

Maddog Unleashed

Symphony of Pain, Scored for Clavicle And Wind Trainer



“Got on the spin bike for half an hour today.” —Lance Armstrong, writing on Twitter, three days after undergoing surgery for a broken right collarbone.

BY PATRICK O'GRADY

In addition to brains, good looks and wealth, Lance Armstrong and I have something else in common—we both waited until our 30s to break a collarbone.

I was 34 and getting set to start my first real season as a bicycle racer when I laid it down on March 7, 1989, on the Santa Clara Pueblo near Española, N.M.

The cause of the crash remains something of a mystery two decades later because in addition to snapping my left clavicle I coldcocked myself, totaling my beer-cooler helmet. I eventually reasoned that excessive cleat wear must have caused me to suffer premature unclipping while sprinting up a short rise, sending me over the bars, onto the asphalt and into the emergency room.

It being my first broken bone of any sort, I duly noted the incident in my training diary: “Broke my f-king collarbone on the Puye Cliff Dwellings road. Tore off a hunk of scalp, raspberried both knees and elbows and picked up a Technicolor bruise from left thigh to waist. Doc says I can't ride the road for a month but can do the trainer if I can stand the pain.”

I'm In Pieces, Bits and Pieces. I could and did, climbing aboard the stationary trainer for a no-hands, 20-minute spin two days later. It was far from pretty. My heart rate was in six figures, and simply getting on my feet every morning was an exercise in pain management; I had a water bed, and the one quick situp required to get out of it was no fun at all.

But I was religious about enduring regular trainer workouts, and after three weeks of indoor spinning I finally ventured outdoors for a short road ride (on a mountain bike). I needed every bit of 45 minutes to ride 10 miles. “Sheeit,” I noted succinctly in my diary. Back to the trainer.

Two months after the crash I rode the Santa Fe Century in just under five hours. And on Memorial Day weekend I finally pinned a number on and raced the Cat. 4's at the Iron Horse Bicycle Classic, albeit without distinction.

Bad to the Bone. Other 30-somethings have turned in more noteworthy performances after breaking collarbones. In 1995, at age 32, Rebecca Twigg won a sixth world championship—and set a world record for the individual pursuit—with seven screws holding her clavicle together. And in 2003, Tyler Hamilton won a stage of the Tour de France with a collarbone that was fractured, but not displaced.

For them, it must be kind of amusing to watch the mainstream media traipsing around after a certain Tour-winning Texan with one wing in a sling as though he were a shaven-legged Sisyphus and the gods had just doubled the size of his rock. It certainly has been for me.

“Lance Armstrong is back on the bike,” trumpeted *The Associated Press* after the seven-time Tour champ Tweeted about taking a half-hour indoor spin. Sure, it makes for a sexier lede than “Lance Armstrong finished 125th at Milan-San Remo,” and a scribe doesn't need to know anything about cycling, or even leave the office, to write it. But let's face it—the dude has gotten worse news from doctors.

So, yeah, I wouldn't bet against Armstrong being able to bounce back from his broken collarbone in time to race the Tour. It isn't exactly the Iron Horse, true, but a guy needs a goal, no matter how modest.