

SPORTS

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A Battery big wheel

Cyclist Zack Garland aims to ride professionally ... and he's off to a good start

BY KENN OLIVER
The Telegram

Ask Zack Garland what profession he'll choose once he completes his ocean and naval architectural engineering degree at Memorial University and you might be surprised by his response.

"Professional cyclist is a pretty valid option, I think," muses the 22-year-old, who hails from the Lower Battery in downtown St. John's.

Not slated to graduate until 2011, Garland has a few years to mull it over, but if his steady climb in the North American cycling circuit continues, he just might be able to forego a desk job and pedal his way to retirement.

In 2004, Garland, then 18, joined the junior national team competing in World Cup races in Europe. In 2005, he raced professionally in Belgium. The next year, he started making waves by finishing second overall at the Charlevoix Road Race, as well as racing the Tour de Beauce with the Quebec provincial team. And last year, Garland was selected to the Kona-Adobe racing team, collecting his best finish (second overall) at the Sydney Twilight Criterium. But those accomplishments and results are just the tip of the iceberg. For the past four years — at the expense of his own social life — Garland has either been training, biking or studying. Little else.

"No one is really biking at my level and doing the school thing like I am," says Garland from British Columbia, where he is currently on a four-month work term. "And I'm kind of proud. I've been on the Dean's list for three terms, so I've got my balance down.

"It's all the personality you have, and I have the personality that I need to be 200 per cent busy all the time. Some people have that, some don't. Training helps clear the mind from school and school takes your mind off training and biking."

This was supposed to be a banner year for Garland, and it certainly started that way in April with a first-place finish on the third stage, resulting in a second overall finish, in the Washington State Tour de Walla Walla.

"The biggest win of my career, actually. It was a pretty stacked Canadian and American Field."

Over his first four years of serious cycling, about the only goal Garland set for himself that he hasn't accomplished is to stand on a national podium.

And this summer's under-23 nationals in Quebec was where he planned on making it.

After finishing fifth in the time-trial portion, Garland was "really optimistic" heading into the road-race event.

"I'm a better road racer than time trialist. And if you could make a course for me, they made it."

But early in the race, reminiscent of the most horrific bike crashes witnessed in the sports highlight reels, someone rubbed Garland, who in turn rubbed someone else which resulted in a broken front wheel.

"Imagine riding and then not having a front wheel and landing directly on the side of your face," Garland recalls.

"So really, the day started for me waking up in the ambulance trying to piece together where I am."

Looking back, he's glad to have walked away without any brain damage, but the crash was disappointing for several reasons.

Not the least of which was losing his chance at a national podium finish.

"There's a lot of 'what-ifs', but I guess it's knowing the legs I had that day ... I would have been contesting to win. No Newfoundlander has ever been in that position before."

The crash that kept him from a podium finish also cost him a chance to be selected for the national team set to compete in a race in France and the world championships.

Garland, undaunted by the setbacks, re-focused, trained, and took spot in this year's Tour de Shore, a two-day road race along the Southern Shore from Riverhead to Goulds at the end of August.

A week later Garland won the first stage of the Tour de Quebec, nearly taking the whole thing.

"I was leading the race up until the last day where it was one of those rolling chess games where it just never played out and I ended up third overall."

Shortly thereafter, he took first place in the British Columbia Oak Bay Criterium, and third in the Bastian Square Criterium on the west coast.

While he's years away from conquering the Canadian cycling scene — most riders peak in their late 20s to mid 30s — Garland is using his time in the temperate climes of B.C. to try a new brand of biking called cyclo-cross.

Using a bicycle closer to a road bike than a mountain bike, the sport is a grueling test of strength and endurance. Just what Garland relishes.

"Cycling is one of those sports, it hurts to lose but it hurts a lot to win," he spins. "When you learn how to subject yourself to the physical strain you need to win, as a rider you can progress."

Cyclo-cross, as its name implies, challenges the rider with equal parts cross-country running and cycling. As the riders make their way through a course, they will come upon 15 to 18 inch barriers. At this point — "and this is an art in itself," contends Garland — the riders must dismount, pick up their bikes, run over the barriers and resaddle the bike and continue on.

"I don't worry about being good at it," insists Garland, "but I knew I would have fun doing it and I've had some people tell me I might excel at it."

In his first cyclo-cross race, he placed fifth. In his second, a seventh. Not bad for a first timer in a field of 30 more experienced riders.

To compete, however, Garland had to have a bike built to meet the demands of the sport. He turned to long time supporters and personal friends Joe Planchat of Canary Cycles and Paul Collette.

"They're the reason I can bike," he says of Planchat and Collette.

"There are so many people from Newfoundland that have made it a reality for me to be able to ride. I've always said, 'the only thing I've ever had to do is turn the pedals.' You ride with their strength."

Garland is set to return to the island in time to start classes in the new year. With no work term planned for next summer, it leaves plenty of time to feed his passion.

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Zack Garland, 22, hopes to compete professionally in cycling. — Submitted photo

Pro cycling a fringe sport in Canada

Professional cycling, while gaining notoriety, remains a fringe sport in Canada.

So it's understandable that most people don't fully grasp the types of races professional riders compete in.

There are three main types; a road-race, a criterium, and a time trial.

Somewhat self-explanatory, a road race is a point to point contest, like the Tour de Shore, that begins in at one location and ends at another. In some places, riders race a loop of 5 to 20 kilometres so many times to complete the distance, which usually ranges around 150 to 180 kilometres.

In a road race, it's all about biding your time and waiting for the moment to make your move.

"If you want to win it, more or less the trick is to conserve as much energy as possible everywhere except for when it's the time you can use it most effectively," Zack Garland explains.

In a team setting, a road race has a group of riders reducing wind resistance for a team member, allowing the rider pedal with less effort because, "when you're riding behind someone, you're saving about 30 per cent of your energy."

Road races are where Garland feels his strengths are.

"It's kind of a sadistic thing, the more I suffer and everyone suffers in a race, the better I do."

A criterium is a "specator friendly" race usually held around a city block — "imagine doing a race around George Street", says Garland.

"It's less than a kilometer long with really tight corners and you race for about an hour, usually about 40 or 50 laps.

"With a tight course, the speeds will average, in a fast pro- criterium, 45 km/h. So with that, there's crashes and they're always fun to watch."

The third event, the time trial, is just that. However riders use a different bike, more like the ones used by triathletes with lower handle bars and a solid rear wheel.

"It's just a complete individual effort," says Garland. "All riders go off at minute or two minute intervals and it's just you against the clock."

Speeds in a time trial average 42 to 48 km/h on a course that averages 20 to 40 kilometers in length.

Combine all three disciplines together and you've got a stage race, like the Tour de France, where each stage has a winner but at the end of all stages, an overall winner is crowned.

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