

Savor the Moment

(Looking on the Bright Side, or Lady Luck Hates my Guts)

As I was pulling onto the freeway; bike on the trailer, wife, son and mother-in-law somehow finding a place to sit among the mountains of gear filling the truck, it occurred to me what a lot of work it is to go racing. You don't just wake up one morning and flip a coin – “should I hang around the house or go racing today?” – no, a successful race weekend requires months of planning and hard work. This is probably a big part of what draws people to the sport...when that planning and hard work pays off it's incredibly rewarding. I hadn't raced in over a year, so I was looking forward to the WERA West season opener in Las Vegas even more than I would a normal race weekend.

Things didn't start out the way I'd hoped in Las Vegas. I was learning the track in 40 degree temps with 60mph winds. My transmission decided to put second gear on strike. My riding skills, meager as they were to begin with, had suffered more than I expected during my hiatus. No problem, I worked around second gear and kept my head down, working on going faster around the racetrack. Then on Saturday night, back at the hotel wrestling with my 2 year old son, in the midst of a full body slam I landed just wrong and dislocated my shoulder. I knew instantly that it'd come out, having dislocated it 3 times in the past 6 months, and let out a ROAR that was more anger than pain. My squeamish wife bravely forced the head of my humorous back into the socket which happens with a slide and a pop and more noise than you'd expect a shoulder to be able to make.

Now it was gut check time. I felt like packing up and going home and learning to knit. But I'd come this far, and it didn't seem like things could get worse, so I figured I might as well race. Arm wobbling around in the socket and bike falling in and out of second gear several times a lap, I took to the track. I got great launches in both of my races, then immediately slid backwards as everyone shifted into second and I was forced to shift into third. Ouch. But I fought with honor, turning lap times within 110% of the leaders. Not exactly MotoGP material, but better riding than I'd enjoyed in a while. Which was when it occurred to me that in many ways, for many people, racing is more about overcoming obstacles and achieving something than it is about collecting trophies.

I started this race season with the intention of doing well. I knew I wasn't going to be winning any races in the hyper-competitive 600 expert classes I'd be contesting, but I figured I'd finally clawed and scraped my way far enough up the food chain to be able to run mid-pack. I bought a dirt bike to cross train on. I went to lots of track days. I spent a little money upgrading the trusty steed. I was comfortable with the bike sliding, and was braking hard enough to stand my F4 on the front wheel going into turn 1. I haven't been racing very long, but I know when I'm going faster than usual. As the season got underway, I knew I was going faster than usual. Things felt like they were clicking.

The races in Vegas turned out to be previews of bad luck to come. My aging bike just wasn't competitive with the newer machines, and I couldn't seem to get through a Saturday practice without something breaking. I was forced to switch from the Dunlop 208's I'd used for two years to the newer 209's the Dunlop guys recommended – a change that they assured me I wouldn't notice – but which rendered the bike almost unrideable. I rebuilt the motor completely, fixing the transmission in the process, but the horsepower gains made with new rings and functional cam bearings weren't quite what I'd hoped for. I was also making mistakes in preparation and strategy. Things looked bleak.

After 3 more weekends spent holding down the back of the 600 grid, I dragged the family up to Buttonwillow for what I figured would be my last race of the year. We were preparing for a cross country move and I just couldn't justify continuing to spend a thousand dollars a weekend only to come home frustrated, battered, and with another DFL on my results sheet. The setup was still suffering from the 209's, but I decided to just push as hard as I possibly could and if the machine threw me on the ground then so be it. I didn't quite have the intention of crashing, but I knew I'd be pushing harder than I'd ever pushed on a bike that was clearly very angry. I got a decent start and was fighting hard throughout the first lap. The rear tire that I'd put on only two races before was apparently cooked from the Willow heat the week before, so I couldn't get any power to the ground. The field was walking away from me, and even though I'd gotten used to it I wasn't happy.

Then, as I was toying with the throttle seeing how far sideways I could get and still make it out of Buttonwillow's turn 13, something suddenly changed. I was having SO MUCH FUN I couldn't believe it! Everybody else was going faster than me, but I was pushing myself and my machine to the limits of what was possible on that track on that day. I started hearing the exhaust sing to me exiting the turns, and feeling my knee digging deeper and deeper

into the ground. Smiling inside my helmet, I was making my motorcycle do things I'd never made it do before and it felt really good! Wow, this is why I started doing this...this is why I'd spent so much money and time and risked my fragile bones. This was pure joy, fueled by gasoline and sticky rubber. Every time the trusty steed shook her head going down the front straight (yes, that's how wrong my setup was - she'd headshake on the STRAIGHT) I actually appreciated just how nuts this whole thing was and how thrilled I was to be there. The race ended and I packed up and went home, another DFL on the results sheet, but with a new appreciation for enjoying the moment, regardless of the details of the overall situation.



On the ride back to LA I decided that I still had one bit of unfinished business to tend to before I could put the racebike on ice and travel back east – I needed to go back to Willow Springs to feel that happy in-the-moment feeling at the first track that'd ever given it to me. Willow is where my heart is and I felt like I hadn't done the track justice in my last outing there.



I managed to find a set of 208's and immediately went faster than I had the previous month. I wasn't even going to race this time, just practice on Saturday and enjoy the track time, so I felt no pressure. My approach worked, I was having a BLAST and enjoying every moment of every lap. Turn 2 was back to being a traction playground, and turn 8 was no longer my enemy, but the best thrill ride I could possibly dream of. I LOVE RIDING A BIKE ON A RACETRACK! The funny thing was, the happier I got, the faster I went. I bested my personal lap record and was again making the bike do things I'd never made it do before (spinning up the rear out of turn 4 is just as cool as everyone said it would be!). There was no tomorrow and no yesterday, the whole world was taking place right there underneath my wheels. I was sorry when the last session ended, and went home a happy man.



Months after that last outing, I was talking to Chris Jonnum about my lousy season and asking him if he thought it was worth writing about. He told me that "often stories about defeat are more interesting than stories about winning." I thought a lot about that, and I thought about my losing season, and I think I understand what he meant.