

Race Day Lafayette

By Mike F. Foley

For me, nothing quite compares to the speed and exhilaration one feels racing bicycles at top speeds.

At 38, with nine races under my belt this season, it's been almost six years since I've considered myself a competitive road racer, though I'd never stopped riding.

I'm registered for Pro 1/2 category in the third annual Lafayette Criterium, where some of the top racers in the state will be competing. With a DNF (did not finish) in both of the last two races at Davis and San Rafael respectively, I am due for a decent placing this day.

Straddling my bike waiting for the start, grouped together with 47 other spandex-clad athletes, I am feeling those familiar pre-race jitters. Glancing around, I recognize some good riders and some very strong sprinters. Everybody always looks 'fast' on the start line.

My whole family is here: it's the first time my young nephews Shane and Brice will see me race. I wanted to make a good showing.

My brother-in-law Pat, a long-time runner, says, "You guys look like you're just pedaling around out there. Why don't you just go out and win?" "Riding a bike is easy," I say, "but racing bikes can be brutal."

The announcer: "Riders ready?"

Boom! We're off. Click, click, click: The crisp sound of dozens of clip-less pedals. We're rolling!

I start in the third row back. Single file into 'turn one' I see riders ahead already up and out of the saddle. One rider is making a move, jumping out front. A seventy-minute race, I need to conserve and not work too much or work too hard into the wind, I tell myself. Be smart – let him go.

Rider down! That nasty combined sound of metal and Lycra on asphalt makes

me wince. The rider who tried to jump clear early is now sliding across the pavement. The pack cleanly avoids the carnage and sling-shots into a strong tailwind down Golden Gate Way at speeds of over 30 mph.

Don't create any gaps; keep it tight.

Now riders are moving up on both sides of the line and bunching up at the front of the pack. Hugging the inside corner, the pack, now three lines wide, brakes lightly and leans into turn three. One rider leaning too far hits his left pedal. Sparks fly. Somehow, he manages to keep his tires on the road. Later, a tire explodes.

Often riders will literally lean on one another, holding each other up, and then get right back to racing. I'm just happy when the crash I hear is behind me.

Hammering down Mt. Diablo, the increasing headwind drives the group together, forcing everyone to 'find wheels' to draft. Riders that want to work quickly find a train of riders in their wake – 'wheel suckers.'

I try to maintain a spot in the top ten to see if any 'attacks' are happening and be in a good position to grab a wheel should the one ahead of me start to slow down. There are also usually fewer gaps near the front – less of a "slinky effect." At times, I find myself on the front, quickly take a short pull, and let the next rider through.

The crowd noise is not a factor: a few cowbells (standard bicycle racing noisemakers). I can just make out the muffled announcer's voice as we approached the start/finish. The biggest factor is the wind blowing down barricades and cones on either side of the course.

Seeing that rider crash in the first lap made everyone a little edgy; much braking going on. The lead riders drive the pace. Locked onto the wheel in front of me for much of the race, unattached, without a team to work for – or rider to work for me – I save myself for the final sprint.



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It's "go time."

At '2 to go' we whip around the corner and up onto Mt. Diablo Blvd so fast I can't breathe. Ripping through the start/finish, I hear the bell signifying the final lap – ONE to go!!!

The announcer beckoned and it's all out to the end. We come in hot around the last corner. Everyone is up and out of the saddle, spread wide on both sides of the road. I'm on one wheel, then another, and then there's the line. Pain, broad grins.

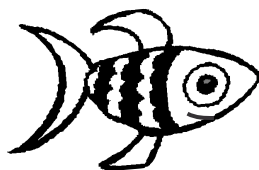
It was a good race: well organized and fun. I finish 21st overall – in the top half. It helps me justify racing in the main event.

Will I be out there next year? Definitely!

Orinda resident Michael Foley is a USCF Category II racer and has completed solo bicycle tours from California to Montana and Oregon. He is author of "Bicycling Beyond City Limits," which chronicles his 55-day cross-country journey with six friends (available at Orinda Books and Amazon.com).

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