



The Races That Change You

In the part of the country where I live, this year saw an exceptionally long Spring. Cold, wet, windy days. While I no longer race a bicycle for a living, I can't help but feel my environs and wonder what life would be like on a bicycle, that day. Somehow the memories of races get burned into your senses for years. I'm beginning to believe for the rest of your life. Stage races, especially. It probably has to do with the fact that all of the bodies sensory organs are in use simultaneously during an effort that last for days or weeks. Stage races are always tests of survival. Those feelings and that struggle to maintain or better your standing get etched into your being. Stage racing offers up challenges that simply won't get matched in 'normal' day-to-day undertakings.

With July just around the corner, the sports world turns it's attention to 'Le Grand Boucle'. The Tour de France. The biggest stage race. So big in the press that many people probably think it's the only race the riders do all year. Never mind the eight or so stage races the riders have already done to prepare themselves. Those freezing wet days of Spring send me straight back to the Three days of de Panne, the Tour du Pays Basque, Criterium International or the Tour de Romandie.

One day events are great, but it's the stage race that celebrates the bicycle more than any other. Stage races capture the imagination and stoke flames of anticipation. They showcase the magnificence of the bicycle by demonstrating the feats that can be accomplished by riding one. Anyone flipping through a newspaper who comes across the route map of a stage race looks in wonderment or disbelief at where that route will go in three days or three weeks. Stage races are journeys. They are the events that build a riders character and set their bar of tolerance higher and higher. Every time a cyclist finishes a stage race that nearly broke them to pieces, they know deep inside that they now have what it takes handle any lesser event more easily.

Whatever your level as a bike racer, make it a point - make it your mission - to enter the biggest, best stage races that you possibly can. Sell your old equipment on eBay, get rid of whatever you can on Craig's List and use your airline miles, drive the scummy team van, take Greyhound or Amtrak and find your way to the start. Even if it's 48 States away. Getting to a stage race and riding it is the best way to get acquainted with these United States. I only know one person who I think gets a better understanding of this country than can be had by doing stage races. He walks across it. It usually takes him about a year, each way.

I'm always amazed to meet bike racers who avoid stage races. Their reasons for not participating often rooted in fear. Fear of the unknown. There is no question that leaving

behind the one day events for even a three day undertaking is a big step. It's a step that pays huge dividends, though. Athletes are people, and people have their issues. Someone that has been racing for several years and still won't enter stages in their home State has more to overcome.

"Hey, are you going to Tour of the Gila, this year? I heard your team is going."

"Nah, man. I'm not doing that thing."

"How come? You said you're in between jobs, taking the year off of school and your grandma is sponsoring you."

"I don't climb that well. I've heard it's long and steep, out there."

"Your climbing has gotten much better in the last year."

"It's really hot, too. Plus, I've heard there's a Gila 'monster', or something there."

"Ok. Well what about that stage race next weekend, down in Conner."

"Ah, those stages are all flat and long."

"Yeah? And.. ?"

"And I don't have a disc wheel. There's a time trial in it."

Most of the time, a rider with excuses like that just needs to get one stage race under their belt and they'll be on their way. Sadly, if their problems are really deep, they may never engage in the most memorable events they could do. The idea of having a bad day and getting left behind on a strange road in a land far from home is too much to bear. That's all part of the adventure of stage racing a bicycle. Conquer the fears that keep you from discovering that adventure.

Some stage races can be real disasters. Anything can and often does happen. The usual crashes, food poisonings and equipment failures notwithstanding, there are a whole host of other oddities that can jump up and nail you. There will be days when you feel like you can't get out of bed in the morning. Somehow you rise, nauseously eat an English muffin and get to the race. You're so fatigued on the start line it feels like you can barely hold your head up. When the gun goes off you wonder how your leg muscles got swapped out with trunks of firewood, overnight. Slowly, you ride your way into the day's stage. You figure out how to make it the finish line in the group. Phew. Only four more days to go! Things do get better. It is possible to improve every day during a stage race. By riding and surviving, you build the base that allows you to do more. You can begin to learn how to ride and deliver some mighty blows to your competition. You may get strong and savvy enough to carve your name into the top of the General Classification.

Long before there was an Amgen 'Tour of California', I was a kid living in South San Jose in love with the notion, the romance, of a stage race. My buddy Chris was the same age as me. We were 12. We'd train together nearly every day. We didn't have enough money to get out to Colorado to ride the 'Red Zinger Mini Classic'. That was the greatest stage race in the Nation for kids our age, modeled after the Coors Classic. We decided to make our own stage race, that Summer. Me against him. Every day. We mapped our route a week in advance. It covered many of the same roads that the Tour of California would use over 25 years later. Some of the stages were long, and usually after my first attack (surprise flyer from behind), I'd never see him again until the finish. Some stages he'd come rolling in more than 30 minutes behind. His fight never relented, and the next day he'd be raring to go again. Even then I couldn't believe the never-say-die attitude that he would exhibit. Remarkably, he became a professional cyclist and ended up riding some of the biggest stage races in the world.

The point is, get out there and do some stage racing. It doesn't matter if you're a road sprinter and the only stage race on the calendar has a mountain top finish every day. Do it. It will only make you better. It may nearly break you, and you may get worse for a short

time during and after the race, but when you heal you will be a better bike racer. I personally guarantee it or you get a full refund for this column.

Paul Willerton lives in Bend, OR. He has the dubious distinction of being a 'learned' professor on the sport of cycling. He has earned this through decades of trial, error and triumph. He has finished stage races in both first and last place. "It's the last place finishes that allow me to write and offer others something of value.", he says. For more of his writings, visit defeat.com/blog