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Common Mistakes Made by Junior Road Cyclists, their Parents, and their Coaches – Part 1

As we mentioned in past columns, an objective that Coach Kelli and I have for writing these articles is to share what we have learned about how young cyclists develop based on experience with our youth cycling team over the past decade. We have noted there are certain common mistakes made by junior road cyclists, their parents, and, yes, even their coaches (including ourselves). In this column, we have identified a few mistakes that we have witnessed that reoccur. We bring them to your attention so that you may be able to avoid them, or at least, to be aware of them such that you can handle them to lessen the impact of the circumstances.

1. Upgrading too quickly
2. The obsession to match allowable maximum chaingear
3. Unrealistic expectations
4. Parents trumping the junior's coach
5. Not training, just racing
6. Underestimating fear
7. "Not Sunday School"
8. The importance of emphasizing the team over the individual

In this column, we'll cover the first four items on the list, above. We'll cover the last four in our next column.

Upgrading too quickly

Admittedly, we've made this mistake more than a few times. Success at one level is no guarantee when entering the next level of competition. Even winning or placing within the racer's current category is not a reason enough to upgrade. We've allowed upgrades to talented juniors as soon as they acquired the required points. Our biggest problem area occurs when boys upgrade from Category 3 to Category 2.

For the majority of events that we enter, Men's Category 5, Category 4, and Category 3 are separated in their own races. Juniors in these categories race against their peer group with regards to experience and ability. To the contrary, Men's Category 2 racers are usually combined with the Pros and Category 1's. The step from Category 3 to Category 2 is huge mainly because the 2's must race against higher categories nearly all of the time. To compete at this level, the junior must not only be dedicated to training to survive in their new level, but they must have the maturity to withstand the frustration of not placing.

Juniors and their parents are anxious to upgrade, mainly for two reasons: 1) "To keep up with the Jones's" – they see peers upgrade, and 2) they argue that racing against better competition will make them better. If they stay at Category 3, they feel that they are being held back. They are in a rush with their cycling careers. They look to find a Pro-am or Category 2 team to help them make the transition. Parents are enablers who push their juniors in this direction. Unfortunately, most of these teams are not really looking to develop prospects; they are mostly concerned with finding bodies that can help put team members on the podium to satisfy sponsors. Juniors who reach Category 2 too fast seem to bounce around from team to team and many will end up leaving the sport. A few survive and those are the ones that that this group aspires to become.

We recommend "patience" before upgrading to gain more experience and maturity. Most important when formulating our answer, we advise our juniors and their parents to slow down and consider the big picture: "Don't be in a big hurry". We have a "process" and we share it with our up and coming juniors and their parents. First, we select a few races where the Men's Category 3's are combined with the Pro's, 1's, and 2's. If our Category 3 racer performs well in these races; he has the required upgrade points; he and has the maturity, then we permit the upgrade. Next, we have an association with a Men's Pro-am team that shares our vision. During the season, the associate team allows our Category 2 racer to "guest ride" certain races with our associated team, which helps our junior gain experience while becoming familiar how these teams function in races. At the same time, the associate team learns more about our junior. We've had two juniors who "graduated" from our program that are members of our associated Pro-am team.

The obsession to match allowable maximum chaingear

In the spring of 2012, we wrote an article that addressed the pitfalls of the obsession of having a junior's bike to roll-out to exactly the allowable maximum chaingear (26 feet). Indeed, we had a number of parents who questioned why we didn't insure that our juniors' bikes' gearing matched the maximum allowable roll-out. It became such an issue that we made a presentation to our team and parents about the ridiculousness of this obsession. As a result, we wrote our second article on junior gearing in May 2012. We answered the questions:

- How much does it really matter to come as close as possible to Rule 1M6's road maximum chaingear?
- When does it really matter?

We discussed the factors and variables that impact the answers to these questions:

- Optimal pedaling cadence
- Sprint pedaling cadence - leg speed
- Hill climbing pedaling cadence - power
- Time trialing - speed and power
- Crank-arm length - height/leg length
- Power and strength capability
- Gear shifting efficiency and timely acceleration - timing
- Roadway slope/gradient
- Road surface and condition
- Wind direction and speed
- Weight and height of the cyclist
- Positioning on the bike
- Position in a group
- Size of the group
- Energy, hydration, and fatigue
- Effort duration

We showed real data from one of our 18-year-old Category 2 racers, who achieved his peak power and peak power-to-weight numbers while using a maximum 50x14 gear combination compared to using a 52x14.

Without considering the factors above, it's just random whether or not having the largest allowable chaingear is helpful to a junior's performance. On the other hand, we've seen dozens of juniors fail roll-out at nationals and other races because somebody tried to maximize gearing to the largest allowable chaingear. How many times have we heard a parent or junior argue with an official, "But it's passed roll-out all year with the same set-up!" Of course there is a reason: Roll-out is not very accurate unless the wheel is rolled **straight** between the beginning line and end line. At nationals, they usually have a tray that insures a straight and accurate roll-out.

It's not just at nationals where this obsession has tripped up a junior. After the juniors race at the 2014 Historic Roswell Criterium, a parent from a competing team came to me and complained that his daughter failed roll-out when she had passed the day before at the Athens Twilight. He asked if we had anybody who had failed. Of course, we didn't because we "under-gear" our juniors. I handed the distraught father my 30-foot tape measure and said, "Maybe they made a mistake when they laid down their roll-out. You should check it." Two minutes later, he was back. The distance was correct, 26 feet. As it happened, in the beginning of the season, this father set-up his daughter's bike to have the maximum allowable chaingear. After the Athens Twilight, he noticed the rear tire was worn, so he replaced it before the Historic Roswell Criterium. Unfortunately, the new tire had a slightly higher profile and, thereby, a larger circumference. The result of his obsession was a disqualification.

Unrealistic expectations

Parent/Junior expectation and pressure to succeed in road cycling – "My child is a great athlete syndrome". Parents of juniors and juniors who've had success in other sports such as running, swimming, triathlons, soccer, and even MTB,

often believe they will quickly find success in road cycling. Most frequently, this is not the case and when success in road cycling isn't deemed as timely, pressures mount for immediate success. Paired with the fact that they see younger and supposedly "weaker" teammates who are successful racers, their own expectations are heightened. We've experienced this phenomenon time and time again even though we've cautioned the parents and juniors that road cycling is far less simple than it appears. We've explained that having ability, strength, mental toughness are ingredients for success, but skills competency, tactic development, and experience are invaluable and they can't be shortchanged.

We preach patience and experience will help remedy these situations. We explain that our most successful juniors have endured many setbacks over time before they reached their level of success. It can be tough and we often rely on our reputation to help convince these parents and juniors to persevere.

Parents trumping the junior's coach

Although parents have their junior's best interest at heart, their meddling with their junior's training and racing can have the opposite effect, not to mention the disruption produced with their coach and their team. As a caution, we have found that our biggest offenders of meddling parents are those of triathlete youth who join our team. It may be a coincident that these are the parents that cause this issue the most, but we honestly have had most of our challenges with this group. Perhaps you haven't had the same experience, but in our situation it is quite evident that this parent group seeks us out to help their juniors improve their cycling skills and techniques for draft legal triathlons. More often than not, to them bicycle racing is secondary. Indeed, we've had difficulty getting across our "Team Approach" message of to this group when their juniors join our race team. On the other hand, triathlete juniors and their parents are quite compliant when attending our camps and clinics.

Regardless of the athletic background, it needs to be made clear to all parents that you (the cycling coach) is in charge of their junior's training and racing. We sternly advise our parents and junior team members to follow our rules and failure to do so will result with a suspension or dismissal. It could be argued that this tact is bad business, but we have found that our membership appreciates this stance because it promotes stability among the whole team, juniors and parents.

Through your experience, you may have other mistakes that you have found to be common to add to this list. For us, we have found that it is impossible to always avoid these common mistakes. Sometimes they seem to be camouflaged by unique circumstances, but at least when they become apparent and we are better prepared to handle them. We hope you can avoid or recognize these situations such that you can adequately handle them within your coaching program.