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What are you looking at?

Have you ever watched or participated in a bike race and seen an athlete just crush the competition? Maybe you were the one being crushed at the time and you thought to yourself, “Where did that guy come from?” or “How did she do that?” It can be a humbling experience. If you are a new athlete this dilemma can be even more baffling because your experience in the sport may be limited or perhaps nonexistent. If all the competition can be that tough, you think maybe you should find another sport. The trip home from the race is bound to include thoughts about what it will take to get better in the sport.

Sometimes what happened during the race can be very obvious. You or someone else made a mistake and the competition jumped on it. You messed up and you know what not to do next time. Then there is the race where you are caught completely off guard and the next thing you know, you're history. Was that Superman you just lost to or was it an unlucky break? When you are confronted by a strong performance, one of the most important things you can do for your own morale is to review the situation carefully and decide what it is you are looking at. Were you out classed or just having an off day? Even if your performance was not as good as your opponent's, you still need to recognize all the things you did correctly.

No matter how talented an athlete may be, they do not just suddenly appear on the scene like Merlin the magician. Chances are good that years of work and failure preceded the stunning performance that got everyone's attention. Often an athlete's strong performance will come as no surprise to a lot of people. Those are usually the people who have ridden with or against the new superstar, when winning wasn't always easy.



(525) that no professional has ever matched. He won on the track and on the road, setting records and crushing the competition. To this day many knowledgeable people consider him to be the greatest cyclist who ever lived.

When Eddy Merckx came out of the peloton to win his first big race, October 1, 1961, you can be sure that it was expected in the eyes of many people. Four years later he proved he had arrived with his first professional victory. What made Merckx such a good athlete was his drive to win. During the 1970 Tour de France, he not only won the Yellow jersey, but the King of the Mountains and Sprinter's jerseys as well. Even if he had lost the first fifty races he entered, his drive to succeed would still have shown through. During the years that he was competitive, he amassed a collection of wins

When he raced, the question wasn't whether or not he would win, but how would he do it this time. In the eyes of many people he was Superman.

Sometimes you get the chance to see someone emerge from the ranks and begin to stake their claim on the future. Sometimes it is someone you know. Sometimes it is you. At the 1996 U.S.C.F. Junior National Championships, several athletes were laying their claim on the future. Erin Mirabella had been the 1992 Junior Women National Omnium winner. She returned to championship form after recovering from a leg injury. She went on to compete at the National and International level and represented the United States in the Olympics.



Another story was written at the end of a long day at the 1996 Junior National Track Championships. The athletes competed in various events throughout the morning, afternoon and evening. They were watched by their parents, coaches and rivals. The evening competition included Junior 17 and 18 year old men racing the one kilometer time trial. The racing had been going well and there were some strong performances. It looked like the time to beat was going to be about one minute and nine seconds. A respectable time to be sure and a basic qualifier for the Junior Worlds team.

Then Darth Vader arrived at the starting line. He had a jet black, rubberized skinsuit, black helmet and a black carbon fiber bike. The equipment was state-of-the-art and the image was impressive. It was the dark of night, storm clouds over head and the velodrome lights stabbing down on the start/finish line. Every eye in the place was on this athlete when the starting gun went off. As the race unfolded, it was clear this was going to be the fastest ride of the event. One minute and seven seconds later it was all over. It was clear that the remaining athletes could not hope to eclipse what had just happened.

And that was the question on a lot of minds. What had just happened? This guy came out of nowhere and just killed everybody. Or had he? As I mentioned before, no one comes out of no where. The local athletes had been familiar with Brian Sitcer, but the people who raced on the West coast were. So too were the athletes who competed at the 1994 and 1995 Junior Nationals. This athlete was not some Superman from another planet, but an athlete who specialized in one event. He won the kilometer and the 1996 Junior National Kilo Gold Medal.

The opposite side of this coin is that you could very well be the athlete everyone will suddenly see turn in to Superman. We need to talk about this other side of the coin. Let's reverse the view about what are you looking at. When you look in the mirror, what are you looking at? Do you see yourself as a competitive athlete? If you don't, you need to start. They say time is money, but time also gets people into bad habits. Habits like not seeing how you are doing as an athlete.

Get an 8 ½ x 11 sheet of paper. Write at the top of the page in capital letters and red ink **“YOU ARE LOOKING AT A WINNER!”** Every time you do anything that brings you success, write it on that piece of paper. If you figure out a new bike handling skill, write it on the piece of paper. If you made it through a tough

race and did well, write it on that piece of paper. Hang the piece of paper up in the bathroom next to the mirror where you can see it every day. Every time you reach a goal, improve a skill, place in a race or just get better, write it down on that paper. Everyone goes through days when they just don't feel good about something. It is important to keep track of what you have already done and what you are going to do next.



During the 2007 Tour de France they had an athlete profile about Christian Vande Velde. Like most great athletes, he admits he is his own worst critic. He does a great job, but is the first to notice his mistakes. What has helped to make him such a good cyclist is that he can get past the mistakes. That is what every cyclist needs to do; get past the mistakes. That is the idea of having a sheet of paper there on the mirror. It is so simple, but so good. Everyone needs those little reminders of how much they have grown. How much they have already done well. The other thing you need to do is remember where you are going. Every athlete has goals that they aim for when training or competing. Write your three top goals down on small pieces of paper. Stick them all over your house to remind you why you are doing what you do. Stick them on the refrigerator to help you remember to drink orange juice instead of eating ice cream. Stick them by your alarm clock to remind you why you are getting up so early. Stick them by the door to remind you on your way out why you are going riding instead of to the movies. Reinforce your actions with little notes to yourself.

No one gets to be good the easy way. There is no magic bullet to make someone into a super racer. It takes only one viewing of a Tour mountain stage or Paris-Roubaix to see that hard work is the key to success. Things like the Tour de France are seen as the biggest challenge because it calls upon an athlete to give all they have to meet the challenge. Just entering that race is the dream of every top cyclist. For these athletes that challenge starts all over again every day when they get up and go ride. The goal for you as a new rider is to start seeing your hard work as being valuable, even if the first efforts are small. You must give yourself credit for the work you do and when the days are tough, look at that sheet of paper and remind yourself...."**You are looking at a winner!"**

Now turn off your computer and go ride! Good Luck!