

Eric Sprattling

Chicago, 1959-1999
aneurysm while racing



A man who never rested

The race was over and I was looking for something to drink when Marcus rode up and told me Eric had gone down crossing the tracks on the final lap. "God damn it," I said, "I knew this would happen." Railroad tracks and cattle guards cut across the course in some two dozen places. Some of the ruts were six inches deep so dangerous that race officials had put mats down over top of them. It was obvious that someone would go down. I just couldn't believe it had been Eric.

Marcus and I rode out to where he'd fallen, to make sure someone had been out to help him, but he was already gone. Probably got up and finished the race, I thought. I expected to find him back at the car - a little bruised and a little torn up, maybe, but laughing about it now. It was the sort of thing Eric would laugh about.

But he wasn't at the car, either, and when the race official told us he'd been flown by helicopter to the hospital in Madison, I started to worry. It didn't seem right that anything like this should happen to him. He was more than part of the team; he was our coach. For the last three months, Eric had been taking groups of messengers out on training rides. He'd skipped chances to ride with his own category in order to ride with us and coach us through the races. He even had a plan where he'd lead the sprinters out early, wearing them down so the rest of us could blow past them in the last 100 meters. "I don't care who on the team wins," he said, "as long as it's someone on the team." Eric wasn't racing for himself the races he cared about were the six and twelve hour time trials coming up later in the season; he was racing for us.

We weren't family, so they wouldn't tell us anything at the hospital other than that he wouldn't be coming home that night and that his family had been notified. That was when Jason, who had seen it all happen, told us that it looked like Eric was falling before he got to the tracks, and that he was unconscious as soon as he hit the ground. "It looked like he might've had a heart attack," Jason said. I spent most of the drive back to Chicago thinking about just that.

Monday morning I found out Eric had had an aneurysm and would be in a narcotic-induced coma until his condition had stabilized.

The way it unfolded, with every bit of news on his condition just a little worse than the last, made it difficult to believe what was happening. Now there was nothing anyone could do but hope for better news.

Friday afternoon, I ran into Jon in front of 161 Clark. "Did you hear about Eric?" he said. I could tell by the look on his face that it was bad news, and there was only one piece of news that could be worse than what we already knew. Eric had died at the hospital some time that morning.

I'd only known Eric for about eight months, but in those eight months, he'd made quite an impression. The first time I met him was in the Tour Da Chicago. I remember his teeth they were awful; you couldn't miss them and that he apologized for sprinting past me at the finish line. Since then, I'd learned that, in addition to his having been a messenger for some 13 years (the last few as Velo's designated zone rider), he was also one of the strongest distance cyclist in the city. He'd gone to work at Infocomm recently, but he still logged miles on the bike by taking the long way home. After work, he'd help his wife at their cafe, sometimes working until two or three in the morning. And after a full week of this, he'd rise at six on Saturday and Sunday mornings to take us out on training rides through the north suburbs, sometimes as far as Wisconsin. He never seemed to need rest. I studied the way he rode, what gears he used, the way he attacked headwinds and hills. Most of what I know about cycling I learned watching him.

Every other cyclist we saw along the routes seemed to know him. It dawned on me that he could ride with anyone in the city. But he rode with the messengers because he had been a messenger himself. We share a take on cycling that few other

cyclists share, and since Eric's own competitive days were coming to a close, he wanted to pass along some of what he knew.

I spent the rest of the work day Friday thinking about that.

When I got back to the office that afternoon, everyone seemed to know. No one mentioned the fact that Eric had passed away. Instead, they told stories. Like the one about the time when he rode out to Kenosha for a race, took second, then rode back that same night. And the time when some of the girls at Infocomm got together and said, "We think you're a handsome guy, so we'd like to help you get your teeth fixed" I can only imagine that Eric thought it was funny. And the time he led a group of weekend warriors on a century ride, how they came on their four and five thousand dollar bikes and how Eric on the same Carrera he'd been riding for years, after a full week at Velo and maybe three hours of sleep set the pace for the full hundred miles, pulling ahead by a few blocks every so often to smoke a cigarette while the rest of the group caught up. And a whole lot of other stories that may or may not have been entirely true. It felt good to hear people talk about Eric, to know he'd be remembered for what he'd done both on and off the bike.

There's no question that he died too young, but as Marcus said, "At least he went out doing the thing." For someone who spent as much of his life on two wheels as Eric did, I don't suppose any other way would have been right. I only hope he can get some rest now. He's earned it.

-Jeff Benjamin
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