



## The Cycle of Life

In so many ways, cycling is synonymous with life. The most glaring evidence of this commonality is the sheer number of times that one must fail during the pursuit of success. Failure in cycling comes in a multitude of forms. Just like life. For someone who is not willing to risk failure, bicycle racing and life simply will not offer their highest bounties. While all of this may seem elementary, ask yourself how often you have been willing to fail - and fail spectacularly - this year. The line between success and failure is razor thin. I've noticed that most people are afraid of that razor.

Everyone in a race has a different idea of what failure means to them. Not finishing the race. Not winning the race. Getting dropped on the first climb. As the race progresses, their notion of failure may morph into something else. They may make it so far into a race in great position that they realize that there is no longer any risk of failure. The race is a complete success even if they finished last in the group they are in.

There are self saboteurs in every race, too. These are racers that know they are going to fail. In fact they set out to fail. They will do everything in their power to make sure they don't have to stare down that razor. Face that chance to win. You probably know some. They are strong enough to be in the lead group every week, yet they hang themselves out to dry at some point to ensure they won't have to win. They don't want any part of the razor.

Failure in cycling is a must. Training day in and day out, you ride to failure. You sprint until you can't pedal one more revolution. You climb until your mind says go and your body won't. You ride so hard for a period of days until you simply can't go as fast, anymore. Then you rest. You digest these types of failures. When your body heals, you are stronger because of them. This kind of failure is somehow more easily endured. Usually no one is watching.

Similarly, our minds have an ability to digest other types of failures. We have an opportunity to become stronger from them. In order to do that, we have to constantly risk failure. Bicycle racing is one the greatest arenas for building this type of personal strength. After all, it's only a bike race. Failure does not mean financial ruin, broken families or public humiliation. How come so many racers are not willing to risk higher levels of failure? It is absolutely essential to growth.

I was recently talking to an athlete who told me of the point where she lost her fear of failure. She was trading blows with one other rider during a bout for a National Cyclocross Championship. Attrition had widdled the field down to the two of them, going for the win.

They attacked each other incessantly. By the time she heard the bell ring for the final lap, she discovered a sense of calm. Even during the chaos, it swept over her like a gentle wave. She was no longer afraid to lose. Simultaneously, she was also not afraid to win. Free of burden, she rode away from her opponent and became National Champion.

The most graphic risk of failure comes in the moments leading up to the razor that divides winning and losing. It is The Ultimate Time. When a racer experiences the excitement of being in the hunt for the win, nothing less will ever compare again. Whether at the head of the field in the final corners of a criterium, dangling at the back of a six person group on the final circuit of a road race or going into the last couple miles of an event with a breakaway companion of 100 miles, The Ultimate Time has arrived. It's time to dispatch.

Living in that moment, to me, is the greatest challenge in the sport. I don't think I'm alone. Everything that happened until that point is no longer valid. What happens next is what matters - and it happens fast. There's no time to pull over and collect yourself. I remember the feelings that surged through me when I was finally able to get into position to actually win. It had taken years of building to get there. Suddenly, facing the chance to win, there were all kinds of strange new emotions. The notion of what failure actually meant had continually changed along the way.

When faced with the chance to win, what is failure? Not winning? No. Failure is not going for it with everything that you have left. That incredible taste of the delectable time of reckoning has all the best ingredients. You have to beat people, in those moments. You have to deliver the most decisive blows in your repertoire. You have to summon something crazy deep down inside you or even create something you didn't know you had to do it. That is what makes it so great. To witness the wildness of the things that lead up to the razors edge of winning is to experience this sport to the fullest. Crossing the line first is absolute elation, but it's only the end of the great time. The end of the most exciting time. It's the icing. The cake of racing is the dueling for all the stakes. Once you get some of that cake you will want it every time.

Always embrace the chances that you are presented to either win or fail trying. Never fail to try. Those are the opportunities that we live for. Just like no one goes through life with one success after another, no bike racer wins every race. Life is often defined by how we rebound from our failures. How many times we pick ourselves up from failures and rise to face another challenge. For most racers, there will be a disproportionate number of races that they will need to learn and grow from loss in order to find themselves in that incredible position they can win from. One success can change everything. The only failure is being too afraid of failure to try. The more you try, the more confident you become. You will begin to absolutely relish the hunt for the win.

Most importantly, be your own best friend. Being too hard on one's self is a regret that nearly all athletes have, regardless of level, after they stop competing. Years later they are finally able to reflect and wonder why they were so difficult to themselves. Racing your bike should be fun. It should be a vehicle of excitement to learn more about yourself. Let yourself enjoy it no matter what the outcome. Seize your opportunities, take on some risk, and don't be afraid to fail. Do it like that in life and in bike racing. They are, after all, synonymous.

*No stranger to failure, Paul Willerton is fortunate to have had bicycle racing to show him how to keep getting up after being knocked down. You can read more from him at <http://www.defeat.com/blog> - you can also email him at [wolf@defeat.com](mailto:wolf@defeat.com) to ask questions about your riding or give input on the Wolf Den Articles.*

