

# The Count of Ten Speed

By Matthew Dunn

I suppose it's only natural to reflect on one's life with the big Five-0 lurking just around the corner. After half a century of a walking upright and mastering the many nuances of the opposable thumb, I find myself spending more and more time pondering the secrets to my success, as well as the tripwires of my failures. What am I looking for? I don't know, maybe that defining moment that laid the foundation for all that came thereafter; that flash of time when I transformed from an indistinguishable stick figure into a living and breathing Picasso - a distinct human being, vibrant and complex.

Certainly, there is no shortage of milestones in one's life deserving of a nomination, if not the award itself, too many, in fact, for me to delve into without risk of losing your attention. Instead, let's set the Way-back machine to the year 1972. Nixon is still President, the Vietnam War rages on and the Volkswagen Beetle is the most popular car in America. We don't have one, though. My made-in-America father thought the German product was subversive propaganda - a Nazi helmet on wheels. Me—and

I was fourteen and a half that summer and no, it wasn't the summer I lost my virginity—became a real man, the emblematic laurel held by my girlie-magazine-addicted older brother to be the pinnacle of male virility. That adult-oriented episode was part of season three—the maturation point for all good sitcoms and crime dramas—which comes later, if you'll pardon my pun. With the clock spinning its final lap of my first half century, the summer of 1972 was simply—is simply—the only summer still haunting the hollows of my mind.

I grew five inches taller. My voice dropped two octaves, and hair began to sprout in places I hadn't imagined it ever would, but nothing impacted my leap that summer from boy, to one of what

my mother called “the older boys,” more than the evolution of the bicycle. I owe a lot to Mr. Schwinn and Mr. Huffy, for it was their innovation that put me in the driver’s seat of my own destiny years before I could drive a car.

As a hyperactive ten year old I’d gotten my first “wheelie” bike at a local department store. The “in” style for baby-boomer preteens like me, it had high-rise handlebars, a banana seat and an enlarged, drag-racing slick rear tire. For years I rode that bike everywhere; to the store for candy, to my friend’s house to play with our slot car sets, to the park to play pickup games of baseball. I was the King of my domain—one square mile of residential blocks peppered with churches, a library and a tiny shopping plaza. Nothing was out of reach, my only limit being the strength and endurance of my skinny, and then bald legs. Nothing, that is, until that fateful day outside the grocery store when I was informed there was something “cool” beyond the old Skinner place, a dilapidated farm house that sat at the edge of town, serving as the boundary marker for our parent-restricted autonomy. School had been in summer recess for only a few days and anarchy ruled the peddlers, as we were known to the driver-licensed-armed-and-dangerous teenagers in the neighborhood. (In a few weeks we would be organized— meeting places synchronized, ballgame schedules established—but until then it was every man—boy—for himself.) I’d been nursing a bottle of Mountain Dew all morning, making it last as long as possible—my father only gave me one dime per day—when a kid I loathed emerged from the electric doors with two Dr. Peppers in one hand and a box of Pop Tarts in the other. He always had more money than anyone else and was quick to make it known. Spotting me sitting with my back to the store in the only shady section of the curbing, he strolled over and plopped down next to me.

“How they hangin’, Hardo?” Bobby asked.

Bobby was also one of those guys who bastardized everyone’s last name by adding a “do” onto the first three letters. Finley became Findo; Kennedy became Kendo; Harmon, my last name, became Hardo. And if you’re last name didn’t slide smoothly from his mouth upon adding his “do”, he used

your first name. You get the idea? Annoying! Where it came from nobody knew, but it started around the same time his parents split up, the first ones in town, my mother claimed. My dad said it was just Bobby's way of acting out, rebelling. I think he just liked being a smart ass.

"Not bad," I said, gazing off into the parking lot. I was scanning for hot cars—a Mustang, a Roadrunner, a Vette, anything to clue Bobby to the fact that I wasn't interested in talking to him. It was too subtle.

"Been out to the track yet?" he asked. He then popped open his first soda with a metal opener he kept tethered to the belt loop of his jeans. That was another thing that irritated me about Bobby, he always wore long-legged jeans. No matter how hot it got, and in Upstate New York where we lived it lingered in the eighties and nineties most of the summer, he never succumbed to shorts. He thought himself too cool, that was my guess, and consequently another reason to despise him.

With no hotrods to deflect my curiosity, I asked what he was talking about.

"The go-kart track, man. It just opened up this week. It is *so* cool. I took a spin out there yesterday with my old man. Three laps for a buck. He slipped me a Hamilton and watched me race. That's thirty laps, man. Coolest thing I ever did. Damn, those cars are fast too. A lot faster than that piece of shit Jimdo built last summer. And the wheels didn't fall off." He laughed during the last part, remembering as I did the sight of Jimmy Smith plowing into his folk's white picket fence during the first and only test drive of his homemade "Indy Racer". It had been a boring summer up until then; made me wish he'd crashed in July instead of the end of August just so we would have had something to focus our aimless energies on, someone to bust on all summer.

"If you do anything this summer, man, you gotta go there," Bobby said. He was stuffing his face with a raspberry pop-tart now, his mangled teeth covered with crimson jelly and specks of breadcrumbs.

Now there's a memory, Bobby Greenwald's genetically misaligned teeth. I say genetically because his father owned the same set of choppers as his son. The first time I saw them together I couldn't stop staring, bouncing my unbelieving eyes back and forth like Chris Evert's latest boyfriend. And now that I think about it, his two younger sisters did too, one of which I believe became a dentist and made a fortune off the decaying fruit from the Greenwald family tree alone. That was one thing I had over Bobby, vertical teeth.

"Where is it?" I asked. It couldn't have been in town, I'd have known about it by now. In those days I may have only had a dime in my pocket at any one time, but I was well connected. King of the peddlers, you could say.

"You know where the putt-putt golf place is on the way to that new mall in Utica?" he replied. "The cool one with the clown face on the last hole?"

I nodded that I did.

"Take a left at that corner and go a couple of miles. You can't miss it."

I knew the area. I'd been there several times on parent-chaperoned shopping trips. You know, the ones to get new underwear and shirts you couldn't stand. Well, it was at least twenty five miles away and it was summer recess. My mother would have no need and absolutely no desire to "schlep" me, my brother and my friends out there for entertainment purposes alone. "That's what you have bicycles for," I could already hear her saying. As for my work and town hall engrossed father, who I rarely conversed with except for the weekly "don't forget about the lawn," well, good luck pilgrim.

As I stared at my four and a half year old, silver and gold companion that had carried me home safely a thousand times through rain, mud and snow, I realized it would never get me to that go-kart track. Not over fifty miles round trip in a single speed. My brother's bike, maybe, that was an "English 3-speed," with a gear for going up steep hills and another for accelerating down. He was no match for my Schwinn Spider in rough terrain, but a trek to Utica and back would be all roads—long, hot,

endless pavement. My brother and his friends would leave me and mine in the dust, laughing as they disappeared on the horizon.

“You been to the putt-putt yet? Since school let out, I mean?” Bobby was unrelenting. “I nailed that sucker right in the nose yesterday; won a free game. My old man didn’t want to pony up the extra three bucks for another round so I played the free one alone. Had eight holes in one, one better than Sando’s record.”

I didn’t believe him—the free game or the eight aces—and neither would my best friend and putt-putt aficionado Tommy Sanford. I had no doubt his old man would have backed him up, but he didn’t count as a legitimate witness in our circles. There had to be an unofficial member of our unsanctioned clan present when said record was set. That included all homeruns hit during spontaneous homerun derby events, shopping plaza parking lot three-lap time trials conducted after the stores closed, and measurements taken of crawfish caught under the main street overpass. Bobby would fuss and cuss, arguing that his word alone should be enough, but his “new record” was destined for disqualification. Things like that were too important; you couldn’t just take a man’s word for it.

The rest of the day proved uneventful, and like most of the first days of every summer recess, I went to bed hoping the whole two months wouldn’t line up the same. Laying there in bed, the glow of the tiny, rabbit-eared television dancing shadows off the walls, I thought about the smile I wanted to wipe off Bobby’s face and the go-kart track that seemed just beyond my reach. Walter Cronkite was on the screen, talking with a NASA official about the next Apollo flight to the moon. It would be the first night launch and the final lunar landing, he said, and the only mission with a professional geologist aboard. *The last one*, I thought, *I guess that means I won’t be going to the moon someday.*

Ever since I’d watched Neil Armstrong set foot on the moon when I was twelve, pronouncing to the world the “one giant leap for mankind” as his oversized boot hit the lunar surface, I had wanted

to be an astronaut. That night, with the adrenaline of a brand new summer recess still coursing through my veins, all I wanted to do was get to that track. At that moment, it seemed as far away as the moon.

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With the dawn came a new day and I awoke full of the raw optimism that epitomized my teenage years, lifting me each morning like a kite on a breeze. Surely, my father would understand my need for the ten speed bike, all I had to do was explain myself. Along with reminding me about my chores, my father's mission in life seemed to be inducing me to "explain myself." After I'd broken a window hitting balls in the backyard—even though I'd been told many times not to—I was instructed to "explain myself." After my mother found our cat, Mittens, with its ears glued shut, I was instructed to "explain myself." You get the idea.

"Where's dad?" I asked my mother. I'd just bounded into the kitchen, eager to present my argument for a new bike, when I noticed he wasn't sitting in his customary spot at the table with the newspaper at full mast.

"He had an early meeting to attend at work," she replied. "But he wanted me to remind you not to forget to cut the grass. It's been growing like a weed now that summer's here. Did you need him for something?"

"I wanted to ask him something," I said, uncertain of my mother's Vice Presidential powers in matters of this nature. I decided to take a shot anyway.

"What's wrong with the one you have?" she asked. This was always my mother's opening argument. She probably read it one of Dr. Spock's parenting manuals, under the chapter titled: *You'll never dazzle your children with brilliance, so baffle them with bullshit.*

"All my friends have one," I said. I knew they all didn't, but she didn't know that.

"If all your friends had gonorrhea, would you want that too?" she replied. Ever since taking health class and sharing some homework assignments with them over dinner, my parents had tossed

aside the tried and true “if you’re friends jumped off a cliff” analogy for the more grown-up venereal disease variety. I had to admit, the visual *was* more effective, I mean, the sight of the pus alone had made ever kid in my class squirm like worms on a hook during the horrifying, but thankfully black and white, film strip.

“It’s not the same thing,” I said as I sat down at the table and scanned the counters, blinded by the glimmer of the brand new toaster, coffee maker and blender she had recently gotten during Sears Gigantic Spring Clearance. Shading his eyes just as I was now, my father had asked her what was wrong with the old ones, but she only laughed and asked him not to be so silly.

As my mother paused, I sensed a crack in her armor. And a crack in her armor almost always led to a crack in the old man’s. “Well, if we did buy you one, we’d have to buy your brother one too,” she concluded. “And I really don’t think we have the money right now for two.”

*So much for the crack.*

Take some advice. Never, ever, be born within a few years after a sibling of the same sex. Not if you can help it. Otherwise, you’ll be relegated to a life time of hand-me-downs, identical Christmas presents, identical haircuts, a shared bedroom, shared friends, shared underwear—an accidental hazard—and the humble owner of whatever adolescent commodity is selling at two for the price of one, which, in this case, would be bicycles. How he’d ended up with a 3-speed over my single speed I’ll never know. First born preferentiality would be my guess, which happened occasionally like a locust plague and to which my parents would undoubtedly plead the fifth.

“He doesn’t need one,” I countered. “He’ll be getting his learner’s permit this fall and then he’ll be driving everywhere.” I knew this fact because my brother had been telling me so everything minute of everyday for the past six months, rubbing it into my “snot nose” so often I could set my watch to it, if I’d worn one. My only wish was that when he finally got his license he’d drive off a cliff, mimicking his distraught, Gonorrhea-infected friends.

“That’s true,” my mother said, contemplatively. She set a plate of peanut butter frosted toast in front me, my breakfast of champions for as long as I could remember. There was a glass of orange juice already on the table, the only source of vitamins she required I ingest. The rest of the day I was on my own until dinner, funneling in anything I could get for a dime or scrounge off my friends. Consequently, my summer diet consisted mainly of carbonated, yellow, orange or purple soft drinks with a side order of anything cream-filled, regardless of color.

“But you know, we’ve only got the one wagon,” she added, referring to the forest green, imitation walnut paneled, four wheeled family room that sat idle in our driveway only occasionally on a Sunday evening or the odd Christmas morning. “I don’t even get to drive it that often.”

*Rats!* I thought I had her. At this point I knew from experience that any further rebuttal was useless. I also knew that when questioned, my father would robotically side with the prosecution, rendering my defense for the bike ineffective. The only thing he would add to my mother’s sentiment would be my penance.

“Earn it,” my father said that night over dinner. “Go find a job and earn the money yourself. You’re almost fifteen, for Christ’s sake. When I was your age I had a paper route and six lawns to mow all summer. And I did them both with only a wagon and a muscle-powered, reel mower.”

He went on for a while, but I’d tuned out at the “when I was your age” part. The bottom line was simple: if I wanted a new ten-speed bike, I was looking at self-financing. The next day, good old Bobby, whose father bought him everything, offered a solution. And I’m not talking about leasing.

“Steal it.” That was Bobby proposal. Coming from a guy who’d just exited the store with a one pound bag of mini candy bars and a six pack of Orange Crush that he would undoubtedly consume in the next ten minutes with a silver straw and spoon, it was a surprising suggestion. And he said it so matter-of-factly it left me wondering if the perpetual jingle in his bottomless pockets was actually marked money, embezzled from his father’s bedroom dresser. But to his credit, he wasn’t going to just

stand on the sidelines devouring chocolate while I evaded the assistant manager and his posse of hairstyle-challenged clerks at the local K-Mart. Oh no; Bobby was ready to get in the game, offering not only a plan, but a role as my accomplice.

His scam was simple and I had to admit, ingenious. He had seemingly considered every detail, except for one. I didn't really want to steal a bicycle. I really didn't want to steal anything, but I also didn't want to admit that in front of the gang of boys who were now gathered around listening intently to Bobby's enter-grab-and-exit strategy.

Sensing my hesitancy, my best friend Tommy pulled me aside and whispered encouragement into my ear. "You've got to do it, man," he said. "It's the only way. You know you're old man ain't never gonna fork out a hundred bucks for something you've already got." He was referring to my silver and gold Schwinn. Then, his mood turned deadly serious. "We can't let the rest of these punks leave us in their dust. Charlie's got a new ride, Mikey does too. Hell, even Fat Willy found a used twenty-six incher at a lawn sale across town. It doesn't look like much but it'll put a hurt on that Spider of yours on the road to the go-kart track, guaranteed. Think about that man, the sight of Fat Willy's fat ass peddling off into the sunset."

I had to admit, that was a big motivator, no offense to Fat Willy. But still, stealing? The thought of it sent electric shock waves rippling through my arms and legs. I needed a drink and a moment to think, so I went into the store and blew my only dime on a twelve ounce bottle of Squirt. My brain needed a jolt and real grapefruit flavoring was the only thing that could do the trick. When I came back out, Tommy picked up right where he left off—appealing to my ego.

"You're the King, man," he said. "King of the peddlers. Always have been and always will be *provided* you get that new bike."

It was true; I had been the king in our little town. For years, I exhibited unparalleled acceleration in a one block drag race, superior handling over the mud encrusted trails that wound in

and out of the woods adjacent to the park, and camel like endurance during all day games of tag. But now, technology was threatening my reign and I couldn't ignore it any longer. Maybe I wouldn't ever go to the moon, but I was going to go to that go-kart track this summer, and with Tommy as my witness, I vowed right then and there that I was going to arrive before Fat Willy or anybody else.

"Now you're talkin'," Tommy said with a huge grin. Then, just as he was leaving on the new bike he gotten for his birthday—he was lucky, he had a summer birthday as opposed to my December anniversary—he said I would need a new title to go along with the new bike.

"The Count of Ten Speed," he said. "How does that sound?"

It sounded good. *Really good.*

Over thirty years later, I still liked the sound of it. It had a majestic flair unlike anything I'd experienced before. *The Count of Ten Speed*. I was almost fifty years old now, never became an astronaut, and though I've lived a good life, I often look back at that summer realizing it was a peak of sorts, the kind of high that I'd never reached again. Even to this day it triggers a flutter in my heart when I think of what was and what could have been. You see, the summer of '72 was the summer that defined who I would be for the rest of my life.

I remember it was a Tuesday and how the summer sun burnt high in the clear blue afternoon sky. The air was thick and hot, pushing ninety degrees, perfect conditions for what Bobby had in mind. He and I had just finished reviewing the plan and were stashing our bikes behind the dumpster in back of Wally's Bargain City when the first big wave of nausea hit. I'd felt the same stomach-twisting bubble working it's way up my throat six months earlier when Tommy slide a Playboy magazine under my sweatshirt inside our local drug store and told me to "be cool." I'd made it out alive that day without getting caught *or* puking, but I never wanted to feel that way again. Yet, here I was on the verge of the second true criminal act of my life.

As we walked determinedly toward the front entrance, a chorus line of shiny new bicycles of every size and color parked happily in front of the store, Tommy's voice echoed in my mind. *It's the only way.* God knows how badly I wanted that bike, how badly I wanted to go to the go-kart track, how badly I one day wanted to go to the moon. That's when I remembered the newsman saying that it was the last trip, that the Apollo mission scheduled for the upcoming winter would be the final lunar landing. *I'm never going to go to the moon,* I concluded in a stress-induced realization. But I am going to be somebody. I'm going to be *The Count of Ten Speed.*

"When you see them all running toward me," Bobby said. "That's when you make your move."

I nodded before watching him enter the store through the automatic glass doors.

What struck me about Bobby at that moment was how calm he was. Inside, I was shaking like my mother's three-legged washing machine, while he stood solid as the oak tree I'd helped build a fort in the summer before. It was deep in the woods and far enough off the common path to keep unwelcome intruders away. That was where I tasted my first beer and where my friends and me memorized every colorful page of every Playboy we could get our hands on. Standing outside the store now waiting for Bobby's cue, those days in the tree seemed like a long time ago and I myself like a little boy protected from the reality of the adult life I ached for.

Suddenly, I heard a crash as Bobby dove head first into a stacked wall of boxes displaying the Ants In The Pants kids game. It was on sale—apparently due to overstocking—and, thanks to Bobby, now scattered all over the floor. There were ants everywhere and as if they were actually alive and crawling into *his* pants, Bobby began squirming on the floor in a wild, heat-induced epileptic fit. Delightfully shocked, I could only peer through the glass wondering if he was doing it on purpose or if our caper had gone horribly wrong. He'd told me we was going to make a scene but hadn't described it quite in the way it was now appearing before my startled eyes. Then, just as I was considering going

inside to see if he was alright, a number of clerks and concerned customers came running over, including the employee stationed near the door.

“You see that old geezer over there?” Bobby had asked me just minutes ago, pointing at an elderly man who looked like my grandfather. “He’s the meet-and-greet guy. He’s also in charge of keeping an eye on all the outside stuff, including the bikes. I come here all the time with my old man and I’ve been watching how they run things. When he leaves his post, you grab the bike.”

Watching Bobby wiggle on the floor and the attention it was drawing, I realized the plan was working to perfection. Now all I had to do was hop onto the bike of my choosing and ride off into the sunset, all the way to the go-kart track. Hell, all the way to the moon.

It didn’t take me long to spot the ride of my dreams. It was a silver and gold beauty—the same colors as my Spider—with pencil thin tires, frame mounted gear-shift levers and ergo bend handle bars. But most importantly, it sported ten incredible gears for hill climbing and flat-road speed supremacy. I gently rolled it out of line and held it in front of me, feeling, I imagine, the same excitement Neil Armstrong felt the first time he saw the Apollo space craft. *Bound by neither gear nor gravity.*

I mounted it, surprised at first at how high and narrow the seat was. I’d been sitting in a well-cushioned banana for years and wasn’t prepared for the cheek-splitting rigidity offered by Schwinn’s latest triumph. It seemed that with all its technological advances it could have at least had a semi-comfortable seat. That annoyance quickly disappeared as I pushed off and pedaled joyfully across the parking lot and around behind the building to Bobby’s post-heist meeting spot. This bike had power I’d never dreamed of and I’d only shifted up a few times before pulling in behind the dumpster. I couldn’t wait to get it out on the open road.

Standing grandly next to my old bike, the two looked like night and day; like a Corvette next to my parent’s station wagon, like a jet next to the Wright brother’s biplane. Then, suddenly, it seemed

like a stranger standing next to a friend, and the ear-to-ear smile that had accompanied my getaway vanished. This new bicycle was not *my* bicycle. It didn't belong to me. It belonged to someone else. To Wally himself, I don't know. But it didn't belong to me, that much I felt for sure. It wasn't that my father was preaching in my thoughts to "earn it," because he wasn't. And at no time did I sense my mother gazing judgmentally over my shoulder. To this day I can't say why I took that new bicycle and placed it calmly back into line with the rest of them in front of Wally's Bargain City. Or why I still waited out by the dumpster for Bobby, knowing that he would reminisce my cowardice in front of every kid I knew for the rest of the summer, if not the rest of my life. It was just something I had to do for myself, something to this very day I'm glad I did.

As I expected, the legend of chicken-shit Hardo spread throughout town like a wild fire before succumbing to the scrapheap of yesterday's news along side Jimmy Smith's accidental and hilarious fence demolition of the year before. Thankfully, our attentions move on to fresh girlie magazines and girls in general, who seemed surprisingly different than they had in summers past.

A few weeks after the botched capper, as Bobby often referred to it, I ironically found a job assembling bicycles for a man who ran a small shop out of his is garage at the edge of town. He sold new bikes as well as old ones after he'd repaired them. Often, he would give one away for free if the eager youngster bemoaned a good enough hard luck story. I learned a ton about bikes and business from that man and by the first week in August I had earned enough to buy the best bike he had. After spending one evening tuning it up, Tommy and I and a few of our other friends made the trek to the go-kart track the very next day, arriving a good twenty minutes ahead of Bobby and his friends who had started out ahead of us that same morning. Everyone except me had been there before, but I didn't care. I didn't need to be the first man on the moon, only one of the few who could say they'd braved the journey.

I never spent a lot of time moralizing right and wrong back then and don't now, but I know when it fits and when it doesn't. When Tommy pulled in the go-kart parking lot a few minutes after me, huffing and puffing, exhausted after thirty miles of steaming pavement, I knew the title he'd bestowed upon me honestly fit.

It was the summer of 1972, and I'll never forget the crackling sound of my wheels spitting stones in that gravel parking lot or the words Tommy said as she saddled up next to me, "The Count of Ten Speed, I presume."