



Enter The Mode

The gun goes off. The race has begun. You are now engaged in what is happening around you. You have entered a long period of self preservation. There is a lot to do to now to 'not lose' this race. It's time to take on a mode that is not necessarily aggressive, but more 'passive aggressive'. This is a conservation mode wherein you function at a high level of attention and good position in the field - staying in the top 30 riders. Very strong or lucky riders sometimes wing out of 80th position into a breakaway that goes to the finish, but it's hard to make a habit of that. We want to practice habits that will continually result in more winning moves.

Bicycle road racing is sort of like a chess match on a three-dimensional, moving board. You don't get to control half of the board's position, but you do get to control your own. You are your king (or queen - but we were talking chess for a minute), and you want to be the last one standing. Enough of the chess analogy for now. The importance of your positioning in a race cannot be stressed enough. Become too aggressive for too long at the front of the group, and you become vulnerable. Lay back, be lazy, rested and calm, and you can miss everything. As I've mentioned before, this column has been dealing with amateur racing in the United States. Professionals can sometimes lay back for three hours, comfortable in knowing that their team or another will chase for an hour at the end of the race. You don't have that luxury. Too many amateur races are won randomly to race like that.

There is a passive aggressive riding style that you can develop that works for you. It's not always the same. On any given day it's different, and it can be wildly different throughout the year. There will be times when it simply can't be done. Those are 'survival days', and I hope that you don't have to ride like that every time you race. Those riders are the ones who occupy the last 30 positions in the field and stay there. In chess, they are the pieces that get taken off the board quickest. It happens to everyone at times, but the goal remains to race in the style that results in more winning moves.

In your passive aggressive mode, for example, you operate in the zone that allows you to accelerate easily onto the back of four or five riders that are attacking. You pull through in that group of riders and don't even bother with what is happening behind you. You want to pull through because you want the race to have to come back to you as much as possible. If things get over-heated, you will relax until you're ready again. You ride in a manner that you can sustain, but if the field re-gains your group, you're able to mesh back into your top 30 spot. If you see a climb ahead or know that a good climb is coming, you are able to roll yourself into a top five or top 10 position easily enough without over-exposing yourself in the wind. You arrive in that position just before the road starts ascending. When the race makes an unexpected turn and goes down a road with a fierce crosswind for 20 minutes, you are right there to tag onto the first echelon. For the riders outside of the top 30, their day is often over at that point.

Through this sort of passive aggressive racing, you can dramatically reduce your energy outlay through the course of the race while exponentially increasing your chance of success. You have less exposure to crashes, big gaps opening in front of you, lack of knowledge of who's up the road, and other forms of physical and mental stress that happen in the peloton. Racing this way all the time will help you 'not lose the race' deeper and deeper into the race. Winning is where we're heading - and that requires the 'aggressive' move. That's different than what we've been dealing with, here. We'll get to that one later.

Being in good position, watching and following easily and protecting your tender under-belly, you become a rider who is seemingly 'always there'. You want this to be second nature. In so doing, you use even less energy. You end up with more in store to use in a really aggressive way in the late stages of the race. Practicing good racing habits is essential to making major breakthroughs. When you

establish yourself at the head of the action, you are truly participating in the race. You will see things develop and learn at a much faster rate than the riders that are not up there. Race after race, you will realize that you can maintain your 'establishment' with less effort. You will want to race like that because it's not only more productive, but it's more exciting. Isn't that what you're out there for?