

Baptism by Fire;

from Blue Suits, IBM, and the Cobbled Streets of Boston to Maillots, the Pro Peloton, and the Mountains of Spain

It was a sunny January morning in Madrid, Spain where I awaited the arrival of a *cyclist* who I would be meeting for the first time. My mentor's instructions were to be punctual, keep a low profile (figuratively), and to observe the mechanics of the group that I was to train with that day.

I was more nervous now than I had ever been during my recently abandoned career as an IBM marketing representative. When a cyclist appeared on the near horizon wearing a bright yellow jacket my heart began to beat a little faster still. As the rider approached, I could clearly discern the ONCE logo emblazoned on his jacket. My heart beat became almost palpable as I clicked into my pedals and prepared for take-off; and so would begin my first season of training with some of Spain's and the world's top professional cyclists.

The ONCE rider, Santos Hernandez, a friend of the bike shop owner who had taken a personal interest in me, made polite conversation with me during the 15 minutes it took to reach the meeting point. Upon our arrival at the site of the waiting group of some 8-10 pro riders representing top notch European professional cycling teams such as Clas, ONCE, Lotus, I was met with what is best described as a high degree of circumspect. My being the only one wearing a helmet coupled with my new-fangled DH Scott bars (new and not yet seen in Spain) only heightened the perplexion of these seasoned professional riders as to how this odd "yanqui" had wandered into their group.

Unlike US cyclists, who tend to be relatively educated and on the up-side of the middle class divider, European pro cyclists are, with few exceptions, a hard-nosed, tough, working class group. A collegiate cycling team is an oxymoron in Europe. Thus, I quickly learned that relating to this group that I had voluntarily left a white collar job and its sustenance to pursue my personal dream of becoming an elite triathlete, only served to increase their sense of bewilderment.

So what was it like to train 3 times week with a group whose members included mountain stage winners in the Tour, Giro, and Vuelta? Brutal, educational, nerve-wracking, exhilarating, are terms that fairly well cover the spectrum of experiences that I encountered.

Most of the training was done in a two-abreast, tightly grouped paceline (an unthinkable formation in my native Boston). For me, this was baptism by fire, as I had never trained in a group, much less one where the distance from my front and back wheels and handlebar to the next rider rarely exceeded 12 inches.

Initially, I lived in dread that my inexperience would cause a mishap and send that year's favorite in the Vuelta, Anselmo Fuente, crashing to the ground. Fortunately, the initial few weeks of training was moderately paced and over easy terrain, so I quickly became adept at group riding and avoided provoking an incident that would have banished me from the group.

Paceline riding did become more challenging as we began to venture out into some of the more challenging terrain that surrounds Madrid. For example, if the pace going up a difficult climb became overwhelming (and it frequently did) causing you to fall back 1/2 a bike length, all those riders behind you would now find themselves similarly 1/2 bike length behind their tandem. This would cause a heap of venal insults to be cast your way, further exacerbating your mental and physical anguish as you struggled to regain the "sanctuary" that was having your front wheel 6 inches behind the rider in front of you.

Many times I would pray that upon reaching the base of a difficult climb, that I would be positioned at the end of the paceline. This way, if I were unable to maintain pace with the group, at least I would not disturb the riders behind me and then have to endure the barrage of insults that would accompany this failure.

One such time that I was dropped on a climb, the group decided to sustain the pace on the ensuing downhill as I struggled to reconnect. For the next **20 miles** I fought desperately to catch the tail of the group that was relaying itself every 5 minutes. Several times I closed to 50 yards but invariably we would arrive at another climb and I

would be exhausted from my chase effort and once again fall further behind. Of course, the riders in the group would look back occasionally and found the sight to be very amusing.

When I finally did reconnect, they pointed out that it would be easier to ride with the group instead of chasing it. Funny guys, yet I knew that while I had not impressed them with my climbing that day, I had earned a certain respect for my doggedness. Gradually, I was becoming an accepted member of the group and was dubbed "el americano de Boston."

Another funny anecdote occurred one day when near the end of a ride we shifted into a single-file pace line and each rider was to "pull" for 15 seconds at a very fast pace before peeling off and attaching to the back of the evolving pace-line. It was pure exhilaration to be a cog in this elite group flying along at 35 mph. When it was my turn to pull I put in a solid effort and proudly peeled off and drifted to the back of the pace-line. What I then learned is that just prior to the last rider passing you, it is necessary to stand up and dramatically reaccelerate in order to catch the draft of the blistering group. Unaware of this, I simply tucked in behind the last rider and proceeded to watch them ride into the distance. Adios. There was no chasing them on this day.

My coming of age was perhaps best highlighted during an 85 mile tough, hilly ride that we did in early April shortly before the three week Tour of Spain race. It had been a particularly challenging ride over difficult terrain and I had hung the whole way while others had been dropped. I was tired but at the same time positively psyched. About 10 miles before the end of the ride we began the last climb up a short (1 mile) but steep hill. The pace was moderate as everyone was tired and satisfied that enough hard work had been done to be able to call it a day. What to do?

I took a deep breath and I ATTACKED! It was my chance for a little revenge and for once I was at least going to make these guys hurt more than they wanted. At a curve on the hill I could see the gap I had opened and while nobody in the group had as yet responded to my challenge, I could clearly sense their pique at having to decide whether to swallow their pride or make a painful go for it--half of my objective was accomplished. Seconds later the group disintegrated, as it became every man for himself in the race to the top. While I cannot claim to have been the first to the top (Eduardo Chozas was), I was not the last, and it was a blast.

The next season I would watch Chozas win a key mountain stage in the Tour with eventual winner Greg LeMond a close second. Somehow seeing Chozas drop the entire Tour field that day and finish 6th overall the next year made me feel not so bad at all the times he had done the same to me in the mountains surrounding Madrid.

I have many fond memories of those initial two years and I often chuckle at the good fortune I had in first finding my way to Spain, and then in happening into a group of professional cyclists whose talents I only really understood when I saw them elbowing for position at the front of the peloton in events like the Tour de France.

My cycling skills and ability took a quantum leap forward, and just as importantly, my experience with these Pros gave me a new perspective on my personal goal of competing at an elite level in triathlon. First, bearing witness to how amazingly fast these guys were gave me a whole new idea of just how high the ceiling was in terms of propelling a bicycle over ground. Second, as I contemplated my upcoming foray into triathlon's elite events, I realized that in least terms of cycling, I had already seen the worst possible scenario.

Two years later and coming off leg surgery, I went to race at Ironman Canada as a relative unknown. In attendance were many of the sport's elite at that time: (Scott Tinley 2nd at Hawaii 10 months earlier, Scott Molina Zofingen winner that year, Ken Glah New Zealand winner that year, defending champ Ray Browning, Christian Bustos, etc.) Some of you may know the story---some guy from Boston who trained in Spain broke the bike, run, and course records enroute to a stunning upset.