

Bicycling against pain

Before, Johnny Stausholm had to take pain killers to stay alive. Now he swears to two wheels.

Finally, he had enough. He felt ashamed. He couldn't carry on anymore that way. Together with old friends in Grenå in Denmark, he felt the difference. They were well; he was sick. His place at Ålgård (Norway) felt more like a prison than a home. There he sat, often alone, without a job. Large daily quantities of pain killers were consumed to ease the pain. But the morphine tablets did little to keep him upright; mostly they kept him sitting or lying down.

At last he had enough. He realized that something had to be done, and he decided to do it. He did not seek to escape into death or any other form of denial. He wanted to get his old life back. Early in 2009 at his home in Grenå, he resolved first to cut away half of the medicine, then eliminate the rest after two weeks if the plan succeeded. It didn't succeed. It barely got by.

Up until April of 2001, Johnny Stausholm was a strong, sturdy man. That was before the accident on E-39, in which a car from behind crashed into the one he was driving. The speed of the other car was relatively low, but the impact of the collision was sufficient to change Johnny's existence forever.

Shortly after the accident, Johnny started to feel unwell. His arms became numb. Then the pains came creeping. After many painful days and months, he received a diagnosis: major neck injury. Then followed two operations: surgeons replaced two destroyed neck vertebrae with titanium implantations. But the pains continued unabated to rack his body, mostly in his head, neck and shoulders.

At the time of the collision, Johnny had almost completed his education as a machine engineer. After that point, he could manage neither to complete studies, nor to work. Instead, he found himself captive, imprisoned by pain.

After returning from Denmark in 2009, he would try to escape from that prison: but how? During his teens Johnny had been an active athlete, lifting weights and running track, a real powerhouse. By 2009, he had gained a good deal of weight. The former athlete needed to be coaxed back into existence.

This would be his second attempt. The year before, in 2008, he had borrowed a virtually untouched hybrid cycle belonging to his youngest son. He set off downhill and decided to make a circuit around Limavannet (Lima lake). The beginner bicyclist might as well have lain down on a mat of nails. He thought he would die. However, there were also moments of pleasure when, aided by pain killers, he left the bike at the roadside and walked into terrain to enjoy the beautiful weather and scenery. From Ålgård town center, he had to drag both himself and the bicycle uphill to get home afterwards. Several painful days lying on his sofa ensued. Bike trip number two proved to be at least as painful as the first one. "Since this is so painful, I may as well take it a little further", he said to himself, and went for another 5 kilometers. On the third ride, something unexpected occurred. It was one of those seldom, warm days in Rogaland. Riding in only shorts, T-shirt and sandals, he stopped to go down to the riverbank at Ravndalsbakken at Gjesdal. Behind a large stone, hidden from the road, he threw off his clothes and waded into a pool of the stream. Afterwards, he lay on the riverside to bask in the sun. There the naked man met the bare truth: "yes", he told himself, "I have my problems, but such a wonderful experience in Nature I haven't had for several years!" Then

he rode back home, to another couple of days lying on his sofa. After a few more attempts, he gave up cycling. It had become too painful and difficult.

But now, in 2009, after the trip to Denmark, he resolved to try again. Without consulting his doctor, he cut in half the prescribed dose of pain killers. His body begged for relief. Johnny responded by ‘beating it up’. He rode and rode. Two weeks after reducing the dose of pain medicine, he cut it out altogether. During three to four weeks, he was constantly pedalling along country roads and sweating out the last remnants of pharmaceutical industry. The pains were still racking his body, but somehow he managed to turn his thoughts away from them and from pain killers as the wheels chewed asphalt kilometres. At home, he also thought in terms of bicycling. Pedal-power and thought-power combined to make a powerful mixture.

Farewell to sandals and hybrid bikes! Hello to Ålgård Sykkel- og Spaserlaug (bicycle and hiking club), where he finds helpfulness himself, Per Reidar (“Pitter”) Olufsen. ‘You may borrow this as much as you like,’ Pitter says, handing Johnny a cross-bike. That was something new: he laid 25 kilometers on it, most of the while crying (not tears of joy). So he just had to carry on.

Soon he was cycling with other members of the group. He found himself being left behind. “They are not allowed to do that”, he told himself. One day he was training with two new club members. “Do you want to do the ‘sausage round’ (popular nickname for a 50-kilometer course sponsored by Gilde, sausage factory). “No way”, Johnny answered. They set out for Seldalsbakken (Seldal’s hill), a daunting lung-test for bicyclists. When the other two came to the top, Johnny was standing waiting for them.

“How many years have you been cycling?” one asked. “One and a half months”, he replied. “Where did you train before that?” “I’ve been lying on my sofa, eating morphine for several years.” So he ended up doing the ‘sausage round’ anyway, and with a respectable time.

“Now you have to come along for the ‘Lysebotn-Bryne’ ride”, said Pitter. No, no—well—maybe, yes. Johnny had never ridden more than 60 kilometers in one day. But by then he had long since gotten his own wheels, and before him was an ordeal of 157 kilometers. For starters, the first 10 kilometers are more vertical than horizontal, from Lysebotn at fjord level to the top of the mountain plateau high above it. Riders who make it to the top know something about losing motivation to continue. Johnny rode alone most all of the way. From Oltedal to Bryne, tears streaming, he kept moving, and rode in to a respectable time of 5 hours, 17 minutes. That’s a good time for a beginner.

Back at home followed another few days of sofa-sitting. He promised himself that he would never again inflict such a killer ride on himself. But suddenly he had to laugh. He found himself already planning the next year’s Lysebotn-Bryne.

And not just that: Johnny Stausholm contacted Team Jæren and began training with that team. Then came a wild idea: why not take on Trondheim-Oslo, the big strength-test, in 2010? In the Trondheim-Oslo, Johnny rode for Team Jæren’s second division. He clocked in at 15 hours, 30 minutes, an unbelievably strong time for one with only 12 months’ training. Such haste causes terrific aches and pains, even for one who is not already hurting.

Afterwards, Johnny was out of circulation for three months. But he would soon tackle an even greater ordeal. In 2007, he had tried to work as a machine engineer, but after only three months, he had to quit. It was too difficult to concentrate. Now, however, he had gained a

mental tool for coping with the pains and wanted to try again. In the fall of 2010, Aibel hired him for a half-time position: full day Tuesday, Wednesday, and half of Thursday.

This time it works despite the pains, not all the time, but enough to stay. Johnny would rather ride 200 kilometers than work an 8-hour day. But he doesn't give up. Neither did he give up when, together with his friend Ibrahim Shabi, he bicycled from Ålgård, Norway, to Kosovo with a painful meniscus on top of the 'regular' aches and pains.

No one must believe that this is some kind of miracle story. "I will never be cured. The pains will always plague me. But I have learned a new way of coping with them." We're sitting in his kitchen, where he serves homemade, super-dark chocolate cake, strutting with antioxidants.

In 2004, I wrote about Johnny Stausholm for the first time. When he opened the door today, I could barely recognize this man: fit and trim, full of vigor and vitality. In the middle of telling his story, he needs to take a break. We both need time to wipe eyes and swallow something which is not chocolate cake.

Johnny Stausholm has tried to help many pain-ridden neck patients. They are in a terrible state, but their injuries are invisible. Some of these give up, turning not to bicycling but to suicide.

Five to six times a year, Johnny has to take out the morphine case. Every third week he goes to a doctor in Egersund for an injection of local anaesthetic in his neck and shoulders. That gives relief for some hours or days. And he goes regularly to counselling at Jæren district psychiatric center, where it helps to "empty his head". "I pay a high price for standing upright. There are some days every year when I have to collapse for a while. I need to be alone then; and I really wish that I had could turn it off and get some peace, if only for a little while," Johnny admits. Often he gets only a couple of hours' sleep at night. Those closest to him describe a man who, far from being self-pitying or self-absorbed, is caring and helpful.

"I don't know where I would be today without cycling. But my method is so untraditional, I don't know if I can really recommend it to others. My appeal to other chronic pain patients is that they must never give up. It is always possible for each person to find his way to a better everyday life. It is largely about setting goals and dividing them up into attainable smaller goals," Johnny says.

He speaks of life as being good. He tells of his girlfriend and best supporter, Mai-Britt, and of their walks together. And he has begun planning a new long-distance ride, from Nordkapp in northern Norway, to Lindesnes, furthest south., a distance of 1699 kilometers (by air), or 2518 kilometers by road. In something like a week.

Physical exercise helps

"Physical activity can be a help for chronic pain patients, and could be used to a greater degree than today," says Birger Christensen. He is Johnny's doctor in Egersund. "For a patient with chronic pain, the most important aspect of training is to be able to shift focus from the pain to the activity", he adds. "There is research which indicates that physical activity is beneficial for people with psychological problems, such as depression. Chronic

pain is not a mental problem per se, but the pains readily become a mental stressor, as well. That is why training can be a help,” Christensen points out.

“During physical activity, endorphins are released, reducing pain perception and producing feelings of physical well-being. Do they also help people with strong chronic pain?”

“Absolutely. Such a natural pain reliever promotes well-being and helps give a sense of achievement, which are so important for coping with chronic pain. We know that top athletes feel a good deal of pain when they press themselves on, so the ability to master this situation is extremely important,” Christensen says.

“Have you had patients who have managed to cope with their pain in the same way as Stausholm?”

“Not to the same degree. He is an unusually wilful and resourceful person. But generally I would say that all chronic pain patients can benefit from physical exercise, to the extent which they can manage. It is a question of improving physical and mental health, and of being able to change a pattern”, Dr. Christensen explains.

(Translation: Elizabeth A. Røttingen 11/2013)