

STEEL BUTTERFLY'S OR GOLD MEDALS?!

By Alan Ley

Some days I really get into this poor pitiful Alan, mode of thinking. Feeling sorry for myself, wondering why some things in my life can't be easier. "Why does it all have to be such a struggle? Can't things just be easy sometimes?" I ask myself. I was racing the bike, not long ago in Linton, IN. at the USAC Nationals and crashed at 30 mph, landing on my head and neck, breaking the steel bike, Giro helmet, and my spirit. I had raced in the 25-mile time trial on Wednesday and was riding better than I had in years, feeling strong and confident going into the 45-mile road race Sunday. But winning was not on the menu that day. I was riding comfortably in the middle of the peloton. Suddenly, about six riders in front of me a racer went down. The domino effect of the pack caused about 20 cyclists to do battle with the asphalt, resulting in a mass of twisted steel and bodies! Broken shoulders, elbows, bikes and road rash were covering the highway outside of Linton that Sunday afternoon. As I lay on the road unable to move, I thought I had broken my neck but after about 20 seconds I started to move my fingers and legs. I could hear others yelling for assistance. "I've broken my shoulder, over here," a rider cried out. I made it to my feet and eventually made it home with an ice bag on my neck and shoulders for the next few days.

If all this wasn't bad enough, a spider bit me on my left shoulder the next day. I couldn't lie on my left side after the accident or twist and turn in bed. I was sort of like a mummy when I slept, with my left shoulder up in air every night. Some spider must have thought that shoulder looked inviting and I was bitten on my shoulder and forearm while I was asleep. My shoulder and arm swelled up and I developed a rash and the itching was driving me crazy. The bike crash and spider bite all happened in 48 hours; just when I was in peak racing shape and feeling in top form. So you can see how I was feeling down and in the poor pitiful Alan mode. Then I came across this story by an unknown author about adversity and struggles that altered my perception of, "pain and struggle."

Botanist Alfred Russell Wallace was in his laboratory observing an Emperor butterfly trying to get free from its cocoon. The struggle was intense, with life or death consequences. He wondered, "What would happen if I assisted this process?" So with a small knife he made a slit down the length of the cocoon. This is what happened, in his words: "The butterfly emerged, spread its wings, drooped perceptibly, and died." The pain and intensity of the butterfly's struggle had been denied and it failed to grow. It could not emerge and flourish in this world with the strength it needed to survive.

I never thought about struggles and adversity quite like that but the Emperor Butterfly story is exactly right. It is the struggle that defines us. This is so true and how it relates to every one of us in some way. I am as guilty as anyone, but we always look for the easy way, the comfort zone, we don't like to go beyond our own walls, it's a struggle. The Emperor's Butterfly defines our very lives. We must have the journey of struggle and success. Without losing, how would we know what it is like to win? Without lifting the weights, we would never get strong. Without the sad times, we would never learn to laugh. Without failure, we would never learn. We can come back from injury, failure, and bad times.

Whether you're a triathlete or an Emperor's Butterfly, I am convinced that the adversity we encounter and the struggle to live is what will define our lives. Not the possessions or awards we acquire but the journey, the battle we had to fight, the opportunities we seize, these are what makes us who we are. So the next time you start a workout to decrease your run splits or to lose 10 pounds and something happens that gets you off track, step back, smile, and seize the opportunity. The struggle is what living is all about anyway. We as triathlete's, cyclist's and runner's know better than anyone about the struggles.