

THE **MENTAL** CYCLIST™

CHANGE YOUR MIND. CHANGE YOUR RIDE.

THE **MENTAL** CYCLIST™

KYLE MACRAE

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For Euan and Calum

THE ONE SELF-KNOWLEDGE  
WORTH HAVING IS TO KNOW  
ONE'S OWN MIND.

F H BRADLEY, PHILOSOPHER

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PART 1

WHAT IS

MENTAL CYCLING?



## MENTAL CYCLING IS A MINDSET

It's a different way of thinking about your cycling, and yourself, so you can do more on your bike.

Because you know what? It's rubbish being limited in life. Limited in your ambitions. Limited in your achievements. It's particularly rubbish in cycling because all the barriers we bang up against are self-imposed. They're not real. They just *feel* real.

Mental cycling is about blowing up those barriers. You'll do this by becoming an expert in yourself. This means understanding the kind of cyclist you are right now and designing the cyclist you'd love to be. I don't mean what kind of bike you have or what kind of cycling you do. I simply mean: what gets you into the saddle? Why do you ride your bike? What do you really enjoy, and what not so much?

What would you do if only you could, but don't believe you can?

### PRACTICAL PEDAL POWER

Mental cycling is not about changing your personality, or balancing your chakras, or asking the universe to magically make your life better. I won't ask you to believe so you can achieve, fake it 'til you make it, or turn your frown upside down.

Nor is it about pushing your body through the pain barrier to achieve superhuman feats and break world records. You know the kind of thing: here's what Top Pro did, and you can do it too! Except, you can't. You can't because Top Pro has the best equipment, their own chef, a team of physios and sports psychologists, unlimited time for training, God-given talent and, in some cases, allegedly, a big bucket of performance-enhancing drugs.

You don't. But it's not about that. It's about changing your relationship with your cycling so you can love every ride and do anything you want to do. It's about understanding what drives you forward and what holds you back.

The Mental Cyclist is 100% practical. I'm going to help you haul your personal psychological barriers out of the shadows and into the spotlight so you can see them for what they really are. Then together we'll blow them up. Rationally. Mindfully. Permanently. Mental cycling is more than a marginal gain. It's about *change*. Changing your mind to change your ride.

*I've learned that finishing a marathon isn't just an athletic achievement. It's a state of mind that says anything's possible.*

John Hanc, author

## BARRIERS YOU'LL LEARN TO BEAT

While cycling is different for all of us, the things that hold us back are always the same. They fall into two camps: logistical and psychological.

Logistical barriers are *practical* considerations. Things like:

- I don't have time to train.
- I don't have the right kit.
- I don't have the information I need.
- I don't have enough money.
- I don't have any cycling pals.
- I don't have a brilliant bike.
- I don't have any bike.

We usually see these logistical barriers pretty clearly, and they're simple enough to deal with in principle. That doesn't mean they're simple to deal with in *practice*, of course. You might not have the money for the kit you'd like or have any holiday time left to go cycling in the sunshine. But you know what the barriers are and can usually figure out ways to tackle or work around them.

The Mental Cyclist isn't about those barriers. It's about the *psychological* stuff that really holds us back. These are the barriers that many of us find much, much harder to deal with. For example:

- I'm not good enough.
- I'll never be good enough.
- I'm too old, slow, fat (or whatever).
- It's too high, hard, long (or whatever).
- I'll just make a fool of myself.
- Everyone else is better than me.
- I'll feel dreadful if I fail.

Your mind is smart. It knows you inside out. But sometimes it tells you stories. Negative stories that shatter your self-confidence. Then, when you think about doing something challenging, something you'd love to do, your mind says: NOPE.

The stories aren't real. But they *feel* real. So we build psychological barriers that hold us back. Stop us doing things we'd love to do. Limit our ambitions. Affect our performance and spoil our fun.

## HIDDEN NASTIES

Psychological barriers are insidious. They live in the shadows of your self-consciousness, pecking away at your belief and confidence. They tell you the worst possible version of your story. They try to stop you doing anything out of the ordinary. And if that doesn't work, they make you miserable while you do it. They tell you that everything is too difficult, too dangerous, and it's definitely going to be a disaster.

When you listen to them, this all comes true. You give up, or you don't even try in the first place. You're trapped. The way out of the trap is by listening to your mind. And, sometimes, challenging the stories it spins.

## WHY YOUR MIND MATTERS

In the West, we tend to imagine our brains and our bodies as separate things. It's a model attributed to the French philosopher René Descartes, but it goes back a lot further than that. The model goes like this: we have a body to do body stuff and a brain to do brain stuff, and they happily get on with it in isolation from one another.

But that isn't true.

## ALL JOINED UP

We've known for a very long time that our minds affect our bodies. That can be directly, such as extreme stress making us physically ill. Or it can be an indirect influence, such as feelings of sadness making us more likely to reach for the Jaffa Cakes. If we're experiencing depression, we may experience physical changes in our menstrual cycle, disturbed sleep patterns or unusual aches and pains. When we grieve or experience other kinds of emotional trauma, we often lose a great deal of weight. If we're really stressed, we're more likely to get the cold or suffer from headaches.

And it's true the other way around. What happens to our bodies can affect our minds. For example, when we don't get enough sunlight we don't make enough Vitamin D, and that makes many of us miserable. When the mercury climbs, we want to go outside – and if it climbs very high, some of us become more aggressive. When we exercise hard, we get an endorphin rush and feel great.

In cycling, the mind-body connection affects everything: how motivated we feel at the beginning of a ride, how much energy we put into the effort, how we deal with obstacles, and so on. A puncture is always a puncture, but it's your mind that decides whether today you're going to fix it calmly and get back on the bike or waste time stamping your cleats and shouting at clouds.

As the kids' rhyme might put it, our brains and our bodies are up a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G. But while they're in a close relationship, it's far from an equal one. Your brain is very much in the driving seat. And it doesn't have a neutral gear. It's either working for you or against you. Either pushing you forwards or slamming you into reverse.

## TELL YOURSELF A STORY

I had a vivid imagination when I was a kid. And that gave me superpowers.

Once, I was carrying two heavy bags of shopping back home, and my energy was fading fast. Instead of giving up, I imagined that I'd heard a cry for help inside my head. My parents were being held captive by a machete-wielding psychopath! If I didn't carry the shopping all the way from Glasgow, where I lived, to London, which was 400 miles away – right now, on foot, without stopping – he'd fillet my father and make my mum into mince.

I was no longer walking home from the shops. I was a hero on a life or death mission.

## PUSHING IT

Of course, I knew there wasn't really a psychopath. But our minds are powerful, even when we know we're imagining things. I gritted my teeth, gripped the bags tightly and strode purposefully down the road. How far could I go if I really had to? Would I push myself to the very limits of endurance? Would the plastic handles that were already cutting into my hands make my fingers fall off? Would I only make it as far as Manchester before keeling over, gasping with my final breath: "I tried, mum and dad! I really tried!"

Well, no. Obviously. But I did make it home without stopping or dropping the shopping, which was quite something. 'Hysterical strength', it's called. I was mainlining adrenaline, capable of extraordinary feats. I felt just like the apocryphal mother who somehow manages to lift a car that's threatening to crush a pram.

When our brains tell us stories, our bodies listen.

*Train your conscious mind and your subconscious mind to start working for you by getting those great powers to move in a new direction.*

Steve Backley, athlete

**KNOWING YOURSELF  
IS THE BEGINNING  
OF ALL WISDOM.**

**ARISTOTLE,  
PHILOSOPHER**

## YOUR BRAIN RULES YOUR BODY

As any spin instructor will tell you, often loudly, when you feel like giving up it's not because your body physically can't go on. It's because your brain decides:

- This hurts! This is crazy! I'm not doing it any more! Stop!

The pain we feel is real, but the decisions are being made upstairs. It's your brain, not your sweaty fingers, that swivels the resistance. When you ride, it's your brain that tells your legs to push the pedals. It's your brain that decides how much power to deliver, how much juice you've got left in the tank, and how you're feeling moment to moment.

### TAKE THE PAIN, KILLER

How we experience pain isn't just about the messages our legs send to our minds. It's also about the way our minds process those messages. The placebo effect is a great example of that processing. If you're told you're being given painkillers but swallow a sugar pill instead, you still feel better. The mind tells the body to feel better, and the body does what it's told.

Memory has an effect on how we experience pain, too. If we've experienced pain before, the messages from our legs trigger our limbic system. That's the part of the brain involved in behavioural and emotional responses, and it helps us decide whether to battle through the pain – or throw in the towel.

Many elite athletes use mind training to improve their performance. For some it's about managing pain, which is crucial in sports like competitive cycling. But for most it's about developing the right mental attitude to deliver a better performance. That's because pros know that how they feel can have a huge effect on what they can do.

Those attributes include:

- Motivation.
- Confidence.
- Focus.
- Positivity.

We'd add one more for Mental Cyclists:

- Enjoyment.

## FEEL THE FEAR (AND MAYBE DON'T DO IT ANYWAY)

You're not a pro, but what works for them will work for you too, even if you're not competing or focused on results. If you launch yourself into a ride or a training session with feelings of determination and self-confidence, with a light spirit and positive outlook, with the self-belief that you're capable of doing what it takes, and actually looking forward to it rather than dreading what might happen, those feelings will help you when the going gets tough. But if you start off feeling anxious, believing you might not be up for it, fearing you might fail or have a hideous time, your body will do its best to prove you right.

And so you might fail. Or even if you succeed, you might hate every moment and wonder why you're putting yourself through such nonsense for an arbitrary goal. Whatever you set out to do, it doesn't matter how fit you are if your heart – or rather, mind – just isn't in it.

As I said at the outset, the key to mental cycling is getting to know yourself. It's about understanding what makes you tick and what makes you stop so you can do more and enjoy it more.

What we need here is a toolkit.

### YOUR MENTAL CYCLIST TOOLKIT

Becoming a Mental Cyclist allows you to shed all the psychological baggage that holds you back. What do you need to for this? Let's start with what you *don't* need:

- Italian Lycra®.
- Carbon fibre.
- A gym.
- Keto diets, power bars, electrolytes etc.

In fact, you only need six things to become a Mental Cyclist (assuming you already have a bike). We call it the Mental Cyclist Toolkit. The first three tools are practical, and the next three are all about your attitude.

*When we carry thoughts of negativity and self-criticism, we inspire just what we don't want: poor health and an unattractive physical body.*  
Dashama Konah Gordon, writer

## JOURNAL

You're holding it right now. As part of your journey towards mental cycling, I'm going to invite you to complete exercises as we go along. With each exercise, you'll learn a little more about yourself. You can of course skip these exercises if you like, or just do them in your head. But you'll get the best results if you do them as they're intended.



You can download extra copies of all the exercises from the website: [mentalcyclist.com/resources](http://mentalcyclist.com/resources) (free membership required).

Something else I think you'll find very helpful on this road trip to self-expertise is writing a ride report at the end of every ride to reflect on what was going on in your head at the time. This will help you develop your self-expertise in no time at all.

If you haven't journaled before, you may be surprised to discover how useful it is. It's a powerful tool for capturing how you really think and feel about stuff. And, as we'll see, for *changing* how you think and feel.

## MENTAL CYCLIST MANIFESTO

The Mental Cyclist Manifesto is a 12-step program for doing more on your bike and loving every ride. It's not about hardening up. It's simply about understanding what's really going inside your head when you ride, so you can get your mind working for you rather than against you. If you follow the exercises, you'll develop:

- Awareness of yourself.
- Knowledge about yourself.
- Belief in yourself.

That expertise will improve your performance and increase your enjoyment of cycling – which you'll prove to yourself by taking on a challenge.

## MENTAL CYCLIST CHALLENGE

Why a challenge? Because a challenge is a goal, and goals keep life interesting. They motivate us to get off our butts and go do cool stuff.

Now, I'm not advocating Noel Edmonds-style cosmic ordering here, or suggesting that you can make the future happen by sheer force of the imagination. Clearly, that's nonsense. What I am saying is that if you have a meaningful, rewarding and vivid challenge to focus on, you'll be motivated to achieve it.

The key thing about your Mental Cyclist Challenge is that it ~~should~~ will be something that's beyond your current comfort zone. Your comfort zone is the mental equivalent of an easy ride. It's pleasant enough and might have some sticky bits where the road ramps up or you feel a little bit tired, but it's well within your capability. It's not going to be particularly thrilling, but there's no risk of failure. If your comfort zone was a colour, it would be beige. The beige shade of beige. The colour least likely to excite or delight, to stir your loins or set your heart on fire.

Your Mental Cyclist Challenge should be something that *does* set your heart on fire. Something that motivates you to push beyond your comfort zone. Something that makes you think you *might* fail (you won't). Something you'd really, really love to do (you will).

If you already have a challenge in mind, great! Hold that thought as you work through the Mental Cyclist. You may find that your challenge changes. If you don't have anything planned right now, that's just fine. You'll find yourself thinking of things you'd love to do as we go along, and you'll finalise and commit to your personal challenge in Part 3.

## HONESTY

You're going to be honest with yourself. About yourself.

Becoming an expert in yourself requires a degree of introspection and self-awareness. You may already be used to examining your inner emotions with coruscating candour, or you may find the prospect as appealing as taking a bath in cold baked beans. Either way, I'm going to make it easy, hopefully fun, and definitely effective and rewarding.

## COMMITMENT

You're going to make a commitment, and it's one you're going to love. The commitment you need for mental cycling isn't about going to the gym three times a day or riding eleventy billion base miles in winter. It's not about growing exquisite quads or refusing to eat anything Captain Caveman wouldn't recognise as wholesome.

The commitment you need is much simpler. You just need to commit to following the steps in the Mental Cyclist Manifesto and tackling a Mental Cyclist Challenge. You're going to learn to do something amazing that pushes buttons you didn't even know you had.

*If you dream it, you can do it.*

Walt Disney, film-maker

## FOCUS

There is nothing difficult about getting to know yourself. And definitely nothing mystical. But it does require a bit of focus from time to time. To help you focus, we're going to use Three Mental Breaths.

This is a technique we've nicked from mindfulness, because it works. Whenever you need to focus, to centre yourself, you can achieve that with three deep breaths.

These aren't just quick deep breaths. They're more measured. Here's how to do them:

- Take a moment to get yourself physically comfortable. Ideally you should be sitting down with your eyes closed, but you can do this standing up with your eyes open. You can even do it on your bike as you ride, in which case definitely keep your eyes open.
- Inhale slowly and gently through your nostrils, letting yourself feel your chest and your abdomen inflate. Don't let it become uncomfortable and don't force it – we're not looking for big comedy gulps here.
- Now exhale slowly and gently, feeling the sensation as you breathe the air back out again.
- Do this two more times.

For a guided video exercise in mental breathing, pop over to [mentalcyclist.com/resources](https://mentalcyclist.com/resources).

The reason this works is because breathing and emotional states are interlinked. When we breathe slowly and gently, we're telling our brain that everything is fine. There's no danger here. Nothing to get hung about.

You can try experiencing the alternative if you like. Attempt to concentrate on something or perform a delicate task while breathing very quickly and sharply. You can't do it as well because your brain is frantically punching the fire alarm button and letting off air horns.

We encourage you to use your Three Mental Breaths as the starting point for every exercise throughout this course. It only takes a few moments, but it gets you into the right headspace to focus on the task.

*You work so hard to fix yourself, but maybe what you need isn't another tactic, another book, another five-step plan. Maybe what's really holding you back is the idea that you need to be fixed.*

Vironika Tugaleua, author

**WE TEND TO BE HELD  
BACK FROM OUR GOALS  
BY THE SIMPLICITY OF OUR  
COMFORT ZONES.**

**MICHELLE C USTASZECKI,  
WRITER**

## CLIP IN!

For me, mental cycling was born on the slopes of Mont Ventoux. Or rather, off the slopes.

It's 2005 in the South of France. It's 35 degrees in the shade and everything is awesome. I'd been living in Provence for a year, cycling regularly on a terrible German bike with gears that jumped and brakes that barely worked. It cost me 200 Euros and weighed 200 kilos.

But while man and machine were hardly in perfect harmony, I rode it every day through lavender fields and heat-hazed hills. I'd discovered road cycling, and the love affair would last a lifetime.

But there was one hill I never went near, because it was a monster.

### THE GIANT OF PROVENCE

Mont Ventoux looks like part of the moon was dropped off by mistake. It looms nearly 2km above the plains. It's boiling hot at the bottom and freezing cold at the top. Winds at the summit howl at up to 80kph. On a really bad day, they can reach 300kph. There are a lot of really bad days.

And in the 1967 Tour de France, it killed Tommy Simpson. Cycling up there was unthinkable.

"We're riding it this year and you're doing it too!" my cycling buddy Didier announced one day. The "we" referred to his personal peloton of cycling pals. These were guys I'd never met, because I was way slower than Didier and nowhere near ready for a fast group ride. But Didier was adamant: I should definitely climb Ventoux. I was reasonably fit, he said, and a half-decent climber. I should do it because it's an iconic climb that should be on any cyclist's bucket list. He told me he wouldn't take no for an answer.

Suddenly the unthinkable became far too thinkable. I couldn't concentrate on anything else. Could I really climb Mont Ventoux? Would I?

My thought process went like this:

- It's too high.
- It's too hard.
- It's way too hot.
- It's way too windy.
- I'm too old.
- I'm too fat.
- My knees hurt.
- These guys are serious cyclists!
- I'll get dropped immediately.

- They'll think I'm an idiot.
- I'll ruin the ride for everyone.
- I don't have it in me.
- I'll only fail, so I shouldn't even try.
- Maybe next year...

These thoughts weren't very helpful, but they were very powerful.

"THE PROBLEM IS ALL INSIDE YOUR HEAD," I SAID TO ME

To be fair, I wasn't negative all the time. Sometimes, usually after some wine, I'd tell myself that I could absolutely do it. I'd flip into positive thinking mode, and tell myself:

- I'd LOVE to climb Mont Ventoux!
- I'm perfectly fit enough.
- I can do it in my own time.
- It's only a hill.
- I'll feel amazing when I do it!
- Bring it on!

But those moments were fleeting and rarely lasted longer than a carafe of Chateau Chapeau. When it ran dry, I went back to pessimism. There was no way I was going to do it. So I bottled it. I told myself I'd do it *one day*. When it was cooler. When I'd trained properly for it. When I had a better bike. When I was, er, younger. The problem was simple, although of course I didn't realise it at the time. I wasn't a Mental Cyclist. My head wasn't in the right place. It wasn't even in the right postcode.

## PARADISE LOST

Here's what I was really doing:

- I passed the microphone to every negative thought in my head. I didn't for a moment consider that I could influence those thoughts, let alone control them. I just listened to them and took them seriously.
- I saw the challenge as black and white. It would either be an incredible success or a humiliating failure. Getting to the top wasn't the most important thing. It was the only thing. All or nothing.
- I didn't believe I was fit or strong enough to do it. Actually, factually, this was nonsense.
- I worried about everything that could possibly go wrong. Just because something could go wrong doesn't mean it will go wrong. But try telling me that in 2005!
- I thought that if I didn't do well, Didier and his super-fit friends would see me as pathetic.

There was lots going on in my head. But this last one was the biggie. My self-esteem was on the line. Though I didn't recognise it at the time, and wouldn't have admitted to it if I had, I was equating my worth as a person with my performance on the bike. If I failed on the climb, clearly that meant I was a failure as a human being. Or at least as a cyclist, which is pretty much the same thing when you're trying to climb a mountain on a bike.

So I bottled it. I went home to Scotland, and bottled it again the following year. Then the year after that, and the one after that. Until finally, six years later, I figured out that what was holding me back had nothing to do with my physical ability to climb a hill – and absolutely everything to do with how I was thinking about the challenge.

And thinking about myself.

So in 2011, I persuaded a couple of pals to join me on a pilgrimage to Provence, and together we climbed Mont Ventoux. And I loved it! Because I climbed with my mind, not my muscles.



## WELCOME TO TMC

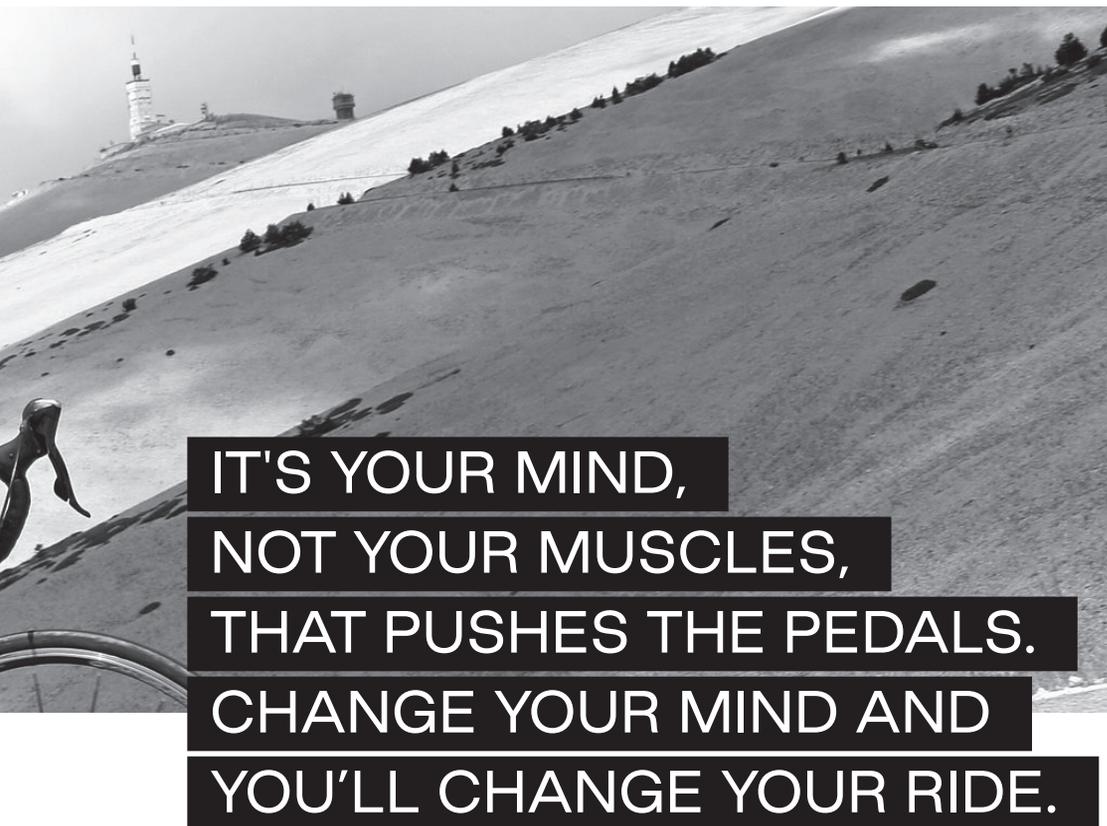
The Mental Cyclist is the result of my journey towards understanding myself better so I could stop beating myself up and feeling like a loser. On that journey, I reconnected with why I love cycling and learned how to make my mind – my crazy, contrarian, catastrophising mind – work for me rather than against me.

I've written The Mental Cyclist to help you do the same. I hope you find it enjoyable and beneficial and go on to take on the challenges of your life, free from the psychological barriers that hold us all back. I certainly wish I'd known this stuff back in 2005.

So clip in, prepare to take those Three Mental Breaths, and let's ride.

*Allez!*

Kyle MacRae





PART 2

THE MENTAL CYCLIST

MANIFESTO

SUPERCHA

S L -E

S L -E

SELF-E

SELF-E

**ENLARGE YOUR**

**E  
S E M  
S EEM  
STEEM**

You are a beautiful and unique snowflake. That's not sarcasm. Every single one of us is different in all kinds of ways. So why are we so keen to compare ourselves to others?

We do it all the time, in all parts of our lives. And we definitely do it when we're on our bikes. We compare ourselves to other people, and we worry that other people may be judging us. It's really draining. It puts you on a pendulum, forever oscillating between highs and lows. It's hero to zero territory. For every moment like this:

— I am the best! I am a goddess on wheels!

There are plenty of moments like these:

- She was faster than me... so I'm no good at this.
- I can't keep up with them... so they'll hate me for holding them back.
- They're all so much fitter than me... so there's no point even trying.

Unless you're a world champion, you're always going to come up against people who are 'better' than you: fitter, slimmer, stronger, faster, braver, better tanned, and way sexier in Spandex. And if you are world champion, the pressure's even worse because the only way is down.

## YOU'RE A LOSER, BABY

Sometimes it's fine to make comparisons, of course. If you're a slave to Strava and constantly compare your stats to Frank or Frieda's, that's great – IF that's what motivates you. Maybe you'll train harder and ride better the next time around. Go you!

But all too often those comparisons sow seeds of negativity and doubt inside our heads. That's because our comparisons aren't *neutral*. We attach value judgements to comparisons, which means we make them matter to us. And when stuff matters, it has consequences.

Think back to my worries about climbing Mont Ventoux. None of my worries were actually about the physical challenge of cycling up a big hill. Not really. They were centred on how I compared myself as a cyclist to Didier and his pals, and what I thought they would think of me if I failed. I convinced myself that I'd be a burden, that they'd resent me, and that I'd beat myself up. Even if they were polite about it, they'd see me as an overweight inadequate from Scotland with ambitions way beyond his ability. Somebody to scorn and quietly nudge off the side of the mountain when nobody was looking. My self-esteem was well and truly on the line. In my head, what mattered most was whether I could keep up with Didier.

This mattered to me because if I couldn't keep up – and I didn't think I could – I'd feel like a loser. Or I'd be a loser, which in my mind was the same thing.

I wasn't focused on how I might improve my performance and give it maximum effort. I didn't think about how I could approach the ride with a positive attitude rather than doom and gloom. I didn't think strategically about how I might mitigate the risks of being unable to keep up or complete the climb. I didn't even consider doing it as a solo ride, free from all the pressure. All I did was think about what other people would think about me.

In reality, of course, they were much more likely to think this:

“ \_\_\_\_\_ ”

Because people generally don't think about us nearly as much as we think they do. And when they do think about us, they generally don't do so in the incredibly, relentlessly, viciously negative way the critical voice in our head tells us they must.

We think they're judging us harshly. They're wondering what's for dinner.

*It's a toxic cycle. Your thoughts become your worries and your worries become your thoughts.*

Lindsay Holmes, journalist

Chances are you privately compare yourself with a few benchmarks in your cycling life. Friends, perhaps, or enemies, or family members, or fellow club riders, or that annoying neighbour with the ten-grand Pinarello and Rapha gear who flies up the road like a pro on EPO.

#### WHO DO YOU COMPARE YOURSELF TO?

*Be honest – nobody's going to read this but you!*

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#### WHAT MATTERS TO YOU?

*You might monitor other people's Strava stats to benchmark your personal performance, or check who's sweatier and gaspier at the end of a ride.*

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When we compare ourselves with other people, we involve two parts of our psychology: our ego and our self-esteem.

Let's talk about ego first. It's often used incorrectly to describe overconfidence and arrogance, but it's actually a term used to describe one facet of our mental make-up. According to the model created by Sigmund Freud, we all have an id, an ego, and a superego. Our id is responsible for our basic primal urges, including the most negative ones. It's our caveman or cavewoman brain, focused on instant gratification and self-interest.

If the id is a wild horse, the ego is its skilled rider. It takes the primal impulses of the id and applies a strong dose of reality so you don't do anything self-destructive. If your id wants to punch the boss in the nose, set fire to his car and break all the windows of the office, your ego realises that such tomfoolery isn't going to be brilliant for your future career prospects, and reins you in.

The third part of the equation, your superego, is what's often described as your conscience. It wouldn't stop you from setting fire to the boss's car, but if you did then your superego would make you feel really bad about it afterwards.

## CHECK YOURSELF BEFORE YOU WRECK YOURSELF

The ego's job is to protect you, and one of the tools it uses to do that is called a defence mechanism. A defence mechanism's job is to react to something in such a way that it stops you from getting too anxious about it. For example, we sometimes use humour to remove the sting from upsetting events or situations. That's a defence mechanism.

Defence mechanisms aren't always helpful. Your ego might decide that the best way to stop you from being anxious is not to try to do anything, ever. For example, it might persuade you that you can avoid the risk of losing a race by not entering the race in the first place. Or it might take your negative feelings about yourself and project them onto other people, such as convincing yourself that a group of super-fit kings of the mountain would leave you for dead. There's your excuse right there. *Why show up when the outcome will be horrible?*

That's what my ego was doing when I thought about Mont Ventoux. My fear of what the other cyclists might think of me wasn't based on any evidence, because of course I couldn't possibly know how people I didn't know would react to something that might not even happen. It was all about my own self-esteem.

*You will never reach your destination if you stop and throw stones at every dog that barks.*

Winston Churchill, politician

**RELAX. NO-ONE ELSE  
KNOWS WHAT THEY'RE  
DOING EITHER.**

**RICKY GERVAIS, WRITER**

We're straight into another exercise, so take those Three Mental Breaths and grab yourself a coffee. A defence mechanism is a tool that changes the way you behave, but also the way you feel. You might like to mentally climb off the saddle at this point and think about yourself in a broader context than cycling alone.

#### WHEN DO YOU NEED TO DEPLOY A DEFENCE MECHANISM?

*When does your brain kick into self-preservation mode and throw you a lifeboat? Describe typical situations here.*

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#### WHY DO YOU FEEL ANXIOUS?

*What are the risk factors? What could go wrong?*

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There are lots of definitions of self-esteem, but the simplest is this: it's how you feel about yourself. It's your feelings of self-worth and self-respect, your confidence in your own abilities, and your ability – or inability – to appreciate that you're capable of talking absolute nonsense to yourself.

Self-esteem is completely subjective. It's also very powerful. High levels of self-esteem have been proven to lead to better outcomes in almost every aspect of life. It helps academic achievement, relationships, happiness, and sporting performance.

### WIN-WIN

The influence of self-esteem in sport is especially interesting because it doesn't just help you perform better. It makes you more likely to get on a bike in the first place.

There are multiple studies showing the beneficial effects of self-esteem in sporting motivation and achievement. Many of them are referenced in a particularly fascinating study that was published in the *Journal of Sports Sciences* in 2009. As it notes, people with greater levels of self-esteem are much more likely to take part in sporting activities than people with lower levels. And when those people participate, they do well because their self-esteem tells them that they can do well.

As the paper puts it, self-esteem is linked to "productive achievement behaviour such as increased effort and persistence." The study goes on to highlight that:

- A strong sense of confidence has been associated with the setting of challenging goals and the expenditure of maximal effort and persistence to achieve those goals.

Let's recap, because it's really important. Improving your self-esteem improves your enjoyment and your confidence.

### YOU ARE YOUR ONLY COMPETITOR

If you have confidence in your own abilities, you're more likely to get on your bike. Then when you do get on your bike, you're more likely to have such a good time that you'll want to do it again and again. If you're motivated by targets, you'll set yourself more. If you're motivated by enjoyment, you'll look for more opportunities to have a great time.

The biggest obstacle to benefiting from powerful self-esteem is the comparison trap: measuring yourself against other people and worrying what they might do or what they might think. So stop doing that. Other people don't matter.

Returning to the *Sports Sciences* paper, here's one Olympian describing his least confident career moment:

- I was a lot more negative than I would normally be. I was a lot more distracted by other athletes and what they were doing.

And here's the same athlete taking about his most confident career moment:

- I ignored everyone else, I was just following my routines, being aware of the crowd but not being distracted by it, not thinking "Oh who's doing what? Where am I? What's the scoreboard saying?" – all the kind of distractions which I was distracted by before. Just focusing on me and what I was doing.

As the researchers explain:

- The athletes interviewed consistently identified confidence as a protection against negative thoughts.

That confidence also meant enjoyment. 64% of the athletes interviewed said they'd enjoyed the events when they'd felt most confident. And 50% said that when they were feeling confident, they felt much more relaxed and much calmer. The same pattern applied to negativity – lack of confidence led to increased anxiety and reduced enjoyment.

## THE FEELGOOD FACTOR

Here's an Olympian gold medallist describing his best performances:

- I just feel very relaxed, very happy with myself and happy with how my preparation has gone... you never know what's going to happen the next day but you're confident that you can perform at a level that meets your expectation.

"Confident that you can perform at a level that meets your expectation". Isn't that beautiful? As a Mental Cyclist, you should feel the same.

Mental Cyclists don't put their self-esteem on the line every time they get on their bikes. They don't waste energy imagining what other people might think of them, and they don't compare themselves, favourably or unfavourably, with other people. As a Mental Cyclist, the only comparison that matters is with yourself.

Not just any version of yourself, though. Compare yourself with the cyclist you want to be.

**AS YOU THINK, SO SHALL  
YOU BECOME.**

**BRUCE LEE, ACTOR**

The kind of cyclist you want to be will be unique to you. Maybe the cyclist you want to be is one who achieves certain goals but isn't mired in misery when circumstances conspire against you. Maybe you want to be able to push yourself just a little bit more than you do at the moment. Maybe you want to get a bit more enjoyment out of your rides. Maybe you want to love every ride regardless of the situation.

If performance targets are what motivate you, the cyclist you want to be may well be the cyclist who rides *this* particular challenging route, who achieves *that* spectacular time, who gets carried around on a golden throne while your rivals weep salty tears of sadness.

But even if specific achievements matter to you, it's just as important to know whether your feelings about them are wrapped up in comparisons with others. After all, you can't fully enjoy the lamentations of your rivals if you're secretly seething because you didn't win winningly enough.

Self-esteem is good not just for your mind, but for your performance and enjoyment too. The way to build and grow your self-esteem is not by avoiding the comparison trap, but by flipping it. From this day forward, you're going to compare yourself only with yourself.

You're going to design the cyclist you want to be.

*You cannot change the circumstances, the seasons  
or the wind, but you can change yourself.*

Jim Rohn, entrepreneur

Let's give your self-esteem a boost. You may find this easy because you already know you're awesome, or it may go against the grain because you tend towards modest self-effacement. Either way, take those Three Mental Breaths and think about what you've done with your cycling so far. What are your greatest hits?

You must write three answers for the first two questions. No excuses!

#### THINGS I LIKE MOST ABOUT MYSELF AS A CYCLIST

*What are you good at?*

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2. \_\_\_\_\_

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3. \_\_\_\_\_

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#### MY PROUDEST CYCLING ACHIEVEMENTS

*These can be big or small things. Challenge your thinking and don't necessarily go for your longest ride or biggest climb. What really matters to you and makes you proud?*

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2. \_\_\_\_\_

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3. \_\_\_\_\_

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## TAKEAWAYS

- Unless you're a world champion, you'll always encounter people who are fitter, faster, slimmer, stronger, smarter or sexier than you. Don't let your critical mental voice obsess over negative comparisons.
- Defence mechanisms aren't always helpful. Sometimes they stop you doing great things.
- Improved self-esteem has been shown to improve physical performance.
- Your only competitor is you.

## NOTES

Looking back over this stage, what have you learned about yourself?

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