Dealing With Your Hottness

Today I was on a bike ride with my 6 year old daughter. She's only been riding for a few weeks. It was the first truly 'hot' day of the year, so far. The gauge was hovering over 85 degrees. About 15 minutes into it she said "I'm sick of Summer. It's too hot." Apparently she has inherited her fathers heat tolerance. Riding in the heat has always been a formidable challenge for me. I know I'm not alone. There is no question in my mind that genetics factor into heat tolerance. People from certain parts of this planet just plain fare better. With that said, you're a bike racer, and no matter what your lineage is you have to deal with heat that can be excessive at times. Sometimes just surviving in the heat is enough to get you results. Making the wrong moves in the heat will guarantee failure quicker than anything.

To oversimplify, when it's hot out, your heart rate goes up and your body starts to take protective measures. It's sending you signals that you should be laying under trees or bushes or holed up in a cave somewhere. Anywhere but throttling yourself on a bicycle rolling over a road that you could cook a meal on. So what can you do? Obviously "hydrate" is a key verb. Not drinking enough water is something that should not happen to you. Yes I said water. That category includes whatever other liquids you put into your body that don't have the reverse effect on hydration. This is not about *what* to drink, but how to out-survive your opponents in the heat. If it's not water, then finding the right drink mix that helps you in the heat is one of your initial homework assignments.

How you drink your drink is the key to ensuring that you're drinking enough. Taking tiny sips every five minutes is a method that doesn't work for most people. They suddenly realize that 30 minutes have passed and they've hardly made a dent in their water supply. Whoops. Let that happen enough times throughout the day and you could be in trouble. If you're spending the energy to go for your bottle, hit it hard. Guzzle some! Try to drink half that bottle down every 15 minutes. Put the water in your body. Then you'll know it's in a spot your body can use it. Sit up and pop the top on it, once in a while. Tearing the top of your bottle is a sure way to make sure you drink a bunch of that bottle. In fact, that's the best advice I can give on drinking. Tear the top off and pound it. If you can keep your liquid cold or get handed cold bottles, that is huge. Enough about drinking.

Airplanes sometimes crash on takeoffs and landings in extremely hot weather because the 'density altitude' is higher in the heat. Just like at higher altitudes, the air particles are spaced further apart in the atmosphere. Pilots need to take special precautions. This does not mean you shouldn't fly in planes on hot days. It means you need to take special precautions, too. I've written a lot about minimizing your energy outlay until the right moments in races. That is even more true on the broiling hot days. When cool water in a stream warms up even a handful of degrees, the fish in that stream hunker down and conserve every bit of energy they can. They will only move if they are rewarded with more energy than the move costs them. It's not a bad lesson for the racer. Move less, and only when you have to.

Of course, if you feel great then none of this matters. Right? Actually, it does. You are

blessed if you feel great during any race. If you happen to feel that way on a high temperature day, nurture it. Pamper yourself. Tear the top off your bottle and feed that great feeling. Strange things happen on super hot days. Massive time gaps during races in extreme heat can be either closed or created by riders that somehow got themselves into position to feel great when others were suffering. How does that happen, you ask? It happens because human bodies become lethargic. Athletic performance can drop more significantly near the end of a long, hot day than any other condition.

Picture this. Take a rolling 15 mile stretch of road. Two groups of riders are five minutes apart. They are 90 miles into a race that has seen temperatures over 100 degrees Fahrenheit. Both groups are suffering in lethargy and can only average 17 mph. The gap would remain the same all the way to the finish. Under less severe conditions if they rode out onto that stretch of road they could ride 24 mph. If they felt normal. On this day, however, one rider in the trailing group felt incredible and took good care to not over-extend or over-expose them self. This one rider is still capable of riding this stretch of road at 24 mph. On this day, they would not even need to attack. They could ride away from the group as if if were standing still. This rider would soon cross the five minute gap and roll past that group as if it were standing still as well. I didn't crunch the numbers on this to see what the gap would be, but I'm pretty sure the rider would win convincingly. Alone. This scenario does happen. It's actually an opportunity made possible by extremely hot weather.

Do yourself some favors and pay attention to the details. Don't forget your sunblock. Even if you've got the killer tan, sunblock can help minimize even micro-trauma to your skin. Even good base tans burn. We're talking about survival, here. Take skin trauma out of the equation. That move can save you percentage points in a long race and it will make a difference the next day, too. Protect your eyes. I know it sounds simple but at every race you see riders squinting into the bright sun and wind. It's slowly taxing them. Anything you can do to keep your core temperature down will pay back in spades. If you can find a way to run a half a degree cooler than your opponents, you're en route to possibly riding significantly faster than them in the closing stages of the event.

Strange things happen in the heat. Brace yourself. "Never give up" is never more true than in the heat. Lots of people give up in the heat. Attrition rates are very high. If you can find ways to survive, you will find opportunities for results. Don't let big time gaps demoralize you. Keep riding. Five minute gaps on a 100 degree day are not the same as on a 60 degree day. This is especially true in amateur racing. It's part of why I love amateur racing. The explosions and unraveling of the racers can be monumental. Just like you're way more likely to see crazy score changes and mistakes in College football than in the NFL, amateur races aren't over until they're over. Stoking the temperature on those races makes that more true. I hope you are able to feel great at the end of an excruciating day in the heat, sometime.

Paul Willerton lives in the heat of the high desert in Central Oregon. You can read more from him at http://www.defeet.com/blog.