

ARTS CORNER

Cycling: More Than a Hobby...

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My passion for cycling goes back a long way. It all began when, at the age of 14, I dallied every day in front of the display window of “Ciclos Colon” dreaming of owning that shiny red racing bike called “Esbelta” (hereinafter referred to as “she”). I can still remember her slim wheels, gentle curves, and the mysterious attraction she held for me. And I must have been a good boy that year because when Epiphany came she was magically transported to our living room by the Three Kings.

And it was the beginning of a great friendship. She was at my side the first time I declared my love for a girl I was walking home (eternally yours, Pilar), and later when I pedaled to the point of exhaustion to blot out the pain of rejection. With her I experienced the sensation of total freedom while bowling along lonely roads deep in the country, merging with the horizon, becoming one with the hills, the valleys, and space itself. With her I needed no one else to be happy, not even Pilar (gorgeous as she was). At the time, I had never heard of endorphins and knew nothing about brain biochemistry, but after a few hours of cycling I was suffused with an intense feeling of well-being and prolonged pleasure, and naturally I loved it. The longer and harder I cycled, the more mountain passes I climbed, the better I felt. And that was the beginning of my addiction.

Later, she became my indispensable sidekick when I was making friends on the road, sharing climbs, descents, scenery, and memorable moments with wonderful companions. Like the time my friends and I plunged straight into the fountain at the first village we came to after taking a wrong turning along the way and arriving at our destination with 180 km in our legs and 40 degrees on the thermometer. And the more we suffered, the more we liked it. We told each other that to be a cyclist you had to know how to suffer. And there was no suffering like your first “bonk,” a collapse caused by glycogen depletion. After a prolonged sustained effort if you haven’t eaten properly (because when you ride a bike you have to eat), suddenly you feel all your strength drain from your body, you can’t even cycle in a straight line, and you may even have hallucinations. I recall one such occasion

when we were helping my friend Manolo (hereinafter referred to as “Caterpillar”) to make it back to Seville after he bonked. (In those days there were no mobile phones to call your parents, and there was a great deal of shame in admitting that you couldn’t make it home.) While we were trying to keep our friend from being run over by a car and, more importantly, from knocking someone down, he suddenly exclaimed, “The road is covered with huge caterpillars about 8 inches long. My God! And they’re crawling along in single file!” And, it goes without saying that from that day on we always called him Caterpillar. A bonk is a very bad thing. My first and only bonk was an awful experience. I still don’t know how I managed to get off my bike, and the first thing I remember is leaning against a milestone on the Burguillos road and hearing the distant voice of my friend “The Wire” saying, “Lettuce” (which was my nickname) “come on man,

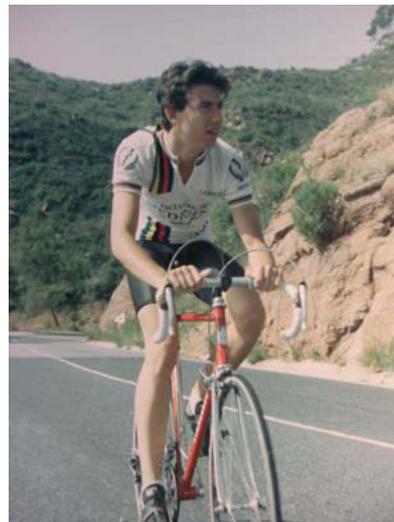


Figure 1. The young cyclist: first steps.



Figure 2. A cyclist and friend “hitting the bonk” in the Sierra Nevada with the Alpujarras mountain range in the distance.

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eat some of this quince and you'll be right in a jiffy." The problem was that I had always detested quince, but I gobbled it all up anyway because, as I said, a bonk is a very bad thing.

But cycling has given me many good memorable moments as well and above all has taught me a great deal. It taught me the value of making an effort, of tenacity, of the spirit of sacrifice, both for oneself and for others. It taught me that everything must be earned and that no one is going to climb that long, steep mountain pass for you. That it will be hard, but you will make it. And that afterwards you feel good, really good. You have excelled yourself.

Those were happy carefree years, years of studying and training, of competing in junior races (without ever winning even one), of enjoying cycling and cycling friends. Then I went to the university and she was my companion only on the road to and from the campus and occasionally when I went for a short spin. Once I started my residency, I totally abandoned the bike. The passion I began to invest in my new interest—dermatology—prevented me from spending any time cycling. And for this my mentor Don Francisco Camacho Martínez must accept a great part of the blame because he not only taught me to love my specialty but also instilled in me a love for research, for a job well done, and for perseverance in my studies. Thank you Don Francisco, perhaps I was not a great cyclist during those years, but you made me a dermatologist and a better person.

Later came my thesis, teaching, and state entrance exams. In other words, work became the central focus of my life. I married and had a daughter (María, who said I was a "bicycler") and the bike reappeared in my life, but this time fitted with a child's seat on the back. It was some time around then that I discovered the mountain bike, which has since shared my affections with the road bike (although I'll always prefer the road because you suffer more), and I have enjoyed magnificent moments riding with incomparable friends (you, Paco Russo, among others).

I don't know whether cycling is an art, or whether it is a suitable subject for this section, but if art is something beautiful, something that makes you happy, that makes you a better person, that you can share with others, then I think cycling is a marvelous art, the art of making an effort and overcoming obstacles, the art of being better.

The Spark of Life

Sports do not build character, they reveal it.

Heywood Hale Brown

I am quite sure that Miguel Ángel Muñoz would be a magnificent used car salesman. And a great TV presenter. And an excellent recruiter of new members to a sect. And the man with whom the most women would fall in love.

And... whatever else he wanted to be. Because our contributor to this month's Arts Corner is a person infused with the spark of life, a kind of joie de vivre, an absolute belief that happiness is mandatory, a sublimated sense of carpe diem. What is more, he is also able to communicate his emotions, to transmit his endorphins, and to infect us all—if only for a brief moment—with his enthusiasm.

This is the feeling one gets when reading his article. The author's narration leaves us in no doubt that anyone who is sitting peacefully on a bench watching "life passing by" will see him pedaling by on "her."

He poses the question of whether cycling is an art. According to the dictionary art is "a form of social awareness whose aim is to satisfy the spiritual needs of man through the use of materials, images, sound, and other forms of corporal expression."

Nothing like consulting an authoritative source when one is looking for an answer. Can there be any doubt at all that the material-bicycle, the landscape-image, the wind-sound, and the other forms of corporal expression-effort all combine to satisfy the spiritual needs of the man-Miguel Ángel as he scales the mountain on his dynamic structure of rubber and metal? So I think we can safely say that the arts include painting, literature, cinematography, photography, fashion, advertising and, henceforth, cycling.

What art and sport have in common is that they both strive for aesthetic achievement, creativity, a particular use of rhythm, and an attention to style. Since the end of the 19th century, many authors have written about modern sport. The 1912 Olympic Games included a writing and arts competition, which Baron de Coubertin called the "Pentathlon of the Muses." The annals of 20th century sports literature in Spanish include a long list of distinguished writers and Nobel laureates, such as Vicente Aleixandre, Jacinto Benevente, Camilo José Cela, and Gabriel García Márquez, have written about soccer and skating.

Many members of the Real Academia Española—Areilza, Ayala, Baroja, Buero Vallejo, Calvo-Sotelo, Cossío, Delibes, Gerardo Diego, Fernández Almagro, Fernández Flórez, García Nieto, Antonio Machado, Marañón, Muñoz Molina, Pemán, Sampedro, Torrente Ballester, Unamuno, Vargas Llosa, and Zamora Vicente—have written about sporting events in the pages of different publications and commentaries on aspects of chess, auto racing, aviation, boxing, hunting, soccer, jujitsu, mountaineering, swimming, skating, Basque pelota, fishing, yacht racing, rowing, tennis, and, of course, cycling.

And our magnificent dermatologist—or whatever he might want to be—is a true example of the art of cycling, the art of enthusiasm, the explosion of emotion, the smoke of illusion, the magic of dreams realized, and of... the spark of life.

A. GUERRA