

28. Need for Speed

Few—but not none—brag about how slowly they bike. Competitive kamikazes would be too ashamed. Hardly anyone in club considered racing dangerous, yet people have died pushing too hard on humid days. Few have the stamina for 8 hours in a saddle; clearly, speed makes long rides bearably shorter. Randonneurs are greedy for miles; routes are never long enough, and they brag about how far they ride, even exaggerate distances. Non-riders either don't believe them or think riding at all is simply nuts. Bicycling involves many such contradictions, some irreconcilable. To bike you must assess risks, avoid extremes, balance, be decisive while nevertheless going with the flow. A bicyclist becomes Taoist. Yin-yang is a black and white pair of extremes blending into a unified spinning wheel of gray.

Emerson quipped, "When skating over thin ice, your safety is in speed." With constant chances of being attacked by dogs, overtaken by motorists, and similar uncertainties, Emerson's maxim seemed in principle to apply equally to bicycling. Modern writers pepper their scribblings with such quips to dupe readers about their degree of education, when, in fact, they lifted it from a cereal box and never read anything else by this penultimate transcendentalist, whose primary philosophy seemed to be that physical senses are misleading and only logic and reason can be trusted, as if people should never attend, bathe, caress, glomb, hug, massage, observe, sniff, snuggle, or stimulate themselves otherwise because that might fool them into thinking... what exactly? That these perceptions might not be so bad? Talk about dangling a carrot!

Once legs recover from a hard ride, libido returns as if you're a Renaissance prince ready to procreate and uphold lineage or a sporty Casanova lusting for conquests to leave behind bastards. Through clean living and regular exercise, you get too damn healthy. Excess hormones push you into compromising situations. Celibacy might make one feel superior, but occasional sex with someone you love doesn't equal degradation, lunacy or sin. Turning unrequited gratification into thousands of pages might, though.

All those who give up something obsess over their ex-vice, rationalize their conversion, speak of it incessantly, vilify it, so much so that everyone around them wishes they'd just resume in so-called sin and shut up. Speed may sound like a good idea, but adds its own dangers: blowouts, collisions, cracks and grates snagging tires, focus on everything but what you've rode out to see.

Mileage mongers who post to websites probably don't have as many miles per week as they say. Those who wish to be best will bamboozle, hoodwink, and hyperbolize. Riding 8 hours per day repeatedly is quite as much as a body can stand, and, even if one averages 20 mph, that's only 160 miles per day. A rider would have to take at least 1 day off a week, to do all other business including bulletin board bragging, even without steady employment. One site recommended 270 miles per week plus cross training and weight lifting to get into shape for randonneuring, as if this didn't already qualify as the activity itself. Al knew people who rode up to 150 miles per day on specific trips, coast to coast or continent to continent, but they gradually built up then slowly tapered off, not perpetually trained. Transcontinental rides are an awful lot of boredom and pain to endure all at once. During last Shuttle launch, seven astronauts went further in 8 minutes than he had biked all year. People who brag about their miles overlook such humbling perspectives. Real miles are too hard earned to abide imagined ones. So, 6 days x 160 = 960 miles per week. Given a some weeks off, a likely injury or needed vacation, you arrive at the upper limit of what any bicyclist could do in a year, 48,000 miles. This represents an entire bicycling career for many avid cyclists. Real ironmen enduring intense regimens only average 10,000 miles a year. An average enthusiast averages 3,000. Annual tournaments such as Race Across America (RAAM), which is so grueling it claims lives, or Tour de France, planet's premier race, are less than 3,000 miles and take all of a month. To suffer this month after month takes a World-class athlete who's not going to be put off by time killing grades one can hardly climb on foot never mind by bike. Suffice to say few if any are going to average 1,000 miles a week for a year, and be hard pressed to do that in a month; 10% was more realistic, born out by frequency of repairs and reports from randonneurs and shop owners he knew. More typical among healthy travelers were these curiously symmetrical figures: Driving -443 hrs for 12,000 mi. Bicycling -120 hrs for 1,200 miles. Walking -120 hrs for 443 miles. He preferred to bulge the middle average at expense of extremes, drive and walk less, both of which are more costly and risky while they no longer appealed emotionally or physically to him.

A century is no sainted number. Some ride a double metric, 125 miles. Some prefer 3/4 centuries and single metrics, less hours to complete, less commitment. Half centuries are popular. What you do to accomplish them is irrelevant. He just wanted fresh air and mild activity, not savage contests with those thinner or younger. Elitists make comments, don't comprehend it's hurtful.

Egos are easily bruised. A youngster told him with tears she'd only managed 12 miles at a club meet; what's wrong with that? Former members said they couldn't keep up so dropped out. Intimidated, they didn't feel they belonged, didn't post on club bulletin board, didn't show, simply avoided nearby rides where they might run into snobbish elitists. All their welcomes didn't amount to any more than compassionless lip service and excuses to run you off the road. Should you happen to mention doing a 99 mile ride, you'd be met with derision and disbelief for not hanging another century under your belt or spandex waistband.

At club rides, frequent repeaters were sportifs, who drop everyone including their own, because it's a time trial every week. Main reason they stuck together was to draft each other, but, near end, they sprint to parking lot. A competitive mentality is fine, provided participants agree to race, are equally matched, and venue supports such activity. Harder to go far slowly than it is to speed along in slipstreams of other riders. He could outdistance and outrun any kid younger than 13 years old, probably most over 75, and whoever works in an office and never rides. Didn't make him better, happier, prouder, or wiser. By inference, racing veterans should get no thrill out of speeding past someone practically crippled from 30 years of desk jockeying. Such put downs were antithetical to having a nice outing in outside air. Tried to change that, with minor success, through emergency repairs, endless encouragement, and forum postings. Some riders showed up every week because he helped them along when they started. Someday he hoped they'd do the same for others, pay his favors forward, because he had already had enough club abuse for a lifetime.

Racers give bicyclists a bad name. You don't have to speed to enjoy. By frightening off timid beginners, racing ruins more group rides than shows respect. Racing on bikeways is more idiocy. There are actually tormentors who go out intending to compete on them, if only for a small segment. They expect to find pigeons, deemed inferior by where they choose to ride and more concentrated than on roads in general. Other users see this as aggressive and hostile. Heroes like Legstrong do get people started, but then they expect to be like Johnny, find out they're not, and quit. "I tried to catch up with your bicycle/but you took my breath away," drearily sang Caroline. Bikes collecting rust far outnumber those actually being used. This suits businessmen/motorists just fine, a net waste in their favor. Sportif riding has nothing at all to do with biking as transport. Supporting club was too indirect a means to convince

people to ride instead of drive, he began to realize. Club members only bought bigger vehicles to transport their bikes.

He would rarely succumb to an urge to “teach them a lesson” when inhumanity became so obvious it got the better of him, provided bikeway was deserted. Once on a late afternoon group ride he simply pushed hard into wind and left all but Frank behind, then even Frank. At turnaround point, he took a break, made a phone call, and waited for group; nobody showed, so started back by himself. Saw a dot of yellow near first crossing. Cranked to high cadence, hit 28 mph, and caught Frank, who had reversed early, probably to avoid him, then overtook Stinky, a paraplegic on a handcycle. Stinky was emphatic that nobody should wait for him, no pity, which they respected, although he did take this opportunity to cruise and refresh as well as enjoy a little company. Stinky seemed in good spirits, but, sadly, it’d be the last time he’d see his acquaintance alive. Who knew? Stinky never acted as friend, opened up to him, shared details of serious illness, solicited any recognition or support. Instead, spared everyone such burdens, as if a noble thing to do, as if nobody paid attention to someone else’s suffering because they might have to do something to alleviate it. It’s all about acknowledging pride, never admitting weaknesses to which all flesh is subject. Exit Stinky, quickly forgotten. Regrettably, cemeteries are full of strangers you never got to know.

All this racing and successfully overtaking charged his batteries, as well as a bellyfull of fried rice after a day of hill climbing, so legs felt optimal. When a teen caught and passed them, he and Frank settled into a chase. Teen must’ve thought it a challenge or a threat, so sped to lose them, never once sitting. No matter how slim and young, teen couldn’t keep up 24 mph on a mountain bike. They bided their time, never once standing. Teen kept peeking under an armpit. Grizzled trailers with a tailwind didn’t relent, a pair of specters like half the Horsemen of Apocalypse, poised left to pass on teen’s wheel. To see clearly and well, always keep bright sunlight over your right shoulder, angels not demons. Tired of this trite strife, he began to fly and dropped them both. Neither recovered. Teen mounted a few vain attempts, but couldn’t close a widening gap.

Often during these impromptu sprints people turn off to claim victory. He turned off because he wanted to hug some bayside points at dusk. Views were spectacular. Sun, setting directly over city near its northernmost point of year, sent a giant column of rays blasting through crimson clouds up over tall buildings like a Hollywood premiere of a Charlton Heston movie. Scenes like this made

twilight rides seem worthwhile. Working harbor across bay made him wonder which was worse? LNG domes, which threatened instant local doom? Or giant merchant ships being filled with scrap metal from bundled automobiles on their way to China, where all America's jobs are going and World's largest army is being built? Unlike many cyclists he knew, he didn't shut down emotionally or intellectually while riding by himself. Real issues don't disappear because you wish they would.

Edging back onto path and flicking on lights, another challenger sped to pass. Previous scenario repeated, only this time he wore out interloper, who stopped panting at a crossing, possibly on the verge of a heart attack, while he cruised on solo into deepening darkness. This did his ego no good; reminded him he was a has-been. But it did warn youngsters to "eat your Wheaties" should they think they can outlast a wizened reprobate. Old men should act their age, behave within acceptable parameters, but, on a bicycle over flat terrain, he sometimes felt young again, certainly feisty, until the next big climb. There was some life left to live, not yet so old the only social gatherings worth looking forward to are funerals, where you can perform your confabulated repertoire and they can't turn you out.

His best account came from final bikeway leg of a near century. A rider bedecked in white on a white Colnago pulled alongside with a sneer, and spun up to bury this tourist on his black, unnamed frame. "So that's how it is," he grumbled silently to himself, tired but insulted. He slowly ramped up to catch just before next crossing, where both had to slow. Then race was on; he just poured out every ounce left after a long day, mercilessly burying snob by a quarter mile over 4. Speck of white got smaller and smaller in his rear view. At his turnoff he slowed to a crawl to await Mr. White, who, with newfound respect, eyed his bike inquisitively. "It's Italian," he said, then exited. It's seldom what you pay for a bike that makes a difference, rather how you tune your engine, if winning is your intent.

What goes through the minds of such competitors? They stake their self worth on beating someone who they think is inferior. They look at you, conclude you're a chump, and toy with you. This gives them pleasure, a cat playing with a mouse. But you can't judge an album by its cover. Challengers grow despondent when they don't choose a big enough sucker for their games. If being first is your goal, you have to commit a huge block of time or go really fast to get in enough miles to compete. Is that all you can do with your freedom and life force? He could derive no pleasure from

winning. What did one win anyway? Easier to be nice than nasty. He just felt shame for each transgression.

Might have seemed exciting to watch Nev Overendo smoke competitors by almost a 1'30" at 2006 CX Nationals, but he felt, standing with his bike by sidelines, like it might have been more fun to be in race itself, if not to win, to negotiate greasy turns in a tight field. Cycling could be a better spectator sport if they had television coverage at bad corners, steeplechase features, and trickiest terrain. For all bells, cheers, and color amidst mud and muscle, each event is over before you know it, and his buddy got lapped by a ringer. A hundred thousand miles is not enough to prep, you have to have been born into it, precise genetic makeup, right wiring, and wiry frame not so crippled by age and negligence.

His crampy legs couldn't keep up with paceliners, who dropped him on hills, since he weighed 50 to 100% more. He lost them in poor weather, when they either didn't show or sensibly slowed. Certain cyclists go year round, enjoy themselves quietly, how bicycling was intended, moderating themselves, taking in scenery. Yeah, bikes are a lot quieter than cars. Some 5,000 mile/year folk went necessarily slower, legs fried, unable to avoid lactic acid tetany or supply enough glycogen to hungry muscles. Really, he found no advantage in doing club rides, but hoped his presence gave others confidence. "So you're him. Hoped I'd meet you someday," he was greeted on occasion, probably from the many times he posted to bulletin boards or word-of-mouth publicity. Didn't impress people in person, though, being so conflicted, inarticulate and withdrawn. Threatened authorities preferred him this way, uncouth and vulnerable, what they considered a nonthreatening pushover.

How is it that people don't grasp differences in mental processes between speaking and writing? Speaking is all about ego stroking, eye contact, gauging responses, saying what others want to hear. Fast talking liars get you to do bad things you'd never dream of yourself, like beat others with whom you have no quarrel. Written words are like tips of icebergs, a few paragraphs banged out slowly from a depth of doubting after applying logic, contradicting, pondering, rehearsing, ruminating. Either way, you appear foolish. Next to bullying, silence is a favored tactic among control freaks and egomaniacs; reveals little to be used against them. What's heroic about strong silent types? They bring nothing to a party, neither vulnerability nor warmth, rather sit as if demigods in judgment, and who needs that?

Ever notice when you don't rehearse you're not so competent? Do you ever feel performance anxiety of not being able under

pressure to say what's not likely to result in retaliation? This competency which everyone expects eludes most performers. What's wrong with mistakes? As long as they don't result in death or loss, it becomes part of what makes happenings exciting and unexpected. Not up to studio performance quality? Sour note sounds? Voice cracks? Burger arrives with an unbidden pickle? Leave your expectations at door. Experience presently what's offered; don't compare it to a rosy reminiscence. Creatures of a given species are all pretty alike and instinct driven. That's what makes humans so much more interesting, you never know what they'll do, unpredictable.

They say, "Be in the moment". Future and past seem far more engaging than sitting around in present boredom waiting for an axe to fall or something interesting to happen. These aren't anyone's "good old days", full of war and rumors of more. Undoubtedly, now wouldn't be so damn dull if you seize it. He tried to pull every detail out of every instance. He watched for techniques that seemed to yield better efficiency evident in speedometer readings. Could feel good pedaling form inside his heels, which meant knees and toes were in, all power being delivered to pedal, and well crouched against wind. Became conscious of flailing knees and sitting erect. If you ignore anything, it's a lost chance to learn. Every email can be an adventure, every event a happening, every pinnacle of effort another rung toward ecstasy.

He'd send out appreciation to gather inspiration from each reply. There's a pirate at the center of *inspiration*, pillaging booty, plundering life's essence. Inspirations do come, but only after inquisitions. You have to ask the right questions to get answers, especially when you pick up papers, read literature, or watch responsible television. Yet these activities were for him a *start me up*; he couldn't stop writing about exciting ideas they plunged him into, which detracted from doing his duty at home or work. Then again, who's to say being an inquisitor wasn't his lifelong avocation, despite whatever he'd be paid, perhaps not a penny. During his productive years he read as little as he could get away with. Couldn't stand its disappointments, all that promise and then nothing, no truths revealed? You have to go out of your way to make real contact from a guarded sphere and worry constantly about consequences. This making contact isn't the same as interactionism, where politicians say precisely what you want to hear based on your institutional brainwashing. Consumerism makes you evaluate every transaction as, "How much is this going to cost me?" Today, a hand stretched out in friendship was likely to be slapped with a lawsuit or restraining order.

Was not ashamed to say he enjoyed easy riding in his area, a fine place for it. Posted often about his local micro-adventures to incite others like him, who needed to sweat but at a pace suited to their skills. Became known for prodding people to ride. Almost everyone could benefit from riding more, or some at least. But for those totally obsessed, “sick sick sick/with the bicycle kick,” he conversely urged moderation. Spoke against cardiac campaigns with excessive pointless challenges, heart rate monitors, and ultra high cadence. Why? Because they aren’t for most people. Few are as physically gifted as Pele, who popularized soccer’s bicycle kick. Not having a cyclometer could be better. His cheap unit helped him keep a 75 mile/week quota. Cadence, heart rate, temperature, all lose meaning over long distances. You don’t care much if a low cost model pops out on a bump, gets broken, lost or soaked. His cheap unit repeatedly “took a licking and kept on ticking”, all that mattered, while others complained of theirs being *on the fritz*. It was better than wearing a watch, something a lot of cyclists did as a compulsive backup to reliable timekeeper inherent in digital cyclometer. There wasn’t much point in keeping numbers on spreadsheets, later to be deleted by bored executors, or paying to know numbers: body mass index, high density lipoproteins, miles ridden, net worth. Data is an unnecessary fad. There’s no proof that you build any quicker or maintain fitness any better with it. You just have to ride frequently—X’s on a calendar work just as well—or yield to your disgust for motoring zeal by biking instead.

Bicycling is analogous to walking. Everyone walks a little bit every day, some more, some speedily, sparse minority runs, and tiny fraction competes in Olympics. Curve is the same for bicycling. You have to know your limits, earn a right to ride a challenging century by building up to it over months or years. Spinning indoors could work if you detest riding outdoors, but where’s the fun in it? No adrenaline rush, broken tarmac, dogs chasing you, elevations in terrain, horrors to tell, or skills built. Hardly anyone spins until they are totally fatigued, like you sometimes must when misdirected on strange roads. Stationary spins didn’t count as miles ridden. Didn’t walk on treadmills either, not at all like walking to church, store or work. Exercise machines are another way to drive, get in fast reps, telescope time. He was in no hurry, preferred long slow workouts outdoors. Physiologists were just beginning to understand merits of fresh air. Millions take over-the-counter medications for nasal sinusitis when it all gets blown out and cleared up while riding a bike, something worth remembering when a handshake is offered.

Competitors test limits, both mentally and physically. They take increasing chances then brag about distance and speed to build their own courage. This makes others ask, "Why can't I?" All should consider their level of fitness, consult with a doctor before elevating heart rate, decide which routes will suit, and note afterwards how they feel. If shortchanged, a longer ride next time may satisfy better. If tuckered out, alter routine, cut back, hydrate better, and take gels or snacks during or right before. A well designed loop allows bailouts. Yet destination rides can be fun. So it behooves each rider to fully appreciate day's dew point, map's features, planned stops, prevailing wind speed, terrain covered, what to bring. Being prepared results in enjoyable outings; spontaneity teaches you about your tolerance thresholds.

Illich put it nicely, "The use of the bicycle is self-limiting. It allows people to create a new relationship between their life-space and their life-time, between their territory and the pulse of their being, without destroying their inherited balance... A bicycle really is the most efficient tool on earth, a perfect transducer to match man's metabolic energy to the impedance of locomotion... outstrips the efficiency of not only all machines but all other animals as well." You'd think cyclists would listen to their bodies and quit or slow down when tired. Yet those addicted to acceleration push themselves ever harder, trying to duplicate that g-force rush they've felt in a racy car, only to wind up hurting themselves or worse. You need to adapt your attitude along with your body.

The local news announced an investigation into death of a bicyclist found on Rocky Hill, a notorious climb. In all but a small percentage of bike fatalities, overtaking mo-ves are at fault. Yet you can overexert yourself with dogs chasing. In 1988, German model and Velvet Underground singer Nico died riding, had a minor heart attack, probably caused by long heroin abuse, which caused her to fall on her head then hemorrhage. A surprising number of adults over 40 have atrial arrhythmia or blood clots which can lead to heart attack or stroke. Prodded by commercial spin, television doctors dimly repeat rumor of penile dysfunction, yet never report fact of automotive leg. Causes of deep venous trauma are dehydration, excessive sitting, particularly where veins are pinched by crossing legs, motoring instead of biking or walking, and restrictive clothing, like socks or undergarments. Ultrasound detects DVTs and represents diagnostic medicine's fastest growing market. It's good advice to back off, drink often, drive less, find socks and shorts that better fit overdeveloped or swollen legs, and ride with companions who keep a similar pace.

Riders don't mind some hills or traffic, but not overwhelming challenges. More ride bikeways than roads. Easy weekday rides held by bike shops or nonprofits were better attended than any of his club's special events. A flat century draws a crowd, but not a hilly tour. Among bicyclists generally, a 12 mph pace is exceptional, especially on club route terrain. Yet it's a low average for club members, most of whom finish a century in less than 8 hours. Sunday club rides did draw a higher than average echelon, mostly has beens and wannabes; it didn't attract local elites, who raced for real in sanctioned Sunday meets.

Acceptance doesn't equal welcoming warmth. Club's charter made it duty bound to welcome public. This takes patience and people skills, neither of which club officers possessed. A club should encourage those who don't now ride by whatever means, such as children's rodeos, guided bikeway tours, or just sticking with those who are struggling. For those who can make haste, why not stage time trials? Why not hold more off-road events? Automatic century registration, existing bike shop discounts, free admittance to races, and occasional weekday rides, might make membership fee well worth it. Such suggestions are wasted on do-nothing dollar grabbers hiding behind nonprofit status.

Instead, club seemed determined to weed out the balky, cranky and weak, the very folks who needed prodding. Club's big but shrinking membership was built on a mission to serve everyone. All it needed to fulfill its promise was an earlier start time every week, a relatively flat 15 mile loop, some events and races, and sophisticated leadership. The more that participants do, the more they want to, so club became whatever its members made of it given available time and personal inclinations. It became less about giving than taking, never enough caring and sharing. Modern life's fast pace doesn't leave room for civility, even in a club where a reduced pace versus mechanized contrivance is readily perceived as a norm. Aggressive, automotive, competitive drive is too hard for some people to shake. Speed is simply another addiction that superficially seems to serve, like caffeine in morning coffee, until it results in headaches and heartaches.

