



I've often tried to imagine a sport that can immerse you in a culture more than cycling. I haven't been able to do it. It's hard to match cycling if you want to better understand the world around you. Play the ball sports and you will learn new things, but you won't match the bike. Those sports, and most others, are always played in the same arena and always will be. No matter where you travel, you are assured of your conditions. You usually travel with a team of familiar faces. They speak your language. If you get in serious trouble and need to pull over, the sidelines are only steps away. There are few surprises. No potholes, loose dogs, squared off speed bumps, sandy corners or cliffs in those sports. Nothing delivers the World like cycling. When you ride a bike, whether you're in a race or not, you see and feel your surroundings in the most realistic way.

Soccer fields in Colombia are shaped the same as in your town in the United States. Bike racing in Colombia forces you to adapt to a combination of terrain and conditions you won't see anywhere else. In your body, you will see and feel that country ascend for 30 miles out of humid jungles. You will scale roads that grow steeper into their summits. It is there that spectators will clog the switchbacks like ants on a carcass. They will cheer for you, but inevitably there will be fans in the mix that don't care for you. You may catch wads of their saliva on your grimacing face. Feel their scratching at the pockets of your jersey. Those will be the least of your worries. Summiting, the heavens have opened and washed the sweat and saliva off your body. As you speed toward the first corner of the descent, your oxygen starved brain has six seconds to become conscious that the road has turned the color of a shiny, swirled rubber super ball. So much raised oil will be on your tires, suddenly, that the physics of braking or leaning your bike into that corner have diminished by 70%. Fighting to stay upright, you click out of your inside pedal and drag your foot through the corner. Your crotch, perilously straddling the top tube behind your stem. The descent will be 12 miles long, but 600 meters into it you're face down in a ditch looking at water drain off of a genus of fern you've never seen, before. Only falling once more during the rest of the descent, the road becomes drier, and as you descend at 50mph back into the smothering canopy of the jungle below, you feel the heat envelope you like when you pop your head in the oven to see if a pizza is done. Granted, the soccer team will face serious competition in South America. Your competitors, though, are a new species of racer, too. Most of them have lived their entire lives in this heat and thin air. You are only stronger than them on select, rare stretches of road. They seem somewhat lazy, but you discovered on the first climb that you are defenseless any time the road will pass toward one of those ant mound summits.

Basketball courts in Belgium look the same as they do in your neighborhood high school. Race your bicycle in Belgium, and you will realize within the first 10 minutes that you need to learn new tricks. Fast. Everyone around you, speaking in their annoyingly intimidating tongue, is acting above you. Like they know things that you don't. Which in fact, they do. Their heavy, thickly muscled bodies, darkened by the long days of Summer, are again better suited to this terrain than yours. They knew that there was a crosswind at the top of the short, steep climb to the church. There was a 90 degree corner, there. Shocked by the church climb, you weren't ready. You find yourself in the third echelon. Everyone in your group is angry. They yell at you like it's your fault they're at a disadvantage. You get the sense that if they don't make it back to the front of the race they might each be sentenced to a life of hard labor - as if this wasn't hard enough. For the next eight minutes you focus on the tiny patch of pavement that exists on the right hand side of the rear wheel of the rider directly in front of you. The space is not more than three inches wide. To the right of that is a lip on the gutter of the road. If your front tire goes there, you will either crash or open an insurmountable gap to this group. The pace is ungodly fast. Surely they won't keep this up much longer, you think. Three times every minute you feel a nearly irresistible urge to sit up. Finally, the pace slackens. The echelons come back together. For 60 seconds, peace. Then, irritated shouting breaks out. You look up to see riders attacking into another 90 degree corner. You're pinned. The riders in front of you are skidding. You hear some distressed riders near you, panicking, then grinding metal, and out the periphery of your right eye you see a body fly up and over the wreckage, upside down. You see that rider's heavy calves shudder as their feet bounce off the large window of a local merchant's storefront. "Was that a bakery or a butcher shop?", you wonder.

It doesn't matter, because you're standing on a massive gear, moving too slowly, again. You see clouds of dust rise out of the group ahead. Your nostrils fill with the smell of manure as the shops give way into giant fields. "Uh oh. Those are stones, coming." Indeed, those are. Bread loaf sized, 800 year old, artheritic cobbles. It's lap one of 12. You better get your act together, soon.

Baseball diamonds in Japan are shaped like the ones as at your local junior college. Bike racing, however, is again different from anywhere else. The Japanese appreciate smooth roads. They have crafted virtual arenas, through villages, specifically for bike racing. If you are an American racing a road bike in Japan, chances are you're part of an International field. Japan has a way of leveling the 'playing field' of International road racing. The journey there is a long one for everyone except, of course, the Japanese. Heat and humidity usually prevail. Europeans are typically wary of the table fare in Japan. They're out of their comfort zone. For an adaptable American, things are looking up. You chuckle to yourself, watching the Europeans. Deadly confident on their home turf, now put off-guard by yet another species of racer. The attacking comes from the Japanese. One after another they tear off the front of the field. You can not believe how aggressive, how determined, they are on their soil. You have never seen these riders, before. Never heard of them. Here they attack you unabatedly, and you develop immediate respect for them. Something else strikes you. The quietness. The climbs have throngs of fans on them, yet there is no screaming. You listen to the belabored breathing of the riders around you. You hear camera shutters clicking among the crowds. You feel the weight of the race set in, slowly. The stress was manageable, the pace not infernal, and yet, the tides of fatigue rose, anyway. You watch as virtually unbeatable riders from other countries fall away, inexplicably. The afternoon turns golden in the moist, hazy sunshine. Through a series of perfectly arced corners on the backside of the course, you distantly view some ancient looking rooftops peering out from the trees. "I'll make my move, here, next lap." You reach in your pocket and pull out a bar with Japanese writing covering the entire wrapper. The flavor, completely foreign, detonates in your mouth. You instinctively know this food will bring you stupendous power, sitting in your stomach. If you have your way, there will be a celebration, tonight, after all. This day, you really are big in Japan.

You don't have to race your bike Internationally to feel your surroundings. You can do it every time you pedal away from your door. You are absorbing things around you that can't be known any other way. That's part of the magic of cycling. You don't merely see things. You feel them. If you get a chance to travel, bring your bicycle. There is no better way to learn about the people and places where you're going.

*Paul Willerton has been immersed on his bike through numerous countries on five different continents. He's still trying to make sense of the oddities he witnessed. For more features and musings by Paul Willerton, visit <http://www.defeet.com/blog>*