

Self-Interest and Cooperation

By Marvin Zauderer

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There's a tension, at times, in cycling. There's the allure of individual progress, achievement, and glory, and the benefits of teamwork and contributing to other riders' success. The mentally fit cyclist skillfully manages this tension, striking a balance between personal goals and those of the group, team, and sport.

In the previous installment of our Sport Psychology column, continuing our series on Responding to Adversity, I discussed how you can [beat the cyclist's "winter blues."](#) This month, I explore **balancing self-interest and cooperation**, the sixth – and perhaps most – advanced skill of the mentally fit cyclist.

It's the last 5 miles of a race, and you're off the front with another rider. The peloton is a ways behind, but closing. The rider urges you to work with him to stay away. You have no idea which of you is the stronger sprinter. What move do you make? Cooperate fully? Stay on his wheel, hope the peloton doesn't catch you, and try to beat him in the sprint? But what if he tries to stay on *your* wheel?

This is an example of a problem called the Prisoner's Dilemma (PD), first discovered by [Merrill Flood and Melvin Dresher](#) at the RAND Corporation in 1950, and [later refined and named by Albert Tucker](#). Not surprisingly, given the times, their research was supported by the U.S. government's interest in an optimal nuclear strategy. (I find myself suddenly grateful that they were thinking about *whether*, not just *when*, to "push the button.")

In the hopes of avoiding a Pez-wide upsurge of painful brain spasms, here's [a simplification](#) of the RAND formulation:

Two suspected accomplices are arrested by the police and held in separate sections of the jail. The police don't have enough evidence to convict either suspect, so they approach each with a proposition: (1) If one testifies against the other and the other stays quiet, the betrayer goes free, and the other gets a 10-year sentence. (2) If both stay quiet, they both get 6 months in the slammer. (3) If each testifies against the other, they'll both get 5-year sentences. Each must choose without knowing what the other will do, and each knows that the other is being offered an identical deal.

If we define the "dominant" strategy in this situation as the one which maximizes your personal gain no matter what your accomplice does, then clearly the dominant strategy is... betrayal. If you knew the other prisoner would stay silent, you go free by betraying. If you knew the other prisoner would betray you, you'd get a lighter sentence by betraying him, too. So logically, rationally, you'd choose betrayal, right? But you *don't* know what your accomplice will do. And thus, the dilemma. Because if he uses the same reasoning, you're both hosed: you'll both betray, and you'll both end up spending 5 years in San Quentin. Which we might call Mutually Assured Destruction, or being caught by the peloton, as the case may be. If only both of you had been *irrational* – or should I say, trusting? – and cooperated with each other. You'd be out in 6 months. Or on the podium.

It's About Need, Not Greed

I first learned of the Prisoner's Dilemma in [Doug Hofstadter's](#) terrific book, [Metamagical Themas](#). He points out that dilemmas like the cycling example above are actually "iterated" PDs. In other words, our race situation is not a one-shot deal; there will be another race, and another, and another. Plus, in contrast to computer-based simulations, we *can* communicate with our opponents, fellow riders, and teammates and come to a shared decision about what to do. So, as opposed to what the U.S. government might have assumed about *its* opponent, post-

Armageddon, you may find yourself off the front with the same opponent again. History may influence your next move, and your opponent's. Will you cooperate, or will you "defect," as Hofstadter puts it? Are you consumed by your own self-interest, or do you see a "common good" to work for?

Interestingly, many computer-based competitions have been held to determine the best iterated PD strategy. Time after time, as Robert Axelrod points out in [The Evolution of Cooperation](#), the most successful strategy has continued to be the simplest: begin by cooperating, and thereafter do whatever your opponent did on his previous move. The strategy's name: "Tit For Tat." (I am not making this up.)

Stanford's Jim Thompson, founder of the [Positive Coaching Alliance](#), advocates "double-goal" coaches for our country's youth. In sharp contrast to the "win at all costs" model so frighteningly prevalent at times in our society, these are coaches who want to win, but who also use sports to teach life lessons and develop a young person's character – benefits that last far beyond childhood. As athletes, we, too, can pursue, mix, and balance two equally important priorities: personal and collective success.

Now, I don't want to be a Pollyanna about this. I realize there's much that's individual about cycling, and sometimes, as Oakland Raider owner Al Davis has said, you have to "just win, baby." I'm suggesting, though, that you can hold your personal goals and collective (group, team, sport) goals not as #1 and #2, or even as #1 and #1a, but as co-#1 priorities. It's about enlightened self-interest, interdependence, being of service, and teamwork. You're still going after what you need the most, and you're being supported in doing that. And, you're doing the same for others. To ride that way, it's important to have, find, and build your cycling integrity; it's important to balance self-interest and cooperation. Here are some tips:

1. Commit to the rules – spoken and unspoken.

Diving into corners, ignoring the centerline rule, drafting off riders from other fields – it's all defecting. You don't need to get ahead that way, and it's worth a lot less if you do. And [all those banned substances](#): just say no. Your results *may* suffer in the short term, but you and your sport will ultimately win. Do your share to make the sport great.

2. Cooperate on and off the bike.

Use your [goal-setting and goal-management skills](#) to set and prioritize your personal goals for the ride, race, or season. Step forward and ask your riding partners or teammates to do the same. Then push hard for goal alignment: Find ways for the group to support as many of the top individual goals as possible. Strive for everyone to get at least some of their top needs met.

With all of this striving going on, pressure can be a natural consequence. There are [many ways to handle pressure](#), not all of which are solo. Remember, reaching out to people tends to build connection. With better connections among people, on- and off-the-bike teamwork is more likely to be effective. And, when you talk with a fellow rider about your struggles, that might make it easier for him to do the same someday. Pay it forward.

In races/rides, propose alliances and confront past and current defections – perhaps by retaliating within the rules, or perhaps just with words. And if there's goal-conflict within your group or team, respectfully confront riders who aren't contributing enough to the common good. Your core mental skills of [Communication](#) and [Managing Emotions](#) will likely come in handy here.

3. Find motivation, satisfaction and fun in contributing to other cyclists' success. And show that you're into it.

The other day, I was riding through town, on my way to a group ride. A cyclist was stopped by the

side of the road, talking with a pedestrian. As I rode by, the cyclist called after me. If I stopped, I might miss my rendezvous. I stopped. Turned out to be [Roei Sadan](#), an inspiring adventurer who's riding around the world. He just wanted to know how to get to the Golden Gate Bridge. Not only did I have the great pleasure of meeting him, but now I get all his extraordinary email updates from his 30,000-mile journey. So if you see a cyclist by the side of the road or trail, ask if they need help. If they need it and you can't give it, try to send it.

[Sustaining motivation can be hard](#) at times in cycling, especially when too much of your motivation is riding on self-interest. Make it a priority to spend some of your energy serving other cyclists in your group, team, or region. For example, find a fellow rider with less experience than you, and if he's looking for mentoring, offer it to him. He may be interested in what you know about riding, gear, routes, racing, teams, tactics, or perhaps the [resources](#) (eg. coaching, strength training) that you've used over the years to improve your cycling.

Finally, in leading cooperation in your group or team, you may need to help certain people differentiate among *want*, *need*, and *greed*. Some people may benefit, at times, from being a little less hungry for their own achievement and a little more into others' (or the sport's) success; hearing some straight talk from you may be just what's needed. Still, telling them is one thing, and *living* it yourself – and liking it – is quite another. Do that lead-by-example thing.

Doing all this can strengthen your integrity, or it may take finding the integrity within yourself to do all this. But where do you look? Perhaps the answer lies in an old Yiddish folktale, which I first heard from the great storyteller [Joel Ben-Izzy](#):

Jacob of Krakow has a dream. (No, not about a ladder.) In his dream, he sees a marvelous treasure hidden underneath a bridge in Prague. So he wakes up and treks (rides?) many miles to the bridge, where he sees a watchman standing guard over the spot. Jacob waits and waits. Finally, the watchman asks him his business there. Jacob tells him the truth. "That's funny," says the watchman, "I dreamed of a marvelous treasure last night, too, but this one was hidden under the oven of a man named Jacob of Krakow." Wide-eyed, Jacob goes straight home, digs directly beneath his oven, finds the treasure, and becomes a very rich and charitable man.

My youngest daughter adds the postscript *she* heard from Joel Ben-Izzy: At the bottom of the treasure chest is a note that says, "Dig deeper!"

Our sport – and, I suspect, our planet – depends on all of us cooperating more and defecting less. A New Year's resolution, perhaps?



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