



## **The Start Line**

The starting line in any bike race is a special place. There are few things that can hold so much in one place. It is a meeting place, a place of hope, fear, confidence and doubt. There is the great feeling of camaraderie among other competitors, rivals. It is the point where all preparations end and show time starts. To me, it's a celebration, because to stand in the group, starting a bike race, means that you have very, very much to be thankful for. You are healthy, strong, and chock full of spirit.

It's important to know that life, and cycling, are not perfect science. Professional riders, who have nothing to do but race, eat, sleep and train, still have a hard time keeping it all together. Life gets in their way, too. Stand on the start of a professional race, and you'll hear riders complaining of problems at home, with their riding, with their rest. When the gun goes off, though, it's a new slate. It's the time to put everything that you've been through recently where it needs to be: behind you.

The start line of an amateur race is a much more interesting place than a professional race. It's a group of riders with much more diversity. There are students, fresh off of final exams and little sleep. There could be a nurse who just got off a grueling night shift. At the other end of the spectrum, you might have someone who just spent a month doing nothing but training and resting perfectly in some exotic place. In most cases, those are your dollars paid at registration, your dollars in the gas tank, your paid-for equipment you're riding on. When the gun goes off, make it count. Some riders might climb better than you or sprint better than you, but this is your opportunity.

The start line is your entry point into a day that you might remember for the rest of your life. Here's a secret that all the trainers, supplement makers, and product manufactures don't tell you: Most bike races are won by a riders who fell way short of 'perfection' in their preparation. Especially at the amateur level. That's not to say we shouldn't strive for great training, equipment, food and travel, but it's just not going to come together that way all the time. Most of the time, it won't. Do yourself a huge favor and remember some key things when you're starting that race. Just because the riders around you might have trained more, slept better last night, and beaten you eight times in a row, does not mean that they are going to do it today. They ate special European granola and amino acids for breakfast, you had an Egg McMuffin and a Butterfinger. So what. They got a massage yesterday from Helga, the former Swedish National team soigneur, you were on your feet for six hours at your day job. Big deal. At the start line, everyone embarks on something equally imperfect, where all kinds of immeasurable factors come in to play: the actual bike race. Your time to make their day a hard one.

Don't let the minutiae matter. Make the decision in your mind: Today, you are going to make your mark on the race. Your signature needs to tear across that race in a way that no one will ever doubt you were there. In future columns I will hopefully shed some light on how to deal with that hulking sprinter who leads you to slaughter every week, or that mangy climber who wheezes when he breathes and rides away from you to win. Those are good things to look at. I want to make it clear, first, that the attitude that you carry to the line is even more important. No matter what your circumstances were leading up to that race, when you're on the line you've got an opportunity to win. That's powerful. If you want to tell everyone at the start how bad your week was, play the head game, that's fine, just don't believe it yourself. When you start the race, no one cares. It's show time.

Bike racing is your sport, so live large. Every start line is another opportunity to capture something that you won't find other places. Even if you race until you're 90 years old, there are a finite amount of days to start another race. Eventually, it all has a finish. Seize each race and you will find more value in your sport. Free yourself from worry or doubt when you go to the start, no matter what you've gone through to get there. Sound your battle cry, and let the wildness ensue. You will be ahead before you even

begin.