



Owed to Sign Posts

The group of four riders had been exchanging the lead in an organized single pace line for several miles. On this cool, darkening Winter afternoon, their glossy eyes and red cheeks bore the effort of what had come earlier in the ride. It was almost over, now. Something was changing. The faces, the mood. Palpable layers of stress infiltrated the group. They had been joking and talking with each other up until a mile ago. Now Dick with the thick legs wasn't taking his turn. In fact he was sitting a bike length off the back of the group. That threw everybody off. Larry with the hairy lower back, he's throbbing away at the front, wondering why he can't seem to pull off. No one will come around him. He's jerking his right elbow spasmodically. Poor Larry. He always ends up in the lead at the wrong time. Bruce with the juice is craning his chin over his shoulder. Look at his furrowed brow. The cocky bastard. Little Freddy is still smiling. At least he'd stopped talking about women. He never does well when it gets like this. The whole affair was suddenly too serious for him.

The peacockian posturing of that group happens all over the World on bike rides every day. It marks the beginnings of the 'gallop' to the line. Inevitably there is a sign post at the end of the sprint. County Lines, City Limits, Historical Markers, Speed Limits. Everyone knows where 'it', the finish, the sign, is at. Someday maybe they'll put up 'Bike Sprint' signs on all those sign posts that motorists don't pay attention to, anymore. Who reads road signs while they're driving? Cars are practically directing themselves thanks to GPS. Road signs, more than ever, are for cyclists. Competitive cyclists, especially. When was the last time someone in a car said "Hey, it looks like we're arriving at the town of (such and such)." Old folks might say that if they can still see well enough to read. Little do they know they are passing beacons of pride. Battle markers that have bolstered and broken bike riders on a daily basis for years.

I owe a lot to sign posts. I grew up with a pack of wily kids that lived only to punch their fist into the air as their tire crossed the plane of a sign post first. Once they had a taste of that feeling, even if only on a weekday afternoon, they could never get enough. They turned sign post rabid. Like an elixir offering the ultimate high, if the habit was not fed again by the next post, it was back down to the dredges. The sprinters dungeon. We were like wild hyenas let loose on the roads. We would sprint for every sign, every day. We would howl and taunt. It got to be quite stupid, at times. Training plans were thrown out the window. "I'm taking it easy today" would last for about two signs. Then adrenaline, youthful vigor and lack of brains would take over. If an issue of Velo News had arrived in the mail that day and there was a photo of a close sprint in it, you could be in for an extra hot ride. You know the photo. Like when a couple riders are pictured right at the finish line, arms outstretched throwing their bikes, heads buried face down on their top tubes. The other faces in the bunch blurred into the depth of the field, visibly defeated.

Usually the first sign post was an indicator of how the rest of the ride would go. That came about a mile into the route. If the sprint was frenzied, it was game on. There was a sign about every quarter mile. After three or four miles there could have already been 10 or 15 hotspot sprints. By that point, our pack of hyena-like kids more resembled a team of tongue-dragging sled dogs at the end of Iditarod. Wobbly legged and oxygen depleted. Our stupidity became exacerbated. It was common for mistakes to start happening. Throw some tempers into the mix, and the cocktail for disaster and pain was complete. By mile marker five, it was no wonder that bodies flew. Doing 15 full-on sprints in a handful of miles is considered a fair amount of work by one's self. Adding seven amped-out challengers sprinkles on danger. I saw kids steer at what looked like right angles directly into each other. I saw hands fly off handlebars during all-out efforts. Feet came winging out of pedals into opponents wheels. Riders got pinned and ground against curbs until there was nothing left to do but bailout into roadside ditches. Sometimes all of us ended up on the pavement together. Training partners? That's the wrong

term. We were sparring partners.

We learned how to win clean and we learned how to win dirty. We figured out how to dispose of faster riders. The subtleties of positioning. How to read body language. How to bluff. We gained a sense of the space around us and how to use it. At 35mph you knew instinctively when one centimeter was enough. Or not. There was another element of vision. As though we could see in front of us and behind us at the same time. We became more coordinated on our bikes. The motion of sprinting turned fluid. For our size, we were explosive. We were able to skim our tires off of each other and physically bounce off one another like it was a handshake and a hug. As we grew, there was more contact, higher speeds, and fewer crashes.

Over time the allure of those rides wore off. It probably only took a couple of years. By then, the wiliest of our group had become masters at the art of ambush. They were able to compromise everyone in the bunch with a solo surprise move well before a sign post. Not only that, but the time spent honing that move had made them stronger than the others. They were able to stay out there, sign post after sign post. That was perhaps the most crushing blow to the riders that had enjoyed early success in the straight up sprints. Sometimes these more versatile riders didn't even need surprise, only a challenging section of road. They had learned how to store power and catapult themselves out of the group like little sign-seeking missiles fired out of a silo.

Though none of our group went on to become paid hit men of International field sprinting, we did win plenty of races. Races that we really should not have won. Field sprints, even. Genetically, we never had a chance to become field sprinters. We didn't know it at the time. We acted like sprinters, alright, but we were scrawny and spider-like. Would we have won as much if we never got to pretend we were something that we weren't? Those painful, bonehead rides were worth every bloody sign post fist pump. Bike races usually end in groups, and only one rider is victorious. The more comfortable they are leading up to that final showdown in the street, the greater the chance it will be their wheel that crosses the post first. There are so many riders who never develop a feel for that last fire fight. When the reality sets in that there's just a mile to go and a certain group is gunning for the win, how many different thoughts are surging through the minds of those riders? That sign post coming up is where they hand out the marbles. Only a fraction of them are prepared to win.

Remember hairy Larry, bent over with the too-short jersey? Don't be like him. You don't have to shave that thing, but don't get caught out, in poor position, self sacrificing time and time again. Even if you're by yourself, the sign posts have significant meaning. They are your Everlast punching bags. They are your padded dummies that you used to stick in football practice. They are the pitching machine in your batting cage. They are the gates that your ski coach set up. They are all those things and so much more. They are free, and they're standing there each and every day, beckoning. Use them often and wisely and they will unlock skillsets you need to win bike races. Take it from me, my old sparring partners, and the scarred up suits of skin that we live in.

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