

ADVICE FROM THE WISE OLD COACH

“EXPERIENCE IS NOT WHAT HAPPENS TO YOU. IT IS WHAT YOU DO WITH WHAT HAPPENS TO YOU.”

—Aldous Huxley

Wisdom comes from experience, but only if one learns the lesson implicit in the experience. For cyclists, wisdom is intimately tied to knowledge of the limits of the ability to do physical work and to withstand abuse without suffering injury. That knowledge can come from personal or vicarious experience of what happens when one overdoes training or racing. Wise riders know when to push and when to back off. They “push the envelope” but from the inside. Some wise riders have an innate sense of what they can handle, but most have gained their wisdom at the cost of a disaster or two.

Age and experience bring wisdom, but wisdom can come to a rider of any age, often after one has done something stupid. A 50-year-old rider with a sore knee visited me for a bike fit. After he was fixed up he was greatly relieved. He had been afraid the soreness was a sign of aging. He explained that in his youth he had been able to ride as much and as often as he wanted, but when he recently jumped on the bike after many years of no exercise, building up to 100-mile days within a month or so, his knee had started to rebel. I sympathetically told him my own story: I rode occasionally in college and then set out to ride from central Oregon to San Francisco on a bike I had pulled the seat post off without marking it. The year before I had toured 3,600 miles at 100 miles per day with minimal training, but after the first 170-mile day of the Oregon-Coast trip, my knee was getting sore. By the end of the second day it was so bad I had to catch a bus home. It turned out the saddle was about 2 inches lower than it had been the year before. My knee has been sensitive and occasionally sore ever since, requiring very careful bike fitting, arch support and long warm ups to stay pain-free. Both of us began to age and learned the importance of bike fit, he at 50, I at 19, after doing something stupid.

Melissa Sanborn is an elite, national calendar racer in the US who gained wisdom from a drastic training error. She writes, “I can tell you that racing because the pressure is on you from team goals and expectations when you’re not ready to race is something I haven’t experienced much until this year. I was sick 3 times this winter... I would build and then get sick again and this cycle doesn’t

stop until you’ve either been sick so many times that you couldn’t *possibly* get sick again or you do it right and rebuild slowly and take the needed time off and not try to do too much. It will compromise your whole season.” Melissa raced well below her usual ability early this year, but learned to respect her body’s need for a gradual return to training and racing after an illness.

Melissa’s experience is far from unique. Multiple Ironman finisher and qualifier for the Kona Ironman World Championships Jonathan Puskas learned from this experience: “In June 2004, I decided to race Ironman Coeur d’Alene while sick and taking antibiotics. As expected, I blew up on course and suffered to a 13-plus hour finish (3 hours slower than the previous year). Following the race, it took nearly two months before I could race or train again. Further, my body rebelled against any quality training/volume for nearly 6 months requiring me to miss the entire 2005 long-course triathlon season.” Jonathan lost a season, and learned not to race when sick.

Jose Morales Zuger is from Guatemala. He is strong enough to get on the podium in national level races even when sick, and he routinely raced sick or shortly after being sick against my advice. (In his defense, it’s almost impossible for him to find clean drinking water where he rides and races). Finally his body rebelled. He ended up with quadriceps muscles that give him agonizing pain each time he tries to pedal. He’s been off the bike several months. He is also losing a season and possibly his career, but has learned the importance of racing healthy.

Many times I have had riders insist on doing hard races before they were physically prepared, only to perform poorly and end up burned out before they reached their potential. One of my clients decided to do one of Northern California’s hardest races as his season opener, with no race miles yet in his legs. He finished so beat up that he could barely train for several weeks, wrecking his early season. To be fair, I didn’t warn him about the danger of what he was doing. This was years ago, before I understood the risk he was taking.

Several times I’ve had clients race against my advice on minor injuries that could have been corrected with a quick bike fit before the race, only to have the injury get enough worse to require time off. Most of them learned from the experience the importance starting the process of correcting bike fit as soon as one is aware that there is a problem.

The parallel I see between these situations is that in each case an athlete did something stupid, something he or she should have known better than to do. In each case the athlete got away with the error for some time, denying for as long as possible that there was a serious problem but eventually found the limit, and learned not to push it any farther. That is wisdom. Others have repeated the same errors again and again, not learning from them.

GAINING OR BORROWING WISDOM

How can a rider gain the experience without paying the price in pain and missed opportunities? It’s natural for athletes to want to compete or to challenge themselves and not to want to back off. In fact that’s part of what makes them athletes. In cases of illness, injury, poor bike fit or inadequate preparation, that enthusiasm becomes a liability. That’s where the coach comes in. Riding hard is the natural condition of a bike racer. I can’t help a rider who doesn’t love to ride. The job of the coach of a true competitor is not to encourage the rider to train more or

harder but to help the rider hold back when appropriate, to moderate pace and take rest days as needed. It’s natural for an athlete who has never faced limits before not to believe in them. For someone to be an athlete, they have to be willing to punish themselves, to ride into fatigue and pain, and to occasionally do things they know are not safe. Sooner or later a bike racer rides home in the dark, or dehydrated or near delirium from hunger. Such things are part of being a bike racer. They make the racer tougher. Serious but unwise athletes often keep riding through illness or injury even when that activity is detrimental and is increasing the chances of a season-ending injury or illness.

While an athlete naturally wants to race no matter his or her condition, doing so when one is not healthy and well prepared is an error. In such situations, the coach can help the athlete step back to see the bigger picture: This one race is important, but is it as important as the rest of the season or the rest of the career? An athlete headed for the Olympics, Nationals or other once-in-a-lifetime events should go if there is any way they can compete. For any lesser races, it makes more sense for a sick, injured or under-prepared rider to sit one or even several out in order to be able to compete effectively the rest of the year. The same goes for training when sick: training when sick doesn’t make one stronger, but it does make one stay sick longer and miss more good training. Sick riders should ride short and easy if at all, even if that means “not sticking to the plan.”

When athletes are sick or injured, they are apt to be in denial. “I don’t feel *that* bad” or “It will probably get loose after I warm up”... They want to train and race. Athletes will convince themselves that they feel well enough to race until their performance is undeniably bad or until the pain keeps them from pedaling. They often see getting off the training plan or not racing as a failure. In fact, not racing when it is likely to be counter-productive is a sign of wisdom and maturity. Riders who have never been sidelined by injury or illness and don’t believe it could happen to them are immature, and like other immature people, they benefit by having a more mature and experienced parent, teacher or coach to guide them. The athlete doesn’t know the problems that can follow from these sorts of errors. The experienced coach does. Anyone who reads this column has no excuse.

USE MY EXPERIENCE

Early in my coaching career, if a client had symptoms of illness or a bike fit problem that was causing pain, I gently suggested they back off until they were well or until they got the bike fit fixed. If they had a race coming up but were not well prepared, I told them it would be better to wait. I spoke as a gently, giving friendly advice. I’d seen enough riders race sick or injured and do fine that I was not entirely sure how important taking time off was. Since then I’ve seen enough real disasters to become much more confident in my judgment and more strict with my riders. If we’re talking about one or two races versus a season or career, the decision should be easy. Now I tell riders that they simply should not race when sick, injured or under-prepared. Because experienced coaches have seen the aftermath of these errors, athletes wise enough to listen should not have to. *RS*

SCOTT SAIFER, M.S. has been coaching professionally in 1994 and has personally worked with more than 500 athletes, the vast majority of whom take most of his advice and don’t suffer unnecessary setbacks. He is somewhat grateful to those who have not followed his suggestions for their contributions to his store of experience. To inquire about benefiting from that experience, please call (503) 233-4346 or visit WenzelCoaching.com.