



Riding 'Rough Economy Road'

Spring is here and riders are sprouting up at races in fresh, colorful uniforms. The peloton is a vibrant field of flowers. Riders that were green last Fall are now a shade of red. They can be hard to recognize. Sometimes it takes until Summer to know who a rider is at a glance. The deck of riders got re-shuffled over the Winter and now all the cards are on the table. The banter heats up with the weather. It goes something like this:

"Hey, did you know that Linda switched to Velo Bellow, this year?"

"I heard that! They have the most beautiful uniforms!"

"Yeah, but they have to ride with Shirley Pain on their team."

"Cack! I know. She's the worst! They get a deal on their bikes, though. They even have a tire sponsor."

"They have a huge budget! They do 'team yoga' for crying out loud. Some rich guy's backing the team. His wife rides for them, I think."

"Do we even get free water bottles, this year?"

"No. We get 10% off those down at the shop."

Ah, yes. Team envy. It strikes at every level of the sport. Most teams have at least one member that is vocal about not getting what they 'deserve'. It's nearly inevitable. This year (2008), the United States looks to be slipping into a recession. Road cycling is not showing the growth that it has during the last decade. Fuel prices are going up. By this time next year it's said that as many as 2 million Americans will have lost their homes. The American consumer is feeling the pinch. Cycling teams too will be less 'liquid' this year. Team envy might be on the rise. I remember only one recession during my career. It came in 1990.

Of course, I didn't know there was a recession going on. In 1990 what I noticed was a lot more 'For Sale' signs in yards I'd pass on training rides. I noticed that I was driving to races in a tired Mercury Merkur instead of a fleet of brand new vehicles that were given to us by a large auto maker. The Merkur had had a run in with a tree and the passenger door was caved in so far that you had to climb in and out through the window, Nascar style. One particular Spring Friday, en route to a road race several hours away, the Merkur lost every gear except for 3rd. The rest of the gears never did come back. 3rd gear, all season. That was the only answer. Our team didn't have bikes to hand out anymore, either. There were a lot of blank jerseys in the peloton, that year. There were fewer teams, more independents.

The worst of times, right? Hardly. It was an incredible time. It was a year of survival. In hindsight, it was one of the best years ever. There was no time for team envy. There were a few teams that were still well funded and seemed to be keeping it together. There were limited spots on those teams though, and they weren't about to change rosters. When it became a struggle to round up enough cash just to stand on a starting line, the essence of

the racing changed. There was no room for complainers. What someone deserved wasn't the issue. It became more about who was going to go have a blast fighting for our survival. Together. Who was going to go accomplish the most while using the least amount of funding, food, lodging and gear. Bike racing went back to the basics. After a few years of free cars, a paycheck, and all the cycling gear you could ever use, something about the lean times felt good. Cleansing. There was urgency and hunger. Prize money wasn't a bonus. It was a way to splurge on tacos for the drive home in 3rd gear in the far-right lane.

The tough times also weeded out racers who were on the fence. Ones that weren't sure if they really wanted to be bike racers in the first place. Some of them were great athletes, but the prospect of a year of living on ramen noodles and paying for their own rubber sent them looking for greener pastures. It would have happened over time, anyway. Their career choice was accelerated. It wasn't a good thing or a bad thing. It's just something that happens in all kinds of pursuits during the difficult times.

What that season taught me is that fewer resources don't always mean less opportunity. There were races where I'd look down at my front tire on the starting line and see threads. The tire casing showing through where there was no more rubber. New tubulars were \$35. If spending that meant there was nothing left for an entry fee on the weekend, I could race on threads. If the tire was so bad there was no way it would last a whole race, I could fake a flat early on to get first pick of the spare wheels in neutral support. I had to get creative. Sometimes there was only enough budget to fly a pair of riders to a remote race. No support. Almost no cash in hand when you landed. The good thing was that apparently the recession meant people had less to do. More time on their hands. It wasn't that hard to fly into a place like Casper, Wyoming and find supportive locals that would put you up, feed you, and let you use their car. That year in Casper I ate Hamburger Helper next to a laid-off quarry worker in a double wide trailer. It tasted great. We laughed at funny shows on the Tv at night. I was shuttled to the races by his stepdaughter in a Civic with a crushed roof against the top of my head, no windshield or windows and shards of glass all over the floor. She'd rolled it a couple weeks earlier. She'd say, "So if I stick around here and hand you these here water bottles, you reckon you could buy me some liquor on the way home?" I'd say "Well, uh. Let's see how the race goes, first."

That season also taught me that who I was with was more important than what I had. What good is a sparkling new free bike, color coordinated uniform and all the Goo® you can eat if your team has no harmony. Beware of traveling to races with people who are there for the free stuff and only feel like they should be getting more. Be thankful for the things that you're given to race your bicycle. Did you get free product at some point? There is a company full of people that work more than 8 hours a day to make and sell those so they can feed their own families. Maybe a bike shop owner leveraged a relationship or spent some of their hard-earned money to make that happen. Always remember that there was a price paid somewhere for what you are given.

For a lot of people, the hard times have landed. Everyone is affected by it on some level, including your local cycling teams. It's not going to be an easy year. What you make of it is still up to you. You have the power to make it one of the funnest, most memorable years you'll have. Get creative and go for it. Find new ways to use the things you already have. There are a finite number of days to do what you love to do. Don't let a shrinking economy stand in your way. Make sure that the people who help you in cycling (and everywhere else) are aware that you appreciate it. That includes your local shops, the people sitting at registration, race promoters, volunteers and any sponsor affiliated with the programs around you. Cast some smiles and belt off big laughs with your teammates no matter how little you have to share amongst yourselves. After all, that can be one of the funniest things there is.

