

Life on two wheels: Stories of cycling, the body and health

By Will Newman (with James Brighton)

My journey into my chosen sport – cycling, wasn't 'typical'. Unlike other children my passion to ride didn't start through interaction with my friends, a role model or an experience in physical education. Rather, having played football and skateboarded (which exposed me to creative ways of thinking, musical styles and aesthetics) my sporting biography changed direction near my 12th birthday when my father was diagnosed with Testicular Cancer. Having received this news and undergoing chemotherapy which eventually resulted in his remission, he decided his life needed a new direction and he would participate in more sport, enjoying his 'healthy' body again. Inspired by his own experiences of what Frank (1995) would call the '*restitution narrative*' amongst cancer survivors, where faith is placed in medical intervention to restore the body to a healthy, functional and 'normal' state, and the heroic narrative told by Lance Armstrong, the 7 times Tour de France winner who also overcame cancer (see Sparkes, 2004), my father decided to start cycling to raise money for charity.

With a new consciousness of the mortality of my father, I decided that I would join him on his cycling expeditions. At this time in my life, I was still working through my relationship with him. We had different interests (he wasn't committed to my skateboarding career!) and I guess we were restricted by accepted constructions of masculinity that meant we should be stoic, emotionless, uncomplaining and ultimately emotionally detached with each other. However, our shared experiences of cancer changed our father-son relationship profoundly. For the first time perhaps as a young adolescent, I realised that life was not stable and safe and there were more experiences out there. Importantly, I wilfully decided to develop a more meaningful relationship with my father. Dragging myself out of bed and swapping four wheels for two was the first step.

Before I knew it, I was not just cycling to spend time with my father (which I loved as we talked as we 'did' things together) but I was developing a cycling career for myself. I willingly immersed myself into the (sub)cultural 'norms' that dominate this sport and learned to push myself to levels of physical pain that I had never experienced before. In turn, my capability to graft out long rides and adhere to masochistic nature of the cycling culture bought reward and self-satisfaction. Rather than question this, I embraced it, couldn't get enough of it. A sign of 'true' commitment amongst my new found cycling friends was if you could push yourself so far and so hard on a ride that you collapsed and had to call your parents to come and pick you up. Call it a result of an over-conformity to 'the sporting

ethic' (Coakley, 2008) or a performance of masculinity, or playing with the boundaries of 'edgework' (Lyng, 2004) I identified more and more with 'being' a cyclist.

As part of my new 'healthy' regime, I developed an instrumental rationality to my body, viewing 'it' as "equipment". I quantified my body in terms of how many miles it lasted without giving up, how fast it could go, what foods it consumed, and what supplements it needed. Rather than accompanying my father where emphasis was on support, enjoyment and "getting round" I was now concerned with watts, calories, heart rate and power outputs as evidence of the 'mortal engine' (Hoberman, 2001) I was cultivating for success. Whereas other 'lads' at school experimented with 'less healthy' activities such as alcohol, drugs, clothing styles or which accompanied more 'traditional' sports and their rituals, my sole concern centred on how far I could push myself and how fast I could go. In short, I gave myself up to the sport and became a 'racer'.

However, life as a committed cyclist bred further risk. Although my chosen sporting identity appeared a 'healthy' choice I quickly became aware that it threatened my wellbeing in a number of ways. In particular, the ultra-competitive cycling 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 2005) constructed its own social values which I quickly embodied. Although I have not ingested prohibited ergogenic aids such as EPO or engaged in blood doping that the sport is so vilified for, I have pushed boundaries of risk that have had undesirable consequences on my body and self. I have acquired a serious back injury and experienced psychological difficulties and negative effects on personal relationships from which I have felt vulnerable and isolated. Rather than assess my health however, I continued to follow the path of identifying as a racer. Upon selection to a National Junior training camp I quickly observed and engaged in unquestioned adoption of cycling-centric rituals such as shaving my legs, consuming the latest 'super' supplements and intense dieting. Outside of riding, I learned to dress, perform and carry myself like a cyclist mimicking the professional cyclists. As Albert (1999) suggests then, risks taken in the professional cycling habitus have seeped into the amateur community, informing how amateur level racers think about and treat our bodies and those bodies around us.

As time passed and I reached my late teens, I became suffocated by the ultra-competitive nature of cycling and the bodily practices I had become subservient to. Although I never feared failure, I became increasingly concerned by the anxiety this fostered in other junior cyclists and by my increasingly fragile sense of self I decided to change direction. After all, following one path unquestionably can blur alternative paths that can be taken. Enjoying the notions of science and training central in cycling I decided to merge my interests by completing a BSc(Hons) in Sport and Exercise Science at Canterbury Christ Church University. Here, I mix my studies with competitive Time Trailing. I enjoy interacting with likeminded people, but I have to remind myself to get the statistics and performance measures out of

my head and simply do what I love. I now see myself as "healthy" in a more rounded way, not just "healthy" for elite cycling. I'm still some way from slapping a basket on the front, but I have smelt the roses.

References:

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