



## Battling the Wookiee™

Some months ago I took part in a talk at a local bike shop. The panel consisted of myself, two time US PRO Road Champion Bart Bowen, and Marcel Russenberger, a fellow Swiss and all-around solid pro back in the 80's. One question from moderator Gary Bonacker was "What was your favorite race?". Marcel answered the Tour de Suisse. Bart answered Philadelphia, because that's where he won his two titles. By the time it was my turn to answer, I wanted a change of pace. While Marcel and Bart were answering it dawned on me that my own memories of racing were now just that. Memories. They were no different my memories of dreams, except the racing happened and the dreams didn't. Or did they? I sometimes mention the importance of 'seeing' yourself do things in your mind before you might actually perform them. I decided to expand on that subject.

It came my turn to speak. "I'm going to put a little twist on your question, Gary." I said. "It's no secret that the power of visualization in sports and in life helps you achieve new levels and accelerates progress. I don't have a 'favorite' race. Some of my worst races are favorable because of what I gained and lost. My favorite part of racing was the process. The process of improvement and learning I can still apply, today." The audience was miffed. Had they come to a self improvement seminar or was this bloke going to tell them a two-wheeled war story?

I continued. "One of my favorite races happened while I was fast asleep. I was about 14 years old at the time. I dreamed that I was in a two-man breakaway with Ron Kiefel (who at the time was US National Road Champion). We were racing through my house. We held a small gap over the field, who were making a lot of noise behind us but we couldn't see them chasing." I watched some people fidget in their chairs. Their faces bent in wonderment. They seemed to say "Excuse us, but this guy is lulu. He's whacked."

I tried to illustrate. "Kiefel and I were very physical against each other. We'd be ripping down a long, carpeted hallway and he would chop me into the wall. I would get smeared across it for 20 feet and somehow recover. Then we'd apex a 90 degree corner into the stairway descent. We'd beat our way down the stairs and then I'd try to clip him into the banister at the hairpin." In this dream, my house had become a criterium course. Our bicycles were able to climb stairs, hands on the tops of the bars, bobbing like it was the Old Kwaremont in Flanders.

When it came time to decide the winner, it got more intense. Our wheels were side-by-side. In my periphery I could see that I would gain a one inch lead, only to give it

back and lose an inch. We were colliding against each other, smacking elbows and shoulders, raking knuckles on railings, bumping heads. I could hear Kiefel breathing, grunting. I had never met Ron Kiefel. His nickname was 'Wookie'. That's all I knew about him. In my dream he was making Chewbacca noises. I won the race that night. With the moon and stars as my witness, the margin was no more than the width of a Light Sabre's beam.

The bike shop crowd was somewhat appeased. At least they heard pieces of what they had come for. Graphically enough, it had been the tale of a two-wheeled battle. The corners of their mouths were drawn. I don't know if their imaginations were at work or if they were smirking. Perhaps some thought "Ya, Willerton. No big wins in your career so you tell us about the dream of a 14 year old boy? Well done." My mouth curled into a smile. The story wasn't over, yet.

"Fast forward a decade", I said. "I was a third-year pro with an apartment above a shoe repair shop in Belgium. Kiefel had had an illustrious career as a professional in Europe. I was back in the US for a few weeks, and I went to the San Jose Grand Prix. It was a good field, with most of the best riders in the country there." I left out the fact that at that time in my life I was so full of vinegar that I could barely last three laps in a US crit without calling out every rider in the field. I wanted, needed, to melee. When I felt good, I just couldn't wait to get the fight started.

The course wound its way through downtown San Jose. Sharp corners abounded. It was incredibly hot out. 'Africa Hot', I used to say. The sun reflected off metal buildings and focused on the race course like one of those chrome funnels people use to try to get more sun on their face while tanning. The heat sapped the field practically from the gun. Cornering was a forté of mine, and shortly into the race I sprinted into a corner while everyone else braked. My wheels skittered sideways over some rough pavement against the curb at the apex, but I knew they would hook up. I carried so much speed out of the turn that it became quiet behind me. In the next turn I cornered even harder. I knew the field would brake, again. I didn't look back. I was flying. Perfect silence around me. Not even an echo between buildings. I committed to not look back at all. One lap went by. Then two. Suddenly there was a presence. Heavy breathing behind me. I looked under my arm. There was a wheel. I swung out wide to look at my visitor.

It was Ron Kiefel. In his wake were two others. He was dragging them along like a runaway big rig truck towing strings of 'Just Married' cans. They were the Italian ace, Roberto Gaggioli, and a racer I knew only by nickname: 'Two-Ton'. Two-Ton was rumored to train by pulling car tires against the ground by a rope tied to his seat post. Uphill. I never found out if it was true.

The Wookie had made a lot of success by blasting his heavy frame through cities and towns around the world at speeds no one could follow. Now he was with me, and he was charging. We were slicing through the course with the abandon of Han Solo's rickety but faster-than-anything-in-the-Universe spaceship. When Kiefel would take the lead, I could practically see him thumping the ammo belt on his chest and roaring like the furry beast. This race was between us. Everyone behind faded into anonymity. Piles of dead Stormtroopers.

It must have been 117 degrees on the street that day when they rang the bell for us. One lap to go. The dream I'd had ten years earlier was not "deja vu all over again". Consciously, it hadn't even entered my mind. Kiefel finished his pull and I took the front. I should have paid more attention behind me. My guard dropped for an instant. There was a blur to my left moving much faster than me. It was Kiefel, out of the saddle and all the way

across the road. This was his patented move. I had known it was coming, and yet... this was serious. I was severely compromised. I looked back at Gaggioli and Two-Ton. They were grimacing in agony. Gaggioli was a good actor, but he wasn't faking this time and I knew it. They were baked. They couldn't help.

Kiefel's move was the definition of decisive. I found out Wookie didn't look back either when he expects to win. He was used to making bell lap-gaps stick. I tried to respond. Standing on the pedals, I felt the venom from his attack seep into me. Trying to paralyze my will. We went through more corners and his advantage grew. Our speed was terminal. This was him, delivering me his death blow. The others were already decomposing, behind us. My chin was planted on my stem, my arms splayed out, on the absolute rivet. Suffocating. My vision became dog eared around the edges and grainy, then turned black and white. We were moving through the course faster than any lap previous. The image of him ahead of me was choppy. Like dogfight footage from wing mount cameras in World War II. One where the pilots' tracers can't quite connect with the Messerschmitt knife-edging in the distance. With just half a lap to go, my cross-hairs wobbled onto the mark. I began reeling him in. Regaining his back wheel on the second-to-last-turn, I saw his head move slightly to the side. He knew I was there. His attack had left us both heaving, but there was no time. We were heading into the final corner. I dove to the inside. Exiting the turn we were perfectly even. Side-by-side we stood up sprinting and clanged handlebars. I bounced off of him. Some space opened between us but was instantly re-absorbed. We were so close I could feel him against me and hear the wind passing through his throat. The final straight was about 400 meters long. We went like that, trading one-inch leads, for the entire distance. With 100 meters left, I felt the muscles in the back of my neck wind up and cramp into a giant knot. Rigor mortis was setting in. With 20 meters to go, in a moment that was unbearably excruciating, Wookie relinquished. His wheel moved behind my vision. I sat down and raised my arms. I had always respected Kiefel. It was an honor to win with him there and on a day he was most definitely 'on'.

I don't know if connecting the circle on a childhood dream made sense to the people that came to hear us talk that night at the shop. I have thought of so many things over the years. Some have come to pass, others have not. The similarities between this particular dream race and the real race, I can't ignore. Did the actual race happen, and the dream didn't? Or was it the dream that was actually happening?

*Paul Willerton still dreams of things he wants to do in this life. The Star Wars® analogies presented here were purely a result of Ron Kiefel's nickname. Paul does not play with Star Wars® action figures, although he would have like to have had some when he was a kid. If he did have some, would he have dreamed of racing bicycles? You can read more of his stories at [defeat.com/blog](http://defeat.com/blog). Star Wars, Han Solo, Stormtrooper and Wookie are registered trademarks of Lucasfilm Ltd.*

