

Musing McKinney

When to say "When" -- The Devil's Lesson in Humility (as told to Scott)

By: Scott McKinney

"Failure is not an option." "Quit is not in my vocabulary." It's the mantra for double century riders - particularly those who take on the Devil Mountain Double.* No matter the pain, conditions, or course, we endure.

Yet there I sat beside the wilderness road that snakes up the east side of Mount Hamilton, surrounded by the filth of my vomit, contemplating a "Did Not Finish." There was no happy place from which to draw. My training and experience were wasted. My focus forcefully narrowed to right here, right now. Failure my best option. Quitting, blissful release. A "DNF," entirely justifiable.

Through mile 110, when sickness first struck, I was riding comfortably with the third group on the road, with a legitimate shot at finishing top 10 in the DMD and posting a similar placement in the California Triple Crown Stage Race Series. Now, after throwing up three times, losing any semblance of power and taking more than two hours to cover less than 20 miles, I knew logically that a DNF was the right choice. Yet even there in the ditch, with my head buried between my knees, I knew I would hate this decision. How could I explain to my kids that it's OK to quit? How could I explain the choice to my buddies who suffered my self-righteous, indignant email blasts following their DNF just last year? Worst of all, how would I feel about this later?

Lee, the SAG driver who plays music from his RAAM-equipped support van, checked my status. "Did you fall?" I must have looked like a bicycle test dummy.

"No, I'm sick."

"Are you in the Stage race?"

"I was."

"Well, you're losing time," he quipped. "Do you have Tums?"

"Ya."

"Are they in your pocket or your stomach?"

"Well, they were in my stomach. Now they're on the ground in that vomit over there."

Lee's good humor cheered me some. I soldiered on. OK at first. Then, worse whenever my heart rate exceeded 130 BPM -- my new maximum. The 6.2 mile climb up the east face of Mount Hamilton near San Jose falls between miles 130 and 136 averages 8.2% and features 11 pitches of 15% or more. So, despite attempts to soft pedal, standing was often the only way to keep rolling. That caused my heart rate to immediately jump above 130 -- merely cruising any other day. I stopped to rest in a turn out and lay belly up in the dirt and gravel not caring that flies and ants found me delightful. I wretched and purged bile in front of a total stranger who quickly fled up hill. Knowing my stomach was unable to take on fluid or nutrition for the additional five to six

hours required to achieve today's goal, I reached for my computer and stopped my timer: 9 hours, 40 minutes, 18 point 9 seconds. I quit.

It was at this very instant that the Devil taught me the hardest lesson of all: humility. But the Devil wasn't done with class. There in my private hell, more than 25 riders passed me on the side of the road. Every one of them asked how I was doing. "I'm sick. Send SAG." After waiting for what seemed like an hour, I gave up on rescue, remounted and climbed toward the Windy Gap water stop, two miles further uphill. Moments later, Tom the expert volunteer, met me in his car. As I climbed in the car and sipped cool water he loaded my bike. It was official. There would be no completion. No placement in the Stage Race. The only grace in my exodus was that there were no cameras to document the moment.

Following my DNF, I sat at the rest stop and watched rider after rider drag themselves up and over this beastly climb. Clydesdales. Women. Middle-age. And last-place. All were riders I had blown past two, three, four -- even six hours earlier.

In the column titled "Justifiable" there is a mountain of evidence and personal experience supporting my decision. Several years ago, in another double century, temperatures topped 100 (add another 20 for road reflection). That day, I got sick at mile 195 and remained uncontrollably sick for several hours. I later learned vomiting is a symptom of heat exhaustion which can occur independently of a headache or muscle cramps. Untreated, you basically melt from inside. Fatality is not out of the question. Sometimes it's best to eat humble pie and live to ride another day. In the other column is but a single entry: Quitter!

The most frustrating thing is not knowing exactly how to correct the problem or if what I learned will help overcome similar conditions in the future. Yet in this Devil's trial there are lessons:

1. Humility. Never disrespect the course. Always respect other riders. That heavy-set girl may pass you before the day is done.
2. Don't count your placement or time before you finish. You must actually complete the ride for it to count.
3. Proper conditioning requires training in the same conditions as those in which you intend to race. No amount of riding in rain or frost prepares you for heat. Temperature differential is important too. During the DMD, temperatures were 20 degrees hotter than those in the weeks prior. I love the heat, but my body needs time to acclimatize.
4. If you're not peeing every hour, you're not drinking enough. The fact that I didn't pee until mile 70 was an early indicator of trouble. Once you fall behind in hydration, you are susceptible to heat-related issues: nausea, cramps, and headache. Once you've gone there, returning to high-performance requires time.
5. Mixing drinks too sweet can keep your stomach from normal processes. In my case, I couldn't eat or drink more than a sip at a time. Because one stop was out of water earlier, I loaded my bottle with ice and topped it off with Mt. Dew. At the next rest, I added water and a scoop of Gatorade.
6. Know when to say when. It's not worth dying over.
7. When you fail, deal with it, reset your goals, and move on.
8. SAG is not a taxi. SAG's job is to keep riders going. Expect the trip home to last a long time.
9. My SAG followed the course to the end so we saw riders from a car's point of view at dusk and after dark. Several riders were unprepared for two or more hours of night riding. They had neither safe rear lights nor adequate headlights. Don't get caught in the dark no matter how fast you think you are.
10. Quitting sucks. Don't do it unless you absolutely have to.

The Devil won this round. We are now tied 1-1. I believe there is a grudge match in our future.

* The Devil Mountain Double, or DMD as it's known by insiders, is California's hardest double century at 207 miles and 19,000 feet of climbing. The difficulty is rated "Radically High." As the second leg of the California Triple Crown Race Series, it's also a timed race. The course warms up on the 3,200 foot climb of Mount Diablo before taking on a series of tough climbs in the hills of San Francisco's East Bay: Morgan Territory, Patterson Pass, Mines Road, Mount Hamilton (east face), Sierra Road (part of the San Jose Stage of the Amgen Tour of California), among numerous other rollers and bumps. I'm convinced this beastly course was conceived by minions of Beelzebub himself. http://www.quackcyclists.com/Dmd07/Dmd2007.htm#The_Devil