



Halftime

"It was 1989, my thoughts were short my hair was long. Caught somewhere between a boy and man." - Kid Rock, All Summer Long

I divide life up into 20 year quarters. 1989 was the end of the first quarter for me, and now I'm at halftime. If you make it past 80, you're in overtime. Kid Rock and I must be pretty close in age. We lived a little differently, though. In 1989 my thoughts were long and my hair was short. I was caught somewhere between a junior and a professional. This has been a reflective week for me. Looking out the window during a rainy hiatus at the Tour of California, that song plays in the background. Turning 40 last week must have something to do with this feeling. 1989 was exactly half my life ago. I know the path that my life has taken, but showing up at this race provides snapshots of many people that cycling has introduced me to. Whether I rode fast or not used to be the barometer for how much I enjoyed the sport. That's a gauge that I don't watch very closely, anymore. Somehow riding fast back then sparked friendships that have nothing to do with riding fast now. Most of the riders I've known have gone on to careers outside of cycling. Rarely if ever to be seen again. There is a handful that have stayed in the sport. I've run into some of them in recent days.

In 1989, Frankie Andreu was just making the transition from amateur to professional. One stage of the Tour of European Communities that year that was particularly difficult. It had several category 1 and hors category passes in it, and the cold rain never relented. Frankie and I struggled together all day, arriving at the finish in a front group of less than 20 riders. I knew then that he was improving. And tough. How tough I couldn't know. Frankie had an ability to put on blinders and ignore the hardest parts of being a professional in Europe. I couldn't have imagined that he would finish the Tour de France so many times. Now he's the live man doing the webcast for the Tour of California. They are fortunate to have him doing the broadcast. With that said, the web cast for the Tour of California is the future of cycling broadcasting. It is excellent.

In 1989, Davis Phinney was a stalwart pro. The first American to win a stage of the Tour de France, he was known around the world for his field sprinting ability. I had admired him when I was a kid. I still have issues of Winning magazines that ran features on him. The second issue of that magazine showed him beating a field of Europeans that came over to compete in Baltimore, MD. He was still an amateur then, so John Eustice became US Pro Champion. Somehow he figured out a way to win the Coors Classic in 1987. I'm still stunned by that. In 1989, I was probably just showing up on his radar. He was always upbeat in the peleton and had welcome a sense of humor. I hadn't seen him for years and had only heard sporadic news of his battle with Parkinson's disease. During this Tour of California I sat with him in a bar in Sacramento and laughed over some stories. I'm sure it

has been hard for him, dealing with the Parkinson's, but he really seems to be doing well. Always such a pillar of strength as an athlete, I never could have pictured him dealing with a disease like this in middle age. His son, Taylor, had set a new American record in the 4k pursuit earlier that day. Davis was beaming. The next morning, Taylor set another record in the Kilo. Taylor Phinney no doubt comes from the right blood lines for cycling. Davis will enjoy living another racing career with his son.

In 1989, Bob Roll was a loud-mouthed, seemingly frustrated road racer seeing the sun set on his road career. He too had accomplished things that I didn't think he was capable of when I watched him racing in Northern California in the early 80's. Bob is one of those people who has much more strength in their body than what they 'look' like. Medievalish strength, kind of hobbit-like. He raced that same Tour of European Communities in 1989. I was there with the US amateur team riding in the stars and stripes. Every day the guys on my team would tell stories about how Bob was giving them a hard time for doing something. If your bike twitched, if you bumped into someone or god forbid were actually on the ground in a crash, Bob would go off on you like it was all your fault. He'd yell "You dumb ass amateur! Look what you did! Go back home, morons." So much for patriotic love overseas. Somehow, I still liked him. I rode pretty well and straight and he mostly left me alone. In the years following, we spent a lot of time on the mountain bike circuit. Those were some funny times. What I knew back then was that Bob, even though he came off a little rough, was actually tack sharp. He could write and tell stories as well as anyone and was never afraid to get in the mix. I never thought that he'd be better known as a television personality. I have seen him several times this week and I can't help but give him a hard time. I need to do it more. Payback for how he treated us back in '89.

There are so many more people than I can write about in this column. It feels good that it doesn't matter now how any of these guys rode their bikes. There is some kind of respect, evident. I know what they did and how hard it is to do. It's more interesting to see what has happened to people. How they have lived. The hardships and triumphs of life after cycling. I am looking forward to the 3rd quarter of my life, but I am not too excited about being 60 at the end of it. Hopefully by sprinkling in some cycling here and there, it will arrive in good health. I hope the same for everyone who does this sport. Not all of the riders that I've spent time with have survived as well as the ones I've mentioned. Quite a few are not even alive, anymore. They burned really brightly in the first quarter and part way through the second, but were destined to exit before halftime. The only sure thing is that, if I make it through the next quarter or two, I am going to be surprised again and again. Keep fostering your cycling relationships. They are cycling in more ways than one. It may be all about speed right now, but that won't be forever. Rock on.

Paul Willerton lives in Oregon. Always appreciative of the sport of cycling and what it has provided him. You can read more of his writing at defeat.com/blog