



What You Miss in the End

On May 19th, 2009, Steve Larsen died of a heart attack while he was doing a workout in Bend, Oregon with an elite running club. He was 39 years old and married with five children. Steve was revered in our local community. His list of achievements in road and off road cycling, triathlon, XTerra and running is long. In our town, his name was visible on signage for commercial properties all over the place. When he stopped competing professionally, he applied himself in commercial real estate. His fierce verve put his competition on their heels in the span of a couple of years. Having spent so much time with him from when we were barely double-digits in age, I wasn't surprised by his success. Quite a few former teammates and people I've known from cycling over the years have now passed on. Many of their deaths didn't catch me off guard. Substance abuse, depression and suicide have played primary roles in most of those deaths. Sports at the highest level, possibly cycling in particular, draw certain character types. Sometimes it seems that people so driven at such a young age can have difficulties when their cycling careers draw to a close. They become stymied attempting to find another place in society. Steve did not suffer from those challenges. He had found his place and was doing well in it. What caught Steve was atherosclerosis. Unknowingly to him, he had heart disease. He had never stopped riding his bike and running. His fitness stayed at a high level all the way to his passing and it may not have occurred to him to get regular heart checkups.

The realization of Steve's life ending has been particularly profound to me. I am affected by his absence even more than his presence. On the day of his memorial, I joined a long line of people who paraded by bicycle to the event from a downtown park. The group rode slowly and quietly, and I eventually rode my way to the front. I was overcome with thoughts and memories of him. If he could have seen that group, I know he would have approved that I should lead it. His service was mostly upbeat. Hundreds of people came. One of his Cervelo time trial bikes was displayed. Some close friends of Steve's spoke to the crowd. I eventually stood on wobbly legs and took the microphone. Facing Steve's wife, children, Mom and brother, I tried to pay some respects. I remembered holding the microphone at Steve's wedding, 16 years ago. I never could have imagined this day. I had decided that morning that I would speak, no matter if I opened my mouth and no sound at all came out. Steve's character has always impacted my own life, and that's what this story is about. From the day I met him, he somehow demanded that I force myself to summon more courage in my own being.

If Steve and I were actually 'friends', it was a different kind of friendship. It was hard to get very close to him. He wanted to compete. Rarely would he ever expose weakness on purpose. His method was to get the upper hand early, intimidate, and capitalize. That's not uncommon among athletes. What was unique about Steve is that he was like that when he was 13. He wouldn't back down to anyone. To a group of junior riders who were giddy to just be away from their parents, Steve was always quick to quell immature behavior. It would leave any kid he came across wondering who this kid Larsen thought he was. "Who's shoes are these?", Steve would say, pointing at the floor in a living room full of kids. "Pick

them up and get them out of here. I want them out of my face and I *really* don't want to smell them." His sense of smell was astounding. The owner of the shoes would sulk over and move them.

I had spent a couple years competing against Steve before I was good enough to be on the same team as him. He had matured physically well before me. It seemed like it had taken half my life to catch up. The problem was Steve didn't want me on his team. At age 15 he was most influential on his well-funded corporate junior team. He had told his team boss "I don't want Willerton on my team." So the team boss moved me into his house with Steve in Squaw Valley near Lake Tahoe, California. I was told I had to prove myself. I rode with Steve every day for two months. We didn't ride 'together' so much as he rode 'against' me. He attacked me incessantly. I began turning it back on him at every opportunity. It turned into the Summer of outright rage and aggression. By Summer's end, Steve and I were teammates and I think.. friends. We immediately left for Europe to go attack foreigners as hard as we were each other.

Our Europe trip went well until a race in late September. I got smeared across a rock wall in a heavy downpour outside of Paris, snapping my collarbone. Steve fell with me and about 30 other riders who all dog piled over us. I'd gotten the worst of it. It was in a Category 1 amateur race, and our team had been invited as juniors. We had no real business being in that race, but that's how we rolled. Get in over your head and start fighting. It was around that time I started realizing that I liked having Steve around. I'd begun to learn how to feed off of him. We always wanted to beat each other so badly, and we'd turn it into a frenzy amidst better competition.

The next year in Italy, Steve and I rode to 7th place in the Jr. World Championship 4 man team time trial. We lost a rider to a crash right after the start, and our third rider became pretty fatigued about halfway through. It was a grind, and we weren't happy with our result. We went back to the hotel and shot fireworks out of our window. It started a blaze that burned up a telephone pole and shut the neighborhood down. Reprimanded by authorities and now 'grounded', I had Steve give me a haircut with a Swiss Army knife. Chunks of my scalp were exposed. I was considered a 'favorite', but I crashed horribly in another blinding rain storm in the Jr. World's road race that week and flew home dejected. Steve said I was looking like a poorly treated prisoner of war.

At Steve's memorial, I didn't have enough time to scratch the surface about what I wanted to say about him. Writing this, I haven't come close to sharing what we went through. I can't seem to do any of it justice. Those are simply times, racing juniors all the way to professional, that are so special. The years passed like eternities, but then suddenly careers were ended. Now, much more suddenly, a life has ended. I would like to recount so much more of what happened to Steve and I at different times, but I would be missing the real point. Steve's passing has taught me things that hadn't yet settled in me. Even if I thought I knew them.

Bicycle racing is a chance to express yourself. It's provides a stage where the expression of courage, determination, self sacrifice, cunning and aggression are all honored. Every time you take the stage, you have a chance to create your expression. Steve Larsen's personality was displayed to everyone who watched him ride his bicycle. Whether he won or not isn't even important. It's certainly not what I remember, now. He used the days he raced to the fullest. His abilities were not wasted. There were times when I didn't like Steve very much. It may have been when he was trying his hardest to get in my way, making his own way. It was never boring, though. In hindsight, having him around was critical for my own development. I wish I was able to tell him that. He was one of those people you're certain will outlast you. Why rush to tell them anything? It took a long time, but the parts of his character that were initially most distasteful to me are what I will miss most. What I didn't like was what I really liked.

I hope there are riders in your group that have more 'panache' than everyone thinks they should. I hope they demand more than anyone thinks they deserve. I hope they attack everyone so often and hard that it sparks continuous revolts in your group. Maybe you are

that rider. I hope you are. Cycling and life are more exciting with you around.

Paul Willerton lives, writes and rides in Bend, Oregon. It's a town that will truly miss having Steve Larsen around to ride with. You can read more from Paul at www.defeet.com.