



Racing Strategies and Tactics

Many racers have a hard time understanding strategy and tactics. A lot just show up and take the hand they are dealt. At lower levels of racing strong riders are often successful at doing this. However, as a racer improves and moves up the ranks the need to not only understand what they are being able to properly employ them becomes essential.

One of the biggest questions that people ask is why are strategies so important? The simple answer is that the strongest rider is not always the one that wins. Often, it is the smartest one. Strategies give racers:

- A target to shoot for;
- A rough outline to follow during a race;
- Guidance on how to shape your training in preparation for an event; and,
- A role and actions for you to play in a race, especially if you are racing with a team.

All of this helps you to maximize your efforts as well as your training before an event. Knowing how a race will unfold and when to use your strengths and protect against weaknesses is often the determining factor between winning and losing. For those who have never worked at this, the learning curve can be difficult and in some cases a huge hurdle to overcome. That is why learning how to race smarter and not harder is crucial to long-term bike racing success.

What is a Strategy?

In its simplest form a strategy is a plan of what you are going to do and when you plan on doing it. Successful plans don't have to be complicated but in most cases they do have a number of things in common including:

- They must be well thought out,
- Planned in advance ,
- Flexible, meaning they can be easily modified as circumstances dictate; and,
- There are specific conditions that must occur for elements of the plan to be executed.

Having a plan is not the end of the story. You also need to implement it and for that you need to be able to

- Think quickly;
- Understand what is going on around you;
- React to changes and modify your plan as necessary;
- Seize and exploit opportunities; and,
- Protect yourself against threats.



In addition to these skills, there is also a certain amount of success that lies outside the direct control of a rider. It is important to understand this too and know that not only do all the right conditions have to come together at just the right times, but that a rider also has to be lucky at times. Things a rider can't control include:

- Weather;
- Other riders;
- Changes to the course by promoters; and,
- Crashes.

Knowing what you can and can't control and focusing your time on making a positive impact on the areas where you can make the most difference and recognizing how and when to exploit issues that develop outside your control are crucial to success and to understanding how to develop a good race strategy.

What are Tactics

Many people confuse strategies with tactics. A primary reason for this is that most people have an easy time relating to specific tactics while it is much more difficult to understand how a series of tactics can be tied together to develop an overall plan. Tactics are the actual maneuvers used to achieve your plan.

Only three results can occur from any tactic:

- Advance your position;
- Maintain your position ; or,
- Lose your position

Tactics can also be classified into two basic types:

- Offensive- designed to advance a position; or,
- Defensive- intended to either maintain or prevent a position from being lost

Tactics are learned through trial and error. This is a key tool to becoming a good racer, but only if you are able to learn from your mistakes and a reason why it is a good idea to keep a race journal and record everything that happens to you in a race.

- Who did what, when and what happened?
- What did and didn't work?
- When did something succeed or fail?
- What are your personal strengths and weaknesses and how did they align with specific types of tactics?



How do You Put it All Together?

So the big question is how do you take a bunch of tactics and turn them into a race strategy? The answer comes down to three things.

1. Ask a lot of questions and answer them as honestly as you possibly can.

These questions really come down to four important areas

- a. Know Yourself: What are your strengths and weaknesses;
- b. Know the Competition;
- c. Know the Course; and
- d. Know the environment you will be racing under.

The better you are at critically analyzing yourself, the course, competition and environment, the better your plan will be.

2. Assemble your plan. Once you have come up with a list of answers to your questions you need to connect them with specific tactics. The key is to dig into your bag of tricks and determine the tactics you are best at that also align with the variables that will be most prevalent in the race. Then it is a matter of putting all those pieces together and knowing how and when they will be used.

3. Finally, execution is the hardest but most crucial step. A big mistake that many racers make is to give up on their plan at the first sign of adversity. Patience is a necessity for any good racer. If at first you don't succeed....try, try again. However, there is also a balancing act that you need to understand. At times it will be important to know when to say when as well as to take advantage of a golden opportunity. That means learning to read a race and understand what is going on around you.

- Who is attacking?
- Why are they attacking?
- When are they going hard versus easy ?
- How does this play into or against your plan?

Becoming a good student of racing and working on the basic skills to execute a winning move are key to making your strategies work. Learn the sport, practice the skills and continually evaluate what is going on around you.

At the end of the day, learning to race smarter, not harder will help you win races.

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