



## Embarrassment & Growth

Today I went nordic skiing. The sport has much in common, physically and spiritually, with cycling. Tracks are groomed over rolling terrain and include steep climbs, descents and tight turns through the forest. Not unlike a favorite, quiet bike route. Skinny profile round edge skis, boots that fit like cycling shoes, and lightweight carbon poles are all built for speed and efficiency. Closing fast on a slower skier down a hill, I moved to the outside of the track to avoid startling them. I was flying. I felt like a falcon diving through its prey. At the moment I was alongside the slower moving skier, I slipped on a long patch of glare ice. My back and head thumped into the hard-as-pavement surface. As my limp, slightly-concussed body slid off the track and wrapped itself around a small pine tree, I thought once again about the folly of sport.

Embarrassment is something that we all deal with at times in our lives. Dropping a cup of coffee on a crotch at a meeting. Choking on a chunk of food at a big dinner. These and similar events are major embarrassments for some people. Sports offer up other forms of embarrassment. Missing an easy pass or fly ball. Topping a tee shot. The list is endless. Close friends have told me "Paul, I can't imagine what would ever embarrass you". Of course I can be embarrassed. I have been countless times. My worst embarrassments have no doubt come while cycling. The reason is that cycling leaves you exposed on so many levels. It's raw. It pits you in a very public environment. For extended periods of time. With very little clothing and no shelter. There are no time outs. No locker room to go to. No bench to sit on, no substitute players, no oxygen tanks. Rain delays? There's not even a snow delay. If it's packed up high then there might be a change of route. The public element is front and center. There are no ticket sales. Everyone is invited whether they are fans or not. Most of the crowd, at least in this country, are more acquainted with the ball sports than the two-wheeled circus that comes to town each year.

If you race your bike long enough, something embarrassing will happen to you. It's a matter of when. Get good and ready to deal with it. It may happen on a scale that makes anything that ever happens to you again a virtual non-event. The good thing is, you will probably be alone. Except for a bunch of public onlookers. Your piers will be up the road, somewhere. Then it will be your choice whether or not you want to share what happened.

Thanks to cycling, I have had more instances of legal public nudity than I ever thought possible. There was no choice. My clothes got ripped off of me. I once had to ride through a Metro area clear out to a long climb and mountain top finish with nothing but a waist strap and floss for my shorts. Thankfully the climb wasn't thronged with people. The finish was though, and that type of effort doesn't leave a lot of blood to go around.

These sorts of things happen frequently in cycling. It doesn't matter who you are. One night a teammate came back from a weekend of racing in Northern California in 1989. He had raced well, but he continued mentioning a rider that he was impressed with but felt sorry for. He explained it like "Yeah, this one guy, he was pretty young, but he had a lot of fight in him. Anyway, something was wrong with his bike, I think. Every time he'd stand up,

it would shift, and he'd rack himself so hard on his top-tube or stem he'd have to stop." The rider would moan, slump down, get off, catch his wind or fix his chain. "He kept coming back, and then it would happen again." This went on the whole race, inevitably happening on the steepest climbs. "I think his name was Lance... um, Armstrong or somethin'."

It's OK to be subject to embarrassment. Cycling is a difficult sport. Things happen quickly and are often out of your control. Racing a bicycle forced me to deal with things that I never thought I would have to. At least past the age of five. Emergency public defecation, for example. I will spare you the exact details, but I may hold an unofficial world record for this. One warm, February morning in the Tour of Mexico, the race was heading out of Mexico City on what is believed to be the most vast highway on the planet. Just as the gun went off at 9:00am, my stomach let me know that it wasn't going to make it 140 miles. In fact, it wasn't going to make it 1.4 miles. I went back to the caravan for support. Our team car was not there. It's keys had been locked inside before the start. No team car. I finally found a car with a roll of toilet paper. We stopped in the exact middle lane and the mechanic in the back seat swung his door open to provide me cover. 30 feet behind us six Mexican motorcycle policemen positioned their bikes horizontal to the rush hour traffic that was piling up. I removed my helmet and jersey so that I could pull my bib shorts off. Just as I started to go, the team car that stopped for me shut it's doors laughing and sped off. Alone, in the middle of this amazingly vast expanse of freeway, I went no. 2 in front of those six cops and thousands of onlookers. It took a while, becoming unpleasant - and increasingly uncomfortable - for everyone there. Screaming, fist waving and honking ensued, growing to a fever pitch. The police grew restless and encouraged urgency from me. When I got cleaned and re-dressed, I mounted up and began to chase the field that had disappeared up the road. The motorcycle cops that had scowled and groaned at me over their shoulders while they held raised arms against traffic were truly my allies and savior. I thought that I may have to ride the 138 remaining miles on my own. Then one moto pulled alongside me, smiled, shook his head in disbelief, and slapped his arm. I held my bars with one hand close to the stem, locked my knees against my top tube, tucked in position and grabbed his elbow. He took us up to 50mph, and five minutes later I was deposited back into the race. 136 miles later, with 2 miles to go, I was involved in a horrifying, drawn out high speed crash that again removed most of my shorts. I limped into the finish alone, exhausted, beaten, bottomed out... but not broken.

The examples of embarrassment that I've cited have been fairly extreme. If you take precaution, you can avoid some of those experiences. That is not the goal, though, and certainly not the point of this story. There is always tremendous value to be had by not concerning yourself with avoiding embarrassment. It has been scientifically proven that a large part of why babies learn things very quickly and adults stop learning is because babies don't care about being embarrassed. Adults are self conscious and don't like to look bad in front of peers or the public. Racing a bicycle, like so many things in life, is a risk/reward proposition. Congratulations to you for involving yourself in such a difficult undertaking. Your efforts and lessons learned in cycling will make it easier to expose yourself to new experiences in the future.

When you're cycling or starting any new sport, job, relationship, instrument, language or art, give yourself every advantage possible. Throw caution to the wind and throw your idea what 'embarrassment' actually means out the window. This will help give your body and mind the freedom to perform the way they naturally can, together. Allow yourself to learn and grow at warp speed. At the very least, you will have more experiences that you can look back on in wonderment.

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