

Slow It Down

Getting to the heart of the matter

By Barry Oblas

A few years ago, as the hot and humid Arizona summer was drawing to a close, I had been riding hills to blow off some accumulated stress from a tough workweek. I had little reason to be concerned about my cardiovascular health, or even consider that I might be at risk. True, I was a 56-year-old male, but there was no family history of heart disease, nor was I a smoker or overweight.

I routinely trained on my mountain bike at about 85 percent of my maximum heart rate. Many of the trails that I rode in South Mountain Park in Phoenix, Arizona, are steep and rocky and require balance, strength, and flexibility to navigate successfully. I, like many other mountain bikers, learned to push myself, try harder, often ignoring the pain of burning lungs and muscles. On this particular day in question, I deviated from my normal riding pattern and paid attention to the pain signals my body was sending me. I'm glad I did, because it probably saved my life!

During one of my hill climbs, I started to feel queasy, experiencing some mild discomfort in the upper chest region. Instead of pushing on, and not giving in, as I normally would have, I got off my bike, took a short rest, and headed home.

Once home I mentioned to my wife, who is a nurse, some of my unusual symptoms. Later, she mentioned these symptoms to a biking buddy of mine who also happens to be a physician. He told me in no uncertain terms that he would not ride with me until I took a stress EKG. The test measures the electrical activity of the heart during vigorous physical activity.

The test revealed electrical abnormalities and a subsequent angiography

showed that there was a 90 percent blockage in the artery feeding my left ventricle (the main pumping chamber of the heart). Before I knew it, I was being prepped for bypass surgery. It was hard to fathom the chain of events: one day merrily cruising along on my bike, the next day being wheeled on a gurney into the OR room for bypass surgery! When my surgeon came to visit me, the first thing I asked him was: will I be able to mountain bike again? To my relief he answered in the affirmative, though I had my doubts.

Recovery from open heart surgery was slow; first little baby steps, making my way on foot around the cul de sac in front of my home, then a bit later it was time for a short spin in my neighborhood on my road bike. Finally, albeit with some degree of trepidation, it was time for my first mountain bike ride. It felt wonderful to be out on single-track once again, doing what I loved more than anything else. I treated myself to a brand-new Specialized hardtail. It was fast, and I felt grateful for being given a second chance at life and to ride the trails of South Mountain.

The Chinese have a saying that: "Crisis is opportunity." I think back to my previous riding style, which was essentially testosterone-driven with the implicit philosophy being that if you don't push yourself, you

won't get better. I can definitely see in retrospect that I was out of balance between the almost obsessive need to compete, prove myself over and over again, instead of just having fun. After all, don't we ride to break out of the daily routine of competition and pushing ourselves to our limits? Why, I began to ask myself, should I do this mindlessly when I'm riding?

Challenging oneself at times and pushing limits is healthy, but my advice to fellow boomers is don't feel you have to. Take time to enjoy the beautiful scenery and listen to your body and the signals it is feeding back to you. Despite myself, I did, and it probably saved my life. And most important of all, it provided me with the opportunity to have hundreds more mind-blowing, fun-filled rides. □



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