



The Old Man and the Lion

This year's edition of the Tour de France has seen continued evidence of performance enhancing drug use. Looking at the images of one rider who tested positive as he was being led by Gendarmes, I was further put-off by the flippant expressions he wore. His arrogance is a window into the world that he constructed around himself. It was a place where he could exist in his own little fairy tale, not realizing that no matter how fast he rode, how many stages he won and how many fans he had, he was poisoning his own soul. No matter how great the world around a person is, they have to live inside themselves, first.

There was a time, a rather long period of time, where news like that made me turn my back on the sport of cycling. From the time my age scored two digits I had tried to improve at cycling. When I finally turned professional I had spent more than half my life honing my strength and skills. Professional racing, unfortunately, was just entering a grotesque metamorphosis into the bio-tech age. As the years passed, I felt more and more betrayed. After I stopped racing, news continually broke about riders, my peers, who were coming forward and talking about their usage of performance enhancing drugs. Their admittance helped me piece together the very confusing puzzle that I had endured during those years. They didn't help me come to terms with my feelings about opportunities that were taken away from me, squandered time, and the physical and mental torture I put myself through for so long.

My reaction was to shun the bicycle. In hindsight, it was the wrong action to take. Cycling, even bicycle racing, is not just about professional racing. In fact, that segment of the sport is infinitesimally small compared to the whole. On the day that news broke about yet another positive test at the Tour de France, I felt those feelings of distaste creep back into me. Instead of flooding through me and drowning my two-wheeled dreams, something else happened. When I got the call that this rider had been removed from the Tour, I was visiting a friend on a road trip. I stopped in to say hello and he said "President Bush is flying in today. First time a President has visited here since the 70's. Let's go get a burrito out by the airport." The idea of food was more exciting than the sighting of the Presidential helicopter, but it was what I saw on the drive back from lunch that caught my attention. We pulled alongside an old man who was riding a retro-looking moped called a 'Whizzer' at about 30mph. He wore shorts and a t-shirt and had on a helmet that just covered the top of his head. My friend driving screamed something to him out the window. They were friends. The old man smiled a big gap-toothed grin. I yelled to him that he should add some air to his rear tire. I don't think he heard me in the wind. We drove off and I watched him disappear in the mirror. "How old is that guy?" I asked. "He's 83", my friend answered. "He does some work on my house once in a while. We'll stop in and see him, later."

We showed up at the man's small home unannounced. The first thing that I wanted to do

was take his Whizzer out for a spin. I asked and he said "Sure, you can ride it. Here I'll go get the key." The speedometer went to to 50mph, but he said he'd never had it past 35. I could only get it to register 33mph wide-open on a flat road in a full tuck. Parking the Whizzer next to his shed, he said "I've got some bicycles, too." I wanted to see what he had. He said "I've got a bike I rode down the West Coast. Oregon to California. Took me 15 days. It's a mountain bike." For some reason I instantly computed his health, the years he could have possibly done a bike trip like that, and his attention to detail and made a guess as to what type of bicycle he was about to show me. "I bet it's a Bridgestone MB-1", I thought. We turned the corner into the shed. "There she is. That's the one." He was proud of this bike. It was a Bridgestone MB-2 with Rhode Gear racks front and rear. It was bristling in perfect condition.

"Would you consider selling this bike?" I asked. He looked at me and his face turned serious. "Oh, no. Why, that bike is part of me." I stood in the shed, looking at the MB-2 and back at it's owner. I made no further offer. I completely understood how he felt. After a few minutes he said "Do you kids want beers? C'mon, let's go in the house." He had a number of really cool things in his possession. He owns one finest 1964 (and a half) Ford Mustang convertibles in the World. There was a lowered pickup truck he had pimped out the day after he bought it back in the late 70's. There was a wooden ship that he had painstakingly assembled with his own hands. "Let me show you the scrapbook I made from my bike trip." He then furnished a massive black leather bound book that weighed about 11 lbs.

He had done his bicycle ride in 1988, and it was evident that he held it as one of the greatest accomplishments of his life. He took more than 300 photographs on the route. He gave most of them hand-written captions. He kept receipts from campgrounds, hotels, restaurants and random things he did and posted them in the book. The photos, when he wasn't pictured smiling in his Oakley Factory Pilot sunglasses, showed that the trip had been an enormous effort for him. It was also undeniably clear that he had had the time of his life.

I closed the book, saying "That was nice of you to share."
"Next year I'm going to do the Oregon Coast on that Whizzer", he responded.
"What now? You're gonna ride that thing all along Oregon?"
"Oh yeah! I think it's gonna be a great trip!" he said.

We put down our empty beers, said our thanks and walked out to the the truck. I was quiet on the drive back to my friend's house. I was thinking about what I'd seen, heard and felt. I thought, what that old man had experienced, that was the true nature of cycling. What happened earlier that day in the Tour de France, that was something else. When an a lion mauls its handler at the circus, we don't turn away and say "The lion is wrong and malicious". We recognize that lions are most beautiful and true in the wild. Professional bicycle racing is the circus. The rider who tested positive abused the lion and had gotten mauled. What the old man had experienced was cycling in it's most natural environment. Cycling is and always will be the lion. What I did years ago was like turning my back on the lion because of what I saw happening at the circus. I hope that other people won't make the same mistake.

Often cited for his romantically twist-full analogies, Paul Willerton can't recall if he's ever been to a real ringed circus. He did spend nine years in the two-wheeled circuses (circi?) of professional road and mountain bike racing. You can read more from him at www.defeet.com/blog

