

TAKING FLIGHT: MY ROAD TO BIKE RACING

My midlife crisis hit when I turned 50. When I was younger and skiing a line of moguls, my legs would talk to me. Now they would scream. Then my friend David asked me to ride bikes with him in the Catskills. We rode about 20 miles, stopping several times for me to rest—I was not feeling great. On one downhill, we passed a guy riding uphill, fast. I wanted to ride and look like him: fit, fast, and focused.

I lubed up my steel city bike and began riding Catskill roads, timing myself to see whether I was improving. I began shopping for a better bike. In one bike store, the employees were admiring a racer who had just won a race. I began reading cycling magazines. With a vague idea about the Tour de France, I bought my first cycling jersey. It was yellow. The fantasies began: *I'm Lance Armstrong*. Fantasy and denial conspired in a beautiful way. I threw myself into riding at higher intensities for longer periods. I was King of the Road. I went to see a bike race in Central Park. Reality crunch. These guys were serious. They talked the talk and rode the ride and looked professional. I was hooked. I wanted to race.

I trained all that winter, got a USCF racing license, and mustered the courage to enter my first race, sponsored by New York's Century Road Club Association (CRCA) in Central Park. As I lined up with the other novice racers at the top of Cat's Paw Hill, near the Boathouse, I remembered my cross-country running races in high school. How I had hated those races, which I entered because my father expected it of me. This was different. My heart rate was high, I was anxious, but the dread was gone.

The starter said "Go!" and we were off, clipping into our pedals, shifting gears, and spinning our pedals to match the speed of other racers. Thirty-odd bike chains whirred around their sprockets. As we rode together in the peloton, I remembered the film *Winged Migration*, where an ultralight plane flies next to a flock of birds. As in that scene, every racer had the same frame of reference: The bikes and riders seemed still, but the landscape was moving. Racers changed position a bit, but not much. In that thrilling moment, I felt like I was part of something that was not complete without me. I belonged.

That same day, a new racing term entered my vocabulary: "dropped." On the second lap around the park going up the dreaded Harlem Hill, I could not keep up with the peloton. I tried not to be noticed as I crossed the finish line alone. Fantasy and denial had gotten me into the race. A single, thrilling moment galvanized me to persevere.

Since then, I've joined one racing team and have gone on to help start another. After each race, my teammates and I share reports of what happened that day: the great moves (usually by our team), the breaks, the crashes, the stupid moves (usually by the other teams), and the drama on the road.

As a source of inspiration, denial has been replaced by a proper training regimen that allows me to achieve my objectives. However, fantasy remains a key ingredient. Who knows? Perhaps 2007 will be my breakout year.

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