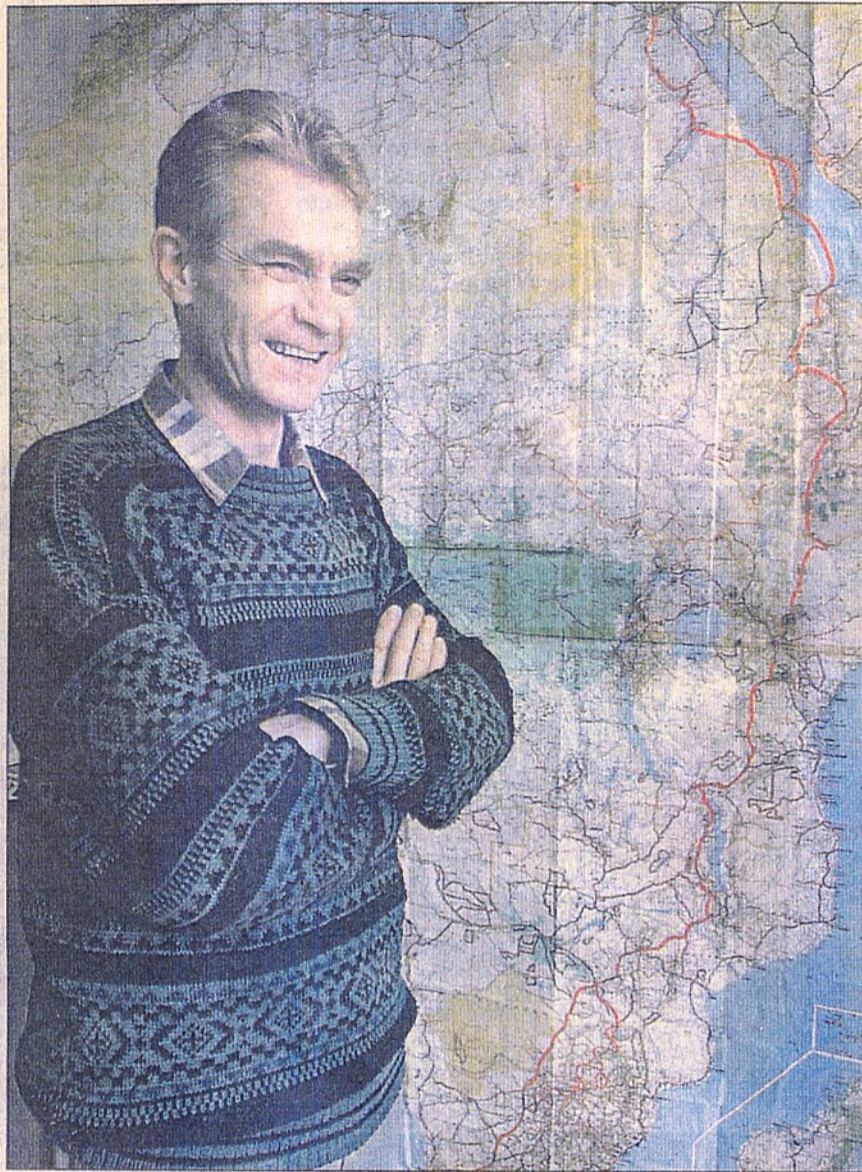


Adventure

A bike odyssey: Cairo to Cape Town

Spectacular race to travel Africa's length

Toronto adventurers fired by cyclists' zeal



TONY BOCK/TORONTO STAR

Henry Gold, co-organizer of the 10,500-kilometre Tour d'Afrique, will be one of more than 30 adventurers setting out at dawn Jan. 18 from the Pyramids at Gi-

LESLIE SCRIVENER
FAITH AND ETHICS REPORTER

You can eat bugs or wrestle with snakes on television, or you can do something to test how truly tough you are — ride a bicycle the length of Africa.

Next month, more than 30 adventurers will saddle up and pedal the continent from Cairo to Cape Town, in a 10,500-kilometre modern odyssey, conceived in Toronto and called the Tour d'Afrique. Said to be the longest and most challenging bicycle race in the world, it will make the Tour de France look like a ride in the park.

Some are 30ish athletic men who intend to pit themselves against the sun, the sand and the heat and race for four months down the Blue Nile, along the edge of the Sahara and later the Kalahari desert, past Mount Kilimanjaro and across the Zambezi River.

Others will look on it more as an expedition and take a more leisurely pace, enjoying the sights and having a beer along the way — though all must be fit enough to ride 105 kilometres a day.

Some of the older adventurers have answered a siren call silenced since youth. They had dreams, grew up, got jobs, raised families and forgot the wanderlust that once gripped them.

"It woke up something in me I'd lost back in the '70s," said Sandra McMillar, raised in Forest Hill, educated at Bishop Strachan School, mother of five and a real estate broker in Charlottetown, PEI. "It was a feeling that you could do anything, the excitement that travel can awaken in you, something I didn't think existed in me anymore."

When she read about the expedition, she rented a bike and rode 3.5 kilometres, more than she'd done in years.

"I'm not a bicycle person, and I'm not in shape," she said. But by mid-August she could ride 100 kilometres at a time.

The Tour d'Afrique is organized by two Torontonians: Henry Gold, 50, an engineer who was executive director of Canadian Physicians for Aid and Relief, and inventor Michael de Jong, 38.

They are driven not only by a thirst for adventure and joy of athleticism, but by a love of cycling. Both loathe cars — the

turn down, Gold says. "I don't want such comfort, wealth and power, and you push aside any thought that this is not good for us and our children."

"We want to make a statement: The bike is the most efficient machine ever built. You can cross Africa on it."

De Jong's inventions include an ill-fated amphibious bike, a more successful inflatable kayak that can load on a bike, and a cleverly designed tent that can be suspended from a roadside tree.

"I'd like to dedicate the rest of my life to putting more bikes on the road in North America," says de Jong, who was raised in Holland, where cycling lanes are incorporated into city planning.

He nearly died and two passengers were paralyzed when a bus slammed into a car he was driving in Barbados.

"Life is so short, so full of imperfections," de Jong says. "The only time I truly enjoy life is on my bike in some country not as rich as ours, where there are few cars. Then you are alive. You remember everything so distinctly."

Alex Campbell, 44, an environmental consultant from Bradford, said he is living out a boyhood dream by signing on. The route is close to one he and his brother imagined doing as teenagers.

He has lost 30 pounds training since July. His longest day trip: a 245-kilometre trek around Lake Simcoe.

Another serious competitor rented out his house and was camping out in friends' backyards until mid-November to save money for the race and what will be his fifth trip to Africa. Paul Gamsby, 37, quit his job as manager of a Guelph pub to raise funds and train.

The \$7,000 U.S. entry fee covers food, water and transportation in Africa, medical and logistical support. Part will go to a foundation to promote environmental protection and bicycle use. Racers will bring their own equipment and set up their own tents each night.

The winner will be noted by the *Guinness Book of World Records* for fastest human-powered crossing of Africa.