



Positioning and Adopting Effective Movement Patterns

I found myself having to reassemble the “road version” of the fixed gear bike, and made the mistake of reversing the stem which brought the handlebars lower than manageable. On the surface it looked like your everyday set up for track racing. The practical reality was quite different and on the maiden voyage, reality hit home with the brake hoods and the “drops” inaccessible (I should have tested it out on the trainer beforehand). Repairs to reverse the stem were carried out on a side street, restoring its bike-ability (basic tools at hand just after repairs, just in case).

The point is that a minor set-up glitch made that bike un-rideable, denting my confidence in a significant manner. When the set up was compared with the road bike, it was clear that the handlebars had in fact been set too low. The lower handlebars required an over reach of the arms; when that became unsustainable, I had to shift forward to the tip of the saddle and ride momentarily by impalement. I was no longer able to weight shift and access skilled movement and my ability to perform my personal movement patterns took a big hit.

This was a good learning moment, and this experience reinforced the fact that set up and positioning matters, it really does. It follows that if the goal is to learn effective movement patterns then you need to be correctly positioned and able to weight shift on the handlebars.

Past observations of training sessions for youngsters (prior riding experiences are unknown) suggest that as a group they unstable, experience difficulty managing the bike, and some were apprehensive of riding. Overall, the bikes didn’t fit well, they kept the wrists are locked and elbows extended. This is not a recipe for success because once you make this type of adaptation it becomes hard to move out of that trap.

What was the main issue with bike fit for the youngsters? The handlebars were set too low, and without better positioning they could not be expected to begin learning a movement pattern, nor could they be expected to bring previous positive experiences to the session. When they could not access the drops, they shifted to the tip of the saddle and in some cases appeared to be very uncomfortable. From the point of view of the class leaders, as long as the aerodynamic mantra was satisfied, then “you don’t have a problem, you look good and are well positioned, let’s ride some more”. Why does this even matter? If we were to project five years to the future, we would find them doing exactly the same thing; having made little progress as far as movement patterns and athleticism is concerned. They might be racing, though full of “swiss cheese” holes in the technique and a low ceiling of performance.

This approach might work at some level, but all it takes is an influx of better talent to expose the weaknesses (which in itself brings up a major question: of those with superior movement patterns, and

there are not many, how do they learn when the concept of athleticism is not accepted). Answer: Natural talent, the ability to self optimize and forgoing the current dogma.

Youngsters require the best of coaching to guide them through effective dynamic balance and cycling specific movement patterns. An important feature of coaching is to listen carefully when they experience difficulties; and you won't know until you ask. Only by expanding the "bubble of coaching experience" will a coach be confident enough to ask the hard questions.

I do think that these youngsters in particular, would have benefited from a period of several years becoming comfortable with supervised road or MTB riding, and in that period it would be the responsibility of the coach to introduce the cycling specific movement patterns in a manner appropriate for the student, perhaps through video review, imitation and play activities. This is preparation for other experiences, and when they are ready to tackle a new experience, they are set up for success not failure.

The sport takes time to learn and perform well, and when the athlete is not positioned correctly on the bike their development may be stunted. Similarly, there will be other weaknesses that could have the same effect of stunting further improvement along the way. A good coach will identify and design a program that corrects those issues.

It takes a great coach to listen to the athlete, expand the bubble of experience and recognize when outside help and instruction may be required.