



## Your Special Place

It doesn't take many races before you see one happen. It might have even been in your first race. Maybe you were involved. "It looks like there's been a *tuch* of wheels, Paul." Sorry, but Phil Liggett will not be around, and there will be no helicopter view. There might be some wisecracker impersonating Liggett out loud, but not until their adrenaline gets processed. For you, skidding tires, swerving riders, scraping metal, sliding lycra and skin are as real as it gets. There is nothing quite like the sights and sounds of some bike race wrecks. These are moments that can imprint folds of your brain in such a way you will always be able to recall them in detail. Ideally, no one gets hurt too bad and everyone walks away laughing. That's right. Laughing. Launching into, and out of, a really scary situation is part of the allure of bicycle racing. Racing is inherently dangerous, obviously, and that presents an issue that many racers struggle to come to terms with.

Ours is a sport that requires an enormous amount of effort. Physically, emotionally, mentally. All ingredients in the 'ultimate challenge' recipe. Drain any one of those ingredients and your recipe can get crappy. Fast. Sometimes the raw physical outlay of a race pales in comparison to the mental and emotional stress of that race. Riders that are better able to cope with the extraneous stresses of a race will be better prepared when crunch time (read: decisive moment) happens. Racers are people. Some people have many fears and reservations, others very few. I have known many supremely gifted racers for whom the only hurdle left between them and International stardom was their own fear. Fear of crashing, notably.

Like many subjects written about in this column, the answer is not yes or no, black or white. It does no good to say "Just don't worry about crashing." It's not that simple. It's a very personal thing, how we deal with our fears and prepare ourselves for battle. Doing it one time is one thing. Doing it in a sustainable way, week in and week out until it's second nature is another. I believe that we each have a spiritual place within us. The core of our being and a place of immense strength. Tapping into it is what makes our greatest performances possible. Fear of crashing does not necessarily keep us from tapping into this 'place', but I do believe that finding it is what makes fear vanish. Including fear of crashing.

One rainy, Spring day in California I was riding to a criterium with six teammates. We had to go about 20 miles to the start, near San Diego. It must not have rained for a while, because there was so much oil coming up on the road that it looked like Exxon Valdez wreckage had been dragged along the same route ahead of us. We all crashed at least once on the way to the race. Every two miles we stopped, bending handlebars and helping a torn up, moaning teammate. We each stood on the start line that day with ripped shorts and large, open wounds. When the gun sounded, we were free. No one could touch us. It was still raining, and slick, and the other riders had not fallen, yet. Some of us crashed again and again in the race, only to get up even stronger. I believe that we who had tasted the pavement had found that spiritual place - and the results were radically different from the riders who were undamaged. For us, fear had virtually disappeared.

Another occasion (see how easy it is to recall crashes? I could go on all day), just a week before the World Championship Road Race's in Japan in 1990. The best amateurs and domestic pros were racing in Spokane, WA. I had won the silver medal at the National Championship Road Race the week prior. It was not good enough to make the team for Japan - I had needed to win gold for that. On the hardest stage of the Washington race, just before we were arriving at the foot of the long finishing climb up Mt. Spokane, there was a colossal, high speed pileup. 30+ riders went down at over 30-mph. My front wheel had exploded into at least eight separate chunks of rim. My helmet was broken into five pieces. My clothing was shredded to the point I almost didn't have any left. I was practically nude. My shorts got melted into some kind of sick, g-string, ass flossing thong with garters. I do believe my chamois

had been ripped out in its entirety. My freshly burgered hind quarter drained profusely into my socks. I am proud of this day, but I am not recounting this as a heroic tale. Too many riders endured too much pain that day for this to be purely a 'me' thing. Many of them broke bones. We all laid there, screaming in agony. My teammate and friend Chris Sheehan came back for me. I was ready to puke. Certain my race was over. He got me up, replaced my wheels, and put me on my bike. I felt a strange cocktail of puissance brewing in me. His gesture, the adrenaline, the stinging, being nude, seeing the pack growing larger as we regained our deficit. We caught the field just as the climb began. We were in last place at the base. When I stood up, I couldn't even feel my pedals. My legs just spun. I rode past 150 riders up that climb. Most of them were disgusted at the sight of my thong and what it barely held. Only 4 riders finished ahead of me on top of that mountain. That night I was told that I was going to Japan in a couple days to ride the World Championship Road Race. If I were able to sit down on an airplane that long.

The point of these examples is not to demonstrate that you must first crash in order to not be afraid of crashing. I am not saying you should throw yourself against a wall and roll around on the pavement before a race. Crashes do not always have to mean 'the end'. They can be good for something. Good ones, you will never forget. They are undeniably thrilling. Sometimes, they are hilarious. If all that weren't enough, you can learn from them. Experiences like that show you things about yourself that you could not otherwise learn. They are part of the 'special gifts of cycling'. People can see that you have lean, tan, vascular legs attached to a strong, sinewy body. What they would not be able to see would be the elements of your being that make you overwhelming: your ability to find and exist in your own, personal place of internal strength. Never give up on trying to get there. Be there as much as you possibly can. Be there, and you will find you are afraid of so little that it's scary.