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So What Are You Racing For?

Every cycling athlete competes for their own personal reasons. Some enjoy the challenge of pushing themselves beyond what they thought they were originally capable of. Others are driven just from the adrenaline of the competition; proving to others that they can be the best. Whatever your reasons are, you will find they can change dramatically once you become part of a team. Being part of a team implies that you are no longer in it only for yourself. Your challenge becomes working with others to achieve a common goal, some of whom may not always be easy to get along with. The individual athletes are asked to use all their energy to support the one athlete who has the best chance of victory. The glory for the team becomes getting their athlete the win and showing that they can work as a cohesive unit. The coach or team director must know his athletes well in order to decide who should be the athlete of choice



Perhaps the biggest bicycle race in the Midwest is the U.S. Pro Criterium Championship in Downers Grove, Illinois.

It is the championship event for elite and professional cyclists and offers not only the National Championship jersey, but a very large prize list. The race is open to athletes from every nation, but only a U.S. citizen can win the champion's jersey. This presents the various teams with the challenge of making a definite choice. If they have a very strong athlete who also happens to be a U.S. citizen, then they will mostly likely try to win the race and the jersey. That will give them the prize money and the National title. Sponsors are always happy when the team they finance is the championship team. If on the other hand a team's best athlete is not a U.S. citizen, then their best option is to win the race and get the prize money. The jersey will then go to the best placed U.S. athlete. So even if the team cannot win the race, they might still win the jersey.

Danny Van Haute is a former champion, long time USA Cycling coach and the director of the Jelly Belly Cycling Team. In 2006 his team's challenge was to decide how best to approach their role at the US Pro in Downers Grove. Having athletes from various places put him in the position of trying to decide the best strategy for his team. The team meeting before the race was about what the goal should be for the race. It was possible for one of the Americans to win the jersey, but it seemed more likely that they could win the race with a Non-American. As the athletes rolled off to the start of the race, it seemed that their primary plan was first prize.

Now when a team plans for such things, they have to take into account that every other team is putting together a plan as well. When your team is planning for a race, what are they racing for? Is it the prize money from the overall win? Is it for all the big cash primes? Is there a championship title at stake? Whatever your team's goals, the athletes must be willing to work unselfishly as a team in order to achieve that goal. They also must be willing to change roles if something happens to the designated leader. That means constant communication and honesty among the athletes. Good teammates are willing to sacrifice their chances if they know for sure someone else has a better chance. If an athlete tries to get support that may not be deserved, it jeopardizes the team's ability to win. That can cause a lack of confidence that may prevent support in the future. If an athlete pretends to be able to deliver a good performance and then fails to do so, teammates will hesitate to help again next time. No one wants to waste their energy on a losing effort.

Not everyone is fortunate enough to have teammates. Most athletes go to races alone and try to find a familiar face to work with. That temporary support will end as the finish line draws near. This type of racing is okay for most people, when they have no choice. However, the majority of athletes prefer a race situation that gives them the chance to perform at their best and with some type of reliable support. If you race alone, you need to develop systems for working with or around other athletes. That means getting to know and trust them not just as athletes, but as people.



Another way of looking at the question "What are you racing for?" is the reason for doing the race in the first place. There are some events that require a focus and level of preparation that makes them high points on a race calendar. This would include qualifying events, regional, district or national championship races or high profile races with a large prize list. These type of races should be approached with the idea of trying to achieve success or victory. Then there are the other types of races. The ones that are used more for training or preparation for a big event.

With these events the reasoning becomes more a matter of what can be gained for the future. Fine tuning a training plan can often include having an athlete compete without any attention being paid to final placing. The idea is for the athlete to push themselves in a way that might not happen during a regular training session. Instead of going for the win, the athlete tests themselves. The goal for the day may be to see how many hard attacks can be made before there is no energy left in the tank. Cyclists sometimes call this burning matches. Your book of matches only has so many in it. When they are gone, they're gone.

Finally there is the notion of simply doing a race for the thrill of having done it. I know a number of athletes who enter a race just to say they did it, or just to enjoy the excitement of having competed with friends. This year I went back to the Snake Alley Criterium as a competitor for the first time in many years. I didn't go there thinking I would win. I went there with the idea of challenging myself to enter and finish a very difficult race. I also went with the intention of showing some of the junior athletes on our development team, that no matter how hard a race may be you must try your best to finish. My personal results were nothing to brag about, but I rode as hard as I could for that day and I finished. I had someone ask me later, "What did you drive all the way to Snake Alley for if you didn't think you would do well?" Before I could answer, another friend interrupted, "You did Snake Alley? I'm impressed. You'd never get me on that course!"

Whatever the reason you race, enjoy it! Life without challenges is boring and empty. There is no time in life when it is too late to do something. There is nothing about cycling that cannot be fun if we choose to make it fun. Despite all the suffering and exhaustion that comes with such a long and difficult event, no Tour de France winner has ever done that race just for the salary or prize list. Every champion will tell you that there is definitely a lot of fun to be had racing. Now shut off this computer and go have some fun!