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Developing Toughness

One thing is very apparent if you followed this year's Tour de France – cycling is a tough, tough sport. Of course, just competing in a grand tour meets the definition of toughness. But even beyond competing in a grand tour is the toughness required to overcome adversity, which is inherent to racing. In the first days of the race, crashes dashed the dreams and hopes of contenders and challengers. Because of the prestige and importance of Le Tour, you might reason that such disappointments would be unbearable for these riders. "Throwing in the towel" would be an understandable response. To the contrary, we watched these riders race on. How do these competitors continue even after they've lost any possibility of meeting their goals in this important race? It comes down to toughness. They deal with the circumstances then readjust their expectations and race on.

Using the pros as an example, we feel that developing toughness in our juniors is just as important as developing their race skills and fitness. Indeed, toughness is a beneficial quality for every person regardless of the endeavor; hence, we believe that coaches should include this element in their junior training programs. Although the stakes for our juniors are not as lofty as those racing in the Tour, their disappointments and frustrations can weigh nearly as heavily.

It is widely accepted that without work ethic and mental toughness, the super gifted individual will ultimately be less successful and have a shorter career than the average rider with work ethic and mental toughness. With that in mind, we prioritize the improvement of toughness from the beginning in our program. Just like the Tour competitors who are forced by adversity to readjust, we teach our juniors how important this ability is for their long term success in cycling and other endeavors.

We present our juniors with progressively difficult challenges with increasingly higher risk of disappointment. We teach that the most important qualities are persistence and patience to overcome these challenges and to handle disappointments. Our motto is "There's always another race".

We teach that the "fun" of cycling is learning from training, racing, and coaching. Naturally, it is exciting for an athlete when the goals are met, but we teach that it is just as rewarding to analyze the steps, testing, and adjustments done to gain improvements that led to the outcome. We stress these three lessons:

- What should have happened normally does.
- Accept the circumstances whether you succeed or fall short.
- There is always another day – an event, a race, a goal. Life goes on and there will be opportunities, perhaps different than originally sought, but they will continue to present themselves.

In detail, here is our message to our juniors:

"There will be times that you will be on top of the world. Other times you will be at the depths of the ocean. Good times replace bad times, and visa-versa. Enjoy the results of a great performance, but try not to inflate your ego. You do not want to expect too much of yourself and become overly disappointed if you do not exceed or equal your "best performance" in your next event. Likewise, do not be too hard on yourself when you have a bad performance. There is a certainty – there will be good

days and there will be bad days. On good days, it could be due to your abilities and preparation or it could be chance. On bad days, your failure could be due to poor preparation, or poor tactics. Or it could be due to things out of your control – it could be chance. In either case, good or bad, accept the circumstances whether you succeed or fall short: *There always will be another day*. Once an event, a race, or a day has passed – it's over. It's in the past. And regardless of the past's outcome, you should look forward with optimism."

Understanding this message is paramount to developing toughness in our juniors. Younger and less experienced juniors tend to have more difficulty in accepting the circumstances of racing; but the example of our older, more experienced team members helps solidify our message. Leadership by example is the best method toward developing maturity and toughness. Our message is easier to accept with the example of our team leaders because it's not just the "words" of the coaches.

We measure our coaching success by watching our juniors gain maturity – "accepting the circumstances" and learning from the circumstances. Another measurement of coaching success is watching the more experienced juniors develop leadership by means of their example to others. The team approach definitely has an advantage to developing toughness - moral support, leadership, and teamwork are great assets to coaching.

A key in developing toughness is presenting challenges that are difficult for juniors to overcome, but not so difficult that their falling short to achieve these challenges does not break their resolve. One example for developing toughness in our program is our annual Chattanooga Ride that we hold each spring. The ride is a single day event that covers 142 miles through the foothills of the North Georgia Mountains. The ride has a time limit and we require that the participants stay together for the whole ride. We arrange full vehicle support for the entire ride, which includes two breaks – it's a ride not a race!

The Chattanooga Ride is an integral part of our junior cycling program. It offers our juniors something huge to overcome. Of course, not every member of our team is ready for this challenge because they are neither strong enough physically nor tough enough mentally to complete the whole ride. To participate, team members must be selected by their performances in progressively difficult qualifying rides that we conduct throughout the spring.

All junior team members and their parents are made familiar with our Chattanooga Ride and the steps toward qualification. We do not discriminate by age, size, or gender. Qualification is determined by performance and progress throughout the series of qualifying rides. In this way, we have a step-by-step process to evaluate the riders. Additionally, each team member is not overwhelmed by the ultimate goal: qualification for our Chattanooga Ride. Indeed, if a member is not selected to participate in the next qualifier, they have perspective for setting goals for next year.

We present qualification, and especially completion, of our Chattanooga Ride as a special honor. It's build into our program as an ultimate achievement. Indeed, the ride gives an opportunity to those who may not excel in racing an alternate avenue for success. By the end of the qualification process, we generally have ten to fifteen juniors, who are selected as Chattanooga Ride participants. We select only those team members who demonstrate the physical and mental ability to complete the event. Even so, completion is not guaranteed. The distance, duration, varied conditions, and group dynamics produce a challenge that varies from year to year. Hence, there is risk for each qualifying participant that they may not complete the ride; however, grit and toughness are products of this endeavor regardless of the outcome. Teamwork and team spirit and are additional products of the ride because the group works

together to get as many teammates to complete the ride as possible. This practice is our team approach in action! For those who complete the ride there is exhilaration and increased confidence. For those who fall short, they accept their circumstances with pride while looking forward with determination to complete the ride in the following year.

Our Chattanooga Ride is unique to our program. Indeed, we've gotten some criticism about our Chattanooga Ride because it does not fit within a "normal" race training schedule. Some have questioned, "Why would you have your kids ride 142 miles when their longest race is only 30 miles!" You may have the same question, but for us the answer is simple: There is more to training than just satisfying the physical side. There is more to cycling than just racing for today. We believe in developing our juniors for the future. Developing toughness is an important lifetime skill and it's not just for Tour competitors – it's for everyone. There are side benefits, too. Our Chattanooga Ride challenge gives the kids some diversity and diversion from the pressures of racing. We have found that anything you can do to keep juniors involved in our sport while avoiding burnout is always a plus!

Still you may not think that a "Chattanooga Ride" is not appropriate for your juniors, but we urge that you find some challenge that pushes your kids to test and strengthen their toughness and prepare them for their futures.