

## INTO THE RIDE #36

### The Comfort Concept

*or*

### How to Have Fun Without Really Dying

By Randy Schlitter

A good friend of mine, who publishes a specialty magazine about cycling, once remarked how he was finding more and more enjoyment jumping on his single speed fat-tired beach cruiser than mounting his high-end recumbent. He explained about how he wasn't that fast anyway, and the less pretentious horse didn't obligate him to strive for speed. He pointed out that actually riding along and looking about, soaking up the ambience of the environment, was becoming a deeply enjoyable event. And even more shocking, he claimed it seemed to make no important difference in transit times.

Lucky for both of us this exchange was occurring over email, so neither could read a face, hear the gasp, or be offended by mutterings or snickers. My return replies spelled out my fear of him going to the dark side, slipping away from taking cycling seriously, and above all admitting he was getting old, I am sure was perhaps within the content of comment.

For heaven sakes he was riding flat-footed, no clips, traps, shoes, tight pants, or jersey! Dare I mention...sans helmet. There he was out there bare and exposed, as far from the image of an avid cyclist one could be, running the supreme risk of blending in as just a guy on a bike! The man was riding without an ego, perhaps one of the most difficult things to ever perform on a bicycle. The revelation was awe inspiring, raising my appreciation of his two-wheeled valor up beyond standards yet known; a man riding minus an ego! Imagine!

This was sheer genius; think of the performance gains, weight and drag reductions, and the cost. Holy cow, this guy could ride just about anything and enjoy it. This was echoing of Richard Bach stuff, it had all the fiber and feel of Zen and beyond. Surely it was April first and my dear friend was only pulling my cycle sore leg. But he wasn't; it was for real.

For real because I too had been thinking of making similar adventures to the dark side, to this world of ego-checked, equipment no-matter riding. I though, being a designer and purveyor of fine cycling machines and all attachments for enhancements, was finding this form of cycling-minus-ego to be the most challenging yet.

My grip on the years of seeking more and more performance was tight and hard to release, but suspected it could be a refreshing rinse of something new but oddly familiar. There within this comfort concept of riding, I was certain, was an old friend, the kid in me I must have abandoned about the time I learned to say and spell titanium. Could this be a passing fancy? And would I revert to my old self by trying to hammer it out in the lead pack, at the very next group ride? There was a ride the very next night; I had the sinking feeling I would not know the answer until the pedal mashing started.

The Pizza Ride, every Thursday night, always a good mix of hammerheads, beginners, bent riders, roadies, and young high-powered engines on mountain bikes. These guys made a habit of dropping anything, just to prove their prowess.

The ride started with the usual winding through town on our cobbly brick streets, people slowly divided up into clicks as speed differences became apparent. Right from the start I was feeling the need for speed and hung with the lead pack. No, my ego was not checked yet, I was like a nicotine addict making shallow promises, ok in another mile I really will relax and just ride. Darn hard to do, dressed in full riding costume, mounted to a wisp of a bike with all the latest gear for the go.

The experiment was not working; half way to the destination I found myself alone and way out front. The hot-rods were not giving chase, letting me be the lead. I kept looking back and wondering what the deal was, surely I was not pounding them. Almost with shame I rolled into the restaurant parking lot, with the pack far behind, claiming a hollow “victory”. I am sure the smug look on my face when we all gathered around the table inspired the comment it was not a race. We always said that, but still sprinted ahead, and toyed with each other. It always had the feel of a race.

With a belly load of pizza we headed back in the fading light of the summer sun. In about a mile the hammers came down. The plot was revealed. The young engines came blasting by, my early start was evaporated, and I like the old fool I am, gave chase. The smug look on their faces told me they were in large reserve and paced with me only for a moment. The increase was something a bit out of my reach, and with the first hill I was dropped. One of the riders was kind, saying he had to get back to start his night shift. What, otherwise you would pace with me? That was when I became a fading image in his mirror. That was when the weight of my ego became a tortus-ring around my neck.

With the lead pack fading in front and the others behind, I was neatly in the middle, and alone again; just me and my fancy bike, and an uncooperative ego. Drop back and ride with the others, chat a bit, enjoy this, it was my cyclist-mag-writer’s voice in my head. I fought it, wanting to catch the young engines, and show off my old man strength (the affectionate term my kids lend to me when I wax them on the trails). His haunting voice persisted, and I felt dumber by the mile, for not yielding. Then it happened. She came up on my left, a surprise from the rear. She was gasping from the effort to close the gap; it had drained her, I thought smugly. But the look in her eye, the texture of her voice said everything. She was proud to have caught me. Now I was in a pickle. Did I slow to pace with her, or do I add the steam and show her how it’s done. She wasn’t speaking, just panting; I’m thinking the pace was too much for her. She wanted this, to reel me in, and me to show no mercy. At least that was my ego’s mind-speak. Then another surprise, she pulls ahead, like a bolt! I was stunned, and gave chase. The terrible stigma of letting a girl beat me hung out as a challenge.

I couldn’t, the power was not there. The girl faded ahead, and with it, my enjoyment. The experiment to ride sans ego became a miserable failure.

A few days later I rolled up to the local bike shop on one of my fat-tire rigs. The day was superb: light breeze, cool temps, and I on an errand from the factory to a downtown bank. The stop by the shop was the first show of face since the pizza ride. Inside the shop manager was busy arranging some new road bikes on the floor; she greeted me with a cheery hello. We chatted a bit about the pizza ride, and the one coming up. She was oblivious to the internal battle I staged that day, and only revealed in what great fun it was to have a good turn out, and to see so many getting into cycling. It was perhaps her cheery words, and refusing to judge, that finally brought clarity to the whole event. It was all in my head, that heavy ego thing, weighting me down, throwing out demands to ride my guts out. My friend was right, he was learning the true meaning of the sport, being about the ride, not the hardware, being about the simple act of being in it, absorbing the moments, and how rare and special it is, to be on this plain, checking the ego at the door and finding the Zen place. I rode away from the shop with a deep smile, and two lazy legs, not minding to a pace, not looking at the speedometer, not worrying at all about the time;. The banker could wait, birds are singing, the trees are green, the air smells sweet, and I of all people was learning to stay into the ride! The promises made over cobbled brick roads, ajar with conviction that the next pizza run it would not matter who passed or was passed, this rider was learning how to have fun without really dying!

Until next time stay into the ride!

Author’s Note: Much of what you just read are composites of events, places, and people, some or none of which, other than the hope of making a point, was true.

*INTO THE RIDE*

