



Leaders

As I write tonight the United States of America is electing a new President. The "Leader of the free World" as the President of the USA is commonly referred to. The race, slowly widdled down to two candidates, is almost over. These candidates publicly battled each other on an increasingly International stage. It's a contest of wit, charisma, beliefs and speaking ability all fueled by money and strategic planning. It's necessary because at the end of the day, there can be only one. No matter how many minds are behind them, one person has to stand as 'The Leader'. Someone to point at. Someone to guide. Someone to refer to when everything is on the line. They are the person where the proverbial buck stops. Always. If it doesn't work out, they will take the blame, too. In theory at least.

What's interesting about politics is the amount of character bashing that takes place. Tuning in for just a few minutes on a daily basis, it seems that it's about 50% "This is my plan" and 50% "This is why their plan doesn't work and why they can't be trusted as your leader." Some politicking seems to be based entirely on character assassination. This is where sport deviates. Cycling, for example, has leaders too. There is so much talk about team leadership in cycling that nearly every squad in the World, no matter what level, has riders vying for leadership. I have been on lots of teams where a leader is chosen, but not supported by part of the team. Some teams are split. Two or more riders are attempting to lead, each forming their own mercenary groups within the team. It's up to the team director to try to make sense of it. They have the option to add fuel to the fire and let it play out, or else lay down some discipline and make demands.

Eventually, cream rises to the top. Cycling is such a difficult sport that true leaders simply happen. Certain athletes can state that they are the leader. They tell everyone until they are blue in the face that they deserve the position because so and so "doesn't have it" or "can't climb" or is "bad in the heat." The truth in bike racing doesn't come by words. It comes by what happens in the races. From what everyone witnesses firsthand. Leadership of a cycling team isn't taken by the same means as a political position. That's wherein the beauty lies.

It's interesting how leaders come to be. Never has there been a leader for long who declares themself as such. Leaders are chosen. Some say that the best example of leadership is leadership by example. There are some common misconceptions about leaders of cycling teams. One large one being that they have to be aggressive, unfriendly and commanding. Certainly there have been those types at the helm of many teams. They are not popular among their peers. Much more often the undisputed leaders are some of the friendliest riders in the peleton. They don't need to instill fear in the common riders. They don't need to intimidate and threaten with periodic displays of furious outbreak. They know that speed and terrain settle everything. They have time. They're not in a hurry. The day is

long and hard. Have some compassion.

When a known leader displays compassion for others during a race, it's akin to a war hero, a General, walking around under fire on the front lines of a battle and acknowledging the presence of everyone there. They then make a lap through the medical area. They give soldiers the thumbs up, make some head nods, wink, pat some shoulders. They move back up through the group, sharing some precious rations. With bullets whizzing past their head, they leave the front line, alone, and make their way into enemy territory to ultimately end the battle by whatever means necessary. No words were spoken to gain the respect of everyone present. The entire field was effected. The General came, saw, and left to conquer.

Statements like "I'm the better rider. I deserve it. I deserve to be Leader. I should get more." are settled on the road. Ultimately, leaders have to get the job done at the finish line. It's a harsh reality of bike racing. In corporations or political office, the leader could actually be the weakest physical specimen in the running. Cycling puts the strongest one in place. There are caveats, though. Sometimes the physically gifted don't have the desire or people skills to lead to the degree that a team needs to grow together. Sometimes they might speak a different language or come from a culture that makes them very uncomfortable at the helm of an organization. Great organizations find a way to elevate that rider. They support them, make them feel comfortable and find whatever means necessary to communicate.

The best cycling teams are structured like many of the top companies: The leader puts key VP's in place around them. Those are the people that they know will be there at critical times, can take orders and execute them. They are exceptional people in their own right. Able to lead lesser teams if they chose to. They are creative thinkers, independent enough to make decisions on their own when they need to. They in turn organize and motivate the riders below them to get into position to get things done for the team. Teams that willfully motivate each other to reach new levels are extremely powerful against teams that are fragmented.

The fragmented teams are obvious in their approach. Everyone is in it for themselves. They may have some great riders, but they're only trying show they're worthy of getting into a top team. Trying to get everyone to convene at the front of the field to chase could take an hour or not happen at all. Chasing each other down is a more common move. Sharing water and food? Only if someone actually wants to get rid of it. Don't expect good conversation at the dinner table. The fragmented team is full of mercenaries with the thought of individual survival at the front of their minds.

With the new year approaching, take the time to put together the best team possible. Decide to either make your team more upwardly mobile or get on a team with a great attitude. Find a team with vision and a positive direction. It doesn't matter what their budget is. If the right people are there, the sales chart will start to point vertical. Make the moves that will help you enjoy the coming season to the fullest. It's about having a great time. Whether you join a new team, form your own or stay with your current club, add your own unique value to the mix. Make a difference in your team. The new leader of the free world isn't worried about unemployment rates in bike racing. That's up to you to solve.

Paul Willerton writes from Oregon and has never held public office. To read more from him and an archive of the 'Wolf Den Articles', visit www.defeet.com/blog.

