



BUT I'M A CHEERLEADER

**EPIC RIDES MAKE OR
BREAK YOU—AND
SOMETIMES THEY HELP
CHANGE HOW YOU LABEL
YOURSELF ENTIRELY.**

By Jayme Otto

Push-pull-push-pull. I chanted through clenched teeth to keep my legs pedaling. Or maybe I was just humming the words in my head. The memory of biking Colorado's Mount Evans, my first epic ride, is fuzzy—because I was fuzzy. And dizzy, especially near the top. At that elevation, my brain had only about half as much oxygen as it was used to. As for my body, well, cycling at 14,000 feet feels like moving through Jell-O. Starved for oxygen, my muscles couldn't push as hard as I willed them to. Every pedal stroke felt like a fight.

I had the unsettling sense of my survival instinct kicking in. That point at which the sophistication of road biking gives way to primal fear: Could I really do this? And more importantly, *why* was I, a 30-year-old database analyst, even at-

tempting to do this? Maybe human beings weren't meant to ride bikes up the highest paved road on the continent.

This had been all Willa's idea. Bright, chirpy Willa. She had sent an e-mail to our women's cycling club announcing that Mount Evans Scenic Byway had opened for the season. A group ride was promptly planned. Was I in? As a new cyclist who had joined the club earlier that spring, *of course* I was in. I just wasn't sure what I was in for. I'd expected a physical challenge and an exercise in mental toughness. But I hadn't anticipated that one ride could alter the route of my life.

Six of us started 30 miles west of Denver in Idaho Springs. As a club, we'd been climbing Boulder's toughest routes all spring—rides like Magnolia, Sugarloaf, and Flagstaff, on which pavement turns to dirt and gradients rise well into the double digits. I'd seen my speedometer dip as low as three miles per hour, which feels like you're standing still on a road bike. Once I had to get off and walk. Okay, twice. But the point is, I'd made it. And each time I pushed a boundary and succeeded; each time I accomplished something I never thought I'd be strong enough to do. It was like another drop in the bucket of my heart, which was slowly filling with confidence.

Mount Evans was twice as long and nearly twice as high as anything I'd ever climbed on a bike. I figured it would either make me stronger or kill me. From the Clear Creek Middle School parking lot, we began our 28-mile ascent up 14,240-foot Mount Evans. We carried more water than usual since none would be available during this remote ride. And even though it was 78 degrees at 7 a.m., we'd stuffed windbreakers, arm and leg warmers, hats, and gloves into our bulging jersey pockets. We anticipated a temperature of about 35 degrees at the summit.

The stronger, more experienced girls pulled our pack. I was grateful the pitch was gradual to start. The ride looked like most of the early-morning climbs I'd done in Colorado: Pine forests and aspens blanketed both sides of the road; there were no cars in

sight. Spirits were high as we formed a double pace line, moving as one. Five miles in, the gradient doubled, and my legs started to protest: too fast, too steep. I decided if I wanted to make it to the top, I'd need to pace myself. I fell back. Riding alone was a small price to pay for a successful summit.

Up ahead the pack continued to splinter. The thing about hill climbing is that everyone has to go at her own pace. Too fast, you lose your legs. Too slow, you lose your mind. Somehow Willa and I ended up together. I was happy for the company but more so for the inspiration.

In the short time that I'd known Willa, she'd become a symbol of personal authenticity for me. I envied her for being a successful nonconformist in a world of conformity. Willa looked like girls back home in the Midwest who had been cheerleaders or dance-team members—she was tall and thin, a natural brown-eyed blond. But instead of pom-poms, Willa had wielded a field-hockey stick and played rugby. Instead of having been raised in a suburb, she'd grown up on a farm. Instead of practicing Catholicism, like everyone I'd ever been associated with, she called herself agnostic—a word I had to look up. She went to college two years earlier than the rest of us, a combination of home-schooling and natural aptitude. She raced both road and cyclo-cross and, at age 27, held a management position in an organization that promoted affordable housing, a cause she was passionate about.

Willa had climbed Mount Evans every year since the club started four years ago. And she'd even raced it. Next to Willa, I felt like an imposter. What was I doing on Mount Evans? I was a cheerleader from Ohio. I was good at things like gymnastics and dance, not activities that required gear. Cycling at this level was more hardcore than anything I'd ever expected to do. Cyclists like Willa trained every day after working jobs that helped change the world for the better. I was training a mere three times a week after working a meaningless job in a giant corporation. I suddenly felt sick to my stomach. My legs slowed to a plod. Willa noticed I was waning.

"Eat something," she advised.

"I can't. I feel nauseous," I said.

"Think of it as taking your medicine," she offered. "It doesn't matter if you want it or if it tastes good. You need the energy if you want to finish this ride."

I wanted to finish the ride. And beyond even want was a compulsion to make it to the summit. It would take months of reflection to realize that my compulsion stemmed from the need to prove to myself that I belonged—to Colorado, my hardcore state, and to the strong, fit world of my cycling club. But more importantly, that I belonged to the hopes I held for myself beyond my limited upbringing, my religion, and my high-tech career. I *had* to finish that ride. The alternative would have been accepting the status quo, and I was hungry for more.

Willa pulled a bag of energy blocks from her jersey pocket. I reached across the small strip of pavement between us and grabbed hold. Popping one into my mouth, I felt the climb give way to a precious piece of flat terrain as we approached Echo Lake. The lake marked the halfway point at Mile 14. We'd been climbing for one hour and 15 minutes. After the lake, the road rose aggressively, as if it were anxious to get above timberline.





This is where people said the ride would really get tough. But I had new energy, new possibilities. The distance between Willa and me wasn't really all that far. I just had to reach out.

We came upon the next landmark, Summit Lake, quickly, falling into a rhythm in which Willa would lead and I would draft off her wheel. When she tired, I would move up and take a pull until she recovered. Working together, we managed to move faster than either one could have alone. Our team effort was rewarded by a descending portion along Summit Lake. The feel of speed after grinding in the single digits was intoxicating. Unbound, my legs flew in a fury of release, pedaling faster and faster until I was completely spun out. Then, dropping my upper body low over the handlebars into the tuck position, I coasted.

Had I been paying any attention to Summit Lake, I would have noticed the absence of encircling trees. In their place were rocky ridges and cliffs, rising 1,000 feet to Mount Evans and the adjacent Mount Spalding. To the east, the only area of permafrost in the U.S. outside of Alaska stretched to the horizon line. You'd think it would look barren, but to me it looked lush. We were at 12,850 feet.

That's when the switchbacks started. Back to the grind, with short, steep punches. I felt like I couldn't fill my lungs, even when breathing through my mouth. I tried to relax my upper body and send energy into my legs, which were burning despite the slow pace at which they were turning over.

I concentrated on Willa's back wheel, a few inches in front of me.

"This is it," she said over her shoulder. "Just keep pedaling."

As if I had any choice. It wasn't like I could turn around.

We'd been pedaling for three hours and were within 10 minutes of the summit. I looked around for an escape route, an easier way to the top than this alpine road full of holes gnawed in the pavement by marmots. That's when I saw my first Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep, standing on a rock outcropping just off the road. Natural climbers, newborn sheep climb as sure-footedly as their parents.

I began my mantra of push-pull-push-pull, struggling to find a rhythm on switchback after switchback. Finally, we came around the last one, exhausted but triumphant. With the end in sight, we did what any good cyclists would do: We sprinted for the finish. Willa got there first. She jumped off her bike and ran to the edge to soak up a view that spanned seemingly infinite mountain peaks, punctuating an ice-blue sky. I wanted badly to follow, to join her in celebration, but I was dizzy and stumbled upon dismounting my bike.

"You better sit down for a minute," she called from her perch on the edge. "They don't call this the road to the sky for nothing."

When everything went black, I knew I was about to pass out. My body

needed more oxygen after the sprint than Mount Evans was supplying. I crumpled. When I opened my eyes, Willa was standing over me. "I'm a cheerleader from Ohio," I explained. "Not anymore," she said, extending her arm to pull me to my feet.

I reached out to her and stood. After taking a moment to make sure I was steady, I walked carefully to the edge. As I looked down on the Rocky Mountains and the clouds that wrapped their peaks, I felt the world at my feet. The insurmountable suddenly didn't seem so foreboding.

In one hour we'd be back to our cars. Within several hours, we'd be back in Boulder. Tomorrow I'd be back at my high-tech job. But things would never be the same. Within a few months, I'd start freelance writing on the side—about cycling. The next year, I'd earn the rank of number-one Category Four female racer in the state of Colorado and be appointed race captain. The next year, I'd quit my job to pursue a full-time career as a writer, specializing in outdoor sports and adventure travel.

For the moment, it was enough to high-five the rest of the club members, who had emerged from another look-out point across the rocks. I donned my cold-weather clothing in preparation for the long, sharp descent.

"There's no guardrail," Willa reminded me.

No matter. I was ready.