

Assignment: Write a “how-to” essay teaching a clearly defined audience how to do something interesting, important, or pleasurable.

Greek Philosophy and the Art of Century Riding

by John Chen

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Okay. This is the summer. You’ve been cycling for a few years now, long enough and often enough that you no longer consider yourself merely a recreational or weekend rider. You may not compare yourself with criterium racers, triathletes, or long-distance cyclo-tourists, but you’ve become involved enough with the sport that cycling has become, well, serious pleasure. And you’ve decided that you’re ready for one of the most serious pleasures of all, bicycling’s extra-innings, overtime rite of passage: the century, one hundred miles, the aim of nearly every serious cyclist at some time in his or her cycling career.

At least you’re ready to get ready to ride a century. But if you’re like me when the idea first occurred, the thought is more than a little daunting. Part of it is the distance, of course. One hundred miles is a trip—even in a car. But on a bike? How will it hold up over those long miles? Forget the bike—how will I hold up? you wonder. Your doubts are made even more acute by the fitness fanatics you sometimes ride with. “No pain, no gain!” “Train till you’re drained!” “Go for the burn!” “Hit the wall!” “Bonk!” they groan. For these sado-masochists, the aim of every century ride, it seems, is the tight-lipped ecstasy of “my personal best,” by which they mean horror-movie agonies of the most intense sort compressed into the shortest period of time. “Five hours twelve minutes!” mumbles a spent rider as he weaves across a century finish line, punches his cycling computer with quavering finger, and collapses over his handlebars. This is pleasure?

I don’t think so. I know of a better way to prepare for and ride a century. It came to me last summer in the middle of a summer-school philosophy course during the week and half a dozen centuries on the weekends. All that my “Better Century” method takes is a little common sense, a little good information, and an appetite for real pleasure. The ancient Greek philosophers I studied in class may have lived a few years before the invention of the bicycle, but they understood what it takes to cycle a century with ease and enjoyment. For these Greeks, all matter exists in harmony, as one delicately balanced whole. And we mortals had better not upset this balance. Then tragedy ensues. This understanding led them to the cardinal virtue of sophrosyne, which means a sense of balance, temperance, and moderation. It is the poise that energizes all graceful action. And bicycling at its best is nothing if not graceful action. So, if you want to complete your first century—and enjoy the miles that precede and include it—forget the exercise fanatics’ religion of pain. Join me, instead, and develop the virtue of sophrosyne.

Sophrosyne begins with your bike. Those hundred miles won’t give much pleasure if you and your bike aren’t in harmony. These days, however, you can scarcely find a bicycle that’s not a mountain or racing bike—neither much good for long-distance riding. Because it is often heavy and its straight handlebars don’t allow you to change position much as you ride, a mountain bike may carry you to early fatigue. Because of its stiff frame and skinny, hard racing saddle, a racing bike will telegraph every pebble, crack, and frost heave from your butt up your spine to your neck. You’ll be in aspirin-chewing agony by fifty miles. If you look around a little bit, however, you can find the right bike for century-riding—the comfortable type, a road bike built to absorb the road surface and lap the miles. Its frame will be stretched out just a little bit in chain stays and fork rake and be built of energy absorbing tubing, such as Reynolds 531 steel. Its saddle will give comfortably under you, and its handlebar stem will be a little shorter than you’d normally select. The shorter stem will sit you a little higher and distribute your weight evenly among hands, shoulders, back, seat, and legs. If you don’t enjoy sitting on your bike, how will you enjoy your first century?

Don’t forget the virtue of sophrosyne as you train for your century. You may be riding for pleasure, but you’re still aiming to ride one hundred miles, and that takes some preparation. Bicycling Magazine publishes an annual century training table in a summer issue and maintains the table on its Web site (<http://www.bicycling.com/home/fitness/training/century>). Follow the plan described there, and you’ll

put in the miles necessary to prepare yourself. To enjoy those training miles nearly as much as the century itself, remember: temperance and balance.

Depending on your level of conditioning, give yourself four to eight weeks to train. If you're able, ride five or six days a week, varying the distance, terrain, and pace of your rides. On two or three days ride at your normal pedal cadence until you know it's time to quit. On two other days, push yourself to ride a little faster than you normally would.

Don't let yourself shift to bigger gears to increase your speed—you'll stress your knees that way. The bigger gears and higher speeds will come as your conditioning improves. Instead of the bigger gears, spin the pedals a little faster. And be sure you're spinning, moving your legs through the entire pedal cycle, not pumping. Pumping is for pain freaks. Save the fifth or sixth days of each training week for a longer ride to build endurance, half again as long as your regular rides. Look for weekend club rides posted in bike shops. They'll give you the distance you want and introduce you to new cycling companions. When these long rides increase to seventy-five to eighty miles, you're ready for a century. Find the one you want to ride advertised in the newspaper, at your local bike shop, or on the Web (again, check out Bicycling's Web site).

The day of your century, think sophrosyne, think harmony, think comfort, think fun. Dress comfortably. Chaffed legs or sore feet at fifty miles are no fun. Don't let your cadence get thrown off by the pace lines of racers flashing by you, their chains and derailleurs whirring like angry bees. Your heart may pound, and you may want to give chase, but they may only be racing forty or fifty miles, not a century, so let them go. If they're going the whole distance, you might just pass them collapsed at a rest stop at about the seventy-five mile mark. If you're riding one of the hundreds of organized centuries that occur across the nation each year, you're sure to meet someone whose pace matches yours. Strike up a conversation. Together you'll sustain yourselves through the curve of your journey: the exhilarating encounters of the first miles, the contemplative stretches of the middle third, the short gauntlet of fatigue that looms for many riders between sixty and seventy-five miles, and the reinvigoration of the final ten or fifteen miles.

Be sure to eat, eat, eat, drink, drink, drink. Remember, you're burning at least six- to eight-hundred calories an hour. You've got to fuel your legs and quench your thirst. Don't stuff yourself—sophrosyne, remember—but do eat and drink enough. I love pancakes before a ride; bananas, oranges, and oatmeal cookies during a ride; and lots of pasta afterward. Yes, some people eat meat in the course of a long ride, and I've watched cyclists down half a pound of catsup-drenched fries coming from a bag so greasy it was transparent, but meat and junk food are hard to digest, especially when most of your energy is needed not for digesting food but for getting you down the road. High carbohydrate foods will give you energy and keep your blood sugar level up, the fuel for the pleasure you feel.

As you ride, sophrosyne will bring you into harmony with the elements and the terrain. Spin into a headwind until you turn and receive the blessed boost of a tailwind. Ease up the hills, bouncing on your pedals until you crest the top, and relax into the descent of the downhill. If you ride in this way, in harmony with yourself, your bike, your partners, and the world around you, you're sure to experience something else the ancient Greek philosophers know about. It's a "personal best" that has little to do with speed and time. The Greeks called it an "epiphany," a shining forth. It refers to those moments in life when we experience with special clarity and insight.

These have given me the keenest pleasures of cycling—odd moments and small scenes that remain vivid in memory: the roof line of an unpainted barn in Michigan, hundreds of cyclists gliding before me down an Ohio hillside, sunlight dancing off the sand and ocean of a New Jersey beach, the neon green of maple trees on Long Island, the rush of lilac scent on a curve in Illinois, the rustle of about-to-be-harvested corn in a Wisconsin valley, two strangers coming abreast of each other on an Indiana back road, their bicycles drifting toward each other in a ballet of first acquaintance. In these moments of high intensity and high energy, with endorphins flowing, absorbed by the rhythms of effort, I feel my senses blend. Eyes feel like fingers, and seeing old pine siding on a barn two hundred yards away, I can feel its grain. Wind acquires color, sound has its smell, taste becomes texture. These are experiences I've had nowhere else but

in cycling, and especially on centuries. They are the rewards of sophrosyne, the fruits of my “Better Century” method. They could be yours, too.

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