray Strawn, said, beaming. “First time without training wheels! He fell down once, but he got back up and finished it.”

Josiah was one of the hundreds of local and international racers of all ages and abilities who descended on the three-quarter-mile circuit around Marcus Garvey Park on Father’s Day for the [Harlem Skyscraper Cycling Classic](#), the city’s oldest continually held bicycle race.

Created as a Father’s Day event in 1973 by David A. Walker, a community affairs police officer who also brought double Dutch to public schools, the race has molded several generations of New York cycling talent, including Nelson Vails, a former bicycle messenger and a silver medalist at the 1984 Olympics.

“It all began with the Harlem race,” Mr. Vails, 48, said in a phone interview. “Back then, they gave away watches from Disney World, and I remember thinking, ‘The winners got stuff!’ ”

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But facing financial difficulties, this year's event — the first without Mr. Walker, who died last summer — struggled to get off the ground.

"We had nothing — nothing — until about three weeks ago," said John Eustice, a racing promoter who first began working on the Harlem race last year with Mr. Walker. "It wasn't as though I was sitting on my hands. I was trying, trying, trying" to get sponsorships. "I owed this to David," he added.

Mr. Eustice said he drummed up a late sponsorship — "Enough to make the race look good," he said — after running into someone from Rockstar Games, the video game company, while riding around Central Park. Nevertheless, the professional portions of the event were removed from a national series of races because the prize money was too low.

Under Mr. Eustice's direction last year, the mom-and-pop event became flashier, with Jumbotrons, live television and sponsors like Saab and Rock and Republic, a clothing company. The added glamour hinted at the 1920s era of New York cycling, but it also left many in Harlem with bruised feelings. "We bulldozed the race," Mr. Eustice said.

He employed a lighter touch this year, not least because of a lack of money. But the real change, said Mr. Walker's son, David C. Walker, who inherited the race from his father and was working with Mr. Eustice, was that the community was brought back in. "It's a Harlem community race — and anything after that is icing," Mr. Walker said.

The lack of Jumbotrons or serious prize money seemed not to deter the approximately 240 racers, who rode hard on a course that has been nicknamed the Skinscraper because of its high incidence of accidents. But Mr. Eustice, a professional champion cyclist in his day, dismissed the idea that the race is more treacherous than any other. "Skinscraper? Some of the local guys call it that, but you know what they need to do? They need to ride their bikes better."

On Sunday, at least one rider went skidding across the pavement during a midrace sprint amid a wrenching shriek of metal on concrete.

"Stay down, stay down!" a spectator yelled as the pack parted like flowing water around him. An odor of burnt rubber wafted over the spectators as the rider limped off the road.

"That crash was so bad I can smell it," said Elizabeth M. Marcello, a graduate student at [Columbia University](#) and fledgling bike racer, turning away from the course. Her boyfriend, another Columbia University rider, crashed at this race last year, she said.

In the early days, riders were often felled by debris left on the road or tossed there by onlookers. The very first year, a rider received a consolation prize after a bundle of wire got tangled in his wheel, causing a crash.

The neighborhood has changed a lot since then, said Richard Cox, an announcer for the race since the early 1990s and also an emcee for the national double Dutch competition. "See those brownstones over there?" he pointed across 121st Street to a row of stately buildings. "I've seen when the city was giving them away for a dollar."

On the stoop of one of those buildings, Tiffany Dufu watched the race with her 4-month old daughter, Ekua, and 3-year old son, Kofi.

"I like taking my son out here so he can see the racing," she said. "He's already asking for a bike."

That attitude would have pleased Mr. Walker, who wanted the race to bring families together, Mr. Cox said. "David did say that 'the day I go is the day we still go on.'"



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