

A full-page photograph of cyclist Lori-Ann Muenzer. She is wearing a blue and red cycling jersey with a large red maple leaf on the front and 'CIBC' and 'Follow' logos on the sleeves. She is also wearing blue cycling shorts with 'CIBC' and 'Follow' logos. She is riding a road bike with red handlebars and a red seat. The background is a bright blue sky with white clouds and a green field.

"AN INSPIRATIONAL 'RISING AGAINST ALL ODDS'
ACCOUNT WHICH MADE ME WANT TO
GET OUT THERE AND PEDAL HARD AGAIN."

—ALEX STIEDA

FIRST NORTH AMERICAN TO WEAR
THE YELLOW JERSEY AT THE TOUR DE FRANCE

ONE GEAR NO BREAKS

LORI-ANN MUENZER'S RIDE TO BELIEF,
BELONGING, AND A GOLD MEDAL

LORI-ANN MUENZER
with **KARL R. WILBERG**

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*To R.J. Childerhose,
Fighter Pilot, Writer, Mentor*

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PREFACE

one gear, no breaks /wun geer no brakz/ *n.* 1 *idiomatic phrase.*

Describes the track bicycle, a fixed gear machine evolved for speed, with no means for speed reduction. 2 describes the journey of the aspiring competitive cyclist. Ambition is limitless, so too is adversity.

—From the *Cyclists' Listing of Words and Phrases* (Cyc.L.O.W.Ps.)

Lori-Ann's story is a true one. However, when she related to me her story, with all of its agonizing reversals of fortune, I wondered what language, what words, could best explain her almost invulnerable cycle of success followed by disaster?

Was there a dictionary—a code book—that could define the language of competitive cycling? As I soon discovered, my authorial colleagues have left the shelves bare of a sufficient dictionary. Therefore, the task is mine.

Competitive cycling is about suffering and speed. Its contradictions include participants seeking fulfilment through mind-bursting, soul-roasting difficulty. Of the cycling disciplines, match sprinting is an arcane sport of codified duelling, where diabolical suffering and danger are meted out, not in a Wild West free for all, but in an indirect, Old World way. Pain, panic, and punishment would certainly be among the most commonly used words in this language.

Creating the word list to encompass these contradictions would be a tall order. Yet this was the easy part.

Like an archaeologist unravelling an ancient mystery, I leafed through Lori-Ann's training diaries—hundreds of meticulously maintained pages—and interpreted the entries. She and I spent months in digitally recorded interviews. I played and re-played the recordings, searching for

the essence of this language. Her coach, Steen Madsen, was interviewed, and these results, too, were sifted through. Also, my own much less successful cycling career had to be reviewed to find the correct meanings.

Months followed, and it became clear that for those who seek the summit, those who want to win and win big, there's a special language hammered out through the triumphs and catastrophes that inevitably follow. Never mind the difficulty of describing the journey, try to explain *why* it is so. Words do not only describe, they also explain.

Fate and time conspire against all of us, including Lori-Ann. The difference with her is that she beat the system.

Explaining this is, indeed, the hard part. Eventually, I found the language of ambition, of adversity, and of triumph, and incorporated it in the *Cyclists Listing of Words and Phrases*—the *Cyc.L.O.W.Ps*.

This language is spoken well only by a few, and I am pleased to share it with you. Of course, Lori-Ann is, *with one exception*, the most eloquent speaker of this tongue. The commentaries by her coach, Steen Madsen, reveal his fluency in this language. Others are not so capable. However, this language sees no need for personal criticism, and so I have altered the names, and personas of certain officials, in order to speak truly.

The exception, though?

It's not really a person, it's a . . . thing—an old thing. But more of that later.

Take your time looking for this anomaly, and while you're conducting your search, you'll run across Lori-Ann's story about finding belief, belonging, and, of course, one other item: an Olympic gold medal. Commence reading. The story begins.

PROLOGUE

Write off

August 18, 2004, Athens Olympic Velodrome, 10:30 AM, Velodrome Parking Lot

Help me. Somebody.

I swore this would never happen again. You'd think that here, in Athens, where I'm a contender for an Olympic medal and Canada's only track-cycling athlete, I would not be a castaway, jettisoned by my team like so much ballast.

But, here I am; on the bus to the velodrome, anxious, alone, and heartsick for home. Maybe I'm unique, but disdain and abandonment have a poor effect on me.

Team Canada staff? Gone. Assistants, managers and helpers? Gone.

They've wandered off to watch riders that have youth, sponsors, and no need for a day job—everything I don't have. Today is a critical training session. All I needed was one person to time my practice sprints, but I've been written off.

I'm thirty-eight years old, and my competitors are young enough to be my daughters. Maybe the officials don't think I can hack it. Little do they know that the workouts I've done—700-pound leg presses—would crush twenty-year-olds, and the next day leave them hobbling.

I've survived those, and a lot more too.

I've put family, friends, and a home life on hold. I've abandoned any hope of leisure, and anything new. My back is held together with scar tissue, and I've been patched up by chiropractors and physios around

the globe. Yet, it's not age or pain that will stop me. Only one thing has *ever* stopped me.

It's the leering dragon of loneliness, a scaly beast with a hyena's sick smirk.

I thought I'd left it behind, but now? It's that voice in my head, the one I've heard for two decades, saying, "You'll never win, you'll never belong."

It's a loneliness with a knife to my soul. A chain around my heart. A gun holding my dreams hostage—and I'm not at an event that permits frailty.

The bus stops. Other athletes spring to their feet. The driver stares into his mirror at me.

What kind of person would keep going? Not a person, maybe a monster; one so driven by ambition that she's lost all care for the risks. Duelling at seventy kilometres per hour. Playing chicken on a forty-five-degree banked track while wearing an overgrown Speedo.

Is that me? An ambitious monster hooked on high-speed conflict?

My eyes scrunch together. I can't break down, not four days before the finals, but I know what my team thinks: *she's too old*.

I have one last ride for an Olympic medal, and one last shot at vindicating the costs. This is Lori-Ann's Athens Alamo, and it's a one-woman fight. Has my inner Muenster—the distilled firewater of concentrated competitor—gone fishing too?

On every front, it seems impossible.

I can't time myself and sprint at over seventy kilometres per hour. I could just give up, I think, and go home.

Home! The thought washes over me, a soothing, warm wave of comfort. Home pulls on my heart from across half a world. Home is a sleepy neighbourhood, a green backyard, and phone calls to my sister. Home is a red-trimmed house, an antique rocking chair, and people who love me.

Home is my coach, training partner, and friend, Steen Madsen.

Yet, he's on the other side of the world, and I'm in an empty bus about to face the race of my life. I'm facing a bigger opponent than a mere dragon. I look away, not wanting to name her. And I know her name well—she's always the last one to believe in me.

My heart wants me to close my eyes, and imagine I'm home. My brain says, "Get moving."

Seventeen years of training take over. Home pulls me back, and yet everything it means is pushing me on.

If home is a million miles away, so too is my goal—an Olympic gold medal.

I stare at the velodrome on the horizon. My mind is quivering like a car trying to claw its way backwards out of the ditch. The motor's revving, like the whole thing's going to blow. My feet scrape on the pavement. Why do I keep trying? Fighting?

I could take my foot off the gas pedal, but, at age thirty-eight, I wouldn't want to develop a bad habit. Besides, it's the only way to get home.

CHAPTER 1

HUNGER

AND THE 1976 MORLAND ROAD, TORONTO, GRAND PRIX

hunger /hun gur/ *n.* 1 intense desire, often for food, sometimes for success. For competitive cyclists, a continual state. 2 (*variant*) a troubling condition. Victories take place, but the hunger remains unsatisfied. Appetite expands and increases the want.

—From the *Cyc.L.O.W.Ps.*

There were a lot of reasons why, even twenty-eight years ago, I would never back off. Some reasons were hidden, discovered only recently, and others were obvious from the beginning. Fast things are fun things. Slow things are boring. Boredom is the enemy.

Of course, like all love affairs, there is a cost. Speed is your friend until you crash. That's when you learn the relationship can be painful—until it whispers in your ear, "Feeling better? Bet you can pull it off this time."

The voice whispered in a little girl's ear twenty-eight years ago.

I can see her now: a blonde-haired missile, rocketing on her black bike, working the frame with her thin arms, leading a line of children, snaking past parked cars on Morland Road in Toronto, Ontario.

The ten-year-old girl turns to look back.

I clench my fists. She's gonna hit an AMC Gremlin right in the bumper.

The girl looks forward, and arcs away from the car. The boy behind her, his mouth a dark "O," careens into the curb, and vaults out of sight, his body thrust forward like Superman.

The girl's blonde hair swings back as she accelerates for the finish line, a stop sign. The other kids aren't even close, but she shoots her left

hand in the air, claiming victory, and jams on the brake, leaving a black tire mark at the stop sign.

She was glad she won. I was glad she was alive.

The others wobbled to the finish. They had lost to her—again. The other kids shrugged and went home. It was supertime anyway. The girl went into her house at 22 Morland Road, and asked her mom if she could stay out and play baseball. I recognized the two-storey brick house, the front flower bed with tulips, and the green door. And I recognized the girl.

The house was my house and the girl was me, twenty-eight years ago.

That day was a good day, like so many others I had as a child. I had loving parents, and good schools.

So, where did it come off the rails? Why did I have to leave on a twenty-year adventure to become the fastest woman in the world? How did home become a prison? How did a child become a stranger, one hungering for challenge and recognition?

Yet, the same causes for the rift were also the seeds of my Olympic success, and ultimately for reconciliation. I'm on good terms with my parents now. But *now* is a long time from *then*.

Then?

The world, according to my parents, was to be a stable and ordered world. One with Peter Pan collars, skirts, and limits. "Lori-Ann, wear this dress," says Mom. "Lori-Ann, don't wear a black top with black bottoms. Lori-Ann, why won't you sit still? Lori-Ann, why don't..." On the other hand, my world—the world of my childhood and adolescence—was one where risk reigned, and limits were made to be exceeded.

I don't know where it comes from, but I've been blessed with an extraordinary amount of energy. I wore out the kids on Morland Road. My tormented back tire blew out after countless skidding-stop finishes. If the racing was too dull, we'd play a version of follow the leader. The leader would weave between cars, skimming the car doors, side mirrors, and bumpers, daring the rest of the pack to follow. Go faster, close the critical rider-bike-car gap and lose your opponents. I didn't think of this as training myself to make critical judgements. To me, this was pure and simple fun.

After the bike races there would be baseball. When the ball players caved, I'd find the tennis players at the courts near the wall of James Culnan Catholic School.

“Hi,” I’d say. “Mind if I hit off the wall?”

They shrug and ignore me.

Wackawackawacka, goes the threadbare tennis ball as it careens off the bricks.

My hand is waving the racquet like it’s a fan on a hot summer day.

Wackawacka . . . pop!

I pick up the split sphere, stare at it, and wonder why it broke.

I’d get back on my bike and rip around the neighbourhood. When the street lights went on, I’d sprint home, disappointed to call it a day.

My mother couldn’t understand why her daughter was a wind-up doll that clattered, chattered, and never ran down. Demure, understated clothes were demolished. Knees were covered in bruises. Hands were dirty with bike chain grease. I had no interest in the ordered, stable world Mom tried to build.

Everybody envies my abundant energy, but it comes with a price. Ask my mom. She’d say I have a tendency to become easily bored; restless with others who aren’t trying hard, refusing to take no for an answer. And, perhaps the hardest thing: I’m different than everybody else, and don’t easily fit in. Still, like everyone else, I wanted to belong in a community that I respected, and to be accepted on my terms. Some people are lucky to be born into that community; I had to ride my way into it.

Then, my family was no more interested in my exploration of adventures, sport and otherwise, than I was in a traditional, middle-class Canadian existence. Their lack of interest created a hunger, a gnawing, empty feeling, and it became another reason why I was hooked on pushing every activity to the limit, hoping to be recognized for succeeding at what I felt was important. The net result was familial conflict and a growing, but nameless hunger.

While at home, I had some early successes, and many of the attributes that my family taught me—persistence, perseverance, and pride—were essential to my ultimate triumph. Ironically, they combined with the nameless hunger and led to an Olympic gold medal. But that is *now*. Let me tell you about *then*.

It’s a myth that successful Olympic athletes are sped on their way by sponsorships or a wealthy sport administration. Also, there is the legend of the successful athlete who starts out as a promising child, and builds

on each success in a continuous progression to the top. Maybe that's the way it is for some lucky athletes, but I don't know any whose lives live up to that ideal.

In my case there *was* a promising start. In grade eight, at Humbercrest Public School, I made Athlete of the Year. A big factor in my success was the encouragement of our coach, Mrs. Jenkins. She believed in me, and helped me channel my vast enthusiasm. Even if I didn't understand the hunger, there was a simple clue to my success: if just one person helped or cared, I blossomed like a sunflower.

Later, in high school, I was lost in the large school population, and, without direct encouragement, I left sport behind. After grade twelve I trained as a legal secretary at Retter Business College in Toronto, and began to make my way through the working world.

At eighteen, there was a final showdown with my parents. I wanted to live by my rules. I was given a choice: live their way, or hit the highway.

I chose the highway.

My parents had, I felt, written me off. As I moved out, I thought, if they wouldn't believe in me, then I would have to. The problem was I didn't.

Some results of moving out were surprising, others not. Loneliness I expected. Privation was anticipated. But the hunger, the primitive need to prove myself? At the time I couldn't explain it, but being cast out transformed the mouse of loneliness, nibbling at my adolescent soul, into a psychic dragon, undermining my spirit and demanding to be fed.

Over the next twenty years, I learned a few things about dragons. One, you can feed them forever, but they're never satisfied. Second, I like to kill them. Third, it takes a monster, an ambitious monster, to kill a dragon.

Everyone thinks their adult life starts when they leave home. In my case, the real beginning started on a bike.

It was not the black one with the bald back tire, and not the \$8000 carbon-fibre model I ride today, but a forty-four-pound mountain bike with squishy tires and reflectors on the spokes. This generic bike, the key to my beginning, was designed to ride from the garage to the corner store. At this time, 1987, I was twenty-two-years-old, working the day shift, doing aerobics in my Reeboks, but still not feeling that I fit in.

Unfortunately, this boat anchor of a bike's fate was to be ridden by me three times a week, from 5 AM to 7 AM, and for up to eight hours on weekends. I was its worst nightmare: someone who loved to ride for the joy of it, for riding puts you closer to the adventures that you dream of. It's hard to say why this is so, but the French author and pilot Antoine de Saint-Exupéry said, "The machine does not isolate us from the problems of nature, but plunges us more deeply in them."

In my case, the bike was the machine that plunged me deeply into life. Here was a machine that would take sweat and turn it into speed. Your speed, your limits are up to you. And so, my apprenticeship began, but I had no idea how tortuous it would be. Throughout it all, the hunger to succeed kept me churning through not one apprenticeship, but two.