

Bike racing no passing fancy for Giro artist

Luigia Zilli competed for a time in her native Italy

BY WANDA CHOW
NewsLeader

For North Burnaby artist Luigia Zilli, bicycle racing isn't just a passing fancy, it's something of a family passion.

Zilli's work is being used to promote the first Giro di Burnaby bike race taking place in the Heights neighbourhood July 14. She ever designed the bronze and marble trophies that will be taken home by the race winners.

But before volunteering for the event's organizing committee, Zilli's interest in cycling wasn't limited to watching the Tour de France on TV.

In fact, she raced herself for a couple years in her native Italy.

So did her younger brother, Franco Zilli.

As did their father, Marcello Zilli back in the 1950s.

Her father was "pretty good" but he had to give up racing to focus on helping with the family farm, said Zilli, 40. He'd have to work on the farm in the morning before riding into town to start a race. "He was pretty tired by the time he started."

Zilli pointed out that in those rough post-war years, bike racers had few luxuries like they do today; not even adequate food. "In those days, [all they'd have prior to a race was] a plate of soup with beans. It was the will to do it [that kept them going]."

Growing up in the town of Col San Martino in the northeastern Italian province of Treviso, Zilli recalled her father got her younger brother Franco started in the sport when he was six. Franco gave it up before turning professional but not before he rode with friends who eventually became tops in the sport, including Gilberto Simoni, a two-time winner of the Giro d'Italia.

And not before encouraging his big sister to take up the bike. Zilli recalled that Franco gave her his old bike which was much too small for her at the time. They'd go riding together in their hilly town and one day he told her, "Why don't you race?"

So she did, although women's cycling wasn't as organized as it was for the boys and men. Whereas the male cyclists could race in nearby towns within 50 kilometres pretty much every weekend, the women would typically have to drive up



MARIO BARTEL/NEWSLEADER

Luigia Zilli's memories of bike racing when she was growing up in Italy, and her own participation in the sport, have fuelled some of her paintings as well as the design for the trophy to be awarded to the winners of the men's and women's races at the upcoming Giro di Burnaby on July 14.

to four hours to get to a race. And because there were fewer categories of women racers, when she started at age 18 she found herself as a beginner having to compete in an age group that included professional cyclists.

"You can't compete with them unless they have an accident," she said with a laugh.

Zilli had her share of successes, winning a couple of races and placing high in others during her two-year racing career. But like her father before her, she found it difficult balancing that and her work as an apprentice for Italian sculptor Carlo Balljuna. It was hard finding time to train with rides of 60 to 120 kilometres, the typical race distances, in the evenings after work.

Eventually she quit racing and covered races in Northern Italy for a local TV station for four years. She

took up painting as a sideline, and started putting on exhibitions and selling some of her work, after being encouraged by others to do so.

She remembers her sculptor boss, Balljuna, who didn't paint all that much, coming to her first show. "He said, 'Congratulations. The pupil beat the master or something like that.'"

Zilli moved to Canada in 1999 after meeting her future husband here during a visit. Art got put aside for a time while she got married and started a family.

So did her passion for bike racing. "When I came I had an idea cycling wasn't popular. Back home every little town like mine had at least one race every year." Here, there was something happening some years in Gastown but that was it.

"I thought that was the reality

here - no cyclists."

Then she heard last fall about Burnaby Councillor Pietro Calendino's efforts to bring a bike race to North Burnaby, dubbed the Giro di Burnaby, in honour of the area's large Italian community. "My first reaction was I wanted to see if I could get involved doing something."

She joined the organizing committee and, because of her experience in the sculpture studio, designed the trophies. "I wanted a quality thing," she said of the heavy bronze trophies. "Not plastic. The one who's going to bring it home is not going to throw it into a closet."

By then she had returned to painting, now full-time, even winning the People's Choice award at a Burnaby Arts Council (BAC) juried show in 2004. She is organizing this weekend's BAC Artists Studio Tour July 8-9, with her own home studio one of the stops on the tour.

Local Giro artist big on bikes

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One of the Giro committee directors noticed a painting in Zilli's home that she had done called Tour de France, which she painted after watching last year's race. Next thing she knew, the committee was asking if they could use it to promote the Burnaby event.

Zilli now plans to paint a series of works on bike races, including the Giro d'Italia, its Spanish counterpart, and the Giro di Burnaby.

She is pleased with the recent increased interest in bike racing which she believes is due to the success of American Lance Armstrong, who has won a record seven Tour de France championships.

"I think it's going to be a great event and

people are going to like it," Zilli said of the local race.

The Giro di Burnaby has at least one other homage to its Italian roots. Unlike the Tour de France, where the leader wears a yellow jersey, the Giro's winner will wear pink, albeit a slightly darker shade, just like the leader of the Giro d'Italia.

As for Zilli, she's got a bicycle gathering dust which she hopes to start riding again, possibly with her two young daughters in tow.

For more information on the Giro di Burnaby, visit www.girodiburnaby.com, and on the Artists Studio Tour, see www.burnabyartscouncil.org.

More on Luigia Zilli's artwork can be found at www.luigiazilli.com.

wchow@burnabynewsleader.com