

# Out of my Head....

By: Dave Drahmman

Athletes all know what it means for an opponent to be “in their head.” Simply put, it means that there is no physiological or skill-level limitation that explains why one athlete consistently defeats another. The limitation is all mental. For athletes in team sports or for those who compete against other athletes, the intimidation, or the history competing against another competitor causes them to repeat “negative messages” in their minds. Fear of defeat turns in to self-fulfilled expectations. Ask any athlete. Everyone has his or her own “demons” to exorcise. One of the biggest milestones for an athlete or team to overcome is to beat that one opponent that has bedeviled them over time. No longer is that opponent “in the head” of the team or athlete. It’s a great feeling.

For Golfers and, I now know, cyclists, physical things can be “in your head.” That tough hole on a golf course or an entire course or event can frustrate a golfer. For a cyclist like me, who does not ride competitively, those intimidators are mostly hills. For me, until today, it was one hill in particular.

You are going to raise your eyebrows when I tell you which one it was, but it’s true: As you head eastbound on Green Valley Road from Sophia Parkway to Francisco there are two rolling hills that have completely “owned me.”

There’s a long history here. It goes back to 2001, when my wife bought me a Gary Fisher “hybrid” bike as a gift. I decided to run an errand on it one morning and rode down from El Dorado Hills to the corner of East Natoma and Blue Ravine/Green Valley to get a few things from the Market. The ride down was easy and fun. On the way back, I got about a quarter-mile up Green-Valley road when I heard someone yell “on your left” and was passed by at least a dozen riders going at least twice my speed. I was in awe and wondered what kind of condition you had to be in to ride like that.

By the time I had gotten to the Sophia Parkway intersection, I was out of gas and out of breath. I stopped and collected myself and took a drink. On the climb up to Mormon Island drive, I stopped twice more. Over the top from Mormon Island to Brown’s Ravine, I rode as fast as I was comfortable riding in the hopes that I could pick up enough momentum to help me climb the hill to Francisco. What a joke. As roadies passed me again and again, all pausing politely to ask me if I was ok, I stopped and started and stopped and started. I finally gave up and walked my bike the rest of the way up the hill. I hoped people would think I had a flat or a mechanical issue. One woman in a min-van pulled over and asked me if I needed help. I was cold but overheated. My blood sugar was dangerously low and I felt nauseated. As I stopped and waited for the pedestrian crosswalk signal at Francisco, I saw a tall, thin cyclist hit the bottom of the hill and start to climb it. He danced on the pedals like a deer crossing a field. It looked effortless. Just before the top, he crossed the lanes and entered the left turn lane, where he waited. As the light changed, he sped off down Francisco and disappeared over the hill. To this day, I have been more impressed by this one display of fitness than almost anything else I’ve seen thus far. Something about watching the grace and ease with which that guy climbed the hill left a mark on my psyche.

Over the ensuing weeks/months/years, I rode occasionally to and from work in Folsom. Each time I arrived at the foot of what I call the “Francisco hill,” I cringed and wilted. I tried varying techniques to approach the climb. Bigger gears, smaller gears; sitting, standing, nutrition, hydration, gels, and voodoo (actually not voodoo, but it crossed my mind) .... Anything I tried led to the same outcome...which was me on the side of the road out of gas and walking my bike. Almost 100% of the time, someone would ride up next to me and ask if I were “ok.” It was nice of them, but humiliating to me.

It was almost two years later that I finally made it up the hill without walking the bike. I had only ridden occasionally and really not improved much. Even so, making it up that hill without walking felt to me like I had won a time trial up l’Alpe d’Huez. For the next three years, I continued riding whenever I had brief

s spurts of motivation to “get in shape,” but there was no consistency at all. Oh, and I still struggled trying to get to the top of the Francisco Hill. I hated that hill and it hated me back.

...fast forward to March, 2007. My latest commitment to being in shape started with a visit to the doctor where they cheerfully reported my weight to be 253 lbs. I was flabbergasted. I was the guy who ran competitively in my early 20’s at 175 lbs. To say I was over my “target weight” was an understatement.

Of course, I again resolved to “get in shape,” so I started riding again. It was hard and painful. I could go around 12 miles before I was completely spent. Of course, every ride seemed to end up with the climb back up to Francisco, and it never seemed to get easier. That hill was officially my nemesis. From March to May, I improved a little, but still felt like I was treading water.

I somehow found CycleFolsom, and started doing Saturday rides with them. Riding with a group was motivating beyond anything I had imagined. CycleFolsom people were supportive and incredibly educational. My every-other-month riding habits changed to every other day. I went from 50 miles a year to 150 miles a week, and the results were amazing. I lost 30 lbs and that 12 mile ride that used to kill me turned into an 80 mile ride after which I felt like I could still go another 50. My 8 mph average speed went to 12, then 14, then 16, then 18 on the parkway. On a recent ride from Folsom to Sac State, my average speed was 20.3 mph and it felt effortless.

Because of CycleFolsom, I rode 2000 miles from May – October, and completed the Konocti Challenge and a few other rides over 100 miles. I found myself riding at the front of the group more and more, and was able to keep pace with stronger riders for longer and longer periods of time. I hit the hills and felt like I was starting to get stronger. In early July, I had one extremely disastrous day on Deer Valley road. You have to get those details from someone else...it was gruesome. But again CycleFolsom people were encouraging and educational. Curt Harvel and Steve Ward and Oz Lee all got me to focus on progress, vs the disasters and the bad days. So I kept climbing. Over the summer I climbed many of the tougher hills in our immediate area, and found myself completing several very long climbs, like the almost 10 mile long climb in the Konocti Challenge. Even at a slow pace, I learned that I could get over steep or longer hills, and recover quickly. So Francisco Hill is not a problem any more right?

...wrong.... I still hated that hill. I avoided it, and mostly feared it. We had history, that hill and I, and none of it was good. I was in the strange position of being able to climb much steeper or longer hills, while simultaneously being intimidated by the Francisco Hill.... It made no sense, except to say that it was “in my head.” On a recent training ride up and down the Hills around the Ridgeview area, I told my buddy that I often rode the more difficult Elmores-Brittany route to climb from Folsom to El Dorado Hills just because I hated Green Valley Road up Francisco Hill. Hearing myself say that got me to thinking that I was letting this hill beat me.

So today I decided that hill would no longer own me.

This morning, I went out and did 10 miles of warm-up meandering through the new bike trails in Folsom. After about 20 minutes, I realized I was procrastinating. I had an appointment and I had to keep it. So I took a drink, and turned my bike around and headed for home... and *that* hill.

The ride over the “prequel” hill up to Mormon Island Drive passed before I knew it had. I was preoccupied thinking about the days’ schedule, and didn’t notice I had topped out and was descending already. I went from the 39 to the 52 and casually accelerated to a little over 35 mph. I hit the bottom of the hill and started up. After about 100 yards, I stood on my pedals. About 1/3 of the way up, I dropped to the 39-tooth chain ring and downshifted in the back. I can’t even tell you which gear I ended up in to be honest. All I know is that I reached a point about two-thirds up the hill and turned to look over my shoulder and noted that there was no traffic coming up the hill. Still standing, I crossed the lanes and got in the left-turn lane at Francisco. Happily, the lights changed as I came to the line, and I rode through the intersection and up easily to the top at the turn to Safeway. The rest of the way home was just as easy. I came in to the house with my heart rate under control and no problems at all. While I am pretty sure that I didn’t look like a deer climbing that hill, I am also certain I no longer looked like a Moose either. I laughed to think that this was the longest 20 mile bike ride I’ve ever taken. It lasted a little over 7 years!

I can say that hill no longer scares me. It's just a hill. Now I need a new nemesis to motivate me.  
...I'm waiting.....