

IMPROVING CYCLING PERFORMANCE

Working with a Coach



DeRosa I Gavia Cycling

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Human Potential Catalyst

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INTRODUCTION

I believe that when people begin to improve or excel at a sport or physical activity which simultaneously increases their level of happiness their lives begin to change as if by magic. People become more aspirational, limiting beliefs begin to disappear and they move further along the continuum of their unlimited potential. Coaching and teaching provide me with the opportunity to help create or increase the rate of positive change in people's lives so I refer to my coaching role as that of a Human Potential Catalyst.

Every one of you reading this eBook has incredible potential – a capacity to excel that is more than likely way beyond what you currently believe you are capable of; my goal as a coach is to help you realize as much of that potential as possible.

Just about everyone has a story related to the time we made the decision to prioritize our personal health and fitness generally and our involvement in cycling specifically. Mine is a simple one.

In the early 1990's I was involved in trying to help a NYC developer resurrect himself from the aftermath of several disastrous real estate projects and for whatever reason all the mail would come to my desk. One day, in and amongst the large pile of mail was a postcard with a photo of someone's abdomen, completely shredded of course, with the following words; **“YOU TOO CAN LOOK LIKE THIS”**. (Yes it is true, there was a time when cutting edge marketing involved the use of postcards). At that time I weighed about 270 with a 50” waist, and as the saying goes, I was sick and tired of being sick and tired.

I called the number on the postcard, turns out it was the Peninsula Spa, and the call went something like this:

ME: “I just received your postcard and would like to come over and see your facility.”

PS: “Do you currently have a gym membership?”

ME: “I just moved into Manhattan and have a two week trial across the street from my office”

PS: “Just so you know we are very expensive.”

ME: “Oh. Well can I come over to take a look?”

Long story short, I waddled the three blocks from my office to the Peninsula, looked around, loved the place (top three floors of the Peninsula Hotel on 5th Avenue, what's not to love?) and asked the **BIG** question – “how much is a membership?”

(PS) “The enrollment fee is \$2,000 and the membership is \$175 per month.” (Remember, this was 1992; a monthly space to garage your car in midtown was about \$250/month; yes per month, not like the current daily rate!).

It was the last day of the month.

I had \$2,010 dollars to my name.

I joined!

In my accountant head I figured if I use the place every day it comes to 6 bucks a day; what a deal! So, every day at lunchtime I would waddle three blocks over to the place, change out of my suit and tie and into some sweats, walk 5 minutes on the treadmill (that's all I could do), showered, changed and waddled back to work. Over time I increased to 10 minutes, then a mile, then ran a 15 minute mile on the treadmill and so it continued – over time I got to a 3 mile run, bought a pair of Nike Air Maxes, 5 miles at tempo, a half marathon, some years later I ran a 50km ultramarathon in Central Park.

Fast forward to 2006 when I find myself, through sheer luck and circumstance, involved in having designed and built an 11,000 square foot health club exclusively for women and trying to figure out how to develop programming that might actually induce people to enroll and get results. We end up licensing a really great program that includes a cycling component called RPM, and we needed teachers so of course I did the certification and, against all odds that included a complete lack of cycling knowledge and experience, I actually passed the certification. After a few months I thought that knowing how to ride a road bike would make me a better teacher so I bought an old bike for 300 bucks, started to ride and found myself developing a passion for the combination of teaching and bike riding; I kept at it. In 2007 I bought a 2003 Merckx aluminum bike; again, as luck would have it the bike came with Campagnolo components and a Selle San Marco saddle (I had no idea that one could actually choose components and when they told me it came with “Campy” I had to look that up on the computer in order to know what they were talking about. Still, it was a portent of things to come). The first time I rode to State Line I turned around and went home; to me it looked as if cyclists were launching themselves off a cliff and I had absolutely no intention of following those lunatics! I kept at it, I studied and practiced. A lot! The immersion theory (obsession?) at its best. Since that time I have been very fortunate to have had the opportunity to spend a lot of time with cyclists, almost all of whom have had much more cycling experience and are much better cyclists than me, and naturally my being a ride leader for the Campagnolo GFNY Gruppo Sportivo has, in addition to being by far the single most impactful experience of my life, has allowed me the opportunity to work with cyclists of all levels, assisting them in achieving their goals. Over the years I have successfully completed additional certifications with Saris (Power Training Certification), I.C.E., and the USAC.

I could go on and on but suffice it to say that in cycling and coaching I believe I have found my life's work; I tell you this story so that you have some understanding of where I came from and why I like to focus on beginner and intermediate athletes – I believe it is where I can make the largest positive impact on people's lives.

THE COACHING PROCESS

I believe that the most successful coaching, the coaching that helps the athlete/student achieve the best possible results, is an art supported by science aided by instinct. I only coach athletes I can work with in person; I need to see them ride, watch how they react to different circumstances, try to understand what is going on inside their head and understand how they are feeling on both their good and challenging days. Having said that, I also believe in analyzing data, just not right away.

Please keep in mind what I said at the beginning of this conversation; I focus primarily on coaching beginner and intermediate cyclists and while **TRAIN LIKE A PRO EVERY DAY** is how I refer to the way I coach it refers more to the attitude and commitment to your improvement we both share rather than the specifics of the training. Professional athletes' lives revolved entirely around a series of **Game Days** and therefore they require an entirely different type of plan – much more detailed and specific to their EXACT requirements at any particular time – although as with you the focus on fundamentals should never be an afterthought.

The coaching process I believe helps most non-professional athletes/students achieve the best possible results can be described in three components: understanding what is true now, understanding where the athlete would like to get to over what period of time, and then creating, monitoring and adjusting a specific plan to achieve the goal.

What is true now requires us (coach and athlete together) to understand the current physiological, psychological and emotional status of the athlete (in the context of physical activity I refer to everyone as an athlete; sometimes I use the word “student” – basically I am talking about **you**)..

Physiological information includes the following; we test using observation and specific testing methods (the list is general and not all-inclusive), as applicable:

- The Six P's: position, pace, posture, pedal stroke, power and perceived exertion
- Knowing if there are any physical limitations
- Resting heart rate (RHR) and maximal heart rate (MHR)
- Functional threshold power (FTP) and other power related metrics
- Cycling skills and abilities on the bike including group riding abilities

Psychological & emotional status includes:

- Cycling history and background
- Personal history
- Ability to adapt to changes in conditions

- Ability to withstand discomfort
- Current personal issues that need to be navigated in order to be able to train properly
- Perceived importance of cycling in the athlete's/student's life
- Level of commitment

Where would we like to get to requires us to understand the nature of the athlete's or student's goals, the process by which that occurs can be as simple as a conversation where the athlete describes his or her goal - for example, to do well in a specific event, to lose weight or become more fit, to be able to climb better and/or ride further or faster. In many cases the athlete doesn't have a specific goal or goals in mind so we create some together. I am a believer in working from the general to the specific and to provide as much education as possible along the way. I often hear talk about FTP and power; I have a certification in training with power however I don't believe it is the most appropriate in depth conversation to have with an athlete without a conversation about the 5 P's I described above, nor should it ever be described as the end all and be all. Discussing power (output) without a correlating discussion about heart rate (the effort required at any given time to deliver that output) is missing the point. Fundamentals first, that's why they are called fundamentals. I like to use measurements that count (and provide some bragging rights for the athlete along the way. For example, in the case of new cyclists, I believe that there is more positive impact on their confidence if they can say "when I started riding three months ago I had to get off my bike and walk part of the Bradley climb and now I do it in the big ring" than if they say my FTP went from 200 to 225. No doubt the power measurement is important, it just isn't, in my opinion, the only thing that matters. It is important to focus on how you feel. What do you do if your power meter stops working; do you stop riding? Strava segments are fun but they don't really tell a true story of how well we are progressing unless we do the segments blindly. By that I mean, we ought to ride our ride while focusing on the ride and we are better served if we look at the segments at the end of the ride to evaluate our progress. We all know too many SSC's (Strava Segment Chasers) who don't participate in group rides and who basically plan their entire ride around a specific segment and how many cyclists they can pass on the list!

How do we get there is simply the creation of a plan that ties together the "where are we" and the "where we want to get to". I am sure you have seen or heard of the **SMART** goal setting process (**S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**ttainable, **R**ealistic and **T**ime-constrained). Plan creation and plan delivery depend on the athlete's needs and how I believe I can best serve those needs.

Specificity is simply creating a goal that can be measured in whatever form you deem appropriate. Finishing Campagnolo Gran Fondo New York in a time between 7 and 8 hours, being able to complete a round trip ride to Piermont from Fort Lee and riding 300km within a 12 hour period are all valid goals.

Measureable means exactly that; the metric used to measure is something that coach and athlete need to agree on ahead of time. It is typical to measure cycling goals in time, speed or distance however for athletes who are beginning to ride for fun and health how about we measure your progress by measuring the reduction in your resting heart rate or how long it takes you to get back to your RHR after a hard interval.

Attainable is sometimes tricky because we want to set goals that can be reached; the “art” I talked about at the beginning of this story is what helps us decide what is attainable. Some athletes come to us full of confidence but let them set too big a goal and they tend to over train while on the other hand there are athletes who are much more capable than they believe; keeping them on track to what seems like a huge goal is key!

Realistic requires us to take into account the athletes lifestyle, their ability to devote time to cycling training, responsibilities outside of cycling (imagine!), starting point and sometimes continual adaptation of the plan without letting the athlete discouraged.

Time constrained: a goal without a timeline is a dream.

SUMMARY

My goal in coaching is to help the athlete improve his or her life, not for the athlete to follow the plan in a vacuum. Step by step we relate the athletes cycling success to the potential for success in the most important aspects of their lives: relationships, health, financial potential, and capacity for personal development. Anticipatory thinking is an important quality in successful coaching; it is important to train our athletes with the question “how will this affect the other aspects of their lives?” as a major consideration.

I am a Level 3 licensed USAC Cycling Coach and have been successfully inspiring and coaching cycling students/athletes individually and in groups, both indoor and on the road, since 2006. In addition I have trained six of my students/athletes to become certified indoor cycling coaches. I write a blog about cycling and life: <https://humanpotentialcatalyst.wordpress.com>

If you have any questions about cycling coaching and training or have an interest in discussing how my coaching services might benefit you or someone you know please feel free to send me an email to vito.valentini@gaviacycling.com and let me know your story and how I might be of service to you!