

Handout Mentality – when a ride becomes a race – Part One

A friend dropped by the other day as he does regularly for a chat about bike racing. When we had dealt with the usual subjects such as does Lance still love me and chemical imbalances in the pro peloton, he mentioned that there was a spirited debate going on in his club about groups setting off for rides which were turning into races. I reminded him that he and I had been in one such group many years ago when he had been stirring the pot up front and I had simply dropped off the back. I had a race the next day and I had come out for a tempo ride at most. I wasn't interested in going any faster and I didn't. To my surprise, hostilities ceased at the front and they waited for me, almost apologetic that they had been anti social. Apparently the recent intra-club argument centered on this etiquette or lack of it.

I have the advantage, (which comes with the disadvantage of being between 65 and dead), of having seen this argument from a wider perspective. So I will start with a confession. I was once bailed up by a driver when an unofficial race I had organised got out of hand and caused him to take evasive action. I was all of 8 or 9 as I remember. When I was 12, I joined the Cyclists Touring Club in Britain and started riding with the local group. There were two categories of riders – “hardriders” and “loiterers” – possibly as much as 10kph difference in their plans for the all day Sunday jaunts and a diametric difference in their attitude to cycling. Hardriders sometimes raced, loiterers never raced. This was the CTC, basically a touring organisation, not directly related to the large network of clubs who participated in cycling as a competitive sport.

I have to pause here for a snapshot of Britain in the 50s and 60s to explain the importance of the bicycle. A bike in Britain in the years after the war was like a scarf, gloves and a raincoat – something that few people could live without. It was essential transportation for all but those who lived in large metropolitan areas with efficient bus and rail. It was also the means by which the millions who lived in crowded and depressing urban situations could escape to picture postcard country villages within around an hour of pedaling. So cycle touring was very popular, racing perhaps less so.

There was a sharp division between those who rode for pleasure and those who rode for pain. (There were also divisions between the racers and I'll get to that). Those who toured would be unlikely to use any contrivance or article of dress that would be used in a race – compare that with today's lycra world. Even racers, when training, prior to the mid 60s, would be unlikely to use racewear – with the exception of shoes. When I think of the miles I've covered wearing jeans and Y Fronts – double seams in all the wrong places – I wonder why it took me so long, (and I was one of the first in my area to convert) to adopt a track suit with racing shorts underneath. So appearance was part of the etiquette – it was unseemly to turn up for a ride overdressed. Better to look too casual than too sharp.

Roads in Britain then could be divided into three categories. Main highways which cyclists avoided absolutely, lesser roads which were generally safe enough and the little winding lanes which were deliberately sought out for their variety and peacefulness. Now if you've watched the odd British TV country based sit-com, you'll have noticed that some of these lanes are barely two cars wide so a bunch of 20-30 bike riders needed to observe a disciplined approach for their own safety. This included intra-bunch communication, the ability to switch from double to single file on a warning from the front or back and above all the ability to ride in a bunch without causing danger to your companions – a steadying hand on the rider at your side before looking behind for instance. Club elders enforced the rules and it was a general principle that a year's bunch riding with a club was the necessary apprenticeship before graduating to racing.

Back to the divisions between the racers. Then, as now, there was a debate over whether cycle racing would be allowed on public roads. In Britain it had reached the level of a serious dispute which eventually held the sport back by generations. Some argued that cycle racing on open roads would not be tolerated which led to the unfortunate belief that only time trialling would survive and only if it was held in near secret circumstances of plain dress, no numbers, 6.00am start times and race courses only mentioned in code. My local was the F2R – the F2 raced in the reverse direction. (Most time trials took place on out and back courses). Other freer spirits, pointing to the national sports of France or Belgium, simply ran “massed start” road races. Sometimes when the conservatives of the Roads Time Trial Council met the trend-setters of the British League of Racing Cyclists at a bikies' hangout, pumps were drawn and it got physical. The situation was eventually turned on its head when the time triallists took more and more liberties in search of faster times, a leading exponent and record holder being caught riding the white line on a busy arterial road to maximise the tow from traffic. Police came to the conclusion that bunches – which were restricted to 40-60 riders – escorted by lead and follow cars, were less of a traffic hazard than 120 tow chasers spread out at one minute intervals.

The picture I'm painting happened a long time ago in a far off land. But it's mirror appeared here in Australia when cycling became the endurance sport of choice. Space age bike technology and colourful lycra lured folks without bike handling skills or experience into the bunch via rides like Around the Bay and Murray to Moyne. The enduring popularity of handicap racing in this country means that there's an entry level for all who want to be racers, whatever the ability or skill. Then there's the new outlaw image. The Frankston Derby only had a bad name if you knew it's history. The same free for all along Beach Road in southern Melbourne is now the “Hell Ride” and you don't need the details to get the idea. It's all in the name. *To be continued*