

## The French Ascension

What smart people think about is thinking. The maintenance of our cranium and its constituents needs to be Job #1. In practical terms, being able to remember where we put the to-do list, or more precisely, the don't-forget-to-do list hovers right up there with locating our bifocals and car keys. Our red-yellow-green relationship with our brains covers the spectrum from breathtaking neurologic breakthroughs to "dancing with the one that brought ya." Yet there's surprising resistance to acknowledge the foundational role of the body, i.e., the physical framework that carries our cognitive mainframe.

The body/mind connection stretches from centuries-old Buddhist precepts up through Moshe Feldenkrais who flipped the descriptors when he discussed the Intelligent Body and the Flexible Mind. Released last month, "Keep Sharp; Build a Better Brain at Any Age" by Sanja Gupta, MD, professor of neurosurgery at Emory School of Medicine, offers this: quote, "The influence of exercise on brain function is so spectacular that the American Academy of Neurology has published new guidelines" which include that "physical **inactivity** has been calculated to be the most significant risk factor in cognitive decline...Fitness could very well be the most important ingredient to living as long as possible."

Thus, gentlemen, this evening we're going to dive, to delve, but not devolve, into the wide world of sports. Sport is not the enemy of a man's IQ; to be athletic is not the opposite of being smart. One only needs to recall the iconic photo of a beaming Einstein tooling around on his bike for validation. The supposed cultural aversion to brutes whose move their lips when they read is pervasive but problematic. I'm moving my lips as I read this, but I guess that's different.

If the Western cerebral aesthete believes that sporty types are lesser life forms, the same could be said about political gangsters, Wall Street pinstripes, and academics. Aside from the venality of Yankees and Red Sox fans and/or the recent wave of Crimson Tide obstreperous omnipotence, for the most part, both the classically educated and the sporting crowd know deep down that it's just a game. Even Ivy Leaguers proselytize about the head-clearing benefit of a brisk walk across the quad. We should all remember that we remember better after moving about.

What I find fascinating about sports is what competition reveals when victory or defeat hinges upon our brains, spotlighting the way we calculate the next move, as well as our character and commitment to fully draining our tanks in effort.

First level of revelation - man vs. himself. Once our need for speed for survival passed, i.e, when going faster than predators was no longer a prerequisite for seeing another tomorrow, the challenges of running - or swimming - farther and faster, jumping higher, lifting more than ever before, all became internalized. At its core, at our core, it's simply fortitude; an individual triumph over pain and fear. We've all given this a go at some point during our lives, be it by climbing the rope of doom in gym class or saying yes to the unchecked lunacy of a New Year's tai-bo boxing/hot yoga resolution. But when the testosterone or alcohol wears off, knowing you set a new PR (personal record) when running the neighborhood 5K leaves you feeling better and thinking clearer, that's good for you.

Second level up, man vs. nature features Sir Edmund Hilary atop Everest, Peary and Admunsen reaching their respective Poles, Fossett in a balloon, Magellan on a ship. The most recent example is Alex Honnold who climbed El Capitan in Yosemite ropeless but definitely not hopeless. The documentary "Free Solo" follows Alex up this sheer wall of stone and is a testament to trajectory and training, finger strength and fortitude, and unbelievable calm on the flinty edge of death. If you're ok with vertigo, you should see it, just gobble a couple Dramamine beforehand.

Some claim that the ultimate in athletic competition is Level Three, man vs. man. Or as Hemingway would say, mano a mano. Or as Roberto Duran gasped, "no mas, no mas, mano" or something like that.

Because to win at this level, the victor must beat another human, look him in the eye, hold him fast in his grip, be better or smarter or faster or simply more unyielding. Most important is being able to maintain composure and be strategic while toppling his opponent's tactics, strength and ability to suffer as well.

Still and all, solo sports seem to have, almost by definition, a smaller audience. Team sports undeniably scale. As a rule, to stir the masses you need to get to Level Four, complete with a noisy crowd, multi-modal broadcasting, and licensing rights. This swelling of kinship generates the motivation for a collective athletic performance that will be debated in bars, on talk radio, and on ESPN for-bloody-ever.

Team sports play out in specific ways, but cities, universities, and countries all keep score. Athletic teams bond brothers, neighbors and countrymen...or pits them one against another. Star players reap the highest possible rewards in contemporary society: be they hometown heroes, national all-stars, or international celebrities, they're spokespeople for social causes and they bank billions.

What's interesting, though, is that although fandom is universal, the events themselves are dictated by the stripes on one's home field. It's relatively well known that American football is completely different from the rest of the world's futbol. America's pastime is baseball, with Japan and Latin America also revering the green diamond, but for the rest of the world – strike three, you're out.

Only a few decades ago did Americans truly start paying respect to the world's two most widely followed sports: soccer and cycling. Soccer's #1 event is aptly called the World Cup. The emotional (and economic) state of entire nations rise and fall depending upon whether their team continues forward in their bracket. The World Cup claims to be the most viewed sporting event in the world. In 2018, over 3.5 billion people tuned in – to underline that number, that's over half the world's population...and they legitimately start counting fans at age 4. The final game between France and Croatia garnered 1.8 billion viewers. One. Point. Eight. Billion. That's a bunch, yet for us Yanks, only 40 years ago, soccer ranked (pun fully intended) with box lacrosse, fencing, cricket, rugby and cycling. The world at large may still not pay much attention to those first four sports, but cycling, ah, *Vive la difference*.

The invention of the bicycle was hailed first as a major milestone in transportation. Just over two centuries ago, as the Industrial Revolution geared up from steam engines to sweatshops, the bike craze swept across the US and Europe, with a number of very good reasons why. The average cyclist could cover 10-15 mph; horse-drawn travel in the city averaged 4 mph; a pedestrian sashayed at 2-3 mph. At these speeds, going farther and faster was a good thing. Launching in 1880, the bicycle was, from the start, staggeringly more efficient. With modern-day technology, we've reached the point where quote: “the bicycle is an extraordinary machine capable of converting 98.6% of the cyclist's pedaling effort into spinning the wheels, while those who stride along with their feet on the ground waste a third of theirs.”

By 1896, there were 4 million bicycles in the United States, with an even greater number in Europe. Automobiles, by comparison, were the rarest of vehicles; a mere three hundred existed in the United States, with just a handful in New York City.

City dwellers also had another reason to choose cycles over stallions. At the turn of the century, quote: “more than 150,000 horses plodded through New York City, each dumping twenty-two pounds of manure daily. Tons of excrement piled up on the streets, drawing flies and exuding an overpowering filth and stench.” Bikes were the first example of what we might call clean energy. Compared to horses and humans, the bicycle was a symbol of the future. Bikes were also affordable, easy to maintain, plus you didn't have to feed them nor fill them up before they'd go.

As bikes became ubiquitous, their use expanded from mass transport to athletic contests – simply, who could go from here to there the fastest. The Tour de France, founded in 1903, takes place annually in July. Le Tour, as it is called, is cycling's marquee showcase and is billed as “the World's Biggest Sporting

Event.” On par with World Cup numbers, it’s the Super Bowl, the World Series, the NBA Championship and the Stanley Cup all rolled into one. The 2019 race also attracted 3.5 billion television viewers, plus 12 million spectators gathered along the roadway. The winner received a cash prize of over a half million dollars and something worth more than money, the prestigious yellow jersey which is worn by the leader.

Amazingly, it’s free to attend if you want to linger for hours alongside a hot stretch of asphalt or cobblestone for 4-5 minutes of cyclists blurring by. Depending on the course -- which changes every year -- the race extends between 2100-2400 miles. Divided into 21 stages, there are a mix of flat, hilly, and mountain stages (including numerous summit finishes), as well as individual and team time trials, plus two rest days – 23 days total. Each stage takes 5-7 hours to complete with the flat stages averaging 125-160 miles in length; the mountain stages are shorter in distance but longer in agony. The rider completing all 21 stages in the fastest cumulative time wins the race, the big bucks, and the yellow jersey.

This all sounds straightforward and superhuman at the same time. Le Tour draws the top 198 cyclists in the world, 22 teams of 9 each, arguably the fastest men on two wheels, as one per forty million people. That is point zero zero zero zero zero zero two six percent of the world’s population, each one of them riding like his hair is on fire. Seemingly paradoxical, cycling dominance is fiercely individualistic yet requires a strong team. While each cyclist benefits from their genetics, training and experience, team strategy carries the day. Each could, justifiably, and insofar not surprisingly, win. But for the favorites, winning depends on everything and everyone coming together as planned...which never happens. Which is why one has to be smart to prevail.

Every sport, profession and culture has its own insider lingo. Often, these phrases offer a more succinct, colorful and memorable description; other times, this jargon serves to keep outsiders out. For cycling, if you want to full monty of cycling colloquialisms, a multi-national group of rabid cyclists who call themselves the Velominati provide lots of testosterone-laced, heartbreaking definitions. For instance, the ruthless finality of crossing the finish line just behind the victor is not called runner-up nor second place, instead its benevolently labeled “first loser. Second place means you had it, but you couldn’t pull it together and make it happen. Second place just means you won at losing.” Not an every-kid-gets-a-trophy sport.

For this paper, the inside baseball talk that carries significance is the metaphor that for every stage each rider gets a fresh book of matches. The challenge is to use each match intelligently. Perhaps you burn a few early to separate yourself and your teammates from the crush of the peloton, to establish early on a perception of indomitable strength that makes the others wilt as they anguish over sucking your exhaust stream for another eighty miles. This works fine on the flats; during the mountain stages, most riders hoard their matches, striking only when at risk of slipping off the back of the pack. To have one or two matches left after crossing the finish line means you didn’t think as well as you should have. It’s best to have one match left with 100 yards to go when the sprint to the finish line commences. Ideally your rival burned his last one to gain the lead, so you strike and surge into the pedals, the flame fuels those few seconds of white-hot exertion, which means the first loser flames out yet you’ve used your matches wisely.

The 1989 Tour de France has been hailed as one of, if not THE greatest mano a mano cycling races ever. This battle was won – spoiler alert – by the greatest American cyclist in history, an athlete thereafter revered everywhere in the world, although with only marginal respect in his home country. No, not the infamous individual who lied to the media and bullied his teammates while cheating his way to the self-proclaimed status of All-time Greatest American - Donald J. Armstrong. Wait, sorry, I mean, Lance Armstrong. The braggart who had his seven Tour de France victories stripped from the record books as all his wins were pharmaceutically fueled and the only thing more toxic than what he injected was the way he forced his teammates to dope with him or be disowned.

Instead, the all-time greatest American cyclist is Greg LeMond. Born in California, LeMond grew up outside Reno, Nevada. He started cycling to stay in shape for skiing, his first and favorite sport. He won the

first eleven bike races he entered, so as is often said, literally and correctly here, he never looked back. LeMond's first Tour de France victory was in 1986, over a decade before Armstrong home-brewed his first (and fleeting) win. LeMond was looking to defend in 1987 but during a tune-up race that spring, he fell and fractured his left wrist. There are only five points of contact between a rider and his bicycle: two hands, two feet, one butt. Therefore, a broken wrist makes it impossible to race. The 1987 Tour came and went without LeMond being able to defend his title.

A few months later, while hunting back in Cali with his uncle and brother-in-law, LeMond was accidentally shot in the back and right side. In a surreal coincidence, hovering not far from this life-threatening situation was a police helicopter; arrival, loading and transport to the closest hospital took only 15 minutes. When he was whisked through the doors of the ER, LeMond was within 20 minutes of bleeding out. He had suffered a pneumothorax to his right lung and had lost 65% of his blood volume. The operation saved his life...but months later, he developed a GI obstruction from the scar tissue. Concerned that his new cycling team would drop him if they knew the shooting accident required a second surgery (as his original team had indeed dropped him after the shooting), LeMond asked the surgeons to also take out his appendix. The press release cited only the appendix removal, keeping the real reason for the operation on the down low. Unbeknownst to anyone except himself and his doctors, LeMond still had 35 shotgun pellets in his body including three in the lining of his heart and five more in his liver. Not surprisingly, the long road back to full recovery kept him from riding in the 1988 Tour de France.

Greg LeMond returned to racing in 1989, but fared poorly in the races leading up to that year's Tour. At the start, he publicly said that he hopes to place in the top 20, but based on his performances just prior, that seems unlikely. He also speaks of retiring after the Tour if he didn't regain his form.

To highlight Greg's daunting prospects, there's a strong field of competitors in the '89 Tour. Pedro Delgado returns as the defending champion; his 1988 victory was by a formidable 7 minutes. Also in the mix was Stephen Roche who had won the Tour in '87, and Laurent Fignon, a Frenchman who had won in '83 and '84. Fignon embodies the haute couture's penchant for style and flair: blonde, thin (quell surprise), and dashing, with gold wire-rim glasses perched on his Gallic nose lending him a professorial persona, if we had to guess, he'd probably teach philosophic deconstructionism. Here's a telling detail: he chooses to ride without a helmet so his ponytail can flutter in his slipstream. Savoir faire over safety is Fignon's approach throughout the race. But nonetheless he's fast, so as a native son, he's the host country's favorite to win.

It sounds fearsome to say they're the top 200 cyclists in the world, but they're also just this side of physiological freaks: spaghetti-shaped arms (why carry muscle mass, which is 6x heavier per cc than fat, creates more wind resistance, and provides virtually no help to get up hills); remarkably high-volume lungs (Miguel Indurian, a five-time Tour winner, could breathe in and out 8 liters of air every minute – most humans process 2 liters per minute); and most importantly, legs that can spin faster, longer and stronger, generating 430 watts of power whereas the average cyclist generates just 165, while the average human might be able to spin the pedals for a couple minutes at 100 watts. Once the pros dismount their bikes at stages' end, most immediately hobble to the massage table, then to dinner, then to bed and ideally those three stops are not more than fifty feet apart. This is not just to rest, but the cycling elite believe that walking about unnecessarily hammers the knees and ankle joints. By not having normal impact to their gait, and by maintaining the tuck position for hours every day in order to limit wind resistance, many cyclists suffer from both adaptive muscle shortening and a perilous lack of bone density. Think of them as crickets and/or birds. Yea, Hieronymus Bosch would like that. We could name this new creature Schwinn or Strava, just not Huffy.

Physics consume cyclists, in large part, because of this, quote: "Over a flat road on a windless day, 90 percent of the resistance impeding forward motion on a bicycle is due to aerodynamic drag. You can make ten, twenty, thirty percent gains through aerodynamics."

Once a professional cyclist slips into the peloton, which resembles either a string of pearls during most of the race or an arrowhead during the final sprint, he aims to stay tucked behind his teammates who are blocking the wind, but not so far back in the scrum that a pothole or an oily patch could “release” a rider from his bicycle and the domino effect would effectively end a rider’s race. So every cyclist is blinkered to stay focused just 6” from the rear wheel of the rider in front of him – which is ironic because they’re passing through some of the world’s most luxuriant landscapes. Fields of sunflowers quilt verdant French meadows. River valleys spill from mountain passes. Ignoring all that, the cyclists have been coached to, at most, look 10-30 feet beyond the rider in front of them in order to anticipate road hazards. I’ll confess that, like most locals, when I’m riding in a pack, the act of not bumping the wheel located a few inches ahead of my front tire consumes all my attention.

Most cyclists in the Tour de France have been racing since childhood. Like baseball and basketball used to be here in the U.S of A., cycling was a spring-board sport for those who the census counted as urban poor or hardscrabble country. Hence the cyclists are not just grunting and groaning and seeing if they can make it to the finish line, but depending upon how far back, or forward, in the standings they finish, it might be the difference of \$100,000 in their pocket...or being booted out of a job. Therefore, there’s an equal amount of physiological and mental stress.

Sometimes the tedium of riding for 21 days and 2000+ miles provides a chance to think about family, or finances, or a chat if the chap riding alongside you happens to speak the same language...but then suddenly four riders take off in a break and damn, you weren’t paying attention. If the breakaway group works together, each rider taking a turn at the front of the four-pack to break the wind for thirty seconds, then slipping to the back of the group for 90 seconds, moving up, catching their breath, leading again for thirty more seconds...with this choreography repeated over twenty or forty or even a hundred MILES, and they win that day’s stage because you were thinking about something other than racing for just five minutes during the first hour of a five-hour race, there’s this: sometimes a stage win is enough to cement a team contract or a salary raise the following year...so pay attention, focus, ride fast.

Returning to the 1989 Tour. Delgado, the defending champ, makes an unforgivable mistake on the first day and misses his designated start in the time trial by almost three minutes (a time trial means each rider is given a starting slot and races solo, no team support, no aerodynamic drafting off other cyclists, just the rider, his bike, and the will to go as fast as possible). At the finish, the four previous winners – Fignon, Kelly, Roche and LeMond – cluster in the top five. For the rest of that week, those four as well as the other 194 riders test their legs and team support. Considering most of the flat stages take place during the first week, it’s very hard for any rider to escape the peloton. LeMond tries to stay just inside the front edge while assessing his condition, but there wasn’t a real reason to risk a breakaway, which for cyclists is when a small group throws down the gauntlet and accelerates away from the pack – tossing a multi-lingual “See you later, suckers” behind them. 95% of the time the breakaways are caught before the end of the stage, so it’s seldom a winning move, but definitely ballsy. That said, the advertisers whose logos are on the jerseys of the lead group who will receive 90% of the TV broadcast time that day LOVE breakaways.

After the first rest day, though, Greg LeMond wins Stage 5 which is the second time trial, gaining the overall lead, and with it, the yellow jersey. His victory signals to those who have dismissed him that it’s not smart to count him out quite yet. Fignon is second overall, five seconds back. Below that day’s headlines were photos of LeMond’s time trial bike, which features special aerodynamic handlebars that keep him extended horizontally not sitting upright, plus his rear wheel is a solid disc; if it had been windy, this design would pose handling problems, but by not having spokes and with his hands virtually clasped together on the aero bars, this low triangle creates dramatically less air drag. Not everyone notices, moreso, no other cyclist or team lodges a formal complaint, so the race surges on.

Let’s provide some local context as to what happened next, and why, and how. If you’re an average Cincinnati cyclist, a solid ride is 3 hours in duration. In that time span, with just the minimum number of

hills which you can't avoid, you'd probably cover 35 miles and burn about 300 calories. During those same three hours, a pro cyclist would double the number of miles, that is, 65-75 miles and burn, oh, 4500 calories. Their engines burn so hot and efficiently, it's near inconceivable.

Next, imagine racing between Cincinnati and Columbus...not just riding, but racing. Then do it again the next day, from Columbus to Cleveland. And again, for nineteen more. That's like running 21 marathons in three weeks, but a multi-stage bike race is possible only because you don't have the incessant pounding on your joints, the impact of accumulated foot strikes. The bike doesn't jolt you, but instead you clip into the pedals and spin your legs like a gerbil caught in the wheel. Most telling is the difference between racing and just riding. Literarians Eugene Rutz and Jim Murray would attest to the steep increase of stress, vigilance, anguish while willing your mind to stay calm and your body to stay strong, when all you really want to do is please slow down. But when racing, there is no slowing, no taking it easy, no stop, just go. In the words of L Frank Baum, racing is a horse of a different color.

If the '89 Tour route were superimposed on a map of North America, it would stretch west from Cincinnati to the California border. Racing across the plains, racing up mountains, and more mountains, and more mountains, often sprinting to finish lines at the very summit of the mountains, squeezing out the very liquid of your soul, every last drop, not just to conquer gravity, not just to match the 200 other best cyclists in the world, but to win. To cross the finish line first. Racing so fast and so hard that your vision blurs, your heartbeats sound in your ears and your lungs heave.

Of the last 11 stages in the 1989 Tour, 8 are in the mountains where race commentators predict that overall victory will be decided because of the soul-crushing climbs. Again, here in Cincinnati, cyclists test themselves by hauling up the long inclines into Mt. Adams, Clifton and Indian Hill, or in NKY, up from Route 8 into Ft. Thomas to the east, or into Boone County to the west. We labor and sweat and stand on our pedals as the bike resists going forward and instead rocks side to side. It's simply us versus science, specifically, man vs. gravity. We're so labored, and slow, that wind resistance is minimal. Depending on the grade, speed (a term used euphemistically here) can bog down to 4-5 mph; any slower, we topple over. So it's simply a matter of will. The best cyclists in the world, that group of point oh oh oh oh oh two six percent, they glide up the hills, not grimacing, but strategizing.

The mountain stages in France can yield an elevation gain of 14,000 feet, that's almost three miles up, in a single day of racing. To ride up Monastery in Mt. Adams, from Eggleston to Celestial – that's only 250 feet elevation gain, less than a football field on end, over half-mile total distance. It's a hard stinkin' climb. Most of the hills here in town range 5-10 % grade, with only 5 above 12% and just one topping out at 15%. To be fair, the 11.5% grade into Mt. Adams is consistent with many of the Tour de France climbs, but the mountains in France go on, and up, for 8 or 12 miles, which is like climbing up to the top of Mt. Adams 20 times in a row, and all at once, with no rest going downhill to start again. Even worse, a Tour de France mountain climb might comprise only a fifth of that stage's total mileage, plus, like a water bottle of hemlock for Socrates, that stage might also include one or two other mountain climbs. On these mountains, hairpin turns anchor switchbacks, which do ease some of the grade, but visually, when you look up and see the road fold back and forth, back and forth, and back and forth another fifteen times up the mountain, first your heart, then your will breaks. If you're a leader, there's a motorcycle maybe five yards in front, serving as a wedge to part the crowd, but spewing carbon and generating noise so close that it seems like it's inside your head. Last, there's a sea of countless fans, or were in pre-Covid 1989, and these fans as close as arms-length away from the riders as they climbed, an endless wall of faces cheering and jeering and spitting, sometimes running alongside. Race officials surround you. The wall of noise is insistent and inescapable. The Dutch in particular will gather on the mountain routes days in advance. My theory is that for those who live in a country located below sea level, getting a chance to climb a hill, to gaze out over trees and valleys, to be halfway up a mountain, is a lifelong reason to celebrate, all of this ultimately concluding with public intoxication and bad social media.

The French mountains sing like Julie Andrews in “The Sound of Music” while their numbers detail the descent into pain. Mont Ventoux – over 12 miles long, max grade 12%, elevation gain of over 5200 feet, which means climbing from sea level to Denver, the Mile-High City. The Col de Tourmalet – maximum grade of 11% over 12 miles, total elevation gain of 4626 feet. The Col d’Aspin – over 7 miles of climbing, average grade 6.5%, maximum grade 9.5% which mirrors the rise of Stanley Ave from Columbia Parkway up to Vineyard...and it’s 14x longer. The Col de la Ramaz, 8.6 miles uphill, max grade 11%. The most fearsome mountain, the Alpe d’Huez, 21 switchbacks total, nine miles long with an 8% average grade. Marco Pantani, the fastest cyclist on Alpe d’Huez, reached the summit in just 37 minutes and 35 seconds. Unbelievable. Then again, Pantani was a hot mess of human growth hormone, EPO and steroids. Like Armstrong, Marco was stripped of most of his wins; he died due to a drug overdose a few years post-expulsion.

The Tour de France is the hardest endurance event on the planet. Exercise scientists have calculated the riders’ TRIMP value (“training impulse,” or training volume multiplied by training intensity) for the 21-day beat down at an astronomical 7,112. For reference, the TRIMP for running a 26-mile marathon is about 300. If you talk to cyclists who have raced, who set out to push themselves for hours at a time, across hundreds of miles, at a pace set just a tick below lactic acid overload and exhaustion...they know how hard that is for just an hour, or a day. But 21 days – oy!

Going into the Pyrenees, LeMond owns the yellow jersey and the lead...by just 5 seconds. Three days later, when the peloton exits the Pyrenees, Fignon is now ahead...by 7 seconds. Stages 15 through 20 are in the French Alps. The leaders struggle to not to let each other out of sight (radios aren’t allowed in the 89 Tour, so if you can’t see your rival, he could either be just around the next turn or two miles ahead). LeMond attacks early and regains the yellow jersey, but for just two days. Stage 17 features the formidable Alpe d’Huez where Fignon reclaims the lead, and stakes a 26-second gap between himself and LeMond. Fignon adds another 24 seconds to his lead the following day. On the last day in the Alps, LeMond wins the stage, but remains 50 seconds behind the Frenchman, a cushion which the latter maintains the next day in the second-to-last stage of the Tour.

Fignon’s lead seems insurmountable as the final stage, which is often more a ceremonial parade than competitive chase, is short (only 15 miles), flat and fast. French cycling fans been ramping up the celebration with every passing stage: singing in bistros, eating escargot, drinking champagne and generally having bon temps. On Sunday, July 23, the crowds gather along the Champs Elysees for the penultimate stage and what they believe will be the rightful French ascension to cycling’s throne.

In order to make up the 50 seconds, LeMond has to be at least 3 seconds faster per mile. For the top two cyclists in the world, 3 seconds per mile faster seems unattainable. Even though Greg LeMond clocks almost 34 mph that day, he’s riding for less than half an hour so making up a minute in less than 30 minutes is *impossible they say*. The day before, the two competitors rode 81 miles and not a single second was added to or subtracted from Fignon’s lead.

For three weeks, LeMond and Fignon staged a marathon game of two-wheeled chess, attacking and counter-attacking. Their average speed was almost an identical 24 miles per hour. For the final stage, LeMond brought back the aero handlebars, the solid disc back wheel, and a helmet that looked like a streaking comic book superhero.

Cue the trumpet soundtrack. Greg LeMond did not make up 3 seconds every mile; astoundingly he gained 4 seconds every mile and won the 2041-mile long Tour de France by eight seconds. It’s a gross understatement to say that every second counted. There are precious few things at the Literary Club that take just 8 seconds, not even signing in on Zoom. An epoch ago, the speaker pausing to take a sip of water or the speedy Nico handing you a drink, maybe that was eight seconds. Eight seconds is just two measures of music. Both LeMond and Fignon finished in 87 hours, 38 minutes; LeMond added 35 seconds to that total while Fignon added 43 seconds. That’s a hari-kari inducing, soul-crushing margin. In basketball, that’s like

shooting 90% and losing by a point, or in football, completing 27 out of 28 passes, the last of which was dropped in the end zone in the final seconds, to fall short by 5 points. Can you imagine spending almost a month racing from our clubhouse on Fourth Street to LeMond's home state of California and win or lose by this? (*count eight seconds on fingers*)

They say that one of the best ways to ensure you tackle a challenge is to publicly announce your intentions. Although this will be down the road a bit, I'll be missing from a couple meetings in April 2022. One year, one month, and one week from today, two of my guests this evening and I will set out to ride up Haleakala, the second highest climb in the U.S. which is 36 miles of climbing a 5-7% average grade. The Haleakala route is akin to riding uphill all the way from Cincinnati to Miami University in Oxford, OH. Compounding the distance, it's the same grade of as going up Heekin 72 times. But that's all we have to do that day, no biggie, one hill, no racing, maybe some light-hearted chatter for the first, mmm, 30 or 40 seconds, then 300 minutes of grunting, cursing and hissing "Are we there yet?" Heaven have mercy on my apple-pie-loving wide-body chassis that slows my climb to an illusion of forward motion.

Here's my holy grail. Bikes not only are efficient transport, they also brilliantly forge new friendships which happen less frequently post-college. I, like many males, have the dominant gene for recessive social interaction; but this inability to summon small talk is nullified when spinning gears on a bike. Since we're never racing, the conversation flows like the gyroscopic and Newtonian magic of remaining upright while the wheels in motion remain in motion. My guests this evening are mis amigos, many are riding buddies, friendships forged on two wheels. In pop psych speak, they're my enablers. I'm so frightfully excited that we're going to ride up a flippin' volcano. I'll do our best to channel my inner LeMond. My mantra for the training challenge is Suffer more. Talk less. Lose weight.

Cycling journalists rightly call the LeMond-Fignon showdown the most thrilling Tour de France ever. The yellow jersey and overall lead changed hands virtually every second day. Most importantly, LeMond embodied bon courage and was smarter than Fignon. He used his head as well as his strength by applying aerodynamic advances. To quip that LeMond was eight seconds smarter than Fignon – really, who could make that call – that would lend too much Svengali-narrator revisionist power to make this story fit into a Hollywood cliché comeback kid ending. Because, truth be told, he wasn't 8 seconds smarter. No, he was 58 seconds smarter. First he had to claw back Fignon's 50-second advantage, then LeMond tacked on eight more seconds as his lead. It was breathtaking race. It could be said that, in the end, Fignon took a few breaths too many that final day.

In August 1989, less than a month after his miraculous Tour victory, Greg LeMond also won the World Championship – a one-day race across 161 miles. In 1990, a year later, LeMond returned to successfully defended the yellow jersey for his third Tour de France victory, the last in his career. But in the 1990 World Championship, LeMond finished fourth...eight seconds behind the winner.

Is Greg LeMond the greatest cyclist of all time? – no, not by a long stretch. Eddy Merckx, whose nickname is "The Cannibal" sits atop most lists. Merckx, Bernard Hinault, Jacques Anquetil, and Miguel Indurian are legendary– their respective palmares include winning the Tour de France five times. Each. But in 1989, Greg LeMond was the man of the hour, a true American champion, and now 80 more people know of him. Greg LeMond won the 1989 Tour de France because he was strong and smart. His victory heralded a remarkable comeback after being shot and almost dying two years earlier. Ultimately, he raced intelligently, using all his matches at the right times.

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