

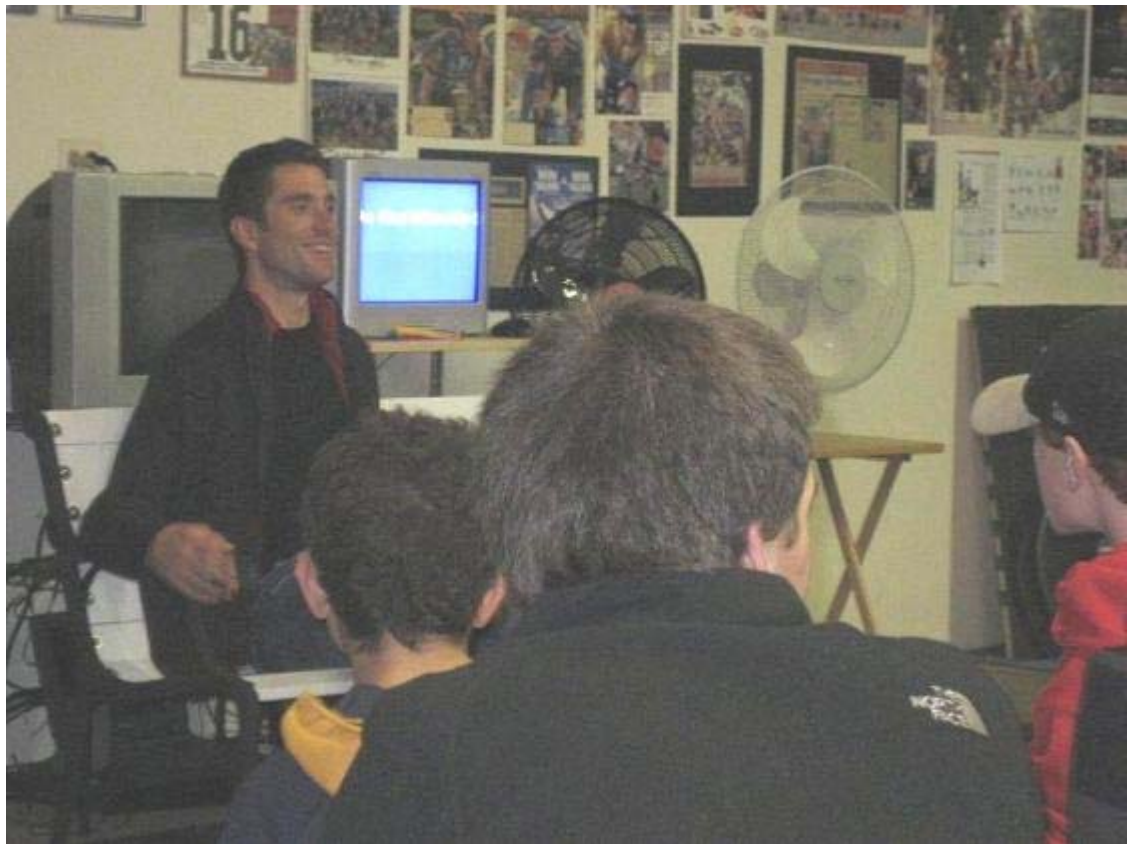
by Steve Thordarson
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What is a role model and where do you find them?

I have been a coach for USA Cycling for about 25 years. During that time I have coached a lot of different athletes. Over that time I have coached a majority of Juniors, both boys and girls. There are a lot of things that make coaching Juniors a little more difficult task sometimes. There are the usual things that go along with learning a new sport, but when you are young you need a role model or two. These are the people who make you feel excited about the sport you are learning. Most of the time they are what we might call the stars of the sport. The people who have risen to the top of their sport.

The trouble is that sometimes the people we choose as role models can fall a bit short of our expectations. There achievements in sports are undermined by their lack of character. I can try to teach an athlete everything they need to succeed, but I am probably not the person that inspires any of them. That is where the role model takes over.

Over the years I have steered the Juniors I coach towards athletes that I consider to be great role models. These people don't just excel at their sport, but are really nice people as well. You see them on television, or in the pages of a cycling magazine. When I travel, I try to get autographs or pictures of the "heroes" for the Juniors. Unfortunately, the average Junior will never meet their role model in person. But once in a while they get the chance to meet one of their heroes.



Friday the 13th can be a day some people go through cautiously. However, November 13, 2009 will be a day a lot of Chicagoland Juniors will remember for the rest of their lives. That's the day they got to meet Christian Vande Velde.

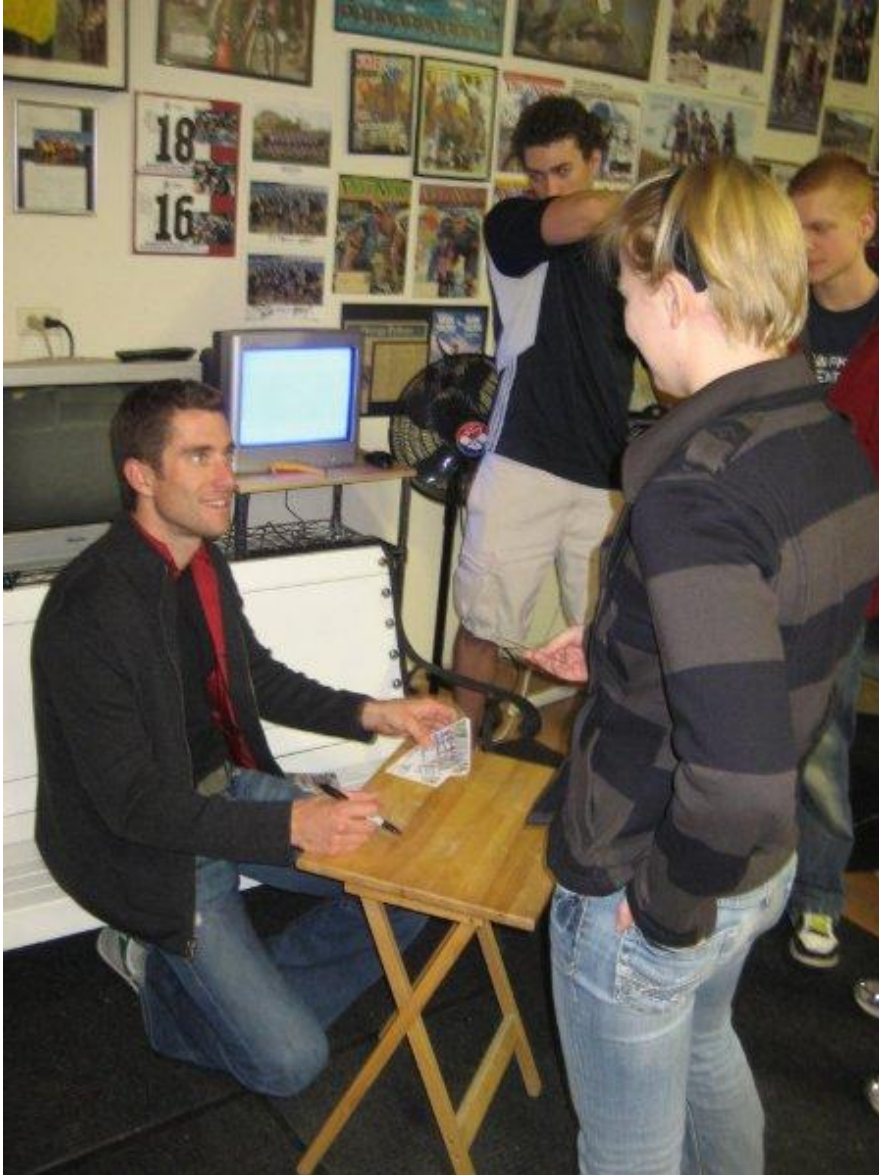


Actually they didn't just meet Christian, but hung out and talked with him for about 90 minutes. There was food and drinks for everyone and a great atmosphere. They asked him a lot of questions about everything you could think of, got plenty of great advice, heard lots of personal stories, got his autograph and had their pictures taken with Christian. Not a bad way to cement a position as role model.

It wasn't just one sided either. Christian had wanted this to be a Juniors only event. Parents were welcome, but they sort of hung out at the back so the kids could be up front. I can see why he is a good father, because he likes talking to kids.

As I mentioned before, part of being a coach is trying to point the Juniors at good role models. In this case the credentials of the athlete were a no-brainer. Christian has had a dream-come-true type of cycling career. He started out as a Junior here in the Midwest. He went from local teams, to the US National Team, to the US Postal Service team with Lance Armstrong. In 2008 he reached a place most cyclists will only watch on television; Fourth place in the Tour de France! Sounds like a good candidate for a cycling role model.

But a role model is often more than just someone who has achieved things an athlete wants to duplicate. I don't want to sound like I am part of a VDV fan club, but there is more to this particular athlete than results. There were 40 kids from a bunch of different clubs in our shop that night and they learned a lot. Despite having amazing success over his cycling career, Christian Vande Velde is as humble and down to earth as they come. He has not let his cycling results inflate his self-esteem at all.



Cycling is one of the most difficult sports in the world. As a Junior, most kids will not have teammates or even have friends who understand what they are doing or how hard they have worked. There are very few schools that are willing to include cycling in their list of student sports. In that kind of an environment a good role model may be all an Junior has to relate to.

Years ago I read a story about a famous basketball player who argued that he was not a role model and that people shouldn't look at him as one. No one can control becoming a role model. We can't prevent someone, even a complete stranger from wanting to copy us in some way. The struggle for us all is to live our lives in such a way that we actually can be good role models. Knowing that you are in the public eye puts an obligation in front of you to act in a way worth copying. Individual character can do more than even the best results.

It didn't matter to any of the kids at our shop that night that Christian is still working on his first Tour de France win. He has already achieved more in cycling than most of us will ever achieve. In 2008 we all saw just what Christian Vande Velde is capable of when he gets to be the leader. In 2009 we saw what a power house his team has become. Who knows what we will see in 2010. One thing is for sure. We will continue to see an athlete who loves his sport, the people who cheer for him and the family who has helped make him what he is.

Thanks for the inspiration, Christian!