

Cycle St. Louis

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Wednesday Night

by Steve Pittman

Dark clouds roll east across the Mississippi River at 6:40 p.m. and open up on the Gateway International Raceway in Madison, Ill. The “A” riders have just completed two laps of their regular Wednesday Night criterium race. But when the pouring rain turns to sheets of rain, USCF race official Marilyn Roberts steps into the middle of the track and stops the race.

The A riders stream soaking wet into the covered pit area as the sky turns darker and rain pounds the tin roof. Along with the “B” riders waiting to race at 7:30, the structure now protects 100 or so cyclists who watch as the storm delivers its fury.

I look around at the group and realize that I know at least half of them. However, the pecking order prevents me from socializing with more than just a few. Somewhat akin to a pack of wild dogs, respect and rank is based on the number of kills here. I don’t respect anyone I can beat, and those who can beat me (everyone in the A race and many in the B race) will rarely make eye contact, much less strike up a conversation.

Those who fall in between, the ones I can take on a good day, I watch the closest. We can talk. But tangling with one of them is the toughest. Some kid who just started racing I can drop without injury to me or him, and the same holds true when I challenge someone well above my rank. But matching up with a rider at or near my level means guts win, and putting your guts on the line hurts, win or lose.

At 7:15, some of the nicest bicycles in St. Louis still litter the wet pits unattended. Theft is never an issue here. My own \$1,300 ride rests against a steel pole unnoticed. None of these guys would want it, nor would I desire any one of their bikes. Mine is the best bicycle of them all and will remain so until I buy another.

At 7:45 (15 minutes past the start time of the B race) the rain continues to fall although not as dangerously as before. I can see that the A riders didn’t want to go back out, and I too begin to lose my will to race. I’d rather go home, that is, if everyone else goes. But to leave now would mean losing face, rank.

No one ever really wants to race. I liken it to going to church. It’s hard to get motivated to go, but when it’s over you feel much better. It’s a thing you tell your buddies and yourself you want to do while watching the Tour de France. But when race day comes, the moment of truth, I must force myself through



a cloud of fear and panic to the starting line. Once I get past the first three laps, I can relax a bit. And, if I finish up front, it’s a blast. But when you tell people you’re a racer and that you’re racing tonight, you can’t very well look them in the eye later and say, “I just got scared and came home.”

The race mentality is neither right nor wrong; it is simply the truth. The truth for me is that despite the fear and my hatred of it, I cannot stop. At some point every spring I take a spanking at the hands of a friend or some stranger out on the road. My neck hair stands, my lips peel back to reveal sharp, white incisors, and I launch into a seven-month racing/training spiral that delivers pain and ecstasy in equal doses.

At 8 p.m., Wednesday Night race organizer Vann Knight picks up a bull horn and calls off both events. Tonight, no one gets hurt. All good doggies go home. **CSL**