

Get Smiles with Your Miles

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I enjoy my bicycle. There's nothing like the freedom of rolling through the countryside propelled only by the power of my own legs, feeling the warm sun on my skin and the cool wind moving over my body, engaging the world with all five of my senses. It's a way to disconnect from the high-stress world on the other end of my phone/internet connection and reconnect with the wonderful, natural, stress-free world outside my door.

"Of course you enjoy that," you're probably saying. But, it wasn't always so.

When I resumed cycling as an adult 11 years ago, it was fun. It felt new, it was different, and (for me) it beat the heck out of running. Even riding with fellow cyclists on group rides was a joy for a while. But, eventually, the fun gave way to the seriousness of it all. We weren't riding a bike; we were "training." And, training isn't supposed to be fun. "No pain, no gain," as they say.

The next thing I knew, I was wearing a heart rate monitor and using my bike computer to capture every pedal turn, wheel revolution, mile of travel, foot of elevation gain, and calorie burned. All the bits of data went religiously into the training log. The year of 2006 featured 5,229 miles of travel, 313 hours on the bike, 290,489 calories burned, and 1,421,298 turns of the pedals. Or, at least that's what my training log says. Sadly, the log doesn't tell me much about where I rode, what I saw, who I was with, or if I had fun.

Group rides became a quest for the fastest average speed I could survive without my heart exploding; fellow riders would literally push themselves to the point of nausea just to hang with the front group. Not that I was ever able to keep pace to see it, but the stories from the front line were like battle stories. Friends still refer to the Thursday night group ride as "the Sufferfest."

Too old and too heavy to keep pace with younger, fitter bodies, my own eventually rebelled, as knees and other body parts screamed "enough!" But, truth be told, my spirit gave up long before that. It wasn't fun; it was work. And, I already had a job. I was riding the bike to relax and escape. What was I training for anyway? I still miss my friends, but I don't miss the suffering.

I recalled those days recently while enjoying a leisurely bike ride along the new Eastside Trail in Covington, passing people out walking, jogging, and biking. Young or old, intense or relaxed, fit or newly active, the one common denominator across everyone I passed was the smile on their face. People were enjoying themselves. Getting outdoors and being active made them happy.

It makes me happy, too. My bad left knee means no sprinting or hard climbing, but that's OK with me. A slower ride means a better chance for those faces to smile back, and it creates opportunities to exchange a few words instead of a gasp for air.

But, for all the folks I see out there daily, many more are still at home. The "no pain, no gain" mantra can be a real turnoff.

And, that's too bad. In a county, a state, and a nation facing a true epidemic of obesity-related illnesses brought on by poor diet and inactivity, a gentle walk or a leisurely bike ride would do us all good.

For those who missed recent news coverage, Georgia started a program last year called SHAPE (Student Health and Physical Education Partnership). Nearly one million students in grades 4-12 were given five basic tests of fitness measuring flexibility, body/mass index, aerobic capacity, and the ability to do push-ups and curl-ups. A shocking 20% of students tested failed all five tests. "Not only couldn't they walk a mile, but they couldn't touch their toes, and forget push-ups," said Georgia Commissioner of Public Health Brenda Fitzgerald in a recent speech.

I'm encouraged when I see families and parents with children out walking or biking on the Eastside Trail. They're giving their kids a healthier future, and they're increasing their own odds of being around as grandparents and great grandparents.

"Exercise" conjures up notions of training logs and grueling efforts that leave you aching and exhausted. For most, simple activity is enough. There's a Community Bike ride from the Square today at 3 pm. In a few leisurely miles, you'll enjoy lots of smiles.

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