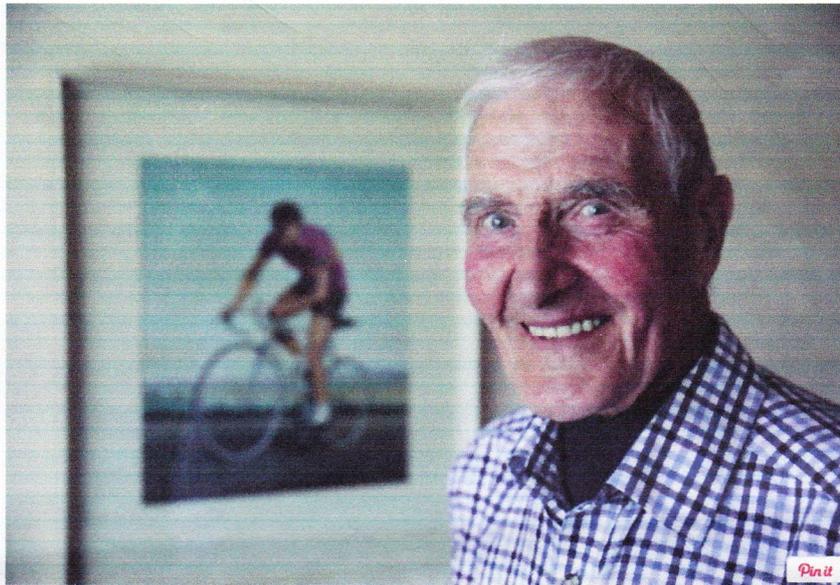# Obituary: Ian Steel, cyclist

Ian Steel: Cyclist was the first Scot to race in Tour de France and only Briton to win Peace Race. Picture: Robert Perry

Born: 28 December 1928, in Glasgow. Died: 20 October 2015, in Largs, aged 86

Ian Steel, who has died aged 86, was one of Scotland's greatest cyclists. He was the first Scot to start the Tour de France, in 1955, but his crowning achievement was to win the Peace Race three years before that. He remains the only British rider ever to conquer a race held behind the Iron Curtain – between Warsaw, Berlin and Prague – and dominated by the Eastern Bloc.

Arriving in Poland for the start of the 1,400-mile race, Steel and his British teammates had never witnessed anything like the scenes that awaited them at the national stadium in Warsaw. "A mind-blowing spectacle," Steel recalled. "Bands, marching, flags, Stalin everywhere. At the end, they released a thousand white doves into the skies above Warsaw."

Once the race got under way it was the crowds that struck Steel: "Millions and millions of people watched the race, seas of them. It shook us rigid; you can't imagine it."

It was late in the race, on a mountain stage to the East German city of Chemnitz, that Steel landed the first blow, attacking the leader, Jan Veselý. He claimed the overall lead but came under relentless assault in the remaining stages. Steel was aware of the political dimension to a westerner leading, though he said: "I had no idea about politics, or any of that stuff, and I was determined to ignore it all. I was focused on riding my bike. If I'd stopped to take in the scale of the thing, either politically or in a sporting sense, I would have been overwhelmed by it."

Veselý, the 1949 winner, was the most persistent, attacking Steel all the way to Prague, where the final stage finished. "Veselý tried everything into Prague, his home town," Steel recalled this year. "He tried a couple of times to break away and then the French-Pole [Jan] Stablinsky took off and I chased." Veselý spotted his chance, counter-attacking and forcing Steel on to the defensive. He caught him only after a desperate chase; but the Scot learned his lesson and spent the rest of the stage shepherded by Greenfield and shadowing his main rival. Eventually they entered the Strahov Stadium with Steel's lead intact.

The stadium was packed with 220,000 people, but the reaction to Steel's triumph was muted. "When we finished the different stages there was always a lap of honour," said Steel. "But when we got to the finish in Prague there was no victory lap, nothing."

The British team won the team competition as well. "We got radios, briefcases, statues, and a bike," said Steel. "I gave the bike to the correspondent to the Picture Post, who followed the race around."

Steel was born in Glasgow but in 1939 he and his younger sister Margaret were evacuated from the city to live with their grandparents in Dunoon. The ten-year-old Steel loved riding a bicycle, and he was enterprising, combining his main interest with paid employment by becoming an errand boy for the butcher: a job he did on his bike.

Back in Glasgow after the war he became an apprentice pattern-maker. Aged 18, he also joined the Glasgow United Cycling Club and began racing, taking part in a 25-mile time trial (a solo race against the clock) in 1946. He competed in time trials but joined another club Glasgow Wheelers, because he wanted to try massed-start road racing. This was the type of racing that was popular on the continent, though it was an underground activity in the UK, with massed-start racing on public roads banned.

Steel was attracted by the continental glamour of road racing. Even the names – of riders and bikes – excited him: "Robic, Coppi, Bartali. Campagnolo, Peugeot, Legnano – like illicit, guilty pleasures," he told Rouleur magazine a few years ago. "I wanted to be Fausto Coppi."