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The Invisible Teammate

Andrew Jacobs Psyched U.S. Olympic Cyclists to Victory

Susan Weaver

Like the Olympic athletes he counsels, Andy Jacobs never seems to just go through the motions. When I met him in L.A. this summer during the Games, he was there in every sense of the word -- whether in the Ramada Inn, where the U.S. track cyclists and their coaches holed up for the duration, or in the velodrome stands, where by the final day he almost superstitiously insisted on sitting in a particular seat next to the aisle in the second row. "He's really into what we're doing," marveled one of the team pursuiterers who've been the main focus of his work with the U.S. Cycling Team. That was the day the pursuit team had overcome incredible odds to qualify for further competition. "You should have seen him down on the infield jumping into everyone's arms..."

Jacobs became involved with the Olympic effort for the same reasons he began working with the University of Kansas men's and women's track teams in

December of 1981. Andy Jacobs always wanted to be a psychologist, but "I didn't want to become your typical shrink. I like the challenge of helping healthy people to improve themselves." He was studying for a Ph.D. in clinical psychology at the California School of Professional Psychology in San Diego when he became interested in sports psychology in an effort to improve his own tennis game.

There he took a course from Bob Nideffer, whom Jacobs is quick to credit as an American pioneer in the field. While sports psychology has been widely used in Eastern bloc countries since the 1950's, Nideffer was a man ahead of his time in this country. In fact, his book, *The Inner Athlete: Mind Plus Muscle for Winning*, sold poorly here, but a Russian translation sold 14,000 copies in a week.

Jacobs went on to concentrate in sports psychology, at the same time organizing a program for the San Diego State tennis team to help them prepare mentally for competition. It turned their fortunes around and sent them to the Western Athletic Conference finals that year.

After receiving his degree, Jacobs returned to his native Kansas City and set up private practice. His first proposals to area schools to set up a

sports psychology program got no response, but then he met KU's Mike Bahrke of the Health and Physical Education Department at a University sports medicine convention. In December 1981 he first began working with the track team through the efforts of coaches Bob Timmons and Carla Koffey, and one thing led to another at KU, where he now works with xx teams.

About the same time he got involved with the Olympics. "When I got out of grad school, I had four goals to accomplish with sports psychology: my first goal was just to help people, and to me in this field that meant not only helping athletes in competition but to help them as individuals. The other three goals involved working with a major university, a professional team, and an Olympic team. The reason for wanting to get involved with our Olympic team was and still is that those are the greatest athletes in the world. And I cannot think of a greater honor than to be involved with the United States Olympic team. Growing up, the Olympics always meant a lot to me. Being involved with the Olympics is something I will never forget."

With his supportive, encouraging manner and a genuine enthusiasm for what he and his athletes are doing, Jacobs is the kind of guy you immediately

feel comfortable with. I mean, you can sit with the man at the top of the stairs leading from the Ramada Inn lobby to its second level of motel rooms and not feel you are putting him out. That's where we were when at last I managed to find a slot in his busy Olympic week's schedule...at 10:30 one evening.

"There is no typical day," Jacobs laughed, when I finally pressed him to talk about the pressures that he himself felt during the incredible week which would ultimately rewrite U.S. cycling history. The men's track and men's and women's road race teams were in the process of winning medals in every event except two which they had entered -- for a total of nine.

"I get up," Jacobs continued. "I'd like to exercise but usually I'm too exhausted or I don't have time. I'll spend some time in the morning talking with some riders before they go over to the Velodrome...At the track I do whatever's needed. Sometimes I run errands, go down to the back pits and talk with (riders or team support) people. In between races some riders have come up and sat with me in the stands.

"After everything's over and I'm drained mentally and physically, I come back and go to dinner with two or three different guys every night. Then I'll spend the evening hanging around. Usually I'll talk with somebody every night."

One of the team pursuiterers came along the hall at about that point, looking for Andy. It was going on eleven o'clock.

"Hey, I'm sorry, it's too late for us to do anything tonight," Jacobs told Pat McDonough, offering to hypnotize him in the morning. "Go to bed and get some sleep."

McDonough, obviously pumped about the next day's competition, punched the air as he strode down the hall toward his room. "We're gonna do it!" he proclaimed.

Jacobs, as usual, was practical. "You won't if you don't get your sleep. Go to bed."

Agreeing that he's pretty "rational in the way I deal with things," Andy admitted that being in charge of helping others cope brought plenty of pressure.

"What's hard for me is I care so much about each of these guys, if one of 'em doesn't do well, it gets me down." Of course, Jacobs added, seeing their successes sends him up, up, up.

"When Harvey Nitz and Steve Hegg (individual pursuiterers) were on the medal stand, it brought tears to my eyes because I know what they've given to be where they were. And it was a neat feeling. And I want to have that feeling

three times again on Friday."

The accompanying "In Pursuit of a Team" tells how Jacobs' pursuiteres fared against a string of misfortunes. As Pat McDonough observed at the close of track competition, "Andy, you told us to be prepared for anything -- and thank God you did."

Below, Jacobs tells how he helped the team prepare and what sorts of pressures his riders had to deal with.

In Pursuit of a Team

Pulling Together When the Chips Are Down

Susan Weaver

Under a sun as relentless as a streak of bad luck three American cyclists bore down on the last kilometer of the 4000-meter team pursuit -- an event in which two teams of four riders literally chase each other around the track. Their goal in this round of Olympic bike racing competition was merely to qualify among the top eight teams and, riding last, they knew the time to beat: 4:32.25.

The full team of four should have easily been able to break 4 1/2 minutes under normal circumstances. After all, two of the three--Steve Hegg and Leonard "Harvey" Nitz--had already demonstrated their strength by taking gold and bronze in the individual pursuit. However, the team had got off to a bad start with a mechanical problem on their first ride. A wheel on one of the bikes had not been tightened sufficiently. The unfortunate rider had wobbled around the first two turns and fallen over onto the grassy infield. The Americans had been granted a reride, but without that fourth man to share the work.

Now they were paying in sweat and nerves. Hegg, Nitz, and Brent Emery were

on pace for 4:32, trading off the agony of the lead position every half lap.

But Emery was slipping. Even as the crowd chanted "USA! USA!" a gap was opening between Emery, on the back, and the other two. In quick succession Emery called to his teammates not to lose him, Hegg swung up the track banking to leave the front position to Nitz, and swooped down into the opening ahead of Emery.

Slowing for his teammates, Nitz looked back and seemed to veer up the track. In an instant, Hegg's front wheel grazed Nitz's rear, and Steve Hegg was down.

Emery crashed into him and hit the concrete heavily. Before the eyes of the horrified crowd, the U.S. pursuit team was self-destructing.

One man in particular jumped to his feet and stared in disbelief. In the past two years, sports psychologist Andrew Jacobs, Ph.D., had spent weeks at a time in residence at the Olympic Training Center with members of the U.S. Cycling Team. He had worked especially closely with the pursuiteders, helping the "long" team of eight to get over their internecine rivalries and think like a team. He had become, as one member put it, "a professional friend." At that moment, as he ran up the stadium steps toward the tunnel leading to the infield, he knew that everything he had ever done with them was being put to the test...

The past few days had not been easy. Although they had arrived before the start of the Games on Sunday, the team pursuiterers would not have their first qualifying ride until Thursday. Meanwhile they went on training rides and counted the cycling medals as they piled up and got antsy. With the success of the rest of the team came optimism and the pressure of expectations. Thinking of performing in the media spotlight made tensions worse. But, working with Jacobs, the pursuiterers handled the pressure just as they had handled the previous question of the Soviet/Eastern block boycott: they set goals to measure success in their own terms. They wanted to win a medal and to ride a good time: for them, a 4:25. Whether the Soviets were there or not -- and whether the U.S. team won the gold or not -- the clock doesn't lie.

If waiting was hard, competing was tougher. Individual pursuit events preceded the team events, with Nitz and Hegg representing the U.S. In the first qualifying round, Hegg blazed to a new outdoor world competition record in 4:35.57, eclipsing Nitz's performance--and Nitz's recently set American record (4:36.44) from the Olympic Trials. Steve Hegg's first Olympic ride marked him as the man to beat and, in his own mind, set him up for a possible fall.

That night he confided his fears to Andy Jacobs. "I'm scared," he said.

"Yeah, I can understand that," replied Jacobs. "What are you scared of?"

"Getting beat," Steve said. "It would be pretty bad if I set a world record and then I got beat."

"Yeah," Andy soothed, "I can understand how you feel, but you're not gonna get beat."

It seemed to help to voice the fears and receive Jacobs' reassurance, but still Hegg slept poorly. And the next morning, though he had breakfast with Andy, he wasn't able to keep it all down. But Hegg, formerly a world-class downhill skier as well as a cyclist, pulled himself together. Jacobs talked to him on a familiar theme--just to focus and do what he normally does. Then he helped him pump up his tires and made sure Steve had his backpack before he rode off to the track on his bike.

Steve lived up to Jacobs' prediction. He rode masterfully. Even in the gold medal round he refused to let the heat of competition tempt him into too fast a pace at the start. With steady acceleration he gradually crushed his German opponent, Rolf Golz.

Meanwhile Nitz was discovering he had not quite peaked in his conditioning for the Games. But he wanted badly to win a medal and made it into the top

four. In the semi-final round Nitz had found that same German, Golz, to be too much for him. So he purposely eased up, letting Golz overtake him to end it on the seventh lap. With this cool-headed strategy Nitz saved himself for the next round and the attempt for the bronze.

In this last ride which, Nitz said, "hurt more than I ever have in my life," he harnessed his desire for the win. "I was thinking of the podium the whole time." Almost exactly as he had planned, he started his kick at 2 1/2 laps to go, coming from behind in the last kilometer to win by .05 second.

So the podium was his, with his tears during the national anthem attesting to what it meant. And Hegg stood on the top step wearing the precious gold, winner by 4 1/2 seconds over the German, Golz.

Waiting Game

Before the team even arrived in Los Angeles, Andy Jacobs tried to alleviate the extraordinary pressure of the Olympics by reminding riders that "this was just another bike race, scarcely different from any other world championship."

But once they holed up in the Ramada Inn near the track and The Torch was actually lit, they might quickly lose that perspective. Once the media began hyping the medal count, and insinuating the notion that even second is failure,

they might forget all realistic standards of achievement. So Jacobs, with his quiet smile and reassuring, accepting manner, was on hand to remind them:

"That's why I'm telling you about doing the best you can. That's my whole philosophy about not focusing on winning, but on doing what you're capable of doing."

On the day before the first team pursuit qualifying round, Jacobs had his hands full, talking with the four who had been selected to ride...and with the remaining two who would not. Some riders even woke him up to talk in the middle of the night.

Dave Grylls was one of those who had been left out. "When (coach) Eddie B. told me I wasn't riding, his reason made me mad. He was afraid I would blow up like I did in 1982," Grylls told a reporter darkly. To Grylls, digging up a poor performance so far in the past seemed unfair.

"So," Dave explained, "I talked to Andy about my not riding. He said, 'Dave, you've got to be ready to go because you'll probably have to ride the next day.'" Nothing elaborate, but Grylls was focused on what had to be done.

As John Beckman, another alternate, put it, "Andy doesn't have to say anything complicated. Oftentimes a simple thing is what you need to hear."

The pursuiterers readily admit that before Jacobs came along, they didn't hang together as a team. As he relaxed with a massage from the team trainer, Steve Hegg remembered their first meetings with Andy. Hegg grinned impishly. "We were all sitting in the room going 'Shrink, quack' -- all that kind of stuff. All these prima donna cyclists, we're a pretty bad group to work with, I think," Hegg laughed. "But Andy really brought the team together. This year after the meetings we really felt good. We'd go down to dinner and the whole team would actually sit together. The whole team. That's pretty good, 'cause there's a lot of bad feelings and some burnt bridges on the team. I know I don't like some of the guys, and they don't like me. But we'd sit and talk about stuff everybody talks about--money, girls, cars, motorcycles, what you're gonna do after you're done cycling. It's great."

Now just how much of a team they had become was about to be tested.

The Test

After four days of Olympic buildup, the team pursuit qualifying heat had finally begun. In this first round each team was riding alone against the clock. Fourteen teams would attempt to qualify, and eight of them had already ridden. Now the American team of Hegg, Nitz, Emery and Pat McDonough were on

the start line.

Each face testified to their intense concentration, and McDonough drew a deep breath. His words from the day before seemed written across his face.

"This is the most important thing in my whole life..."

Then there was the gun. The riders began to move off the line and into a neat queue. But somehow McDonough wasn't getting in line. The crowd didn't know why, but this was clearly instant disaster. With no time to wait, the first three motored away, while McDonough inched his way around the first turn and fell over onto the grassy infield. Coach Eddie B. waved the other three off the track, and everyone waited for a ruling.

As McDonough sat dejectedly by trackside, coaches and officials huddled over the bike. The problem was insufficient tightening of the bike's solid disk rear wheel. It was not considered an approved mechanical failure, thus the decision that the team must qualify on a reride without him.

It would be tough. By the time the U.S. was called up for its reride, they knew they must go below 4:32.25.

Down on their Luck

In spite of his disappointment, McDonough went to work, pumping up the

American trio before their restart. Then they were off, with the lights on the velodrome scoreboard posting their times with every half-lap. As the three began their final kilometer, with the crowd roaring encouragement, Hegg, Emery and Nitz were on pace and those who knew their ability for a final kick were confident they could qualify.

Then came the crash. It was a moment of nightmare for the crowd ... and for the team. Nitz remained upright, but Hegg fell and slid sideways on the concrete, suffering a painful lump on his left hip. Emery was airborne briefly, then landed hard. He lay on the track even after Hegg had limped off and finally was taken to the medical tent. There he fell unconscious while the clock ticked off the minutes toward the last possible reride for the Americans.

On the infield their teammates who had not been riding -- Grylls, McDonough, and Beckman -- had been hustling about since the crash. They fetched towels, helped check out the bikes for damage, and tried to keep everyone calm and positive.

With just 15 minutes to go until the reride, Brent Emery came to. Despite the pain, he had no choice but to ride if the team were to qualify. The three assembled and McDonough made them clasp their hands together for a cheer.

This time there were no mishaps. McDonough and the others cheered from the sidelines along with Andy Jacobs, who had managed to get through security onto the infield. Hegg, the strongest rider, took the punishment of breaking the wind at the front for as long as two laps at a time. "I got carried away," he modestly said later.

Nitz also took extra long pulls, and Emery rode courageously and in extreme pain. At the end the clock read 4:29.92: the US was in. The words "miraculous" and "unbelievable" were on the lips of those who knew track racing. And the team was bonded by adversity in a way they would not forget.

As Pat McDonough put it, "I was so proud to be a part of this team. We had every curve thrown to us today, and we proved this team has guts."

Not Over Yet

That day the US team pursuiterers gave their fans one more trip to the edge of their seats with their elimination round against the top-rated Danish team. The American riders, four strong including McDonough, came from behind in the last lap to win by .01 second. The U.S. would ride the next day among the top four teams.

After everything they'd been through the American team was full of

confidence on the morning of their last two rides. Watching from the stands, Andy Jacobs pointed out the American flag decals on their helmets which he had given them that morning. He sounded excited and nervous at the same time. "No matter what happens, I'm proud of these guys."

With Grylls substituted for Emery, they rode their semi-final round, against the 1983 world champion Germans. Unexpectedly the Germans cracked under the pressure. The team literally came apart on the fifth lap and were easily caught, advancing the U.S. to the gold medal round against Australia.

Although the Aussies had ridden the fastest time (4:23.56) in the previous heat, the US had turned in 4:25.15 against the Danes the day before and felt worthy of the match.

On the line the riders sought to concentrate. Out of respect for Emery's brave performance the day before, Grylls had promised him the gold medal, should they win it. Emery steadied Grylls on his bike at the start and watched him tighten his toe straps in readiness.

The gun went off, the riders started. But in a horrible instance of *deja vu* Grylls never got on line: one strap had slipped and allowed his foot to come out of the toe clip. It was impossible for him to pedal. Without realizing

what had happened, the other three were gone. Hegg, Nitz, and McDonough did their utmost, but the gold was not to be had.

They rode 4:29.85, while the Australian foursome clocked 4:25.99.

Perhaps the sense of helplessness was most anguishing. After it was all over, McDonough speculated that if only Dave had called out to the other three, they would have waited the few seconds he needed to get his foot back into the toeclip. Maybe with his help, McDonough felt, they could have made up the difference. Grylls, for his part, said his first thought had been simply to try to get his foot in and catch up. Once again he felt the misery of being left out -- and this time it was with the knowledge that his contribution had been counted on. "This is a day I'll never forget," he said unhappily.

So once again the team was left to reflect on Andy Jacobs' counsel--to remind themselves of their original goals and accept the silver with pride, if not joy. To the world the team presented themselves as a group united. As silver medalists, all five took a victory lap together around the track.

As he'd promised, Grylls sent Emery to the podium to accept the silver. "I felt Brent deserved the medal because he rode his heart out yesterday."

It was an unselfish gesture Brent later termed "the nicest thing anybody

ever did for me." He added, "Dave told me if he rode he would do his best for me, and I think he did."

During the press interviews the usually ebullient Hegg was quiet and said simply, "It was tough."

Grylls, who had joined the other four in the press tent, helped to sum up what they'd accomplished: "I don't have a piece of metal hanging around my neck, but I earned it too, along with a lot of other guys who have trained and worked together for a long time." He motioned to the four alongside him. "I feel that all these guys are my brothers. Just like brothers we don't always get along, but we're brothers just the same."