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Developing Patience

It's generally accepted that today's juniors are heavily influenced by peers who need immediate gratification. We have observed this condition among several of our junior team members. Often the parents are enablers, too. It is our observation that the condition becomes even more prevalent when a measure of success is achieved. Once we've helped our youth reach a level of success, they expect more and more quickly. Frequently, their expectations for greater success are accelerated. Other coaches have mentioned to us that they've had similar experiences with juniors and parents. Indeed, we've discussed this phenomenon in past columns. We call it "creating a monster", which should be avoided for the sake of the junior, the parent, and the coach.

As we all know, success at one level is no guarantee when entering the next level of competition. The categories are inherently more challenging at each higher level. Also, "aging up" in the junior classifications are similarly more competitive. We owe it to our juniors and their parents to provide them with a sense of perspective and patience. It is our responsibility to develop patience for our youth cyclists. How can we help our juniors develop patience so they can handle their progression in cycling? We hope to answer this question in this column.

Most important when formulating our answer, we need to advise our juniors and their parents to slow down and consider the big picture: "Don't be in a big hurry. The fortunes of bike racing can cheat expectations with frustrations."

There are two important areas: patience in their training and patience in their cycling careers.

Patience for Training

Several of our juniors use power meters for their training. Their ages are from 14 to 18 years old – both boys and girls. We provide training plans for each junior and they post their daily workout results by uploading the corresponding workout file for our analysis. Having this information is valuable to our coaching staff. It gives us insight to how juniors are training. It also gives us some insight into their perceptions of their training.

Juniors are similar to adult athletes in one respect with regards to their training. Joe Friel commented in his latest book, **The Power Meter Handbook**, "For some riders... training is all about producing numbers, especially high numbers". The juniors in our program who use power meters are very result oriented; they want to excel to the next level, so they often go harder than they should on "easy" and recovery days. Our coaches must keep a pulse on these kids. These juniors can easily overreach, which can lead to poor performance, frustration, or burn-out. Controlling their patience for training and thereby developing their patience for training is the easy part of developing patience. It is relatively easy to convince these kids to back off their training because we can show them Training Stress Scores (TSS) and Intensity Factors (IF). They understand and appreciate the numbers. Their successes in races confirm patience in training. On the other hand, when it comes to patience of their cycling careers, the task is more difficult.

Patience for Cycling Career

These same juniors who want to produce high numbers in training are the ones who want to be promoted to the next race category or reach the next level as soon as possible. Developing patience for their cycling careers is more difficult and even more important than developing patience for training.

Throughout the years, we noticed several young and talented athletes leave our sport. We believe these athletes leave cycling prematurely. Many of these cyclists achieve early success and experience meteoric climbs in their careers. With their early successes, they bolted from local teams to select teams while acquiring acclaim and sponsorships along the way. Naturally, their expectations excelled along with their careers. Also quite naturally, many of these promising cyclists hit a “ceiling” along their rise. The “ceiling” occurs for different reasons such as sponsorship cutbacks, team management changes, roster changes, missed promotions to the next level of the team, and “aging up”.

The “ceiling” is a new experience for many of these athletes and they are unprepared for the circumstance. To the contrary, they are “programmed” by the system to expect more as they move forward in their careers. They see their peers receiving promotions or offers to join higher level select teams. The pressure mounts and few can overcome the frustration of not meeting their expectations. Often their parents, the enablers, are overly frustrated, too. The financial burden and involvement can feel like a setback. Pressure mounts from their families, too. They run out of options. It’s easy to understand why many leave our sport at an early age.

We face these challenges on our own team. Several of our more successful juniors want to be noticed by select sponsored teams or they want to be promoted to the next category. Many times the parents are right there with them. Perhaps you’ve heard the argument we’ve heard from some of our parents, “My child has earned it. He/she has earned a move on to the next level.”

We have an answer to our juniors and parents, but it’s a long one.

- We give them examples of promising young athletes who moved too quickly. We tell them that impatience and high expectations often cause these promising athletes to drop out before reaching their potential (most cyclists reach their potential in their mid to late 20’s, and even older).
- We emphasize that juniors are not “little” professionals. We emphasize patience and maturity for their career development.
- We emphasize including collegiate cycling in our juniors’ career pathway. We encourage school success and emphasize good grades in our program. These elements are important to parents.
- We underscore reasonable goal setting including long term career goals. Developing patience starts with the goal setting process. Reasonable goals must be established and our influence, as coaches, is invaluable.

In summary, we reiterate that patience is the best policy to their long term success.

When developing junior cyclists, we must do everything that helps them develop completely for a cycling career. To develop patience in cycling careers, it’s important to include options that allow your junior to continue cycling beyond their junior years. Establishing multiple pathways is crucial. For example, we’ve established relationships with several college coaches and clubs over the past few years. These relationships have led to four varsity cycling scholarships and three collegiate race club membership in the past two years. We have two outstanding collegiate offers for our next program graduate. We encourage coaches to establish similar relationships with colleges for their athletes.