



## **Exhaustion of Leisure: Identity and Cycling**

**by Finn Kolsrud**

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**Abstract:** This note examines amateur bicycling from a sociological perspective, relying on interviews and the concepts of exhaustion and flow. Kolsrud's project examines the ways that the drive to compete gets mixed with the drive to get ahead. His findings give him some surprise; he assumes that "badass" culture would define the racers' mindset, but he finds that sharing stories and sharing the workload are just as important. In the end, Kolsrud describes a complex "civilizing process" to racing and training that emerges when he more closely investigates the concept of flow. His ending questions complicate any easy notion that hyper-masculine drives must always form the foundation of bicycle racing ethos.

**Keywords:** sports, bicycle racing, criticism, competition, play, sociology, identity, bonding

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## Introduction

A few years ago, a colleague at the University of Northern Iowa asked me what I do for “fun.” After thinking about this seemingly simple question for a second, I blurted out: “road bike racing, um, like Lance Armstrong.” My colleague’s reply, “sounds exhausting,” sent me into a momentary existential crisis.

As an elite amateur cyclist, I realized that my “leisure” time is devoted to practicing for and competing in bike races. For many, the term “leisure” evokes ideas of relaxation or time spent with friends, doing something that involves little or no stress. Instead, individuals like myself spend their “leisure time” in stressful situations, participating in grueling training rides and bicycle races. In fact, some amateur cyclists will train upwards of twenty hours a week while maintaining full time jobs or class schedules.

I thought about exhaustion and leisure again after the 2013 Iowa State Cycling Championships, a 96-mile race in Riverside, Iowa; it is a particularly difficult road race. I asked myself, “why do I do this?” In fact, I did not enjoy any part of the aforementioned race. What was I getting out of this sport? Did my participation have anything to do with some basic needs, with my identity? During the following months, I kept reflecting on my participation in the sport of cycling. I had bad days and good days on the bike. I kept training, racing, and talking about both activities with cycling friends. I wondered how cycling shaped the identities of individuals like me. As a result, I decided to turn my reflections on racing into a study of cycling through the use of participant observation and formal interviews. I wanted to apply my training as a sociologist to my training as a cyclist, especially focusing on the ways this physical training might really be about identity training. Work and leisure are often discussed separately. However, I came to understand that the amount of time, effort, and discipline that even amateurs devote to cycling could resemble the professional, daily work lives of those same individuals. Individuals who were interested in working hard and achieving in their professional lives seem to apply the same mentality to their pursuit of the sport of cycling. My beginning research question was: how do interactions—among competitive amateur cyclists during racing and training—shape their identities?

## The Sport of Cycling

Very few people play professional American-style football, even though many males play football while growing up. It is nearly impossible to break into the ranks of a professional sport like football without the infrastructure of college grooming and having the right physique. In contrast, while it is not easy to become a professional cyclist, it is incredibly easy to race on weekends in either small local races or in larger, sanctioned, regional races. The nature of bicycle racing enables almost anybody with a bicycle and a desire to ride to engage in citizen races. According to Kendra Wenzel in *Bike Racing 101*, “the absolute best part about cycling is

that anyone, with the right amount of determination and motivation, can succeed. Our sport does not limit based on body type, background, age, or ability. Some of the best professional cyclists are those with average talent who also have a fanatical love of cycling” (viii). Although the sport has a democratizing, popular appeal, it is not an easy sport; and as Wenzel aptly explains, “fanatical love” is a necessary ingredient to success on the bike. Often, bike races involve adverse conditions such as rain, high wind, and extreme cold or heat. Additionally, most races cover long distances, with races ranging from 100 to 200 kilometers, accompanied by a shorter race—a “criterium”—the next day. Usually, criteriums are held on closed off city blocks that form a loop and incorporate downtown business districts. Crashes often occur in road races and criteriums, providing an interesting parallel to NASCAR races. The technical nature of the courses, the tight spacing between racers, and frequent crashes appeal to both sets of fans.

In fact, many cyclists I knew, even before I started my research project, thought of cycling training as both hard work and hard play. It may be that some of these people derived more pride in the hard work they put into their cycling lives than the work they put into their work lives. Jay Coakley and Peter and Laura Finley discuss what is referred to as a “sports ethic”: a set of norms that competitive athletes follow. First, athletes must be dedicated to the game above all else and must meet the expectations of other athletes. Next, athletes must continually seek to improve performance. Furthermore, athletes must play through pain and display toughness in the face of adversity. Athletes must not yield to any obstacles that they may confront. Before starting my research project, I thought that the “sports ethic” would be a major issue I would encounter often. But I was surprised by the direction that my project would take. Participation in cycling came to serve a dual purpose for the riders that I observed: it created a space for participants to live on the edge and feel like outlaws, and it simultaneously provided participants with a platform for pursuing individual goals and achievements. All the while, participants in cycling training and racing took part in a community where they developed shared rituals in order to further bonds between and among group members. And so I became increasingly interested in how participants competed against each other and also succeeded together.

## **Cycling and Sports Literature**

In order to understand the culture of cycling, it is helpful to have some knowledge about professional cycling’s relationship to the media. Professional cycling is not like American football, soccer, or basketball in terms of generating large amounts of revenue. Today, sports like football, basketball, and baseball are increasingly made for TV; as George Ritzer notes in *The McDonaldization of Society* (1995), television time-outs are now fused to the game itself. Cycling on the other hand receives little media coverage in the US, beyond sporadic television coverage of the Tour de France. According to Doreen Carvajal, writing in *The New York Times*, the sport’s popularity is only waning. At the elite level, the sport is contending with severe identity problems due to the negative publicity surrounding numerous blood doping scandals, especially catalyzed by revelations that seven-time Tour de France champion Lance Armstrong

had doped for years. Armstrong was stripped of all seven titles—and two of his former teammates, Tyler Hamilton and Floyd Landis, have also confessed to doping.

Difficulties such as televising a six-hour race on narrow roads and the sport's myriad doping scandals have impelled long-time sponsors to leave cycling. Yet, each year, a new crop of neo-pros and new fans are drawn to the sport, often called one of the most difficult sports because of the demands placed upon the rider's endurance and muscle strength. The very nexus of the sport seems to exist because of this contradiction: it is graceful and fluid, like flying, and yet, in races, it seems to be a sport of extreme exertion, even to the point of collapse. In *The Tour de France: A Cultural History* (2006), the scholar Christopher S. Thompson describes the early days of the Tour de France as a battle zone where "human suffering 'in the flesh,' the almost total exhaustion of the racers' moral resources, the bad luck of some, the physical breakdowns that 'nail[ed] others to the ground,' and the weather that 'deployed the somber veil of catastrophes'" were part of the sport's attraction (111). Racers were often called *rescapés* in French: survivors (113).

As a result, one of the main themes I have been investigating has involved the reasons why individuals put so much effort into an activity, without much visible reward. Generally, I have found how "toughness" is displayed through sports participation. First, there is the theme of the "survival of the fittest." Coaches and team leaders challenge players physically and mentally. The players that are the "strongest" go on to become team leaders. Second, as Steven Schact confirms in "Misogyny On and Off the Pitch" (1996), the idea of "no pain, no gain" is continually invoked. And, if players relent even after sustaining injury, they may lose their status on the team.

Record numbers of women are participating in sports. Title IX is cited as one of the reasons for this. Masculine and feminine dichotomies, however, still linger and can be found in images and language surrounding sports; the research by Lee McGinnis, Seungwoo Chun, and Julia McQuillan in "A Review of Gendered Consumption in Sport and Leisure" (2003), has guided my understanding of these imbalances and issues. "New" sports are developing that dispense with gendered language. Mountain biking, skateboarding, and snowboarding are individual sports that allow for femininity and masculinity in a variety of shapes and forms. The history of cycling is importantly woven into the history of gender equality, especially since the advent of the safety bicycle in the 1890s ushered in new forms of rider-friendly fashion which resulted in many cultural changes; a history of these developments is outlined by David Herlihy and Christopher Thompson. Women have their own race classification, but their equipment and clothing are nearly identical to men's. On the road, it is hard to tell the gender of a cyclist, which is not like the sports of figure skating or gymnastics. As a result of these characteristics and of the exhausting nature of the sport, a range of masculinities and femininities is often present in cycling. But, the nature of the exhaustion and suffering seem to push bike racing in line with other sports, in that there are often displays of hyper-masculinity in the racing subculture.

## Method

The participants of my preliminary investigation on the racing subculture were individuals who were actively engaged in road cycling. Those who were interviewed had been training and racing for at least one year. I asked questions that explored various dimensions of road cycling and road cycling culture. One area of exploration that increasingly grabbed my attention was the way in which group dynamics affected the individual in the sport. I targeted these dynamics by inquiring about the ways in which these cyclists trained and interacted both on and off the bike. In addition, I asked how their competitive environment was similar to, or different from, the environments in which they carried out their “daily lives.” I was interested to know how competitive cycling fit into their broadly conceived life environment. I began with theories about the idea of exhaustion and toughness, but as my interviews proceeded, I realized that group dynamics, dedication to the sport, and feelings of fulfillment due to the exciting nature of the sport began to emerge as new and compelling ideas that upended my early notions about hyper-masculinity and competition.

## Discussion

For the purposes of this note, I will describe three of my interviews: Kelly, Chuck, and Jake (not their real names). Interviews were critical for the study of identity construction. During these conversations, respondents negotiated their feelings about participating in training and bike racing. Each brought to the table a different perspective on the masculinity, risk, and socializing factors of cycling. Through testimonies, I observed that displays of masculinity and toughness appeared in many forms. What seemed at first to be displays of toughness—signs that signaled and demonstrated a stereotypically masculine gender identity—turned into a more gender-neutral demonstration of toughness. “Toughness” was associated with not giving up in the face of physical pain or injury. Furthermore, toughness also referred to the participants’ ability to withstand harsh weather conditions, physical pain by riding at an uncomfortably high pace, or the physical pain that resulted from crashing and scraping their skin or breaking bones. Additionally, displays of toughness arose especially during “rehashing” or story-telling sessions after a race or training ride. This phenomenon manifests as a group of (usually male) cyclists in a circle discussing the race, often during a post-ride or post-race meal. Another example of displays of toughness occurred during poor weather conditions. I experienced this phenomenon during my participation on a very rainy two-hour group-training ride where individuals stressed the importance of carrying on in the stormy conditions.

Gender and sexuality issues could have been explored more during my preliminary research and also during the question-construction phase of this project. Often, though, I discussed ideas and questions during a ride and this made for some truncated and breathless conversations. Doing research during the heat of the ride was both helpful and difficult to manage. And I want to stress that this note is a work-in-progress, a work that will require me to fine-tune my approach and my theory-set.

During my interviews and fieldwork, cyclists delineated sharply between recreational riders and competitive cyclists. Recreational riders were construed to lack the same obligations as competitive riders. Recreational riders have a perceived degree of freedom due to their status as non-racers. Recreational riders were viewed as being unaccountable or lacking any obligations to their teammates, to other riders, and to the pack. Competitive cyclists put themselves at risk in group training rides and races, they put others around them at risk, and they also put their reputations as riders at risk. Hence, competitive cyclists' behaviors, actions, and identities were constantly undergoing evaluation through their performance on the bikes (and off the bikes too, during post-ride story-telling). Two categories exist: those who race and those who don't. Upon becoming a racer, that person seems to very quickly attach to a wide set of groups: their race team, the riders in each group ride (regardless of who is on which team), their fellow racers, and the larger community since they now have a different role than just using bicycles to commute or for relaxation. For racers, the goal of using the roads is for training, and this distinction seems to make group affiliation very important for each cyclist.

Chuck discussed this distinction between racers and non-racers subtly. He noted a transformation of self when he moved from using the bike as a form of transportation to using the bike to race. However, he talked about cycling for commuting, riding easy, "spinning," or racing interchangeably. He noted, "I casually ride, train, and race. It has been a progression as I have met other riders who enjoy pushing the upper limits of speed on a bicycle." I noticed that once Chuck talked about his racing, there was an instant sense of belonging that came with his affiliation with other racing cyclists.

Kelly put her participation in cycling in the context of other endurance sports in which she participates. "I do consider myself a cyclist when I am training, but currently I'm doing more skiing and running than cycling. I think that cycling is a distinct culture with crazy styles and intensity." She noted the image that some cyclists perpetuate is extreme: some even drink excessively during the season, even on evenings before races.

In Dan's interview, he used the term "badass" to describe how he viewed himself as a competitive cyclist. He also used the term "outsider" interchangeably with the term "badass." Dan felt that as someone riding on the road, he was doing something that was not widely accepted. The cyclists were very conscious of their sport being a nuisance to some motorists on the road. This appraisal of one's right to the road conflicting with motorists was incorporated into the identities of the respondents as going against the grain. This outlaw status was not used to differentiate the racing cyclists from recreational cyclists, although the respondents alluded to the need to ride on the road as essential for race training.

The data regarding dangers and risks in cycling was consistent with Edward Albert's study of the normalization of risk in cycling, "Dealing with Danger" (1999). Respondents referred to crashing as "just part of the game." During my observation of one training ride, several cyclists in a group started swerving and becoming unbalanced causing some braking and skidding of tires, but there was no crash. The incident provoked laughter in the group. It was considered a "close call," perhaps just one of many on any given training ride that might last two to three

hours. This incident reinforced the notion that the excitement catalyzed by potential crashes was considered in a playful light; the risks, though real, did not result in serious worry or fear. Jake elaborated how he felt about the risks and fears of riding and racing in our interview:

Besides the fear of being run over by a pissed off motorist, and being crashed out by people who do not know how to ride their bike, the dangers are pretty exhilarating. For example, going just under 60 mph down a hill thinking you are about to take off is great. Or riding totally surrounded, within inches of others, on bikes while traveling at 25 mph hour around a 90-degree corner...it is just a good time. Like sophomore year of college, I got knocked out and it was so ingrained in me to finish the race, so I don't remember anything that happened, but I finished the race. When I drop out of a race it's for serious issues, I hate droppin' out.

Jake articulated some of the fears of riding, although he quickly dismissed the fear of danger and he shifted the focus to the "exhilarating" aspects of this danger. Jake talked about pushing the limits in terms of danger, although he specifically talked about training and racing as a way of pushing the body to the limit and not "giving up."

Kelly also normalized the risk of cycling injury, stating, "Cars will always be on the road and sometimes they get too close, but usually they are reasonable. There is gravel and glass and flat tires, but it's all part of the game." Overall, there was a sense that pushing the limits of one's physical ability was important to the presentation of the self as a cyclist. Aggressiveness and fearlessness in races were valued by the participants to some extent. However, endurance and perseverance in the face of physical pain and harsh conditions were two of the most important values in the cycling community.

Cycling does not simply offer participants another realm to show how hard they can work or how much pain they can endure. Cyclists I interviewed attempted to describe a type of exhilaration they felt when racing and training. Instead, cyclists seek the "flow" or the feeling of being "in the hunt": the indescribable feeling of total connection with what the rider is doing. Most riders I have talked to and interviewed reflect a desire to systematically train, race, and achieve a type of exhilaration, or what Susan A. Jackson and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi describe as "flow." Riders discussed a positive feeling about their comfort with and connection to their bike and the bike ride/race. Put another way, riders expressed a certain amount of being "in tune" with their bike, with the physical environment, and with other riders. In fact, the cyclists I interviewed presented two contradictory functions of the sport. While riders liked training as preparation to beat other cyclists on the road, what happened in practice was much more about harmony. In fact, to do well in bike races, racers have to work together, communicate with each other, and form allegiances on the road in an ever-changing environment. At the end of a long race or training ride, there was a shared exhaustion. Even riders on opposing teams would often embrace, shake hands, and share stories about how the race "went down."

## Conclusion

In my fieldwork, I have identified more than one major theme. These themes are interconnected, but somehow seem counterintuitive. Engagement in the sport promotes shared values: hard work, enhancing performance through systematic means, and rational thinking to achieve progress in the sport. Consequently, achievement and measurement, limit pushing and normalization of risk all appeared in the participants' observations and interviews. These findings are consistent with the "sports ethic" of cycling: physical toughness and normalized risk. Interestingly, participants saw themselves as outlaws and living on the edge. But, the individuals I interviewed and the cyclists I observed seemed nothing like what a casual observer would call an "outlaw." Instead, they seemed to exhibit some of the characteristic traits associated with Midwestern, middle-class adults in the 20-40 year-old range. They took turns at the front of the pack, they slowed down to let others catch up, they worked together to bring back breakaways, they helped new riders learn how to ride safely in the group, they helped each other with technique and diet—sharing the newest information, critiquing riding position and equipment choices. Moreover, they were often silent when a strong rider suddenly became weak, but they were quick to offer compliments on good performances. They were anything but outlaws. The bike community seemed to provide individuals with an audience to play edgy characters together. Ironically, what individuals ended up talking about the most were the social aspects of being outlaws *together*. The feeling that cycling was a "combative" sport was contradicted by many moments of cooperation and fellowship between riders.

These preliminary results, while exciting, have consequently directed me toward areas that require more attention and more questions. One of the major themes I thought would quickly emerge, masculinity, was not really discussed by the riders. In fact, the idea of toughness seemed gender neutral and there are very few differences between the way men and women are judged as far as their toughness. However, in further research, I will ask questions that will specifically target gender issues.

Next, cyclists discussed feeling exhilarated and spoke about the tangible nature of training and racing their bikes. In future interviews, I will explore how these types of feelings of connectedness to what they were doing was similar to or different from that of their work or home lives. At this point, I can only speculate that the type of excitement found on the road and the support provided by the racing community might be things that they are lacking in other dimensions of their lives. I will continue to investigate the community dynamics in more depth. Through my fieldwork and interviews I have found that instead of focusing on the winners and losers in the sport, amateur cycling community members desire exhilaration, a drive which results in a type of exhaustion—a shared exhaustion.



2012 Iowa State Road Race in Riverside, Iowa

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