

Bicycling

March 30, 2014

Jade Wilcoxson on Concussions

To Ride or Not to Ride

After suffering a concussion in her first Classic of the season, pro cyclist Jade Wilcoxson discovers that the road to recovery is more complicated than she'd imagined



Photo: Wilcoxson's helmet shattered during her accident, potentially saving her life. (Jen See)

Racing in the [Spring Classics](#) is treacherous. The weather is usually horrendous (although this year it was quite nice), the roads are narrow, the cobbles are mind-rattling, and you're fighting shoulder to shoulder with 150 to 200 girls for four hours. It's usually not a matter of if you crash, but how bad it hurts.

This year I made it 50k into my first race, Omloop Het Nieuwsblad, before bad luck struck. I was feeling awesome and sitting in the top 20. A girl in front of me decided to ride into a space that didn't exist, then hit a car and ricocheted into the peloton in front of me. I don't remember the next five minutes. I'd gone down hard and took the brunt of the fall on the back of my head. My helmet did its job and shattered in the process. I can't imagine what my skull would look like if I didn't have a helmet on. I suspect it would have been a life-changing (or life-ending) crash.

My mechanic found me and held my bike while I tried to get back on it. I apparently fell down three times in the process, but when director Jack drove up I told him I could still race (adrenaline = bad decision making). He took one look at me and told me to get in the car. I think my eyes may have been pointing in different directions.

I spent the next 48 hours feeling like I was rocking on a small boat in the middle of the ocean. I wasn't allowed to use the computer, watch TV, or do anything that stimulates the brain, and spent a lot of time sleeping in a dark room. I tried to have a cup of coffee and my teammates quickly put the kibosh on that. No more caffeine? What?! Might as well go back to bed and sleep for a couple days.

When I started to feel a little bit normal again, I tried to ride my bike. A 30-minute roller ride left me foggy, exhausted, and ready for a two-hour nap. I slowly worked my way up to an hour on the rollers, then went outside. My first ride outside was definitely a sensory overload. Trees were coming at me so quickly, yet I was going only about 15mph. I wondered how I was going to be able to return to racing in a peloton at 30mph.

For those that don't know my riding style, the Classics are my thing. I feel like the more miserable, technical, and windy the race the better.

The short power climbs and the cobbles suit me well. I was only going to be racing in Europe for two and a half weeks. My foggy brain had to clear quickly to make it to the first World Cup of the season, Ronde van Drenthe.

I quickly learned that the brain can't be rushed. It's not like road rash or a broken bone where you know very objectively what you can and can't do and how long it's going to take to heal. It's a lot more complicated than that. Thankfully Optum takes concussions seriously and has its riders complete an online [ImPact concussion baseline test](#) for brain function and a smartphone-based [Sway Balance System assessment](#) as well. I passed my ImPact test with flying colors, but on my balance test I scored **46/100**. The average for this test in non-concussed members of my team was 90-97. That's pitiful! While I was feeling better, the Sway test was an objective indicator that I still had a long way to go. I had a Skype consult with two doctors, one of whom was a neurologist that helped me develop a timeline of when to return to racing.

Both doctors pinpointed my major symptom, poor balance, and told me I shouldn't even think about returning to race until it had returned to normal. My balance was fine on the bike, but when I closed my eyes I couldn't even stand on one foot. No problem! I never close my eyes and stand on one foot while I'm racing, right?

However, the docs were quick to point out that the balance was an indicator that my brain was still recovering and not ready to endure the stress and stimulation of racing. In addition, when the brain is bruised, it takes at least three weeks for the bruising to return to normal. Think about all the stages of a bad bruise on the outside of your body. It's painful, turns colors and eventually, after several weeks, goes away. The brain is the same, except it's much more fragile than your skin. If I were to hit my head again before the first concussion was healed, the doctors explained, it could have long-term effects and would take much longer to recover from.

After a lot of discussion and a few tears of disappointment, my team and I decided it wasn't worth the risk of reinjury before my brain was fully healed. I had flown all the way to Europe for my favorite races of the year, I was in excellent form and I had only made it 50k into my first race. Bummer. But on the bright side, I still have a functioning brain because I

ignored the obnoxious competitive voice in my head and instead listened to all the voices of reason surrounding me.

I learned some important lessons during the course of this injury. First of all, it's important to have baseline testing in place to give you objective measures of when you're back to normal. Second, this is only bike racing. Granted, it's awesome, but this is only a small window over the course of my life. Third, it is so important to have an educated team of people helping you decide when to return to riding and racing. If you go it alone, you're likely to return too early and may suffer consequences you hadn't bargained for. Finally, as it turns out, missing a few races wasn't the end of the world. It's a long season; I'll make it back to form eventually. I always do.

We're pleased to report that Jade recovered in time for the US domestic season, and is competing at the Redlands Bicycle Classic stage race.