

“Expecting Nothing: My First Cycling Race Experience”

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I’m reminded yet again of something I’ve known for a long time. That is, if you expect nothing and get something, you’ll be satisfied. It’s a lot better than expecting something and getting nothing, which typically leaves you pissed off, if nothing else.

As I cycled from my Westside apartment to Brentwood, I was resigned to what I had expected for some time: I would not be racing. My category had filled up weeks ago, and the wait list was at least 30 deep. Still, I went to the registration table and inquired anyway. The response I got was just what I already knew... the category was full. I was told, however, to stand by, because names on the waiting list would be called before too long. So I waited, and even got a look at the said list. Only 25 names were printed, and mine was not on there. Obviously I was not even in the top 25, rendering an already unlikely race spot all the more of a long shot. Still, I listened to a woman call names, saw a couple guys get their race numbers, and watched the minutes to the race’s start time dwindling away.

Finally, two of us race hopefuls were left standing. The woman handling the list suddenly asked me my name. Startled, I quickly told her my name was not even there. She said it didn’t matter, that there were just two more spots still open. At this point, there were also just about two minutes until the start.

Within seconds, she had my name and license number, and I had my race number to pin on my jersey. A friend standing next to me pinned the number on me as quickly as he could, as I observed my soon-to-be competitors already gathered at the start line. Finally pinned, I hurriedly pedaled my way down the sidewalk toward the start, hoisted my bicycle over the metal barricade, then catapulted myself over it, much to the amusement of an onlooker.

Suddenly there I was, in the back of a pack of 75 racers. No more than 60 seconds later, we were off!

So began my thoughts as we tackled our first lap. “Would I be able to keep up with the pack for seven laps of 2.3 miles each?” Silly me for initially thinking the whole race was 2.3 miles! We were in it now for the next 40 minutes and more than 16 miles.

I first thought... “At least I started the race, and at least I might make it one lap with the group.” But the race pushed on, the pace hastened, and so did I! At a fast yet manageable speed, and with smooth, controlled turns, we were into our second lap, then our third, and so on. Soon my thoughts changed to... “At least I’ve done half a race.” There was not much break away at all... the racers were mainly together in one big pack, and I was right there in the middle of them! The fourth lap came and went, followed by the fifth and the sixth, each of them settling me more and more comfortably into the adrenaline-laden rhythm of competition.

I glanced down at my timer toward the end of each lap, and by the time I saw we had ridden almost 35 minutes, I knew we were now starting our last. And still, no major breakaway. We were clustered in

our wide pelaton, picking up the pace even faster for our sprint to the finish. And a sprint it was! I gave it my all and seemed to pass at least a few fellow racers as we neared the finish line. There was no way I could get to the front of the pack, unfortunately. The guys in front were still faster than I am, plus there was no place to get around them even if they weren't! I pushed myself as far forward as I could, crossing the finish line in the pack, just seconds after the top finishers.

In that moment, past the finish line and still moving, I did for the first time what I had not done throughout the whole race... I looked behind me. And some of my competitors were back there! So now I said to myself with certainty... "Not only did I finish the race, I was not last!"

After a short recovery, we were greeting and congratulating one another. It was an indelible moment of accomplishment, given that just one hour earlier, I had no expectations of racing. Soon people asked me how I did. My answer: "I crossed the finish line, and there were riders behind me." To me, that summed it up nicely.

As I made my way home some time later, I reflected on one of the most exciting and lesson-learning aspects of the morning. I had no time to get nervous, nor any time to get intimidated. By some stroke of luck and fate, I was granted this privilege to race. Given the matter of seconds I had to react and prepare, I simply had to jump in and do it. So that's just what I did... I went and did it! Even though I had some initial questions as to my abilities vis-à-vis my competitors, those questions did not enter my mind until the race was already underway. By then it was too late to wonder or doubt... my only choice was to do the best job I could.

I guessed there were at least a dozen racers behind me at the finish. Within minutes I saw the official results. For whatever happened to others I didn't see, and for whoever may have gotten dropped, my place was there on the chart: 45 out of 75.

This was my very first official, licensed cycling race. I could not have asked for a better "virgin" experience. I raced in the Gay Games two years ago, and even though that was an event all its own, I knew I had the race bug somewhere in me. So now, having leaped so quickly into it as I did, I feel I should have no excuse for nervousness or intimidation on my races to come... unless of course I'm trying to win them!

When all was said and done, I loved every minute of my unexpected race day. After all, I got something from expecting nothing. And that lesson alone is more valuable than any place in a race.