

Tribute to a friend

BY DAVE CAMBELL

When I began racing bicycles in Wyoming in 1982, I met a friendly, talented cyclist, named Danny Birkholz, who was quick to offer a smile, a joke, or advice to young, upcoming riders. He had been racing for over 10 years, and was one of the Rocky Mountain region's most highly respected riders. Indeed, his cycling accomplishments had made him literally a legend in the state of Wyoming.

Everybody liked Danny. His easy-going demeanor was in marked contrast with his ferocious competitiveness on the bike. He just loved to ride his bike. His favorite ride was from his home in Laramie, to Walden, Colorado and back ... about 130 miles. He rode a yellow Masi Gran Criterium, one of the "good" ones, built in Italy, but painted in Los Angeles, California. His friends claimed it had so many clear coats that you couldn't feel the decals.

When I was racing in packs of half-a-dozen juniors in Wyoming road events, Danny was both an inspiration and a great friend. He liked to say he was one of the first 800 people in the U.S. to race bicycles; his license number was 00799. He told of when he was 16 and raced in Colorado — when the fields were the size of those in Wyoming.

In the 1984 Dead Dog Stage Race, in Danny's hometown of Laramie, I received an Avocet hubset for finishing second in the junior's race. Danny finished second in the Cat. I-II, and won some cash and a pair of gold-anodized Mavic rims. He was walking around the parking lot, saying, "What do I need a pair of rims for? I have 50 pairs of wheels!" I really needed some rims, and Danny gladly traded with me. Then, he immediately smiled and said, "What do I need a pair of hubs for? I have 50 pairs of wheels."

At the next year's Dead Dog, Danny convincingly won the opening time trial by 30 seconds, over a strong, Colorado contingent led by Randy Whicker of the Dia-Compe-Denver Spoke team. Danny and Randy finished together in the afternoon road race, and Danny entered the final stage with a commanding lead.

While I watched Danny cover Whicker's every move in the senior criterium, I realized I had forgotten to pick up my wheels after the junior race. I retrieved them from the pit and was heading back to my vantage point, when the bell rang to signal no more free laps. The pack stormed by with only 10 laps to go, but Danny was mysteriously absent. He pulled up a few seconds later screaming, "Rear flat!" He had ridden to the start of the race like he always did, and hence didn't have any wheels

in the pit. Since I was right there with a set of wheels in hand, he asked me to give him a wheel. "But, Danny ..." I stammered. "C'mon, Dave!" He screeched, and grabbed my spare rear wheel out of my hands. After putting it in himself, he was off.

The next lap, Whicker was at the front hammering, and Danny came through about 25 seconds later, with his nose on the handlebar stem, fluidly spinning my 15-tooth junior gear. My hero was in dire straights: nine laps to go, and this small-town, Wyoming racer had 25 seconds to make up on one of the nation's best criterium racers, on a course with long, fast straightaways in a junior gear! My doubts, however, were short-lived....

Mark Ward — one of Danny's good friends and owner of the Wheel Fix It bike shop in Laramie, where Danny had worked — took the microphone from the race announcer. "In France, the fans line the mountain roads to cheer for their hero ... chanting, 'Hinault, Hinault,'" he passionately exclaimed. "But in Laramie, Wyoming, our hero is Danny Birkholz, so please join me." The crowd immediately began, chanting, "Danny! Danny!" And as if responding to their support, with each lap, he made up

time on the leaders.

The vocal support became louder and more powerful as the end drew near. Danny maintained a sleek profile and continued hammering away smoothly. Finally, on the bell lap, when the group passed through the finish area, Danny was on the back of the bunch, grinning from ear to ear. And the crowd went wild.

On that day, Danny made up a 25-second deficit on one of the best criterium riders in the country in about five miles, with a top gear of 53x15. How could he not be a legend? Following this amazing performance, Danny thanked all those people who cheered for him. When he graciously returned my wheel, he barely even acknowledged the gear restriction as a handicap. He was just pleased to get a wheel. He looked down at the gold-anodized Mavic rim as he pulled it out of his dropouts, "Wait, this wouldn't be ...?" "Yes," I replied, "last year's prize." We smiled and chuckled.

Danny was an outstanding cyclist and coach, an extraordinary individual, and a wonderful man. He touched the lives of everyone he met — and some of us were truly touched for life. Perhaps by sharing such glorious memories as these, we can ease the pain brought on by tragically losing such an inspirational person.

U.S. Cycling Federation coach Dan Birkholz was killed in the crash of an airliner in Colorado Springs, Colorado, on March 3.



Dan Birkholz: a ferocious competitor and dedicated friend.

Photo courtesy Mr. and Mrs. Paul W. Birkholz

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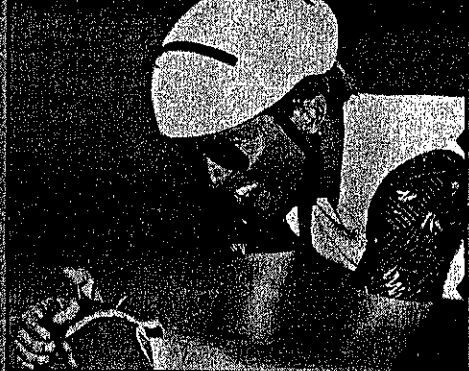
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