

The Skinny on Cycling
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He'll be coming down the mountain.

My wife sometimes tells me that I'm obsessed with cycling. She has come to accept that in order to maintain my weight loss and newfound healthy lifestyle, I need to continue to exercise. This exercise usually takes the form of cycling and yoga. By now, she has also come to accept that my bike will be included in the luggage for most of the trips we take. In fact, she hardly even fusses when I cram a bike, tools, helmets, shoes and other cycling accoutrements into our little SUV. On a recent vacation, my wife and I spent a marvelous week—just the two of us—in a cabin just outside of Pigeon Forge, Tennessee. My plan was to relax and spend some time riding my bike through the scenic byways of the area.

When we arrived, I was in awe of the fall foliage and winding parkway that runs alongside the beautiful Little Pigeon River. As we were driving along, I started to realize that there wasn't a lot of room for cyclists on that road and that the drivers in the area seemed to best enjoy the view by weaving all over the road at about 60 miles per hour. That cycling plan was foiled and I would have to look for a safer place to ride my bike.

As we were driving up to our cabin, I was amazed to find that the road was very narrow and very steep. In fact, I had to put our SUV into 4-wheel drive and low range to scramble up the hillside to our little hideaway. I thought to myself—since the parkway is too dangerous for cycling, I'm going to climb this hill with my road bike without stopping. Even if I don't get any other cycling done this week, I'll at least climb that hill.

The next day it started raining. It rained for three straight days. Now I must admit that the rain is beautiful in the smoky mountains. In fact, it's especially beautiful when you're admiring the rainy view from a toasty-warm hot tub overlooking the mountainside. This lovely scenery, however; does not lend itself to safe cycling on steep switchback curves and mountainous descents.

On the fourth day of our vacation, the sun came out in all its glory. My wife had planned a horseback ride that day, so I readied myself for a ride and climbing that hill to our cabin. After I unpacked and reassembled my bike, I took it for a quick test ride. Something wasn't right. The rear derailleur wasn't shifting quite right. Upon further inspection, I realized that my rear shifter cable was frayed so badly that it wouldn't clear the housing. Without the ability to shift there was little chance of getting a ride in, let alone that steep climb back up to our cabin. Being the resourceful guy that I am, I found a local bike shop listed in the yellow pages and found that it was pretty close to our cabin. After a quick trip to the shop for a new cable and a little time spent doing an emergency repair, I had just enough time for a quick ride before I had to pick up my wife.

I headed down that steep hill from our cabin hoping that I could put in a 10 mile loop and then climb that hill. I sat on the back edge of my seat, riding the brakes all the way down the hill from our cabin with tires slipping and brakes squealing. It was much steeper than I had originally realized.

When I finally reached the bottom of the hill, I realized that it was getting near the time to pick my wife up from her horseback ride. So, with a deep breath and growing sense of resolve and urgency, I decided to turn back around and climb that hill—right then—right there. With my rear gears shifting down a few clicks, I turned and started heading up that hill (the one that required 4-wheel drive and low range gearing in our SUV). I was gritting my teeth and just starting to feel that familiar pounding in my chest when I had reached a point about 50 yards up the hill where the grade became decidedly steeper. Just as I was thinking to myself “I’m finally cycling in the mountains, it won’t be a long ride, but I will conquer this hill!”

KER-CHUNK!

Suddenly I am overtaking by the very strange sensation of pedaling very, very fast, with absolutely no resistance from my pedals, chain or drive train. My next sensation is one of wobbling on my pedals. That sensation is quickly replaced by the realization that my previously slow forward motion is suddenly becoming fast rearward motion. It is just about this time that I realize that my chain has dropped off my front ring and I’m going backward down a mountain with switch back curves. Before I fall, I’m successfully able to unclip and stop my descent and sort of roll/slide/duckwalk backwards to the bottom of the hill.

When I reached the bottom, I put the chain back on, steeled my resolve and headed back up the mountain. My chain dropped three more times and three more times I started up the hill. The good news is that I have now mastered the skill of rolling/sliding/duckwalking backwards down a mountain road. The bad news is that I also realized that my road bike wasn’t made for this type of cycling. I started pushing.

By the time I had pushed my bike to the top of the hill, my heart was pounding in my throat and I was sweating furiously. My legs were burning and I was exhausted. It was at this moment that I got to thinking about why I enjoy cycling. I realized that I ride for fitness. I ride to see new places. I ride to challenge myself in ways that I would not have dreamed about when I weighed 100 pounds more than I do now. As my heart rate settled back down and I changed out of my cycling clothes, I realized that this was almost the same feeling I have after a successful ride. Mechanical problems, short ride duration and near death experiences aside, this was one of the most memorable experiences I’ve ever had on a bike. I don’t think I’ll forget it anytime soon.

This weekend I’m going to switch into winter cycling mode. Most of my rides will be indoors on the trainer. I really don’t like riding on a trainer and I try to spend as much time as possible riding outside when the weather is nice. However, I’m heading into the winter with a new understanding. Cycling isn’t only about long rides and fast speeds.

It's not only about beautiful scenery and conquering hills. It's about doing something good for yourself. It's about being active. It makes me think about a T-shirt that my wife and I saw while shopping on vacation. It read something like this: *You can fall off a cliff and die. You can fall into a raging river and die. Or, you can sit on the couch and die.*

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Wade Wingler, the author of "The Skinny on Cycling" is the father of one adorable little girl, the husband of a beautiful & talented librarian, a Yogi and an avid cyclist. His web site, www.HowILost100Pounds.com features common sense advice on losing weight without suffering and improving your cycling through healthy living.