

READING THE RACE



Bike
Racing
from **Inside**
the Peloton

JAMIE SMITH
WITH
CHRIS HORNER

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WHAT'S MY MOTIVATION?

"RIDERS READY," THE CHIEF REFEREE DECLARES. Bang goes the gun, and you're off on the greatest adventure of your life.

Within seconds, you're riding as if launched from a cannon. By the time you reach the first turn, you're completely out of breath. Spectators are a blur on the sidewalk. Two hundred tires on pavement roar like Niagara Falls. The squeal of brake pads on carbon-fiber rims sends chills down your spine. Your mind struggles to make sense of the overload of messages pouring in. You pass—and are passed by—other racers as you fight your way to the first-class section of this bullet train.

You could be spending your weekend enjoying more civilized, relaxing pursuits. Instead, you're in the middle of this cyclone of bikes and bodies. But why? What brought you here? What motivates a person to race a bicycle?

For most racers, the noise, the blur, the battle, the speed are reason enough. Once you've done it, you cannot get enough of it.

And then there's the thrill of competition. It's a race, and you want to win. Of course you want to win. What other reason is there? Why else would anyone

spend all that time, energy, and money? Hour upon hour of repetitive training. More hours and many miles of driving to races. And countless trips to the bike shop to buy the newest, lightest, coolest equipment, of course.

Winning is what it's all about. Legends are born by winning. Movies are made about winners. Books are written about winning. Well, not necessarily this book, but lots of other books.

So much emphasis is placed on winning that you might automatically assume that every rider's goal is to be first across the line. Yet there can be only one winner. And in a pack of 100 riders, how many truly have a legitimate shot at winning? Fifty? Twenty? Ten? Seven? Three?

However it shakes out, there will be 99 losers.

It's safe to say that only a small percentage of any peloton—call it 3 percent—has the wherewithal to actually win a bike race. So the other 97 percent of the field must have other good reasons to roll up to the starting line. They've put a lot of energy and resources into what will be a losing effort.

Clearly, winning isn't the only motivation. It's a good thing, too. Not every rider can have a movie made about him or her. There aren't enough theaters in America—or theatres in Canada.

WHY DO YOU RACE?

So I ask again: Why?

Why ride the thousands of miles it takes to gain speed and fitness? Why scrutinize every morsel of food that you eat? Why miss your nephew's confirmation ceremony? Why live in a constant state of soreness? Why spend the national debt of a small country on fancy equipment made in an even smaller country? Why go to all the trouble if not to win?

Believe it or not, some people don't care about winning. Some people willingly go through all that trouble and make all those sacrifices just because they like to ride their bikes fast in a group that is in a constant state of stress. They

like the meaningful push toward a finishing goal, even if that goal is just a strip of duct tape strung across the road and they're the 76th rider to cross it. They have no delusions of winning the race; they just like the scene. The pre-race scene, the post-race scene, and the painful scene in between. The one that carries danger and peril. The scene that's played out at 28 miles per hour. That scene. They love to be in it. Even as extras.

Some actors make a living in Hollywood playing bit parts in the background of movies: the out-of-focus guy throwing a Frisbee in the park, the plainly dressed woman carrying shopping bags up the stairs, the anonymous person walking down the sidewalk. Sure, those background actors may have a secret desire deep down inside. And should the hand of fate yank them into the spotlight, they will willingly accept the role. The same can be said for bike racers. If the stars align and events transpire to put them in position to win a race, they will go for it. But winning is not why they race. They race because it's a thrill.

They can't find the same thrill in a club ride; the stress is absent. If you get dropped during a club ride, it's no big deal. You'll catch up to the group when it stops at the next bagel shop. And in a club ride, not everyone sprints for every city-limit sign. But in a bike race, everyone rides with intent. Everyone adds to the electricity. The electricity is what makes it special.

It carries a certain cachet to say you're a bike racer. It buys you some swaggering rights among those who are unwilling to take the risks involved with racing. It makes you just a little more edgy.

At least we like to think so.

And for some, that's the allure of the sport. To them, wearing a skinsuit (as long as it fits properly) is just that much cooler than wearing a regular kit.

Some racers are competitive, but in an internal way. They aren't too keen on mixing it up in the final sprint. They just want to place ahead of a certain point in the field. They may be the ones who are fighting for the last paying

spot on the prize list, or who are sprinting for 50th place. That's their race. They feel good if they finish higher than they did the previous week. Or they may pick a rider who is near their own level of ability and try to finish ahead of that person.

Chris Horner WHY RACE?

I got my first racing license at the age of 15 and have held one almost every year since then. (If I remember correctly, I may have spent a couple of high school years driving around and chasing the next party rather than the next race.) Now, at 41, I hear the same question every time I'm interviewed: "When will you retire?" And I always respond, "When the legs are no good anymore," because I simply can't imagine a time when I won't want to be at a bike race.

Each time that I arrive at the start of a race, I still have the same feelings passing through me as I did before the very first races back in my amateur days. The feelings start to come over me as the car exits the main road and the first signs of the racecourse start to appear. It's always the same adrenaline rush, with nerves rising and excitement growing. Right away, I look around to see which riders and teams are there; what the course looks like (if possible); how big the crowds are; and, of course, how the weather looks. Whether I was pulling up to a Southern California criterium in my VW Scirocco in 1991 or the start of the Tour de France in our RadioShack Nissan Trek team bus in 2012, the experience is the same. And no matter how many times I've been to the start of a bike race, I am always amazed that the feelings and excitement of those moments never change. Retirement? Not anytime soon. ■

The Social Scene

Some riders treat the race as a social event. They may peel off in the final laps to avoid the mayhem of the sprint, but they gladly suffer through the previous miles because it fits their need for competition and social interaction. For them, victory lies in being there. Victory lies in racing well and not getting dropped.

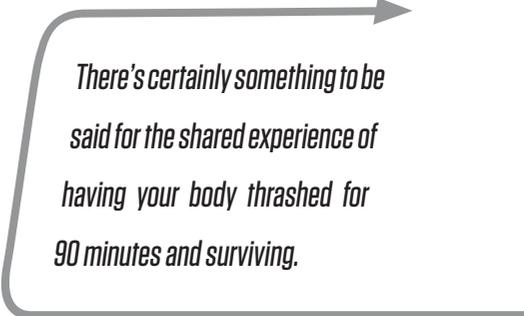
Some organized sports allow you to dog it. For instance, if you're playing soccer or lacrosse, you don't really have to run full blast up and down the field on every play; you can jog while the others hustle. You won't get dropped from the game. Your teammates might not like it, but you can get away with it.

The closest thing to dogging it in a bike race is when you sit on the back of the pack with your tongue hanging out during the fast parts and carrying on conversations with other tailgunners during the slow parts. If you can't survive the hammer sessions, you're gone.

There's certainly something to be said for the shared experience of having your body thrashed for 90 minutes and surviving. It's

a benchmark that helps us judge our dedication. It's also a challenge. We all know of Category II riders who would have much better results if they would downgrade to Cat. III, but they choose to keep their Cat. II license because that's where the challenge is. It may also be where their friends are.

To that end, it's almost like being in high school in that they want to stay with their graduating class. They all came into the sport at about the same time. They raced together and crashed together as Cat. V racers. They laughed and bonked together as Cat. IV riders. They drove to Superweek together as Cat. III racers. And now they're racing as Cat. II racers, whether they're at the same level within that category or not.



There's certainly something to be said for the shared experience of having your body thrashed for 90 minutes and surviving.

Sure, it's harder. Their training regimen is usually just sufficient to make it possible to hang with their chosen group. They suffer plenty at the hands of the fast guys without tasting the success of a victory salute, but they're happy. Their victory is in doing it, not winning it.

That's cool. The more the merrier.

Fitness

Some people race in order to reach fitness goals. Now, the very sound of that notion makes me laugh. I mean, anyone who knows bike racing knows that it's not exactly the healthiest thing you can do to your body. The out-of-balance muscles; the overdeveloped legs and underdeveloped arms. The overstressed trapezius. The hemorrhoids. The constant threat of broken collarbones. The unwanted effects of concentrated pressure on the perineum.

There are far more damaging sports, of course, but I promised my running friends that I wouldn't bash them in this book.

Nevertheless, cycling, in general, is a great fitness activity. Friendly group rides offer camaraderie. But bike racing forces a certain discipline upon its participants that casual riding doesn't. The pressure riders put on themselves to simply not get dropped can push them much harder than a club ride ever would. Working harder than you ever imagined you could helps build character. Personally, I love the feeling I get after a bike race when I sit motionless in my car for several minutes until I can muster the energy to turn the key and push the gas pedal. I feel like I've grown as a person on those occasions when I have to sit down in the shower after a hard ride. I feel alive when I'm that dead.

For some, "fitness" means shedding weight, and the motivation of weight loss has helped many nonracers drop unwanted pounds after they've taken up cycling. And at some point, the competitive fire that has lain dormant in them

Chris Horner THE SOCIAL SIDE OF RACING

The social side of bike racing is a huge factor in creating camaraderie and friendship that can last for decades. For me, when I started out in the sport, the feeling always began the moment we loaded into the car for the road trip to the race. I traveled with the same two guys throughout my early amateur years, and that experience shaped not only my racing but also my social view of the sport. Of course, since then, my travel companions and teammates have changed many times over, but the early experiences and the lessons learned have had a huge impact on my career.

The two guys that I always traveled with in my early years were Todd Brydon (a masters national road champion), whom I met for the first time while training in the dark at 5 a.m. around San Diego, and Rich Meeker (a multitime masters national champion in almost everything), whom I met at a Swami's team pizza meeting (Swami was the local bike club). They were doing the 30-plus races at the time but also did the Pro/I/II races, which was why they allowed me to ride in the car with them. Meeker had a knowledge of every racer—I think he even knew most, if not all, of the women racers—plus the officials, mechanics, soigneurs, announcers, and sponsors (for our team as well as everyone else's). As we arrived at each of the races, his window would roll down at the first corner, and if we were lucky, he would only speak to 10 or 20 people before we actually parked the car. Todd was more reserved in his racing knowledge, but his stories on the way to the race always kept the car ride interesting and fun.

The days were about stories—both telling old stories and earning new ones—and having a great time while doing something we all loved.



THE SOCIAL SIDE OF RACING, CONTINUED

Bike racing began at this moment to give me many of my closest lifelong friends. From travel buddies to training partners to teammates and even my wife, most of the people in my life are ones I met in the sport, and it is a group of friends and acquaintances that has given me a lifetime of stories and adventures. ■

for a long time is ignited. What starts as a weight loss program becomes a full-on racing regimen.

That's also cool. As I say, the more the merrier.

To Help Someone Else Win

Now we're getting somewhere.

If only 3 percent of the field has a chance of winning, then the other 97 percent is there to play a role in the outcome in whatever way it is able. There are several ways to do so. Some are obvious. Some are barely noticeable.

The motivation to drive toward a common goal in competition is what makes team sports great. Riders are willing to spend time and energy training, as well as burning every ounce of energy they have during a race, even when they know they don't have a chance of winning. They're willing to throw everything they have out onto the road in order to improve their teammate's chances. And they do this with little or no expectation of tangible reward.

That's some pretty amazing stuff right there.

THE PRO GAME VERSUS OUR GAME

A rider who aspires to reach the pinnacle of the sport that he or she has been watching on television or online may have to relearn some things to

compete in local races. Tactically, professional bike racing in Europe is almost unrecognizable when compared to racing at the amateur level in America.

Like you, I watch the spring classics. I watch the grand tours. I'm addicted. Like you, I stream them online at my office when I should be working. I won't tell if you won't.

As I watch those races, I see similarities. I also see, in many ways, a completely different sport.

First of all, helicopters. We don't have them at our industrial-park criteriums. If we did, I'm sure you'd learn to pin your number on securely.

Helicopters have nothing to do with tactics. Culture, however, does.

Euro Pro

In America, when a baby is born, the obstetrician slaps the baby's bare bottom to shock the baby and start the breathing process. In Europe, the obstetrician places the baby's bare bottom on a cold bicycle seat to shock the baby and start the breathing and pedaling process.

In Europe, absorption of bike racing culture begins much earlier than it does in the United States. Cycling clubs for kids are everywhere. Organized racing in some European countries starts at age 6, and the national sanctioning bodies for cycling create a clear path to follow from the amateur ranks to the pros. If you have cycling talent, there are plenty of support systems to help you go as far as you can.

Here in the U.S., however, we see very few racers under the age of 15. In fact, according to recent USA Cycling (USAC) statistics, there are only 4,927 registered riders under the age of 18 in the entire country. Compare that to the 6,000 U.S. Youth Soccer clubs in the country and the five million kids playing baseball in the U.S., according to Little League Baseball and Softball statistics.

The Euro cycling scene begins with the way cycling is not only a part of everyday life but also a major part of professional sports. It is also reflected in

the racing that is done over there. Races are longer than races in the States. The amount of television and media coverage is greater. The importance of winning is greater. For many riders, a bike racing career is a ticket away from factory work. American riders will take it as far as they're able, but they're rarely destined to work on a farm if they fail.

That's a fundamental cultural difference between the European pro and an American pro racing in Europe.

As such, the style of racing in the European pro peloton is vastly different from what we see in American amateur racing. In Europe, if a team sponsor wants air time in a telecast, the riders will spend much of their energy to get one of their own into the break du jour. Put a rider on the front and you'll get TV screen time galore and plenty of mentions from the announcers.

European cycling is big business. However, it is also theater. Sometimes what we see in the Tour de France is not what it appears to be. I repeat: sometimes.

For instance, when we tune in to watch stage 12, we see a five-man break-away rolling along the French countryside holding a 10-minute lead over an uninterested peloton. We presume that the riders in the break attacked violently, perhaps on a hill, got a gap, and slowly extended their lead through hard work and a synergistic cooperative effort. That might be true. For the first several kilometers of the stage, I promise you that there was a flurry of attacks. The pace was torrid. Viewed from the helicopter's gyroscopic lens, the pack was shaped like a snake as attack after attack went up the road. As soon as one was reeled in, another vicious attack was launched. And another. And another. And then the yellow jersey stopped to pee.

When the yellow jersey stops for a "nature break," the racing light is extinguished briefly out of deference to the race leader. The field slows down to wait, and whoever happens to be off the front during this stoppage has just been granted break-du-jour status.

Sometimes it's not the maillot jaune that creates the nature break. Sometimes it's the green jersey. Or Mr. Polka Dot. Or one of the other favorites.

The break du jour, meanwhile, is away, gone, up the road, and it will remain there until the team directors start to get nervous.

This type of breakaway never happens at the amateur level of American racing. For one thing, no one is allowed to stop and pee during our races. If the pre-race favorite were to pull off the road to pee, the ensuing attacks would be so violent, bike frames would snap in half. Woe betide the rider who hesitates for a minute in an American bike race, thinking that the field will cut him a break.

In the major leagues, different rules apply.

American Pro

The American professional cyclist is a different animal, a species distinct from both the Euro pro and the American amateur.

The competition to become and remain a professional cyclist in the U.S. is no less intense than it is in Europe. There are hundreds of up-and-coming hotshots who are working hard, hoping to land a pro contract and begin living the dream. But generally, they aren't on a quest for a better life. In fact, knowing what we know about the hardscrabble life of a pro cyclist, the opposite may be true. They are willing to sleep on floors and squeeze eight teammates into a minivan for a 12-hour drive to a shared hotel room in the bad part of town to race. If they get a pro contract, the "dream" that they will enjoy still involves living out of a suitcase for six months, trying to scrape together a decent week of training, juggling airport connections, and fighting the boredom of hotel rooms. But on the plus side, they will know where their next meal is coming from, they will have more than two pair of shorts, and they will have teammates whom they can count on. They won't have to drive to the races, but they will spend more time at baggage claim worrying about whether or not their bike made the trip intact.

It's a hard life.

What we wouldn't give to be living it.

American pro cyclists race a different type of race than we amateurs do. At any point in the race, they can turn to a teammate and tell him to go to the front and reel in the breakaway. And do you know what happens? The teammate goes straight to the front and starts the chase. He has to; he is paid to answer the call. The team members know that there are hundreds of hotshots waiting in the wings who would be willing to do it if they can't. They are paid to train on Thursday mornings so that when their leader turns to them on Sunday, they are ready, willing, and able to crank it up. They can't turn to their team leader and say, "Sorry, man. I got nothin'."

Ya got nothin'? Hmm.

Hello, hotshots? Are you free next weekend?

Amateur racing is much different. It is fast, exciting, dangerous, and hard, but if I turn to one of my teammates and tell him we need to reel in the breakaway, I'm liable to hear any number of responses, none of which shows any promise of accelerating the pace of the peloton.

"No, man, I'm tapering. The state time trial is next weekend."

"Can't. I'm cooked. I played soccer with my daughter all day yesterday."

"You're on your own, dude. I feel like crud."

And if I do get a positive response, will my teammate know what to do once we catch the breakaway? Pro cyclists know exactly what to do because they study it. They're paid to know every tactic available to them and who on their team is best suited for what purpose.

They also know who the strong local riders are when they're racing in Albuquerque, in addition to the other pro riders whom they see every other weekend. And they know which local teams to watch out for when they get to Kenosha. That's also part of being a pro.

Chris Horner

BREAKING INTO THE GLAMOROUS PRO LIFE

For most European riders, if they don't make it to the pro ranks, their life after cycling can be pretty rough. You might be interested to know that for most Americans, life as an aspiring professional—and even for many pros who have made it—can be far from glamorous as well.

My first big road trip was in 1992. We were leaving from Redlands, California, right after the last stage of the Redlands Classic finished and traveling all the way over to Quebec, Canada, to do Tour de Beauce; Tour of Adirondacks in upstate New York; the Olympic trials in Altoona, Pennsylvania; Superweek in Milwaukee; and whatever other local races we could find along the way to fill in the gaps. Our group had five riders and a female soigneur, traveling together for months.

We traveled in a Chevy Astro minivan, donated to us by a local amateur riding club to use for the next three months, and Trent Klasna's Chevy S-10 pickup (standard cab, meaning no backseats). The S-10 was packed to the limit, and the Astro van was packed as well, leaving just enough space for the backseats to recline so that the nondrivers could catch a little sleep between shifts.

If I remember correctly, we only did two or three nights of sleeping in the cars, choosing instead to drive most nights to get to our next host housing or race destination that much sooner. Along the way, the favorite choice for breakfast after a night of sleeping in the cars was the Denny's Grand Slam at \$1.99, so with a \$1 tip we could make it in and out pretty cheap. We usually kept a few groceries in the cars—soda, sandwiches, and chips—to keep the cost down, but dinner was a daily necessity that cut severely into our meager budgets. Even though gas money

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BREAKING INTO THE GLAMOROUS PRO LIFE, CONTINUED

and housing (including even a few hotels during the races) were covered, the food costs quickly ate into the few hundred dollars that I had saved at the start of the trip. Luckily for us, we were racing pretty well, and back in those days the races paid the prize money right after the race ended—and usually in cash—helping us to make it through.

If not for the generous host families along the way, there was no way we could possibly have survived the trip. I think I started with \$400 or \$500 and was down to just over \$100 before we even got to the first race. From then on, every race was about survival and literally making it through to the next day. It's a tough life getting started as an American in cycling, but thanks to all of the race organizers, host families, volunteers, and generous people along the way, I was able to survive the transition from an amateur to the biggest stage in cycling: the Tour de France. ■

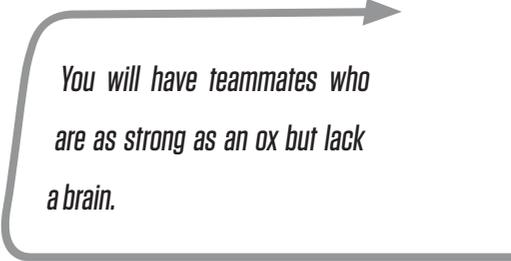
American Amateur

Though different from European racing and American professional racing, American amateur racing is still awesome. It's one of the coolest, most challenging recreational pursuits in the country. It is equal parts grueling and beautiful. Not many sports can match bike racing for the wide range of physical pains and raw emotions that it brings to its participants.

As a body of racers, we come from every known profession and vocation. As such, we are all over the map when it comes to motivations, abilities, and objectives.

In a typical cycling club that has a racing component, you will find a wide array of enthusiastic racers spanning all levels of ability and dedication. There

are racers who take things very seriously and train almost as much as professional riders train. They participate in every race on the calendar, even if it requires driving 10 hours to get there. It is in this group that we find the aforementioned hotshots who endeavor to climb the ladder as far as possible. You can spot them a mile away: They are enthusiastic. They are talented. They are thin. You will also have riders who intend to ride as much as they can but whose training regimen is interrupted by a cranky boss who has the unmitigated gall to demand that they work a 40-hour week. They might also have families with stringent and unrealistic requirements that they actively participate in the upbringing of their own children. They may own a house that is in constant need of paint. If the house is not in need of paint, the racer will take it upon himself to add on a new room that will eventually require several coats of paint. All of these things conspire to keep the racer from training as hard as necessary. Still, these riders race, and they will be on your team.



You will have teammates who are as strong as an ox but lack a brain.

You will have riders who are as strong as an ox and have all the natural ability in the world but who lack a brain. These are riders who, no matter how many times you tell them not to chase you when you're off the front, will chase you every time you're off the front. They are, as a famous cycling coach once described them, "strong like bull, smart like tractor."

You will also find enigmatic racers in your club who show up once in a blue moon. You won't remember their names because you don't see them often enough. They will appear out of nowhere, and they will expect to be considered a part of the team despite wearing the club's kit from the 1980s.

And then come the dedicated amateurs who train and ride a lot, but not nearly as much as a pro. They have no aspirations of riding on a pro team. Nevertheless, they watch everything they eat. They rest appropriately. They

actually ride slow on their easy days and hard on their hard days. They set achievable yet challenging goals. They are dedicated and always wanting more.

Somehow, you're all supposed to come together and ride like a team, using team tactics to beat other teams facing the same challenges.

Another difficult challenge in amateur cycling is that newcomers—women and masters category racers especially—are faced with a steep learning curve. Newbies come into this complex sport and must jump into the deep end of a pool brimming with seasoned veterans who can ride circles around them. The newbies are not worried about team tactics; they're worried about survival. They can hardly get through a 90-degree turn alive, let alone provide a lead-out to your designated sprinter.

Races in the masters category (according to the USAC rule book, anyone older than 35) are often as fast as the top-category races due to the riders' experience and training. There is a mistaken belief that masters racers will take it easy because they all have careers and families to consider. That kind of thinking will get you into trouble. Masters racers are nice on the outside, but their ancestors sailed on Blackbeard's boat.

New masters racers, when faced with the choice of racing with their Cat. IV brothers or with their age group, often make the mistake of believing that the masters race will be easier because they think the old farts will ride slower and will therefore be easier to hang with. That is simply not the case. The masters field is notoriously fast and is full of thieves and pirates who will rob you blind.

I mean that in the best way possible.

Women's racing is much more complex. Women are far more welcoming and embracing of new riders, but they will simply ride away from those who have yet to develop the speed necessary to hang in. The great disparity between abilities in the women's field is amplified by the relatively low number of participants.

Chris Horner

SPARE A THOUGHT FOR THE MASTERS

I truly believe that American amateur masters should be classified not just by age but also by the number of kids they have, the number of hours they work, and whether or not they are married. ■

In some parts of the country where racing is especially popular, new riders may find a more welcoming entry into the racing world. With a greater number of participants, promoters may have the luxury of providing an entry-level race such as a masters Cat. IV race or a women's Cat. IV race, which separates the lambs from the wolves. In parts of California, promoters often embed Cat. II riders into the Cat. V fields to act as rolling mentors to ensure safety and to pass along pointers to the uninitiated. But in most parts of the country, the field sizes are small, forcing promoters to combine fields. That creates a challenge that pro riders certainly never see. For example, pro riders will never have to turn to a new teammate during a race and give instructions on when to shift gears.

MISTAKES AMATEUR TEAMS MAKE

It's a mistake to assume that everyone is on the same page in regard to tactics and strategies, as if bike racing knowledge comes naturally when we buy our first racing bike. It doesn't. And it doesn't come from watching European classics while riding the trainer. Television cameras can't possibly convey the nuances and subtlety involved with team tactics. Race savvy also doesn't come after two or three races; yet many teams will bring in a new rider and expect him or her to learn tactics under fire.

Experienced riders sometimes know tactics so well that they think they're apparent to everyone. True—once you learn them, they do seem obvious. Also,

experienced riders are often too busy training to take the time to mentor younger riders.

A team with experienced riders who can share tactical knowledge would be wise to hold regular chalkboard sessions using Xs and Os to diagram the tactics, just as we see coaches doing in other sports. Actually, since cycling is a multiteam sport, you'd need more than Xs and Os. You'd need Ys, Zs, Ns, and pretty much the whole alphabet. And one letter would be dressed in a kit from the 1980s.

There are some elements that can be taught effectively by walking through them in slow motion without the bikes. Football and basketball teams learn their plays this way. The same technique can be used by cyclists to great effect.

But this rarely happens. More often, every training ride turns into a hammerfest/ego competition followed by a sprint to a city-limit sign with little or no instruction on how to win that sprint and no review of how you lost it. You just keep pedaling to the next one.

Individually, many riders fall into the mileage trap and feel that they must ride, ride, and ride some more in order to either maintain or improve their fitness. Few are willing to get off the bike and talk about racing.

I'm generalizing, of course. But in speaking with riders from around the country, I've come to see this is as a common thread. It's human nature to think that more is better, so riders will continue to think that more miles are the best road to success.

Another mistake that amateur teams make is to devise a race plan that is too rigid: "If anything goes up the road, we have to make sure we put Dave in it." Well, that's not even remotely realistic. Especially if Dave burns all of his matches during the first 20 failed attacks. Or, perhaps a more likely scenario, if Dave spent the entire week on his feet at a trade-show booth demonstrating CNC machinery to prospective clients, he'll be fried after the first attack. Either way, Dave is cooked, and we should have a backup plan. In fact,

we should have a couple and know how to react to what the other teams are trying to do.

A bike race is a fluid, ever-changing, unpredictable monster that is full of surprises. All of those other teams are plotting to upset your plan.

Some teams will employ the same game plan at every race they attend, and they'll place the same riders into the same role each time. By mid-June, every other team will know what to look for. A little advance planning at that point to create a new strategy can keep the team in the hunt—if the members are smart enough to recognize it.

HOW TACTICS HAVE CHANGED

The race tactics that we see today are quite different than they were 20 or 30 years ago. They're kinder and gentler. That's not to say that bike racing is kind and gentle. It's definitely not, but today's tactics are much more refined than they were in the 1980s.

In my first year of racing, I was in a criterium in which our team missed the breakaway. I went to the front of the field and was trying to get the chase effort started when a rider from a team that hadn't missed the breakaway came alongside me, got his shoulder ahead of my shoulder, and slowly pushed me into the curb, bringing my chase effort to a grinding halt. A teammate of mine took up the chase again, only to be physically hooked into the curb by the same rider.

It's a relief to say that things were done a bit differently then.

Eddie Borysewicz was the American national team coach throughout most of the 1980s. In his 1984 book *Bicycle Road Racing—Complete Program for Training and Competition* (Velo-News 1984), the following passage appears:

You must be tough. You must repulse elbows with elbows of your own, but don't fight when you don't need to. Be fair, but don't be chicken. Sometimes you might need to lock your brakes in front

of the blocker, not to make him crash but to let him know you are a dangerous guy to fool with.

If you bothered me when I was racing, I would hit you with my rear wheel—bang it right into your front wheel and knock you down if you weren't a good bike handler. I would say, "You want to play? What kind of game do you want? I'm ready for anything. C'mon!"

Eddie B. was an authority on racing in the 1980s. Today we teach things differently.

In my early years of racing, I can't remember how many times I felt someone grab my jersey when I was trying to move forward in the pack. Another common tactic from the Dark Ages was to simply push people out of the way. If someone wanted to move forward, they might put their hand on your hip and simply push you to the side, just enough to sneak past you.

Legal? Not at all. But common.

Another "tactic" that I remember seeing on more than a few occasions was for someone to reach over while you were climbing a hill and throw your rear shift lever all the way forward. This would cause your chain to jump onto the smallest cog. Obviously, this was back in the Neolithic era when shift levers were located on the downtube of the bicycle and indexed shifting had not yet been invented. Back then we did stuff like that to win races. Today we wouldn't think of such a thing. Anyway, we wouldn't have the opportunity; it's not as easy to mess with someone else's shifters on the fly.

Older racers also know how to sneak into the pit area and get a free lap without having the requisite mechanical problem to qualify for a free lap. I won't tell you how it's done. I don't wish to corrupt your mind with bad ideas. (See me after class.) I will also say that I have never done it. Not in the past 10 years, anyway.

I also remember in my early years of racing that some riders were notorious for taking their own free laps on the back side of the course. This was easy to do during nighttime criteriums. You could just hide in the shadows on the outside of turn 3 and jump in when the field passed by. Not that I ever tried. I had usually been dropped out of contention long before the idea occurred to me.

Today, if a rider tried some of these tactics, he or she would be met with great opposition. We are more self-policing in the contemporary peloton. We

Chris Horner HOW TACTICS HAVE CHANGED

Back in the early years, a lot of pushing and shoving certainly existed within the peloton. My introduction to this side of the sport was given to me by Radisa Cubric, a Yugoslavian pro who raced in the States for about five years. It was 1993, and I was riding for an East Coast professional-amateur team. They had flown me to Florida for a four- or five-week training camp in Mount Dora. It was a tiny town with nothing but flat roads and lakes (or possibly swamps, depending on what your definition of one versus the other might be).

The first race we did together was at an overgrown, undeveloped business/residential neighborhood that had nothing finished except for the streets and the curbs. I found this to be quite common in Florida at the time, as we saw it several more times at other races before my trip was up. When the race began, a break immediately formed of about 15 riders, give or take. It was me, a couple of teammates, and a bunch of guys that I, as a West Coaster, had never seen or raced against before. When the bell rang for the first prime, I was on Radisa's wheel as we came out of the last corner. I had never met him before that day. As we

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HOW TACTICS HAVE CHANGED, CONTINUED

were coming up to the line, he hooked me across four lanes, all the way from the left side of the road to the right, keeping me from winning the prime and almost crashing me. This was directly in front of the officials, who didn't seem to object one bit!

As the break of riders started the rotating paeline once again, I purposely positioned myself on Radisa's wheel so that after he took his pull, I could swing over the top of him and take him straight to the curb. That immediately got his attention, and in response, he reached over and grabbed my ponytail. We proceeded to bump each other down the entire straightaway, almost crashing each other and the rest of the break. In those days, that didn't even get us a stern talking-to from the officials, let alone get us disqualified.

After the race, as Radisa came to our team van, I was sitting in the front passenger seat with my legs stretched out onto the open door. He immediately threatened to rip my head off. I was still a little guy back then, and Radisa was definitely bigger than me—and from the Eastern bloc to boot. Luckily for me, my Irish teammate Paul McCormack jumped between us and probably saved my life. Afterward Paul explained that I should never mess with Radisa because he might actually kill me, and also because hooking was “just bike racing.”

The funny thing about the whole story, though, was that not only did I learn a lesson from Radisa Cubric on standard bike racing in those days, but he and I would go on to become good cycling friends. We even got the chance to catch up during the London Olympics in 2012, where he was directing for the Serbian national team and I was riding for the U.S. ■

don't rely on the officials to see all of the infractions. We also don't tolerate the physicality of the old-school tactics.

Those days are gone.

Sigh.

TACTICS OF OTHER SPORTS: A COMPARISON

I like watching the last few minutes of an exciting football game when the trailing team is using the hurry-up offense. With no time-outs remaining, the quarterback must try to communicate with the coach over the din of the crowd. The clock is ticking. The crowd is making it difficult for the players to hear the signal. There's no time to huddle up and get the message to everyone. They must rely on their knowledge of the playbook and their assignments. The frantic nature of this moment is as close as football gets to a bike race.

When the heat is on in a bike race, there's no opportunity to get together with your teammates to discuss your next course of action. You must know the plays thoroughly and be able to convey complex thoughts in three words or less.

When you report to football training camp, your coach will bestow upon you a document more treasured than the Magna Carta. It's called the playbook. It contains all of the plays that your team must know. Guard it with your life.

Football also has well-established positions that are determined early on in a player's life. Regardless of what position you may want to play, you will be placed in the position best suited to your body type by a well-intentioned coach. If you have a good throwing arm, you may find yourself thrust into the role of quarterback at an early age. Big guys will be put on the line of scrimmage. Fast guys will be made into running backs, receivers, or defensive backs. From that day forward, you will become locked in at that position. You may wonder what it's like to play another position, but you will probably never find out.

The same thing happens in baseball. Once you show any kind of aptitude for playing third base, you will forever be typecast as a third baseman. You may have dreams of being a right fielder like your childhood hero (insert name of a famous right fielder here), but your die is cast. In the world of “Who’s on First?,” your name is “I Don’t Know”: third base.

It’s different in bike racing. You must know all of the tactics on both sides of the ball. They’re happening simultaneously. While you may fancy yourself a sprinter, a climber, a rouleur, or a time trial specialist, you will need to know how to play all of the other positions and how to enact all of the tactics that a bike racer must know. Very few amateur teams have the luxury of protecting one rider throughout a race in order to save him or her for that one solitary burst of talent. Unless your name is Mark Cavendish, you can’t tell your teammates, “I’m not chasing down that breakaway. I’m a sprinter.” If they need your help to chase the breakaway, you must roll up your sleeves and pitch in. Otherwise, you may not get a chance to use your sprint. And if they do accept your diva attitude, you had better deliver the goods when the time comes.

You must, as a cyclist, work on and develop all of the necessary skills. You may be a natural sprinter, but if that’s all you can do, your bag of tricks empties quickly.

The deeper your bag of tricks, the more bike races your team will win.