

Hints from Helotes:

The Saddle Sore That Ate Detroit

by Zaz

In the recent past, some people have accused me of including some fantasy in the articles that I've written for the Violet Crown News. While I always go out of my way to insure that the meeting minutes that I write up as Secretary of the club are completely accurate and factual in every detail, it is true that I have slipped into some fictional embellishment in some of my other pieces. However, the following piece is 100% true (no, really).

By now most of you know that I spent a little more than a week in St. David's hospital in March. A few of you who have fallen prey to my natural attraction to the gruesome, disgusting or scatological have complained of being made nauseous by my more graphic accounts of what happened to me.

For those of you who haven't heard the story, this is a G-rated description of what occurred. If you want the "bad-taste" version, just ask me and I'll give you an oral account that will knock your socks off.

The early spring road races are really my favorite part of the Austin racing season (yeah, I know; I've only been racing a little over a year), and so I did essentially every available road race in the Austin area between the start of February and the middle of March. Things were capped in the Tour of Austin (in Lago Vista - go figure) which was an event I was really looking forward to. Saturday was a bust: I made the initial big break but was eventually blown out the back. Sunday went much better and I managed to somehow scarf a third place in the event. Despite the fact that this was my best result so far this season, I was not yet fully satiated and since I still felt fresh, I cycled around exploring for another thirty miles or so until I totalled about seventy for the day.

Towards the end, I felt a little tender like I had a developing saddle sore. But it was just a minor irritation, so I didn't think too much about it. I eventually loaded up the bike and headed towards home, grocery shopping on the way, and when I finally arrived a couple hours later, I got out of my riding clothes, showered well, and relaxed that Sunday evening. In the shower, I noted that even though I felt tender, I didn't appear to have broken the skin anywhere.

The next morning I woke up incredibly miserable. I was drenched in sweat, weak and achy, too nauseous to eat. And the area around the saddle sore really hurt alot. Aside from the saddle sore, the symptoms were very flu-like and so I promptly called up the doctor who could see me no earlier than two that afternoon. By then I was even more miserable: It was all I could do to drive myself to the appointment. The visit seemed interminable; the Dr. prodded and poked and did all the mildly painful things that Doctors do and finally concluded that I had contracted a bacterial infection in the ol' crotch so he prescribed me some broad-spectrum antibiotics and some (bless his big ol' heart) pain killers.

The next morning (Tuesday) I felt even worse. I poured myself a cup of coffee, but just laid down on the couch and fell asleep rather than drink it. When I woke up a few hours later, I actually felt a little better. But then I noticed some other bizarre symptoms (I'll spare you the specifics; you'd thank me if you could) and freaked out. I immediately called my doctor back, but rather than see me he sent me straight to a urologist. Jesus, Mary, and Eddie Mercks, that was a long cab ride: it was hard enough just getting out of the front door and to the cab, I gave him the destination address and laid down in the back seat.

It's amazing that no matter how sick, doleful, and generally pathetic you are, that the dammed receptionist will still always insist that you fill out the four page medical history before the doctor will see you. I got through half a page before I told her to forget it. Well the doctor did more of those uncomfortable-feeling things that doctors do, but now I was so sensitive that he instantly had me screaming. After a couple minutes of this sado-fest, he announced that I needed to go straight into the hospital. I had an abcess, so he was going to put me under a general anaesthetic and cut me open. I was so feeble that even this sounded like a great idea, so they took me right over there.

Within a short time I had an IV up my arm, a catheter up my John Thomas, a frightening conversation with my new Anaesthetist, and a heapof nurses. They probed, prodded, poked and mostly kept me busy enough that I didn't have time to feel sorry for myself, until finally they wheeled me into the operating room and put a mask over my face.

Next thing I know. I'm in another room, feeling no pain, and I'm wearing some briefs that I didn't have on earlier. I wonder what kind of mean-spirited, but no doubt witty, wise cracks all those doctors, nurses and technicians make while poor SOB's like me are out cold in the operating room...

Well, despite the surgery, my infection was not under control for another several days. The problem was that they couldn't get the cultures to grow from the samples that they took during the operation (since I had been pumped full of antibiotics by Doctor Number One on Monday). Finally, about Friday they positively identified the culprit as Strep A, which is a real badass, aggressive bacteria and which also happens not to be particularly sensitive to most antibiotics. Eventually, they beat my infection into submission, the aftermath from my surgery healed enough so that I could stand or sit for more than a minute or two without whining, and I was able to reduce my intake of pain killers to the point where I didn't feel like puking all the time. And so nine days after I checked into the hospital, and eleven days after my fateful road race, I walked out of the hospital (actually, that part is fantasy; they made me leave in a wheel chair).

Since then, I've managed to get back on a bicycle with a bizarre, ridiculous saddle that has no neck on it and only supports me on my buns. I don't recommend it, but if you have crotch injury I'll loan it to you. In another few weeks I may be able to resume riding on a regular saddle.

You may be asking yourself by now, "Why in the hell is he telling me all this?" Well, the short answer is that I don't want this to happen to you! It's actually fairly unlikely anyway, if for no other reason that infections with that particularly nasty Strep A bacteria that I acquired are much, much less common than infections which are not as aggressive or difficult to treat at home. But, let's face it, you would just as soon avoid even those less troublesome infections also. So here is a list of things that I would recommend you do after every ride. You may be doing most of them already; I was. But after my most recent experience, I'll be doing them all every time. Maybe even more than once if I get bored...

- Don't wait too long between your ride and your cleanup. If a saddle sore has left an opening for bacteria to get in, the longer before your cleanup, the more opportunity for bacteria to get there. This goes double if you're feeling the least bit tender or have other reason to suspect that you actually do have a saddle sore.

- When you do clean up, shower or bathe with an antibacterial soap. This is something most of us don't do because most soaps do not have special antibacterial ingredients. But it is also one of the easiest changes to make. *Dial* soap is the most well known and easily available antibacterial soap. I now have got a bottle of liquid *Dial* in the shower now, and a bar of *Dial* for the road.

- Inspect carefully to determine if you've broken the skin. If so, apply a little antibiotic ointment such as Bacitracin to the area.

- If it's going to be awhile before you get home, at least try to clean up where you are. Just getting that gross chamois away from your skin will help. And if you can, use a little water and even soap. Some long-time racer types use a little witch hazel. But keep in mind that witch hazel is only an astringent, not an antibacterial.

- Wash your bicycle shorts promptly after every ride. Don't leave them lying around dirty or wear them more than once between washings. And be sure to let them dry out completely before you wear them again. (This will also help with fungus control.)

- Wear adequate, well maintained shorts. The day of my race, I wore shorts with a thin, worn chamois because I only expected to be on the bike for 35 or 40 miles. If I had worn a thicker, newer chamois that day, maybe I wouldn't be recounting this sad tale now.

- Most Staph or other common infections will not hit you up the side of the head and generally make you feel as bad as the bug I got. So you might not be as motivated to promptly go to the doctor as I was. If I had waited an extra day, before getting to the urologist, I could very likely be a dead man. That's what happened to Jim Henson (the Muppet guy). He had the same type of bacteria as me (but in a different part of the body). He waited the weekend before he got to the doctor; by that time they couldn't keep the infection from getting into his blood stream and it killed him. Let the way you feel dictate your response: if you start feeling bad, or if the infection does not go away promptly, by all means get to a doctor.

- Generally, fit people (i.e. us) have a higher resistance to infection than out-of-shape people. But intense workouts and races will always temporarily lower the level of immunization factors in your body for one or more days. This means that even when you are riding in top form, you are often more susceptible to disease than you might think. Keep this in mind as you ride and clean up afterwards.

- Don't let this scare story keep you from enjoying your riding. The serious nature of my experience was unusual. But even a minor problem may slow you down for a while, so polish your family jewels early and often.