

Four cities.
Three rides.
Two wheels.
One journey
that taught me
how to
go faster.

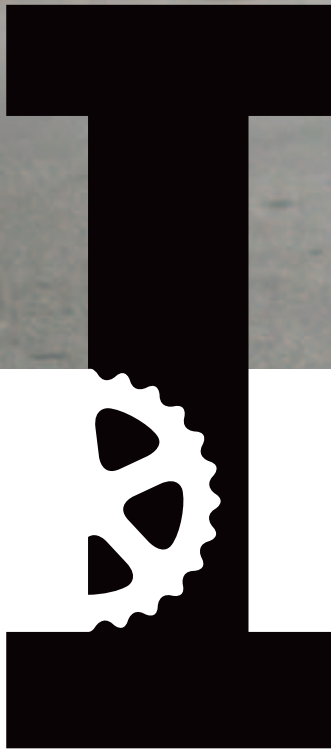
BY SAM POLCER

gearhead*

DRIVE IMAGES/PHOTOLIBRARY (LEFT);
JOE PAYBARAH (RIGHT)



***or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying
and Love the Spandex**



It was a good time to start riding a bike in New York City. In 2006, the Department of Transportation began a three-year project to install 200 miles of bike lanes on streets in the five boroughs, doubling the city's bike network. Groups like Transportation Alternatives, public officials like Transportation Commissioner Janette Sadik-Khan and resources like the Web site *ridethecity.com* led a concerted effort to make the traffic-and-pedestrian-congested city a friendlier and safer place for cyclists.

Featherweight, brakeless, fixed-gear road bikes were the latest transportation trend—skinny jeans-

wearing hipsters braved potholes and aggressive taxi drivers to zip from their lofts in Brooklyn's newly gentrified neighborhoods to cafés, bars and art openings. Their underground bike culture made itself more visible, attracting more and more devotees. Once-isolated areas became accessible; real estate brokers were pleased.

As was I. I stopped buying subway Metrocards (now \$89 for monthly unlimited rides), strapped a chain lock around my waist, bought a helmet and began to explore the nooks and crannies of the concrete jungle. Undeterred by unreliable public transportation schedules, I saw friends and family more. I was in the best shape of my life, and my commute to work was reduced by at least 10 minutes. Talk to any bike commuter and they will certainly rank a sweaty arrival to the office over an arduous underground journey—and almost none dream of going back.

The fondest memories I have from my first year on a road bike are of rides home from parties and concerts during the wee hours, when the number of cars would drop drastically and I could hear my tires on the pavement, the air whistling past my helmet,

CITY HAUL The writer, after crossing the East River via the Williamsburg Bridge in Brooklyn

SUZANNE E. SHAPIRO



and my steady breath on cool summer nights. Whipping around the 45-degree turn in front of the leveled factory at the intersection of Frost and N. 10th in Williamsburg, or finding myself alone on the wide straightaway of Flushing Avenue by the Brooklyn Navy Yards gave me rare chances to feel like I had my own slice of the Big Apple.

Come daytime, though, double-parked delivery vans forcing me into traffic and white “ghost bikes” chained to street lamps—memorials for cyclists killed by drivers nearby—were constant reminders that the city had a long way to go before it would become the new Copenhagen (the world’s most bicycle-friendly city and one frequently cited as one of the planet’s most livable). Cycling, for most New Yorkers, requires intense concentration. Physical and technical improvement take a back seat to basic survival. Will you make that light? Watch out

for pedestrians and that car door! Four thousand-dollar bike? If it’s stolen, you’ll have to walk home.

There are those dedicated few that take it seriously, pushing their bodies to the limit in skin-hugging, moisture-wicking outfits. I’d see them looping through Central Park (Manhattan) and Prospect Park (Brooklyn) on weekends, the spandex-clad weekend warriors, computers on their handlebars, checking their wristwatches, muttering or shouting at anyone who dared threaten the cadence of their pedal strokes by stepping off the grass onto the street. I’d join their ranks for a lap, the right leg of my jeans rolled up, wondering why anyone would take this joyful activity so seriously. They looked like they were solving math equations while sweating up the parks’ hills. With all that gear, all that science, all that struggle—were they even having fun?

If I had talked to cyclists outside of my Brooklyn bubble, though, they’d probably laugh at my naiveté. The sport is fun, they’d say—just look at the thriving industry that supports it. Cycling has seen a surge in popularity among Americans: Membership growth in the USA Cycling organization is up to 5.5 percent annually (not coincidentally, it dropped to 3.5 during Lance Armstrong’s retirement). During the first quarter of 2009, bicycle sales had dropped 30 percent to 2.6 million sold because of the recession, but it could have been much worse: The sales of cars and trucks dropped more than 35 percent to 2.5 million. More bikes were sold than automobiles. And people weren’t



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just buying the cheap stuff: According to *bikebiz.com*, an industry Web site, the average price of bikes sold had increased by a significant 37.2 percent.

As someone who looked at cycling as a mode of transportation—not a form of recreation—I didn’t understand why it was so popular. Was it the high-end bikes? The scenery? The physical challenge? So many people spend good portions of their weekends (not to mention paychecks) sweating their ways up hills—I wanted to know why.

So, I embarked on a journey that I hoped would transform me from a scrappy Brooklyn commuter into a streamlined biking machine. I traded my jeans and T-shirt for a pair of spandex shorts (somewhat reluctantly, I should add; no stigma attached to cycling nagged me quite like the superhero tights) and a jersey. But what I really needed was a new ride.

Like many of us, I can remember the smallest details of the day I got my first bike. On my 10th birthday, my parents—normally terrible at keeping surprises to themselves—succeeded in concealing the true nature of our drive to a shop out in Mattituck, a town on the east end of Long Island, N.Y. During the mid-1980s, enthusiasm among kids and teens for the “mag” wheels, fluorescent-colored chrome frames of small-wheeled, single-gear BMX bikes had reached a fever pitch. If someone was lucky enough

to convince their folks to buy them a new GT or Mongoose, they were the subject of not-so-quiet envy among peers, myself among them. A worn-out copy of the now-cult-classic *Rad*, a 1986 film about a gifted BMX rider from the wrong side of the tracks challenging establishment-sponsored champs in a thrilling dirt-track showdown, remained in my family's VCR for months. (More than 20 years later, my brother and I can still recite lines.)

So it was with a certain kind of excitement that I was (finally!) led past rows of Haros, Dynos, Redlines, GTs and Mongooses and asked to pick one (of a price that was "within reason," of course—which meant that 95% of the bikes were out of reach). Heart racing, grinning, shaking with excitement, the unmistakable and unforgettable smell of polished metal, rubber, chain grease and leather filling my nose, I ultimately settled on a silver Diamondback—and took my place on the country roads of my small town among the ranks of those with their own sparkling rides.

Walking through the front doors of the Trek Bicycle Store in Madison, Wis., I realize just how little some things change.

When the gleaming white Madone 5.1 (Armstrong rides the 6 series) is rolled out to meet me, a whistle escapes my lips. The impression is the same as that of an exotic sports car: moving when standing still, begging to be ridden/driven, bursting with potential energy. I touch it lightly, and it rolls like it's never heard of friction. I lift it, and it practically floats. I start to feel sorry for the pile of chipped aluminum I left in my hallway back in New York, and know I'll never look at it the same way again.

"It's a beautiful bike," Trek CEO John Burke says, as we power up one of the hills through the area's farms (who knew Wisconsin had so many hills!). "Its [name] goes back to Lance Armstrong. Whenever he would get ready for the Tour de France, he would ride up a mountain in the south of France called the Madone. He would time himself from the bottom to the top and go as fast as he could—he

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could tell by his time if he was ready for the tour."

I, on other hand, wasn't even ready for this little hill. Burke, along with his wife, Tania Worgull (who runs Trek Travel, a company that organizes bike tours all over the world) slows down to wait for me. I'm on a fancy new bike, I think. I'm younger. This should be a breeze. What do they know that I don't?

They certainly have a wonderful place to practice. Madison is a cyclist's dream. Miles and miles of bike lanes in the center of town, endless country roads leading past dairy farms, around lakes and over hills just steep enough to give us a good workout—it's no wonder many of Trek's employees ride to work (their office and factory is 25 miles from downtown Madison).

Burke knows that Madison is a great place for cyclists, but he knows it's not alone. "Boulder, Colo., that's another great example. Amsterdam is a great example," he says, loudly, so that I can hear him through the wind. "It doesn't take that much. If you take a look at what it costs to put in a new four-lane bridge and what it costs to make a bicycle-friendly

city, it's not that big of a difference."

Burke is keenly aware of the impact that biking could have, and can rattle off statistics to prove it.

"Every time you can get someone to ride a bike instead of driving a car, you can have a major impact on the environment. You've got 40 percent of the cars on the road right now driving less than two miles. There's no question that our major cities are over-congested, and that if you can get cars off the street, that's a good thing. In Copenhagen, 50 percent of all trips are taken by bicycle. In the U.S...." Whether he pauses to catch his breath or for effect, I'm not entirely sure. "In the U.S., that figure is less than one."

While on the President's Council for Physical Fitness, Burke became aware of a trend just as frightening as congestion.

"There is a health disaster that is coming down our road. Right now, the health-care system is taking care of all these people that grew up in the '40s, '50s and '60s, when you didn't have the obesity levels [of today]. What will happen in 10, 20 or 30 years from now, unless America changes its lifestyle, is going to be horrific. If you take a look at the populations in

Europe, they're not suffering the obesity crisis that we're suffering here." Again, a pause, as we near the top of another incline. "The bicycle is a simple solution to complicated problems," he says.

So the thing I'm sitting on, which I've been describing idiotically to friends back home as a "something between a rocket and a cloud," the \$3K thing that in spite of its carbon-fiber frame and top-of-the line components, doesn't seem to make it any easier for me to get up this hill, isn't just a vehicle, it's a panacea.

In any case, I'd better learn how to ride it properly because, you know what? I'm beginning to cramp up.

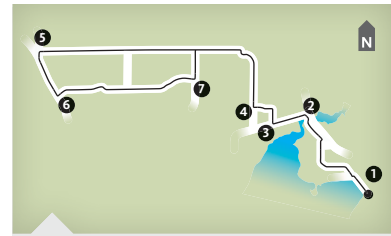
“You have 200 meters to go!” the Italian woman in front of me is shouting gleefully, pumping both fists in the air.

Why she's so happy, I don't know, because I must look like I'm about to die. "There is one person in front of you! You can catch him! Give everything you have left! You can do it! Go! Go! Go!" I am grunting, in this-needs-to-end-right-now pain.

For the past hour, the Italian has been increasing the resistance on the "Computrainer" that my bike is bolted into while she pricks the fingers on my right hand in order to take blood samples every three to five minutes. I give it everything I have, watching the line on the computer screen representing my speed climb to the top, and when she stops cheering, I slow my pedaling, bringing my first—and hopefully last—lactic threshold test to a sweaty end.

Even Lance Armstrong needs a coach (Chris Carmichael), so I've come to **Davanti Cycling** (davanticycling.com) in Boulder, Colo., to meet Luisa Sullivan, an exercise physiologist and, more importantly, a certified USA Cycling coach who I'm hoping will help me turn my sloppy form and untrained muscles into the stuff champions are made of (or at least make me able to climb a medium-sized hill without giving up so easily).

Burke had mentioned Boulder as an example of a near-perfect biking city. It's a place consistently found at the top of lists relating to outdoor sports. And driving the 45 minutes into town from the Denver International Airport, it's easy to see why. Given



A ROMANTIC RIDE John Burke and Tania Worgull suggest a route through farmland outside of Madison, Wis.

"We had 75 people do this 26-mile ride with us on our wedding day," Worgull says. "It was a great time. It can be done in about an hour and a half. Leave the Maple Bluff neighborhood (1), up through Kennedy Heights, and head west on Hwy. M toward Waunakee (2). Make a right on Mary Lake Rd. (3), another right on Woodland Dr. (4), and enjoy quiet farm roads and a couple of nice rolling hills, passing some picturesque farmland. At the end of Woodland, turn left on the bike path (5), where you should consider stopping at the Missouri Tavern for a cold local Wisconsin beer. To get back, make a left on Meffert Rd. (6), left on County Rd. Q (7), and rejoin Woodland Dr."

BUILT FOR TWO John Burke and Tania Worgull riding around Madison

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its cloudless, blue skies, crisp mountain air, position at the base of the dramatic Rockies, and disproportionate number of athletic inhabitants jogging along the sidewalks, biking in its many lanes and trails, or driving into the mountains with kayaks strapped to the roofs of their cars—it's an outdoor sports paradise.

Later, while biking with Sullivan up the road leading to the National Center for Atmospheric Research, a fairly short but consistent ascent up 1,000 feet, I begin to question whether the benefits of science-based training are worth sacrificing the freedom I feel when I'm just riding, unaware of things like lactic acid buildup, metabolic zones, threshold levels, intervals, heart rates and strength training. Can't I just ride until I start to get tired, slow down, then keep going? Won't the love of being on a bike, if I spend enough time doing it, be enough? I'm able to ride for hours at a time back in New York. Doesn't that matter?

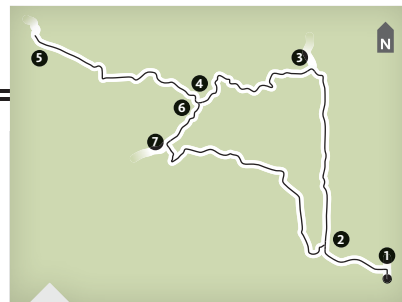
While I think this, Sullivan is watching me struggle up the mountain and laughing good-naturedly at the way my toes point downward as I pedal (meaning

much of my energy is being wasted).

Back at her office, she breaks the news to me gently, when I ask whether interval training—which basically means alternating between high and low intensity levels while training in order to increase muscular capacity—is necessary.

"Free rides do have benefits," she says. "You learn technique and get used to being on the bike, so that you can handle a lot of miles. But,"—here it comes—"if you only do this, you will never, ever

TRAINING DAZE The writer at the end of his lactic threshold test



UP, UP AND AWAY Luisa Sullivan, exercise physiologist and cycling coach, recommends this ride in Boulder, Colo.



"This loop is around 30 miles long. From North Broadway, take a left on Lee Hill (1). At the 1-mile mark, the climb starts. At the intersection, go straight up on Olde Stage (2)—it's steep for another .5 mile. At the bottom of the descent turn left on Lefthand Canyon (3). After 3 miles, veer right on James Canyon Dr. (4) and climb to Jamestown (5). Turn around and take a right on Lefthand Canyon Dr. (6), toward Ward, and take a left on Lee Hill (7) (a steep hill), and take it all the way back."



SAM POLCER (TOP), LUISA SULLIVAN (BOTTOM)

AD



DREAM TEAM (from left) Alexis Marbach, Mariko Fischer, Heather Cafferata and Melissa Cook

improve. You may hit different points of your metabolic zones if you are just riding, but you won't spend long enough in a specific zone to stimulate the associated physiological adaptation."

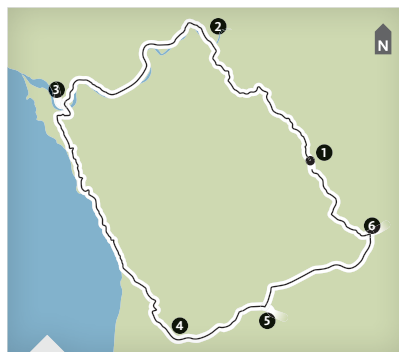
Yeah. No pain, no gain. Got it.

Sullivan asks me a series of questions on topics like time commitment and the kinds of roads I have access to back home. Based on my vague answers ("I don't know how long it takes me to go over the Manhattan Bridge ... five minutes? Twenty minutes?"), along with my test results and her observations about my riding technique, she devises an eight-week training regimen that she says will guarantee significant improvement.

It's going to be an uphill climb.

I decide that if anyone can understand my desire to balance the urban street biking lifestyle I am used to with a serious dedication to the sport, it will be the cycling enthusiasts at Timbuk2, a company founded 20 years ago by a San Francisco bike messenger. Very few of my jaunts around New York city take place without one of their striped bags on my back.

So, a few days later, I'm zooming past rows of grapevines and rustic-looking



COASTING Perry Klebhan, CEO of Timbuk2, shares his favorite ride in Northern California.



"I'm a surfer at heart and I love the cool weather, so I suggest starting at the town of Occidental (1).

Go north on Bohemian Highway—there's a redwood canopy the whole way—then turn west on 116 (2). Follow the river to Jenner (a great surf spot in winter), head south on PCH (Rte. 1) (3). You'll pass the big open beaches of the north coast and the highway stays on the bluff above. Pass Salmon Creek, drop into Bodega and turn east (4), still on Rte. 1. Then peel off on the Bodega Highway to Freestone (5), where you'll connect with the Bohemian Highway (6) and go just a few miles back into Occidental.

general stores, winding my way through picturesque Sonoma County (just north of San Francisco) with Timbuk2 employee Melissa Cook, some members of her local racing team—Alexis Marbach, Mariko Fischer and Heather Cafferata—and my good friend Joe Paybarah, who moved out to the West Coast from New York five years ago and has taken up cycling in order to pass the months he can't spend snowboarding at Tahoe. (I brought Joe along because he is not on a racing team, and I wanted to share my embarrassment.)

More than one person I spoke with had mentioned the wine region of Northern California as a wonderful place for biking, citing its rolling hills and quiet country roads—and it doesn't disappoint. During our long ride, one that tests my endurance and forces me to think about things like pedaling cadence, proper gearing, energy levels and hydration, I can't help but sneak long glances at the landscape. Despite some significant ascents, it is ultimately the scenery that takes my breath away.

And then I realize: I wouldn't be enjoying this if I wasn't doing it properly.

Biking showed me New York City streets I had never seen before, but only when I learned the right techniques—how to read traffic patterns, anticipate car doors and scan intersections for pedestrians—was I able to enjoy it. Likewise, the heavenly hills of Sonoma County would be a nightmare if didn't know how to pace myself or allowed my legs to cramp up. The nice bike helps.

Emboldened, I attempt some of the team riding techniques I see the pros do on TV, but quickly realize I'm the only one. The girls are just ... well, riding. They chat with each other on the straight-aways. They slow down for stragglers (Joe and I). They smile, laugh and holler with glee as they hurtle down the bigger hills—and I do too.

The spandex? It fits me perfectly. **M**

MIDWEST AIRLINES offers flights to and from Madison, Denver and San Francisco. Details can be found at midwestairlines.com.