

HANG'N ON

By Andy Hollinger

At 45 Spartans warriors got to retire from the phalanx. These grizzled hoplite veterans got to go home, get married, start a family and enjoy their hard-won rest. No more wars; no more campaigns. I'm not sure why that age was chosen, but maybe it was at this age when the cumulative affects of fighting all over the Peloponnesian peninsula began to outweigh the experience and skill these soldiers brought to the phalanx. I don't know.

Masters 45+ racing is not retirement at all; although our races certainly have a different character than the other, younger categories. Something happens to a guy around that age that is astounding – at least in my eyes. You could note here all the usual stuff: the talking in the peloton, the friendliness of the racers even between teams, even the races' character seem to be more of that quasi-mix of competitiveness and achievement oriented activity than the younger men's events. But, I think one of most often missed differences between us and the other categories of racers is the way we look at Spring.

Two days before this writing there were several inches of snow on my back porch. Now my huge, blonde Labrador devil-dog is sleeping in the sun, enjoying the warmth. I don't know when I've enjoyed spring more since I was a boy. I remember that special day; it was that day when, for the first time, one could *smell* baseball. Now, remember, back then, there were no other sports than baseball and everybody played it. There were pick-up games *every* day after school and on that first day when baseball was in the air your blood would race, your heart would pound, you'd oil the glove (which is probably what you smelled) and you knew, just knew that the first game was only days away. It wasn't a question of objectives, or planning or long term or even short term goals – it was the pure boyish excitement that fun was just around the corner.

Well, at 45, among many of the Masters group, it starts being like this again, only this time it's about the road and bicycling. Now, this is not to speak for everyone, but there are a few Masters on our team and their eyes have

started showing the boyish gleam again after being dormant since last November. We've all be working hard during the winter: coaches, spin classes, the Tuesday / Thursday night rides up and down "Euro-hill" or maybe just the rollers in front of old Tour videos – but the sun is shining now and we can't wait till there are tan lines again. Somewhere around 45 you start to get that way - Lago Vista is only X weeks away – I know I'm not ready, but I can't wait – this whole year going to be so much fun!

It's this sense of fun; pure fun; I think that sets us apart. Maybe the racing itself means less in some respects – maybe it means more. Part of it may be that this is where we're going be, until we're not. Last year I raced in some Cat 4 fields and some 35+ events ... and it was totally different. Maybe it was that I didn't know the guys and they not know me – but the tenor was different and when I look at the younger guys in training now, it's a LOT different. Spring is when everything is coming alive and to be out on the prairie, sailing along atop my incredible Colnago or my beloved and beautiful Cinelli, suffering (to be sure) but absolutely joyous over just being there and being able to be there – is incredible. Just thinking about it makes you smile. I think that the secret is two-fold.

First, we're at that age when we realize, just too well, that there are a finite number of Springs for us to enjoy and to lose one, for some avoidable reason, would not be acceptable. Maybe it's the fact that nothing works as well as it once did; maybe that we're buying aspirin in the 55 gal. drum size or maybe it's the fact that others at work look up and try to figure out what's going one when we bend at the knees and it sounds like someone breaking up kindling – I don't know. Sure there are objectives and goals and there's work and families and other chores to do – but this is Spring and I ride bikes – 'nuf said.

Second, is that we're old enough to allow ourselves to be boys again. Where I am in the peloton will not change much in the next ten years; the guys with which I ride and those I ride

against won't either. We're here to have fun, work hard and maybe, for me have a whale of a day and be in the same zip code as the finishers. I am not here to race to beat anyone in particular and I don't care about the purse size – I am here to compete and to enjoy and to live life at its fullest – maybe that is why Masters racing is so different. Two things happened at last year's HHH that illustrate my point. First, just before the last attack – meaning the last attack for which I was with the leaders - Tom Bain turned at said "I've got to go now Andy." – and off he went – with me in tow (for a while) but off he went. Tom and I are not friends, we ride for different teams – I think he was checking to make sure I wasn't overlapping his wheel since he had to move right and our eyes met so he spoke. Tom is an incredible competitor and in a different league in terms of racing than me, though we share the same events - but at that moment we were just boys on bikes – having fun. Later, I was passed by the three guys off the front of the 55 group led by Dave Thornton. Dave and I have known each other for more than a

decade and he is one of the true "gods" of Texas racing, not just the Masters set. It was incredible to watch him pull the other two by my group. I was pulling at that moment and we were working hard. Dave looked over and told me to "keep working Andy, keep working – you're looking good!" The fact that he took the time and breath to encourage me was another example of the "old guys" having fun. The enjoyment of Spring brings that out in a person.


So maybe the Spartans had it right, after all. Maybe at 45 the veteran hoplites retired because there were better things to do than push spears at other Greeks. Maybe at 45 we too, realize that there is more to life and if we can, as long as we can, we're going to be pushing ourselves, racing as hard as we can on our bikes. My motto is that my "spirit, mind and soul keep writing checks my body have trouble cashing." New checks come due each spring – how much more fun can you have. Just like smelling baseball all those years ago – I can't wait for Lago Vista, Fayetteville and all the rest. Boys just wanna have fun.

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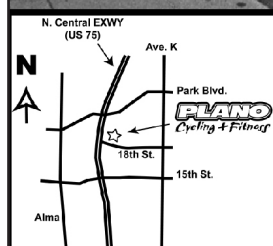
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