

Some people go about their lives making a huge difference, quietly.

[Connie Cycling](#) has been introducing cycling to kids from across the socioeconomic spectrum at the Carson velodrome since 2004. Connie Paraskevin, one of the greatest track racers in U.S. cycling history, runs the program, but it's not just about minting bike racers or nurturing the next generation of Olympians.

Connie's work is something much more important than grooming young athletes: It's helping kids find their limits, then break through to the other side even if they never enter a bike race. I asked Connie to give me an example of how kids use her cycling classes to "break on through." She had a plethora of examples, and I liked this one a lot.

The story of "Carl"

Carl came to Connie's program, like many kids do, in search of a sport. He wasn't sure he wanted to race, but he was pretty sure he wanted to ride. His parents wanted him involved in an athletic activity for all the usual reasons, but nothing he'd tried had worked out. "No problem," Connie said. "Track cycling attracts lots of kids like yours."

Carl was smart and consistent. The first year he got a feel for the track and for learning to ride. He and his classmates learned the techniques unique to riding a bike with no gears and no brakes around a wooden track with 45-degree banking.

The second year Carl added to his skills and continued to improve. He never showed any interest in racing, and the program never pushed him to race, but it was evident that he had a lot of ability. The third year his skills were quite good and his technique was getting refined, so the classes evolved from skill and technique into training and workouts. His body had matured as well and he was better able to hand the more intense efforts.

This was the first time that the track was really starting to challenge him. The coaches knew what he could and couldn't handle, and it was apparent that he had never pushed himself. "That's natural with some kids," Connie says. "Whereas some are aggressive from the start, others play their cards more cautiously. Carl was more cautious, and never got even got close to where his real limits were, or even out of his comfort zone. Still, he rode well and continued to improve."

One day the class was doing a drill called "Hares and Hounds."

Connie laughs. "It can be brutal. The coaches set up the riders in order based on what we know about each rider's abilities. We send out a rider who's the 'hare,' and the others are the chasing 'hounds.' It's an exciting and intense workout!"

Carl was the hare. At "go" he kicked up onto the boards, and kicked hard. Somewhere, in between the moments he was waiting in line and the split second in which he heard

the word "Go!" a switch was flipped. Carl was on fire. He put everything he had out there on the boards.

The coaches stared in amazement at this transformation that happened in front of them as Carl smashed through his own personal, internal barriers. "The full-out effort and rocket speed? He'd been able to do that for a long time," says Connie. "But the will to do it? It happened right then on that day. And once the switch was flipped, it never flipped back off. Ever."

After the workout finished, Carl had another "first." He went to the trashcan and puked. It was a shocker to him as he coughed up what was left of his lunch. He'd never gone so fast and so hard and so deep, and his body was telling him unmistakably, in case he hadn't noticed, that today was different.

A few minutes later he walked up to Connie and looked at her in the eyes, inches away. This is what he said: "Coach Connie, after we finished the Hounds and Hares, I hated you. I've never felt so bad in my life."

Connie smiled at him. "You gave it everything you had."

"Can I thank you?" Carl put out his hand.

"Sure." Connie shook it and gave him another smile.

"I get it now," he said.

According to Connie, that's the moment that she had been waiting for -- for three long years. She knew that this would stay with him forever, the day in his life when he first went beyond himself. Months after the breakthrough, Carl's father said, "He's a different kid since that day. His confidence, how he handles himself, it all changed just like that." He snapped his fingers to illustrate.

Says Connie: "What Carl did that day, that is success. Not a national championship. Not membership on the U.S. Olympic team. Not winning a race. Success is that moment in life when all of that kid's efforts coalesced and allowed him to flip the switch. Cycling was the vector, but the success was what happened inside him."

Connie's program is the same for all kids regardless of their background in that it recognizes a basic fact. This fact is that athletes who excel, although they all stand on the line to compete in the same event, they have all reached that starting line by a different path. Some were given everything, some made do with almost nothing. Some had huge talent, others were endowed with nothing but work ethic and will. "Everyone has arrived at the same place, but from a different path and background," says Connie. "Ten different people, ten different paths. This diversity is what we respect, honor, and encourage. Our job is really the easiest one of all: To help them flip the switch."

Keeping the wheels rolling

Like any organization, Connie Cycling thrives only to the extent that it has financial resources to devote to its programs. On October 13, 2013, I hope you'll join me for the [Connie Cycling Foundation's "Ride & Raise"](#) 20-mile charity pedal in Long Beach. You register for the event by paying a \$35 registration fee, and then you can choose to either raise additional funds through the sponsorship of friends and family, or you can simply show up and ride your bike. There are no fundraising requirements or minimums.

Connie Cycling's work has made a lasting impact on the lives of thousands of children. It has introduced them to what I believe to be the most democratic, exciting, and revolutionary activity known to mankind -- bicycling -- and it has put kids on bikes and a healthy trajectory when they might have taken another less beneficial path. Join us on October 13 to celebrate the mission of Connie Cycling, to celebrate the life and work of Connie Paraskevin, and to keep the wheels turning.

Go, Connie!

written by, Seth Davidson