

■ Ernesto Colnago's first success as a cyclist came at the Coppa Gabellini in 1949.

■ The 1960 Italian gold medal team during the Olympic pursuit race in the Velodromo Olimpico.

Colnago

One of the prestige names in world cycling, Colnago encapsulates Italian style, craftsmanship, and innovation. The company's success began with the man who is still at the head of the business, Ernesto Colnago.



"We've got our own particular style," said Ernesto Colnago in 2011 as he outlined his philosophy. "The heart of this company is passion."

Set up in 1952, and celebrating its sixtieth anniversary in 2012 as Colnago himself marks his eightieth birthday, this well-known Italian brand—instantly recognizable by its ace of clubs motif—is one of the most prestigious marques in the sport. It mixes design innovation, excellence, and beauty with success in most of the great races.

Ernesto Colnago has travelled a long way with cycling: he has acted as mechanic to some of the sport's biggest names, including Eddy Merckx and Fiorenzo Magni, and produced a long line of groundbreaking bikes. However, Colnago has stayed close to his roots. Born in 1932 in

Cambiago, he still lives in this small dormitory town to the east of Milan. In fact, Colnago's home is directly across the road from the factory that carries his name. It is located in the Viale Brianza, and sixty-five years ago, the street was an unpaved track frequented by chickens. It also provided the setting for Colnago's first victory as a competitive cyclist at the age of fifteen. A photograph of the teenage Colnago holding aloft his prize hangs opposite his desk on the wall of his office, which is within yards of where the picture was taken many years ago.

By the age of fifteen, Colnago had already been working for two years at the nearby Gloria bike factory. After four years, Colnago had progressed to head of department at Gloria,

but was focused on making a career in racing. This changed when he broke his leg during a race. While laid up at home, Colnago was able to build wheels for Gloria on a piece rate, and he realized that he could make five times more money working this way than earning a regular wage at the factory. Also, as news of Colnago's wheel-building skills spread, he began to get commissions from local racers, which further boosted his earnings and reputation.

Before long, Colnago handed in his notice at Gloria. In 1952, with financial backing from his father, he set himself up in a small workshop in Cambiago. Despite his youth, Colnago quickly won commissions from some of the biggest names of the day, including Giorgio Albani and the legendary Fausto Coppi. Colnago's big breakthrough came when he was introduced to Fiorenzo Magni, already a two-time winner of the Giro d'Italia and the only rider in racing history

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to have won the Tour of Flanders on three consecutive occasions.

Towards the end of his racing career, Magni had been troubled by a knee problem that Colnago realized was caused by his cranks not being perpendicular. The champion left his bike with the mechanic, who stripped it down and replaced the crank. Two days later, Magni turned up at the Cambiagio workshop to declare that his knee problem had gone and to ask Colnago if he would become his mechanic on the Nivea team.

In June 1955, just weeks into his first season as a professional team mechanic, Colnago celebrated alongside Magni as the veteran Italian won his third Giro title, edging out Coppi by a mere eleven seconds. In third place was young Gastone Nencini. Two years later, Colnago was Nencini's mechanic when he won his first Giro and told journalists on the way to that victory: "If I manage to win this jersey, the credit must go to Ernesto Colnago, a young mechanic from Lombardy who has built me an unbeatable bicycle. It's true to say that before he came to our team we had some problems with our bikes. But with Colnago my problems have been solved."

That was in 1957, by which time Colnago had been building his own bikes for three years. Initially only local amateurs raced on them, but as Colnago's fame increased, so too did demand for his bikes. The first major success on a Colnago bike came, aptly, at the Rome Olympics in 1960, when Italian team pursuit member Luigi Arienti rode one to the gold medal. Throughout the 1960s, as Colnago worked for riders such as Gianni Motta and the Italian national team, more successes followed: Motta took the Giro and a host of other titles on bikes built by his mechanic.

In the early 1970s, Colnago's reputation, both as a mechanic and frame-builder, really took off. This phase began in 1970 at Milan–San Remo, when Michele Dancelli ended a seventeen-year drought for Italy in the country's biggest one-day race. Riding one of Colnago's bikes, which was branded with the name of team sponsor Molteni, Dancelli was acclaimed as a hero who had lifted a curse from the Italians in their most cherished Classic. Photographs that were taken as Dancelli crossed the finish line on San Remo's Via Roma show Colnago standing in the team car, with Dancelli's spare Colnago bike slung over his shoulder. That same evening, Colnago met *La Gazzetta dello Sport* reporter Bruno Raschi in a restaurant in nearby Laigueglia. Raschi had written that Dancelli had won San Remo on a bike that was "in bloom." "Why don't you make a motif from that image?" Raschi asked Colnago. Hoping to become an "ace" in the bike manufacturing world, Colnago put the two ideas together; the result was the ace of clubs symbol that has adorned his bikes ever since.

By that time, Colnago had already been working with the Belgian phenomenon Eddy Merckx, and had been producing wheels for him. In 1971, the link between the two men became official when Merckx joined Molteni and began racing—and winning—on bikes designed and built by Colnago. The Italian master frame-builder later calculated that he had built more than a hundred bikes for "The Cannibal," more than twenty of them in just one season alone. "He was one of the most demanding, if not the most demanding rider of all. Eddy Merckx studied his bikes in minute detail. More than once he visited my workshop in Cambiagio to follow the various phases of construction," Colnago later recalled.

■ Eddy Merckx wins the 1971 world professional 168-mile (270-km) road championship race on a Colnago.



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ERNESTO COLNAGO

1939

Young Ernesto Colnago receives his first bike, a black third-hand model. He gives it the name "Perla."

1949

Colnago achieves his first major victory at the Coppa Gabellini race. He would follow this with a further twelve wins.

1952

The first Colnago workshop opens at No.10 Via Garibaldi, Cambiagio. The shop's sole workbench is made from a mulberry tree given to Colnago by his father.

1966

Having left Magni to join Gianni Motta's Molteni team in 1962, Colnago's four years of hard work pay off when Motta is victorious at the Giro d'Italia.

1985

Just as his career appears to be in its twilight, Joop Zoetemelk rides a Colnago bike to victory at the world championship in Montello.

1996

Johan Museeuw wins the first of his three Paris–Roubaix titles. He ends the year by taking the world cycling championship in Lugano, Switzerland.

2002

Cadel Evans, riding a Colnago, makes history by becoming the first Australian to wear the *maglia rosa* at the Giro d'Italia.

2012

Anthony Charteau claims the prestigious polka-dot jersey of the King of the Mountains after winning the Tour de France on a Colnago C59 Italia.



Colnago and Ferrari met in 1986. Their first bike, "the Concept" was made with hand-wrapped carbon fibre.



The Master Pista Inseguimento track bike with a pink finish and disk wheels.



An early carbon fibre monocoque track bike with full-disk wheels and tri-bars.



A mid-1990s track version of the C42. Pavel Tonkov used the C42 during the Giro.

The pair's most renowned collaboration concerned Merckx's attempt on the world Hour record in 1972. Colnago knew that Merckx's bike would need to be as light as possible to give him the best chance of beating Ole Ritter's existing mark of 30.23 miles (48.65 km). Every part that could be was shaved or drilled. Special alloys were developed in the United States because

the technology was not then available in Europe. The result was a supersleek set-up that tipped the scales at 12.67 pounds (5.75 kg). Riding this extremely cutting-edge machine in the rarified air of Mexico City, Merckx obliterated the record, adding 826 yards (755 m) to it.

After one more season with Molteni, Colnago took on a new challenge in 1974, and moved to

the Scic team led by Gianbattista Baronchelli. He provided the team with Colnago bikes, which made that year the first in which the ace of clubs logo appeared on a pro team's machines. Baronchelli came within twelve seconds of beating Merckx at the 1974 Giro, which initiated a run of almost unparalleled success for the frame-builder that has continued up to the present day.

During the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, Colnago worked with many of Italy's great names, including Franco Bitossi, Giovanni Battaglin, and Giuseppe "Beppe" Saronni. Spotted by Colnago as a junior, Saronni spent most of his career racing on Colnago bikes and took the 1982 world title at Goodwood on one. The teams riding Colnago bikes during that period are almost

■ A classic Colnago steel bike with gear shifting on the down tube, and straight steel forks.

■ The Colnago used by Giuseppe Saronni to win the 1983 edition of Milan–San Remo.

■ The Colnago Ferrari road bike, equipped with Campagnolo components.

■ This innovative off-road bike is made from carbon fibre and built without a seat tube.



as renowned: Del Tongo, Inoxpran, Kwantum, Ariostea, and, later, Lampre. Colnago victories ran into the hundreds and included more major titles. Freddy Maertens and Joop Zoetemelk won the world title riding the ace of clubs marque in 1981 and 1985, respectively. Saronni won the Giro in 1979 and 1983. Yet Colnago's greatest collaboration was still to come.

In September 1993, Saronni organized a meeting in Milan between Colnago and Giorgio Squinzi, the president of Italian plastics manufacturer Mapei. Squinzi had taken over the failed Eldor team in May and wanted to expand the team into a world-leading outfit. The meeting went well, and Colnago went off to the Cologne bike show. Working as technical consultant to

the Spanish Clas team, led by Swiss rider Tony Rominger, he met up with Rominger and Clas team manager Juan Fernández at the show. There were problems with Clas, they told Colnago, who barely hesitated before calling Squinzi to say that Rominger and eight other riders were available to join Mapei, with Clas happy to be the secondary sponsor. The deal was done, and what was to

become the world's most successful team of all time was established for the 1994 season.

That first year there were fifty-eight victories from a line-up that included Rominger, Franco Ballerini, Mauro Gianetti, Andrea Tafi, Gianluca Bortolami, and Abraham Olano. The highlight was Rominger breaking the world Hour record not once but twice, each time on a bike designed and

ERNESTO COLNAGO ON HIS RIDERS

"I've been involved in cycling for over fifty years and I've always tried to help young riders as much as I could, perhaps because my own career was cut short by a broken leg. I started as a team mechanic in the mid-fifties and so will always remember Italian riders like Fiorenzo Magni, Gastone Nencini, Michele Dancelli, and Gianni Motta. I worked closely with the Molteni team and so Eddy Merckx rode my bikes even though my name wasn't on the frame. I built the bike he used to break the Hour record in 1972; it weighed just 5.750 kg (12.67 lbs). I first sponsored a team in the seventies and discovered Beppe Saronni when he was a talented but very young amateur. Beppe was a huge talent, and his late attack to win the world title in Goodwood in 1982 still makes me smile and feel very proud.

In the eighties I helped Russian and Chinese riders. I saw Pavel Tonkov win the junior world title and signed him straight away. He went on to win the Giro d'Italia on a Colnago in 1996. The Mapei team was a special team for me because first Tony Rominger set a new Hour record on a special bike I built for him and then Mapei dominated Paris-Roubaix with my C40 carbon fibre bikes. Taking first, second, and third in 1996 was incredible, but I'll never forget when Franco Ballerini won in 1998. He was the last great Italian rider able to dominate the pavé."




EDDY MERCKX

Thought by many to be the greatest cyclist who has ever lived, Merckx won the 1971 Milan-San Remo on a custom-made Colnago. He won the Tour de France five times.



GIUSEPPE SARONNI

In a career lasting from 1977 to 1989, Saronni won 193 races. His partnership with Colnago reached its zenith when he won the 1982 world road title.



JOOP ZOETEMELK

The Dutchman spent the last years of his career on a Colnago; here, aged thirty-nine, he wears the rainbow jersey of world champion after becoming the oldest winner of the title in 1985.



FRANCO BALLERINI

Italian cyclist Franco Ballerini in action on his way to winning the ninety-sixth edition of the Paris-Roubaix cycling race, northern France, on April 12, 1998.

built by Colnago. He opted for steel because he believed that it would make the bike more stable and therefore more suitable for a track novice such as Rominger. Weight was saved by drilling out the chain, the specially produced sixty-tooth chainring—CNC-machined by a local artisan because Campagnolo lacked the equipment in its range—and the handlebars, and also by using titanium spokes fitted with aluminium nipples. Riding in Bordeaux, Rominger set two astonishing marks: he beat Miguel Indurain's Hour record by 874 yards (799 m), and later broke it again by 2,462 yards (2,251 m) when he completed 34.356 miles (55.291 km).

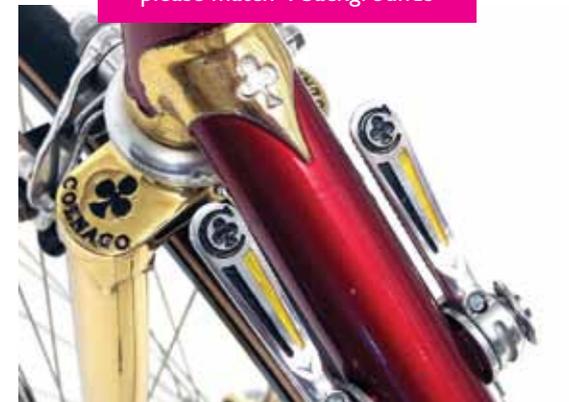
A lesser known but ultimately more influential bike was the carbon fibre C40 on which Mapei's riders won hundreds of victories, including five in Paris-Roubaix. Many people, even within the Mapei team, initially questioned Colnago's insistence that a carbon fibre frame, with its straight Precisa forks, could stand up to the rigours of Roubaix. However, Colnago was proved correct from the start, because Ballerini finished third and admitted that the C40 gave him a better ride than bikes that were fitted with suspension forks, which were in vogue at the time for the sport's toughest one-day race. "Ferrari's engineers had shown us that a straight-bladed fork absorbed shock better," Colnago said later. "Despite innumerable criticisms, everyone soon copied it and all the Roubaix won by Mapei featured the Precisa fork." The big breakthrough came in 1995, when Ballerini took the first of his two Roubaix titles. A year later, three Mapei riders finished alone in the Roubaix velodrome, with Johan Museeuw taking victory after a spectacular team performance.

Mapei bowed out of the sport after scoring ninety-four victories in 2002, but Colnago has continued to work with some of the sport's leading teams and riders, among them Belgian cyclo-cross star Sven Nys, with whom he developed the beautiful and effective Cross

■ A 1779 Mexico Oro. A gold-plated version was presented to Pope John Paul II. It features, from top to bottom, gold rear forks, Ernesto Colnago-engraved pedal, gold-plated front forks and gear shifters, and Colnago brakes.



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Prestige, and, more recently, the Europcar team. At the 2011 Tour, Thomas Voeckler rode Colnago’s latest range-topping model, the C59 Italia, into the yellow jersey and almost to the most improbable of Tour victories, thus underlining Colnago’s ongoing ability to provide bikes that can compete with the very best.

“For me, the whole thing revolves around my love for bicycles,” said Colnago. “I don’t like it when people start off with marketing and colours and then think about the technology. That’s the wrong way round. You can follow the market or you can follow fashion, but elegance is still elegance no matter what your driving philosophy. There’s a base of classic elegance in all of the frames that we do. We’ve got our own particular style. The heart of this company is passion.”

That passion has produced a vast amount of innovation, including successful experiments in the 1950s with cold-forging to manufacture more responsive and less rigid forks, and a rethinking of fork design with Precisa in the 1990s. “Colnago has been the innovator of so much technology in the bike industry,” the company’s founder reflected. “You can see so many things that we’ve developed and that other companies have picked up and then mass-produced. That’s one of the features of this company, that we’re focused on innovation, on doing what we can to push bike technology forwards. That’s often the way it has been at Colnago. We’ve been the first company to experiment and then everyone else has copied us.” The evidence of this is everywhere. **PC**

■ Tony Rominger set his Hour record in October 1994 on a Colnago.

■ Belgium’s Johan Museeuw and Team Mapei win the 1996 Paris–Roubaix.

