

I can't resist... the Death Star is pulling me in! (Going to France again)



Cue the Death Star tractor-beam music, as this bee is being sucked into the giant Sunflowers trap!

What is it that you can't get away from? Is it destiny, your own weakness, or part of a grand plan? When I took some photos of the Sunflowers near Jefferson & Farm Hill, I didn't realize I'd captured a bee in-flight, looking like it was either staring down the giant Sunflower, or being sucked in against its will. While editing the photos I had this feeling that nature was re-creating the scene from Star Wars where the Millennium Falcon was being captured by a Death Star tractor beam and drawn into it.

So what does that have to do with cycling? First, the Sunflowers represent France. In particular, the Tour de France, with all those Graham Watson photos of the races set against a backdrop (or, more often, a foreground) of bright, large, orange Sunflowers. And the Tour is that thing I can't get away from, having been, what, 12 of the past 13 years?

Which leads us to the question of whether its destiny, something that I was clearly intended to do from long before I knew it. Or weakness; I went once, went back again, and found that it had become something very hard to resist. Or has it become that thing that I design the rest of my year around, a goal, something to look forward to despite the difficulties involved, a mission in need of completion?

2007 rolls up. I was thinking, after the bizarre 2006 Tour in which Floyd Landis won and just a few days later was nailed for doping, that this might be the year to sit it out. But it was at exactly that same time that my son (Kevin) was beginning to get into reasonable shape on a bike, a years-long transformation that saw him go from a 225 pound 5'3" boy now affectionately referred back to as "Chunkmaster K" to the 170 pound 5'9" built-like-a-sprinter but climbs like a, well, climber that he is today. He was probably about 190 pounds or so at the time, maybe 5'6" or so, and not very fast up the local hills but nothing stopped him. So 2007 was the year I decided to share my addiction with my son.



Kevin not happy that he can't cross finish line (2007)

It was a fantastic tour. The first big climb was... BIG. The HC (beyond category) Port de Bales in the Pyrenees. My question was, how far up would he get? I didn't give too much idea that we'd make it to the top. We did.

I finally missed one; 2008, the year Carlos Sastre (who?) won. I thought maybe I'd broken the cycle. Maybe I could do something other than see the Tour de France for 10 days each July. But missing a trip to Europe, specifically a trip to a Grand Tour, was gnawing at me. I went so far as to study the possibilities of seeing the Vuelta (Tour of Spain), even buying a few Spanish road maps and guide books, just in case. But I didn't go; things were busy, Kevin had just gotten home from a two-week trip to Italy, and it was easy to sell others (and try to sell myself) on the idea that I'd outgrown this every-year-to-France thing. Easy to sell, but not so easy for me to buy. I still remember how sad I was that summer, feeling like I belonged somewhere else. The "Tour" itself was a bit of a dud; as I said, Carlos Sastre won (who?). But the Vuelta turned out to be a good race, with Alberto Contador, the previous-year winner of the "Tour, getting the win (2nd went to Levi Leipheimer).

Since then, France has continued to pull me back in each July, along with my son. So I've been there for all but one of the "Lance" years (2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005), the Floyd Landis year (2006), Alberto Contador's first win (2007), missed the next one, then went back for 2009 (Lance's "comeback" Tour, taking 3rd, with Contador winning), 2010 (Contador wins but is disqualified for Clenbuterol), 2011 (Cadel Evans), 2012 (Bradley Wiggins) and 2013 (Chris Froome). Curiously, this is the first time I've actually counted them all. 12 out of 13. And my son's been with me to 6 of them? That's hard to believe!

Will I take next year off? Right now, I'd say that would be a reasonable thing to do. Why not try something different? Maybe the Giro (and freeze my butt off in the snow?), or the Vuelta (which makes Spain look like a desert in August). Maybe it would be a good excuse to head over when there's no race going on and ride the Stelvio in Italy? Or maybe that mortality thing will set in (again) and I'll be thinking, what if this is my last chance? What if, as I get just a year or two older, I'm not up to the big climbs anymore?