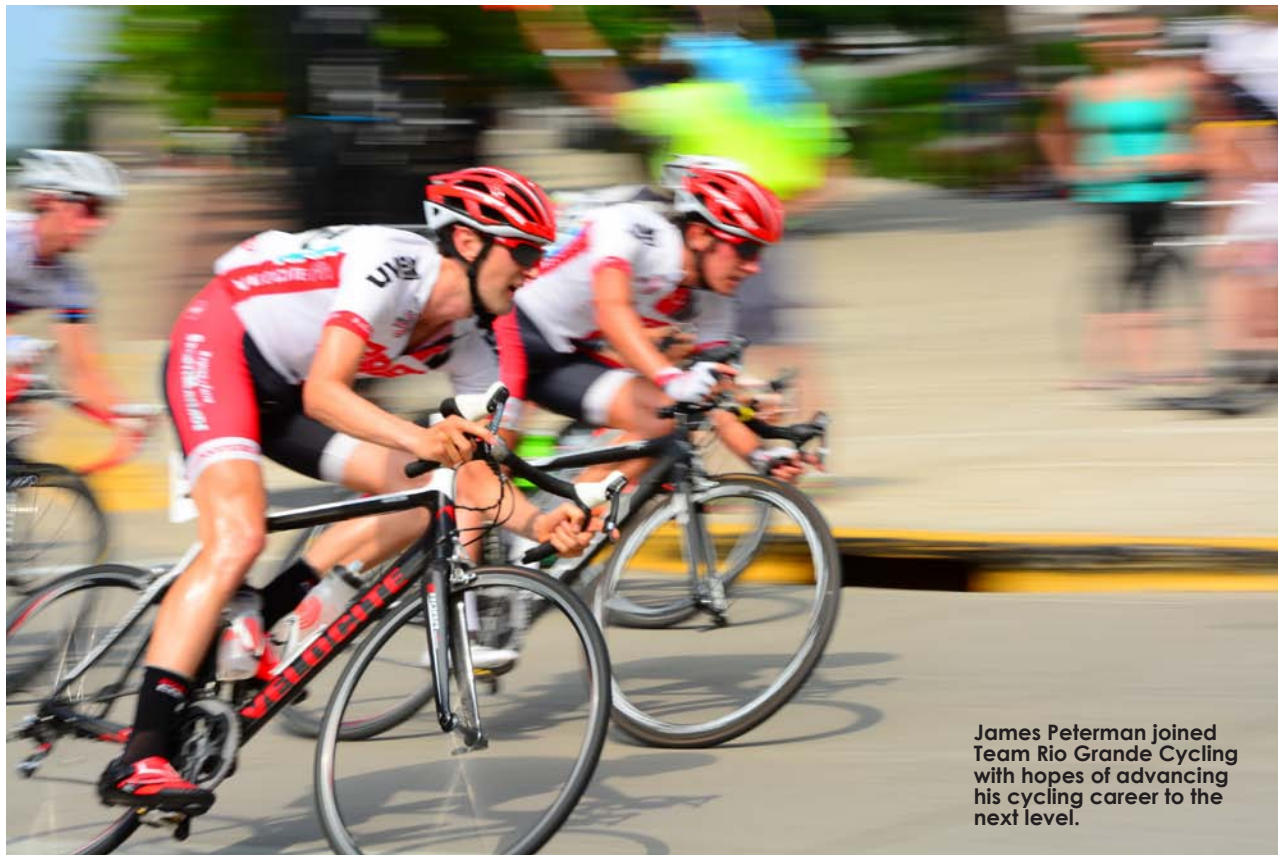


Courtesy of James Peterman



James Peterman joined Team Rio Grande Cycling with hopes of advancing his cycling career to the next level.

At the end of the cycling season a year after Timmy Duggan rode on the U.S. Olympic cycling team, he chose to retire. He was just 31 years old and on the edge of what could have been his best cycling years. But there weren't enough teams, enough options, enough reasons to continue, he says, when he'd already achieved so many of his goals and looked at the balance of existing injuries and the risk of additional ones.

"You look at your paycheck and you look at what other goals you have in the sport and maybe at that point it's like this point of diminishing returns in terms of the sacrifice and what you get from it and what you've already gotten, that was kind of the equation that was in my head at that point," he says. He'd won a national championship and the 2011 Most Aggressive Rider overall title in the USA Pro Cycling Challenge. He had also suffered a traumatic brain injury in 2011 and a broken tibia in 2013.

PEDAL ON UP

The next generation of cyclists brings a wave of change to the sport, ushered in by some of those lost in the middle

by Elizabeth Miller

"The hardest thing that I have, that I try not to think about is, without a doubt, I'm walking away from potentially the best years of my career, but to me, it just wasn't worth it anymore," he says. "I miss the 10 percent of it that's truly awesome, but the truth is that it's a really hard sport and it's a lot of sacrifice and I was just ready to move on, but yeah, let me tell you that 10 percent that's awesome, it's really freaking awesome."

In the wake of the Lance Armstrong dope-ring

about his age who retired last year, too. They're a generation that started just after the introduction of the biological passport, which made it much harder to dope, a generation committed to cycling clean but bumping up against the riders ahead of them who'd used doping to make a name, a salary and a life for themselves. Just entering their 30s, these cyclists are nearing the prime for their careers, and are instead walking away from those professional cycling.

Instead of disappointment, Duggan says, what he

scandal, corporate sponsors pulled their support for teams, and many of those teams shut down. And while doping was pervasive in the sport of cycling, it left many young, potentially great riders who opted not to dope left in the dust of those who did. Fewer teams and less funding left a lot of them weighing the same options as Duggan, and coming down on the side of pursuing something else.



Timmy Duggan retired from cycling after a decade of career highs that included riding on the national team and competing in the Olympics. He's continuing to work with aspiring cyclists and skiers.

wants to focus on is optimism, the hope for the next generation of cyclists who will have more and better opportunities to guide them up the ranks as the sport reforms and hopefully enters a growth period to follow the contraction that came in the wake of the reports on widespread doping released by the United States Anti-Doping Agency.

"We've already seen a lot of sponsors bail and right now it's kind of a lean time in the sport, especially in North America," says Trevor Connor, director of Team Rio Grande. "Around 2006, 2007, there were probably 13, 14 big pro teams in North America, now there's really four. And there are certainly fewer races, so it's a leaner time right now."

At the end of 2012, Pat McGaughan, founder of Team Rio Grande Cycling and co-founder of Rio Grande Restaurant chain, was looking to relaunch the cycling team after a hiatus. Then news of the doping ring started to break.

"Pat's first response was he was going to fold the team, he didn't want to be part of all this — and understandably, especially because when all those revelations come out, it struck close to home. These are people that live in the area and people that a lot of us know. And that really bothered Pat," Connor says. "Then he gave it some thought and realized, this is a development squad and we have this tremendous opportunity to change attitudes, potentially change the sport. So he went from saying 'I'm tired of this and I'm going to pull out' to saying 'Let's actually come back stronger and come back with that focus on promoting clean sport,' so that's a big part of the mission of the team, getting these riders to the pro level with the attitude and belief that doping is wrong and it's not something they're going to consider."

Team members are coached on an anti-doping commitment as part of their management, a flip from the past. He's heard stories of managers telling riders "Dope or you're done in this sport." His team is told that honest results come before top results.

Connor had all too much personal experience with doping in cycling and how it can cut into a career. He's just months older than Armstrong, who's now 43, and was racing in that generation where doping was pervasive. Does he think his career would have gone differently if there hadn't been that kind of culture?

"You know," he says, and takes a deep breath. "That's, unfortunately for me, the big question that will drive me nuts the rest of my life. One of the examples I look back at is one race in 2007 where I

had great form and all the top riders were there, and I ended up coming in 17th, which, out of 220 of the top riders in North America, I was pretty happy with.

"But I've looked back at the results since, and 11 of the guys who finished above me have been busted, so you just have this 'What if?' And that's unfortunately a reality to me. If all the cyclists had been clean, would I have gone to the Tour de France? No, I was never that good. Would I have stood on more podiums? Probably. But either way, we're hoping to change that for these guys so they never have to ask that question."

Duggan says he'd started to see the change by the time his career had started, and that he wouldn't have pursued cycling if he'd thought he couldn't be successful at it clean. But he concurs with what Connor saw.

"There's plenty of people from an older generation than me that made that choice [not to dope], and they were mediocre cyclists in that era because they chose not to dope, or maybe they chose not to cycle at all and you never heard from them at all," Duggan says.

Now, he says, he sees the sport having a lot more integrity than a lot of other sports. But it's up to sponsors and the public to believe that change has happened for real growth to begin.

"A question I got asked last year by a lot of the guys on the team: Should we be in this sport, is there a chance for us?" Connor says.

He told them to look at the contractions in sponsorships, races and teams a different way.

"All the big names in the sport are leaving because there are fewer opportunities, there's less money, there's not a lot of teams, and we go in cycles," Connor says. "My belief is, in a couple years, when all of this is behind us, sponsors will come back, you'll start to see more big teams pop up, you'll start seeing the races come back, and at that point, there's going to be far fewer big names in the sport and these pro teams are going to be looking for the next generation and hopefully that's going to be the guys in Rio. So what I've been telling them is they just need to get through the next couple years, and that's part of what we're here for, and then hopefully there will be a lot of opportunity for them."

Team Rio focuses on riders at the edge of professional level cycling — no one under 21, because Jose Cuervo is a team sponsor (had to know there was a margarita joke in here somewhere, right?). But Connor says that's a nice space to occupy and feel like you're doing some good. There are a lot of under-23 teams out there, but if a cyclist hasn't gone pro by the age of 24, it's tough to find a spot on a team.

Riders in the mid-20s range struggle the most, he says. They're too old for the under-23 development teams, but haven't started seeing their peak performance yet, which, particularly for stage-racing cycling men, may not hit until their 30s. That leaves them to get lost in the middle without support in accessing a racing calendar that would have them traveling all over the country and trying to make a living while working a training schedule that requires almost as many hours as a full-time job, spending 12 to 25 hours a week on the bike, plus a weight program, stretching and core work that can bring the total time demand up to 35 or 40 hours a week.

Determined to develop a better pipeline for developing riders, Team Rio has opened up a slot on their roster for a rider from Sonic Boom, a lower-level development team, who wants to take a crack at bigger races on the national race calendar.

"It just provides us what we're calling this chain, this opportunity for riders to go through what we'd like to believe are good programs and not be left with no opportunities," Connor says. "And we're trying to develop the same thing on the other end. We want to get some partnerships with some pro teams so once

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we say, 'You've successfully gone through the Rio program, you're ready to go to a pro team,' we can then talk to that team and say 'You guys should ride this guy.'"

The system allows riders to focus on improving their level of riding and getting results, learning what it means to be a professional, all while knowing that opportunities for advancement will be there, instead of worrying that all that work and talent is riding a road to nowhere.

It's something of an extension to an existing channel for developing riders — four riders from Sonic Boom have already moved up to Rio. James Peterman is one of those cyclists.

"As I've tried to move up in levels, it's kind of gone along with the whole Lance Armstrong thing, there's been a lot less teams, which makes it quite a bit rougher to dream big," Peterman says. "But I'm hoping that it's turning around here."

He's been racing for 10 years, but has started showing head-turning results in recent years, particularly in time trials. This year alone, he placed in the top 10 in time trial events during at the Tucson Bicycle Classic, Silver City's Tour of the Gila and Best on Hess, as well as taking second in the Colorado State Time Trial Championships and sixth in the 2014 USA Cycling Amateur and Para Road Nationals time trial. He was recently injured in a training ride coming down Sunshine Canyon, and spent a week in the hospital.

At 29, he says, he feels like the old guy on the team. He's also not giving up a backup plan, and is working on a Ph.D. in exercise physiology, where he's been researching a modified exercise bike built into a desk.

"I've heard that some of the riders on Sonic Boom have extra motivation now," Peterman says. "They can see a pathway to a higher level of racing, whereas before you kind of maybe had to know someone or have phenomenal results."

Even though from the cyclists' perspective, times may be looking tight, the fan base in North America appears to be expanding, stoked by events like the USA Pro Cycling Challenge. That race has drawn international cyclists to Colorado for a week of stage racing at altitude.

"In my opinion, it's an exciting time for cycling," says Nicholas Greef, who relocated to Colorado from South Africa to participate in the competitive cycling scene in the U.S. He rides for Team Rio. "The results are getting better and better now for clean riders."

For the next generation, nipping at the heels of those ahead of them, the future looks bright.

"I think it's a great time to be 22 and a bike racer, for sure, there's more depth of talent and what USA cycling is doing with the under-23 program now compared to what they were doing 10 years ago when I was in it," Duggan says. "There's every opportunity for a 22-year-old to succeed now, and the current generation, you don't have to make that choice whether to dope or not dope to keep your job because that's not the way that the vibe is right now."

It's a welcome change for a sport whose funders have to consider the money spent as an investment in advertising.

"Ultimately the sport is kind of a billboard sport," Duggan says. Images of places that host these races read like postcards luring travelers, and the cyclists, riding on teams named after companies that pay for them, function like billboards. And nobody wants a billboard hung on a crack house.

"It's like the one sport that kind of comes to the people just like a parade, and it's hard to monetize that in some ways," Duggan says. "But it's an opportunity too because it's so far-reaching and it's so accessible to everybody. You don't have to pay \$150 to go to the stadium and watch it."

The clean-up of the sport, Duggan insists, has been effective. They've taken responsibility to clean up after a dirty past, and like cleaning road rash, the process stings a bit.

At the highest level, testing is becoming so effective that the top tier of cyclists has really cleaned up, Connor says, and if there are any lingering dopers, it's in the middle tiers, where racing matters enough to count, but not so much that the highest level of anti-doping technology is there. At one race his riders competed in last year, other competitors were inviting people over to show off their EPO (erythropoietin, a chemical that helps artificially boost the body's red blood cell count).

"What I said to the guys on our team is, the people who aren't changing are my generation, and while some of us are honest, some of us aren't honest, one thing that's true of all of us is, we're old and we're on our way out," Connor says. "You really see with all the young riders I talk to, doping is not a consideration. I think as my generation leaves, as the Lance Armstrong generation leaves, the sport is going to take a big step up in terms of honest, ethical riding."

"Even within my career from being a pro at 2005 or so to now, I've defi-

nitely seen what I think is a cleaning of the peloton,” Duggan says. “It’s never 100 percent clean, but our sport, we do more about it and we do more testing than any other sport, and I think that kind of creates a bad image for it initially because people are getting caught and it seems like it’s dirty, but it’s cleaner because people are getting caught.”

The pressure in the peloton now, he says, is not to dope, and that’s not the way it was 10, 15 years ago, when he was first gearing up to begin a career in cycling.

“I think the biggest trick that Lance Armstrong and his group pulled was to convince the clean cyclists that something was wrong with them,” Connor says. “Ten years ago, there was really this belief that if you were clean, you’re weird, and keep it to yourself. And really the clean cyclists need to stand up and say ‘No, this is wrong. We’re the honest ones. You’re cheating us, you’re stealing our results, we’re not going to tolerate you.’”

In the meantime, there’s a bit of a transition period. There are still riders in the peloton who are allowed by the rules to be there, but have a history with doping.

“It’s a necessary time and I think it’s great that the sport’s making this transition, but it’s just this awkward reality that you have so many former dopers in the sport still in a variety of roles, whether they’re in management of a team or in politics of the sport or still competing themselves,” Duggan says. “There’s no other way to make that transition. You can’t just like get rid of everybody who has any doping past because then everybody who has any experience with the sport is out of it. ... You can’t ever wipe the slate totally clean because then there’s nobody left in the sport who has valuable experience as a rider, as an organizer, as management. ... It’s like we all have to associate with people who have maybe a shady history, but some of them are doing more for the sport now and moving it forward than others, but it’s just hard to quantify that. ... It’s awkward because you have all these dopers, right, so they’re all former liars, cheaters and stealers, on some level, but then now you’re depending on these same people or trusting these same people, getting advice from these same people, learning from these same people.”

Since retiring, Duggan’s spent a lot more time on his mountain bike and his skis than a road bike. But he’s far from giving up his participation in the sport or work to advance it for the next generation. He was recently at a meet-

ing to talk about the possibility of forming some kind of riders’ union to give them a voice in terms of their contracts, from salaries to job security to safety concerns over race conditions.

“It can just be horrendous conditions out there and the riders have no say on the conditions in which they race,” Duggan says. “If cyclists had a voice, when it was 34 degrees and raining, and we have multiple climbs and descents to do, we can say ‘No, this is ridiculous, we’re not racing in these conditions.’”

At the starting line for one stage race, it was snowing, he recalls, and there was talk of “Are we racing? This is impossible.” But there was no plan. The gun went off, and the riders made a lap on the street and then stopped. That’s the only time in a career that dates back to college he can remember a race stage being canceled because of weather.

“If it were all laid out, OK, we don’t hold bike races if there’s precipitation and it’s less than 40 degrees, then it’s not anybody’s decision on the day of the race, that’s just policy,” Duggan says. “That’s just having a basic need met, which is safety, and that’s not being met a lot of times at the expense of riders, just so that the race can go on or the organizers can create a spectacle or something. And yeah, of course, the racing in that kind of weather and those extreme conditions and the crashes, it’s certainly great TV, but you know, for the same reason that gladiators in Roman times was great for spectators, but it didn’t work out well for very many gladiators.”

Duggan, now a realtor for Re/Max, is also the co-founder of the Just Go Harder Foundation, which works to cover fees to competitive cycling and skiing programs for kids with an interest in those sports.

“Cycling and skiing are both really expensive sports, and if you could never get that door open in the first place, you wouldn’t know just how much you like it and how much it means to you,” Duggan says.

He’s turning to cycling itself to help pay for some of those barriers to entry. Just Go Harder Foundation is in initial planning stages a multi-day bike race, proposed for the Nederland area for next fall, that could include a gravel grinder and an endurance or 100-mile mountain biking event to fundraise for that youngest generation.

“It’s a great time to be a young cyclist going out to race right now,” Duggan says. “I think the public should trust us and believe in us.”

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