



Heal, Reflect, Rejuvenate

Regular readers of my column know that I pay more attention to the 'cerebral' side of bike racing than the 'numeric'. So much focus, today, is put on training for specific blocks of time at certain heart rates. Giving advice on the subject of training and selling the devices used for 'performance' is where the money is. The profits just aren't there for purveyors of information that I like to share. It doesn't matter to me. The profit is not in me selling it. It's in you putting it to use.

As I write, I can see leaves falling off of trees. It's a cold, gray day. Against that dank palette, the bright torch of Fall burns harder. It's the beginning of the end of 2007. Soon you'll find it hard to get your rides in before the cover of darkness. The chaos of the Holiday's will set in. You'll probably be consumed by tasks that require you to take a 'less selfish' tack. There is a reason why the big races happen when they do. From Halloween to New Year's, road racers get to disappear into their own world. For the most part, the world leaves them alone, too.

I would bet that if you asked any professional road racer what their favorite time of the year would be, it would be right now. Not having to travel much or report anywhere for 12 weeks a year is worth all those months of hardship. They can use this time to heal, reflect, and rejuvenate. For the amateur racer, this time of year can be equally rewarding. When you finally slow down or stop for a while, your body and mind are able to digest those massive efforts you made all year. If things didn't go well for you in 2007, it will be the winter of your discontent. There's nothing wrong with that, as long as you take the right approach. Heal, reflect, and rejuvenate.

Heal. Riding a bike 300 days a year or more makes you tired in strange ways. Look at a cycling team while they wait for a bus to arrive. They look like a pack of zombies. One out of ten will be standing up, and that's usually just to go to the bathroom. That dull ache in your legs while you move through the supermarket? It's time for it to go away for a while. Your body needs some time to repair all the micro trauma that you put it through. Don't worry about losing fitness. You built new capillaries through your muscles all year. Cut them some slack. They'll still be there when you begin riding, again. Get some snap back in your body. At the very least, leave your bike alone until you feel like sprinting everywhere you go. Up the stairs at your house, through the supermarket, between classes. You should feel like you can barely contain yourself in your body. You don't need to do any cycling until you feel absolutely incredible inside. Your body should be tapping on your mind, saying "Hey.. take me for a ride!". That's a great sign that your body has done a good bit of healing.

There's nothing wrong with putting the bike away until you feel like it's time for you to see each other, again. To succeed in bike racing, you need a passion for that machine like nothing else in your life. Absence usually does make the heart grow fonder.

Reflect. This is the time to look at the last 10 months and not have to guess about anything. You know what worked and what didn't. Hindsight is 20/20. You now have that luxury. The mistake that you made, tactically, at the end of the State Championship. If you would have only jumped one more time, you would have made it the finish with the winner. The way that you started climbing better, last Summer. It happened after you did a ton of climbing and had the worst climbing race of your life. You took that little rest, and you came good, again. Not just good. Better than ever. Maybe you can be a climber, after all. The pain of quitting that race where the crosswinds never relented. The group you were in, they made it back to the bunch. You never realized how bad it hurt to quit when you knew you had more in you.

Piecing together what happened to you over the season is important at this time of year. You do it all

year long in bits and pieces. Now, it's time to shelve your season in your mind like it's your own personal biography. That's what it is, after all. This is what the saying 'In order to know where you're going, you need to know where you've been.', is for. You do this to understand what you need to do to attack 2008. When we reflect on a season, we lay the foundation for the coming season.

Ever heard the story about the prisoner of war who survived years of solitary confinement, only to come home and play the best round of golf in his life? He played the course over and over in his mind while he was a prisoner. He smelled the grass, felt the wind, the club in his hands. He physically felt every step of every round in his mind. He improved at golf while he lived in a box, starving and tortured. The power of your mind is more immense than you can ever know in your lifetime. Volumes are written about this. The point is, you can improve your riding and racing when you're not even on the bike. Work on it. This is a skill set that you can tap into all year long. The power to envision what will happen, and what you will do, will put your racing on a new plane. First, look back on everything that happened. Grow from it. Let the strength of the feelings that you experienced this year fill you up.

Rejuvenate. It takes longer than one day or one week. You rejuvenate over the entire Winter. The process of healing and reflection are part of rejuvenation. You do those things, and then you add the ingredients that will last the whole year, ahead. Don't ever let anyone tell you what you can't be, do, or dream. I always say that 'We become our thoughts'. Bicycle racers don't suddenly go out one weekend and start winning. They already went there, hundreds or thousands of times, in their minds. Rejuvenate, and think about the racer that you are going to be in 2008. Give yourself months to think about it. Think about it every day. Daydream about it. Live it again when you close your eyes at night. You know what you've done. Where you've been. Your mind is what will open the border to where you can go next. Until your mind goes there, your body won't follow.

I don't discount that trainers and certain training devices can help your body get stronger. I've used them and I know they work, sometimes. To a degree. Beyond that, it comes down to the two things I believe in more than anything: nature and racing. No trainer or gadget can tell you how to survive a violent spree of attacks through a rain-slicked village into a finish. Those things won't provoke you to make the move that you will remember for the rest of your life. That power, that strength of character to reach for more, comes from something deeper. It comes from self knowledge.

Bicycle racing can teach you many things. The most important things it can teach you are about yourself. Knowing your own physiology is kind of interesting. Knowing your true nature is more interesting. The time that you spend in this sport is a journey of understanding. Use it wisely. This Fall and Winter, heal, reflect, and rejuvenate. Take those steps, tiny as they might seem at first. Organize your mind, and subsequently your body, about where it has been and where you will be it taking it in 2008. You could very well unlock something you never knew existed.