

Evan Madsen

Mr. Greco

English III

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### Breaking the Cycle

The first glimmers of a new day are just now starting to peek through the pines of the Santa Cruz Mountains. The air finally begins to warm, and the smooth blanket of fog lifts from the treeline, replaced with orange hues. The sun is rising, and with it go a small group of cyclists, huffing their way up a steep, winding hill. They've already been riding for two hours and won't reach the top for another four. This ride is physically torturous for most people, but for Jon Madsen and the rest of his biking crew it is the exact opposite. To them, every turn of the pedal, every hum of the spokes, and every crank of the gears, is a crucial part of their routine—all in an effort to keep a cool head in the midst of the bustling and booming Silicon Valley.

Like many of his friends, Jon Madsen was not always a road biker. For the longest time, he had actually steered completely clear of it. "As a kid, I actually used to love to go downhill really fast, and I used to love the mountain bike," he recalled. Jon would regularly take trips to Colorado, where he could take the ski lifts up to the top of mountains, and then mountain bike the rough terrain all the way down, not having to climb for a single foot of pavement. However, this would change when he first moved out to the Bay Area from his original home in the flat suburbs of Chicago. In a new place, with a daunting new job, it was almost a given that increased pressure was going to be a part of his life for a while. On a constant grind, he was in need of a new way to manage his stress. While contrary to most typical forms of relaxation, extreme biking would actually become exactly what Jon needed. Although the inception for his love of

biking was somewhat of an accident (he got a road bike off Craigslist meant for a triathlon that never happened), it truly was the start of a lifelong passion for cycling that helped with much more than just physical health. According to Jon: “It's meditative, [it] allows you to organize your thoughts, get rid of the stress, and clear your head.” Road biking would quickly become something that Jon relied upon to keep his mind healthy, and he would go on rides 4-5 times each week. This habit hasn't changed since he first moved to the Silicon Valley in 1999. To this day, biking remains a given in his weekly agenda.

Since its rise in the COVID 19 pandemic, Jon has shared the road with many other cyclists looking for exercise without the availability of gyms. In the Bay Area, “It is not unusual to find chief executives here clearing their meeting schedules for a midday race through Palo Alto”(Sengupta). However, Jon's motivation extends far beyond just getting out for a little exercise. He has found numerous benefits that go beyond this throughout his years of pedaling, all of which fueled his ever growing passion for the sport. For him, biking has been a gateway to immense personal growth, community service, and improved mental health.

While he rides for many different reasons today, the reason he began going regularly was to keep a clear head in the bustling Silicon Valley workspace. “You know, it's kind of a pressure cooker here in Silicon Valley, everybody's working pretty hard. So everybody is looking for ways to unwind and relax”(Madsen). Jon himself is one of these people, with his wife Deidre revealing that “I like him to go biking because if he doesn't, he gets grumpy.” And the benefits aren't just imagined: research has shown that biking, as well as other high endurance activities, are directly connected with reduced stress, as they force you to regulate your breathing and also breathe deeper, both of which being proven methods to reduce stress. In addition, the continued expansion of your lungs releases pressure off the central nervous system, which also helps with

stress (Barbour). Jon is certainly making the most of these benefits, as he makes sure that at least 3 short, 10-20 mile, rides, and one long, 50-100 mile, ride will fit into his 60 hour work week. He also skips any flat or downhill rides, preferring to ride all of his miles going uphill. “I like the challenge of going up, and so I try to find the steepest hills” (Madsen).

Over the years, Jon has developed a strong passion for self-improvement when it comes to his biking performance. Coincidentally, much of his grit may have come from the new technologies that have been developed throughout the time he's been in the Bay Area. He is constantly using his virtual bike ride trainer, which puts resistance on the pedals, and simulates an actual ride, even including a mixed reality display to immerse the rider.

Another contributing factor was the creation of the fitness app STRAVA, first founded in 2009. While it began as just a small startup in San Francisco, the platform, now being used by tens of millions of cyclists and other athletes (Wagner), has become a staple of the biking community in the Bay Area, as well as one for Jon Madsen. “I like to use Strava because I can track all my activities. . . follow my friends. . . and try to get King of the mountain” (Madsen). Before all of his rides, Jon makes sure to begin his STRAVA tracking so that he can time himself, measure the amount of climbing done, and post the results for his friends following him to see. Naturally, the cycling community and the developers themselves have transformed STRAVA into something of a competition: “who was fastest climbing a certain hill, how many miles had one cyclist clocked relative to another, whose heart raced fastest on this Tuesday?” (Sengupta). However, Jon is more concerned with using it to challenge himself: “Strava is just something, you know, I mean, the main competition is with yourself. . . you can see how you did today versus where you were at the same point last year. . . so it's useful to keep you motivated.” The

mindset of always wanting to improve has also led Jon to embark on some extreme challenges on his bike.

Jon has made it an annual tradition of taking a weeklong biking trip throughout Europe. Last year, he took on the massive challenge of competing in the Tour Des Stations. The event is an endurance race that takes place in the middle of the Swiss Alps. It goes from mountain-top to mountain-top, passing by Ski Stations (hence the name), with a total of 11 peaks. During the race, the riders will traverse 150 miles, and climb the height of Mount Everest (2900 feet), all while trying to make the time cuts to complete the race. “It’s very difficult. . . I started at 4 a.m. and I finished at 8:30 p.m., so I was on the bike for a very long time” (Madsen). Even within this gargantuan task, Jon still found that same enjoyment and stress relief that got him into biking. Reflecting on the experience, he noted that: “It was just very memorable. Lots of very cool little towns that you rode through and cool people that you meet along the way. . . as well as beautiful scenery, just amazing scenery.” This challenge, and the many others like it that Jon has participated in, are a large source of his motivation to always stay consistent. He treats the whole rest of the year like training for these rides, and it helps him keep in great fitness year-round. “He’s developed a real passion for it, and he’s actually very good at it as well. . . even in his late 40s, he’s keeping up with some of the younger guys,” said his wife, Deidre.

Jon loves to ride for himself, and when he goes biking, it’s usually with the goal of self-improvement. However, his passion for the sport has also extended past himself, and in coalition with his company, he often chooses to ride for others as well. Every year Jon participates in the Tour De Cure, and is his company’s sponsor for this ride. The ride itself is a fundraising event done by the American Diabetes Association in an effort to raise money to fund Diabetes research as well as make insulin available to everybody. Within the ride, there are

certain people with red colored jerseys, known as “Red Riders” that are participating and also living with diabetes. “It's really good to see those folks out on the course, and they're super grateful for everybody out there supporting the cause as well.”(Madsen). Over the years, the event has raised well over 3 million dollars (“Join us in the fight”). “ It's great because you are supporting a great cause, and also getting some exercise at the same time” (Madsen). Jon also consistently participates in the Habitat for Humanity charity race, all with the end goal of translating his passion into tangible changes for good causes.

To Jon, biking is a way of life. He puts it aside for very few things, and has no plans of stopping anytime soon. “The good thing about biking is it's low impact on your knees, so you can bike until you're quite old. I hope I can bike well into my 80s or 90s and keep doing it for a long time” (Madsen).

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