

A CYCLE OF SUFFERING: BRIDGING THE EMOTIONAL AND PHYSICAL IMPACTS OF PROFESSIONAL ROAD CYCLING

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Abstract

Entering the final years of his life, inflicted by an increasingly deteriorating and failing body, Karl Marx (1993: 156) penned that “there is only one effective antidote for mental suffering, and that is physical pain”. While this canonical figure could not be further removed from the world of sport, the insight expressed by the infamous philosopher may hold sway against the backdrop of those engaged in professional road cycling. Noted as one of the most physically demanding sports in the world, road cycling is sadistically revered not only for the corporeal toll waged upon the rider but also the cerebral mountains that need to be conquered to enter the ranks of the professional peloton (Nimmerichter, 2018; see also Dekker, 2017; Hamilton and Coyle, 2012). Building on longitudinal sociological research on-and-with professional road cyclists in Europe and North America, Brittain’s research seeks to interrogate the subject of suffering as emotionally experienced and physically performed by those within the high-performance sport. As important work has been done on the physiological and structural dynamics of suffering in professional road cycling, a benefit can be found in research that pursues a broader examination of the subject; work that moves beyond scripts of hyper-masculine vibrato of ‘pushing through the pain’ or the critical management of athletic bodies by those in places of industry and power (see Case, 2015; Gains, 2015; MaMahan, 2015; Newill, 2015; Abdel-Shehid and Kalman-Lamb, 2011; Burstyn, 2009; Hardie, 2009; Gilley, 2006). The purpose of this project is to examine what weight emotional duress has on a rider’s capacity (or desire) to enter into bouts of self-imposed suffering. From a sociological perspective, the study hopes to both augment and bridge a gulf within the academy and literature on professional road cycling (and sport in general). Through its employment of qualitative research, the work has the potential to holistically widen an understanding toward why some cyclists endure the pain associated with their profession and how temporary physical suffering might be an anecdote employed to offset deeper emotional wounds.